Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

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Emma Steinkraus, with Carey Gibbons and Allan McLeod

Impossible Garden: A Contemporary Artist's Digital Engagement with Women Artist-Naturalists of the Long Nineteenth Century and Beyond

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Abstract:

In this digital version of her research-based, multimedia art installation *Impossible Garden*, specially prepared for *NCAW*, artist Emma Steinkraus examines the contributions of women artist-naturalists to historical botanical and scientific art primarily produced during the long nineteenth century. A fully navigable, annotated digital garden created from reproductions of illustrations of flora, fauna, and fungi made by sixty-nine women artists across four continents is accompanied by an interview with the artist by Carey Gibbons. By situating the project within the realms of biography, feminist discourse, social history, colonialism, and environmentalism, Steinkraus encourages a rethinking of works by women artist-naturalists while exploring the nineteenth century as a source of inspiration for artists and scholars today.

American Art History Digitally

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[Editor's Introduction](#) | [Interactive Feature](#) | [Interview](#) | [Project Narrative](#)

Editor's Introduction by Carey Gibbons

The editors of *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* first encountered *Impossible Garden*, the contemporary art installation that forms the basis of this digital art history project, through a prerecorded virtual presentation delivered by its author, Emma Steinkraus, at the College Art Association's annual conference from February 10 to 13, 2021. The paper, titled "Lady Botanizers: A Survey of Pre-20th Century Women in Scientific Illustration," was included in the session "Science, Gender, and the Decorative in the 18th and 19th Centuries." We were particularly intrigued by Steinkraus's work, as it creatively appropriates botanical and natural history illustrations made by women artists, for the most part during the long nineteenth century, in North America, Europe, and Asia. We thought it would fit well within our American Art History Digitally series, sponsored by the Terra Foundation for American Art, not only given the transatlantic, cross-cultural connections throughout Steinkraus's work but also because of the original art historical research that forms its foundation. *NCAW*'s web developer, Allan McLeod, and I worked closely with Steinkraus to transform the physical installation of *Impossible Garden* into an interactive, annotated digital art history project, offering a dynamic new form of engagement with her work not possible within a gallery setting.

Rather than including a scholarly article alongside an interactive digital component, as we have done for our prior digital art history projects, I conducted an extended interview with Steinkraus, probing her motivations and artistic process. Also included is a project narrative, which presents a closer look at the transition from gallery installation to digital art history project. The project encourages a rethinking of botanical and natural history illustrations by contextualizing them within the realms of biography (specifically the lives of women), feminist discourse, social history, colonialism, and environmentalism, while exploring why and how nineteenth-century art continues to be a source of inspiration for artists and scholars today.

Carey Gibbons, Digital Art History Editor, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*