CONSERVATION UPDATE

From Plants to Prints: University of Tennessee Printmaking Artists Drawing from Herbarium Specimens

By Margaret Oliver

What kinds of beautiful art can come from a collaboration between artists and a plant collection? A group of students at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville School of Art visited the UT Herbarium (TENN) in fall 2022 as part of an intermediate printmaking course with Professor Beauvais Lyons and graduate teaching assistant Anthony Huang. There is a long history between botanical art and herbaria and the students had been tasked with producing an exchange portfolio inspired by specimens from TENN.

An herbarium is a natural history collection of pressed and preserved plants and fungi—you can think of it as a plant library—with specimens representing botanical and fungal diversity over time. TENN is the largest herbarium in Tennessee with over 649,000 plant and fungal specimens from around the world, and with a focus on East Tennessee and the southern Appalachians. It’s a research collection, so the specimens are sources of scientific data to help scientists describe new species, ask questions related to plant and fungal biodiversity or about how species distribution has changed, etc. It is also a great source for people interested in what species may be found in an area of Tennessee.

As the herbarium collections manager, I showed the students how to navigate the online database we use for our vascular plants, Southeast Regional Network of Expertise and Collections (SERNEC; sernecportal.org) and helped them access our collections so they could find the specimens they were interested in working from. They selected a variety of species including Tennessee natives little brown jug (Erythroxylon arifolia), American lily of the valley (Convallaria montana), sassafras (Sassafras albidum) and jepye weed (Eutrochium fistulosum) as well as species from outside the U.S. or commonly cultivated like bigleaf hydrangea (Hydrangea macrophylla), jimson weed (Datura stramonium), Arctic rose (Rosa acicularis), and rubber tree (Hevea nitida). The students made a couple of trips to the herbarium to work on preliminary drawings and copper etchings from their selected specimens. The copper etchings were used to create intaglio prints, a method of printmaking that’s been used for printing bank notes and botanical illustrations dating to the 17th century.

The final exchange portfolio contains eight stunning prints by Anthony Huang and students Hannah Crowe, Isabel Fitzhugh, Dana Kim, Shekinah Littrice, Diane Lopez, Kaan Sarisaltik, and William Wensell. Professor Lyons designed the portfolio cover and title page. The class produced an edition of 12 sets of the portfolio so each student was able to receive a copy. One stayed at the UTK Printshop, the TENN Herbarium received one, and the two remaining sets are in the process of being donated to two additional museums or libraries.

Learn more: herbarium.utk.edu.

(Margaret Oliver is collections manager at the University of Tennessee Herbarium in Knoxville.)

Courtesy of Beauvais Lyons: UT Knoxville School of Art student Shekinah Littrice works on her copper etching of jepye weed.