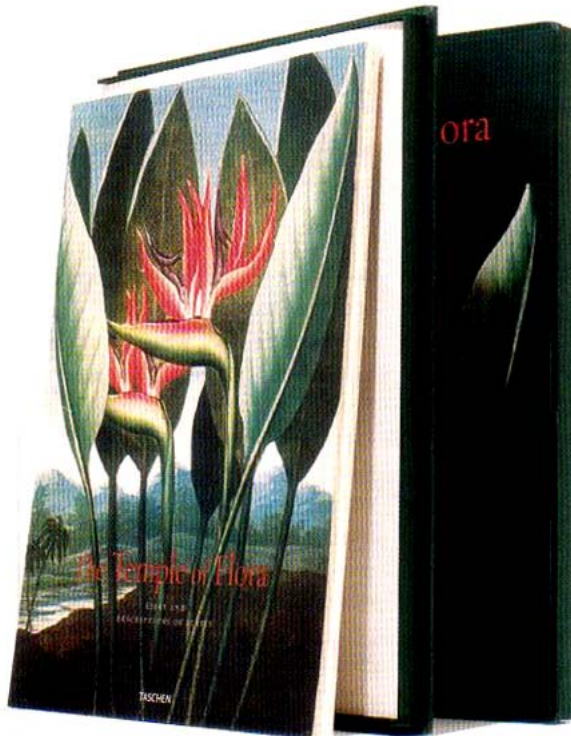


Thornton was no less interested in accurate depiction in his *Temple of Flora*, but he was equally driven by the desire to deify 18th-century science, and the resulting work is as muddled as Buffon's is straightforward. Some of England's most talented artists, such as the portraitist Philip Reinagle, were engaged to paint the subjects Thornton selected, ranging from familiar tulips to the exotic maggot-bearing stapelia. To reproduce their paintings, Thornton employed the finest engravers of the era, who used practically every known printing technique, including mezzotint and aquatint, to capture the full range of color.

Yet no one could paint, or print, like nature. Nobody could satisfy Thornton in this, or in his desire to set the plants in dramatic landscapes—decked with temples and clock towers and populated by sparrows and cupids—that were more suitable as backdrops for a romantic opera than for a scientific study. Paintings were remade, plates reengraved as Thornton's inheritance trickled away. He secured illustrations for fewer than half the 70 exotic plants he intended to document before he was forced to sell everything in a lottery, falling back on the practice of medicine.

Today *The Temple of Flora* is a beguiling curiosity, while Buffon's work is a scientific landmark. The new editions of these books reflect that difference: The plates of *Flora* are printed on sheets of heavy paper that, rather than being bound, are tucked inside a nearly 17-by-21-inch box—an over-the-top design that memorializes Thornton's overgrown plans for the book. *All the World's Birds*, meanwhile, has the heft of a large encyclopedia, possessing an elegant austerity that honors the seriousness of Buffon's original endeavor. Both deserve a place in any library devoted to the art of natural history. Nature, after all, is the confluence of order and eccentricity. ☉

JONATHON KEATS



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