
Cultures of natural history

EDITED BY

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23 Tastes and crazes

Fashions, in the strict sense, do not occur in intellectual matters, nor can they. For they are light-hearted products of imitation and show, necessarily transient and shallow in order to fulfil their function of expressing a merely temporary inclination or mood. They rise, they fall and in their turn are then replaced by something similar.¹ It is common to speak of intellectual fashions, but by that is meant no more than that some set of facts or a theory has caught on and become popular (and not necessarily only temporarily): being non-visual, it cannot serve as a vehicle for eye-catching display; being serious, it is not bound to be discarded once adopted too widely and persisted in too long.

Natural history, however, is not and never has been a purely intellectual pursuit. It has a considerable aesthetic component as well, of varying strength at different periods and in different individuals. Many people are attracted to it primarily for visual reasons, rather than to study behaviour, work out distributions or formulate concepts. Even in its most primitive manifestation, collecting, there can be a delight in shapes and colours and patterns which co-exists with the mere pleasure of acquisition or the sheer satisfaction of having the evidence for some additional item of knowledge.

Once this extra-intellectual interest goes beyond a certain point, natural history is liable to take on an additional dimension: to be drawn on for reasons that are purely aesthetic-cum-social, to become the prey of genuine fashion. At the extreme, the very subject itself may become the plaything of fashion, as happened in the eighteenth century and more especially in the Paris salons. More usually, though, one particular facet is fastened upon and inflated out of all proportion to its intrinsic importance as an area of study. Aspects of natural history which have some obvious potential as vehicles for symbolism are particularly vulnerable to being raided like this, and it is no accident that plants and shells have formed the subjects of the most salient instances that have occurred. In the words of one Victorian magazine, shells 'are so brightly clean, so ornamental to a boudoir', while the special attractiveness of plants, by virtue of their foliage no less than of their flowers, is in need of no

emphasizing. Both possess the additional advantage of easily recognized features which readily lend themselves to adoption as design motifs, by which means they can become completely incorporated into décor, totally abstracted from nature. Indeed, it may well be that natural objects normally become the focus of powerful fashions only if they are subtly in accord with the wider artistic expression of a particular outlook associated with a particular span of years – only if, in their own small way, they serve to reflect that elusive entity, the ‘spirit of the age’.

Conchylomanie

Shells first became noticeably the subject of an elegant pursuit in the seventeenth-century Netherlands. As early as 1607 artists there were being commissioned to paint leading collectors of these with choice specimens in front of them. Just like the postage stamps of later generations, shells came in a gratifying assortment of shapes and colours; many were pleasing to the eye and some even beautiful; they were obtainable from all corners of the globe, but from many of them only rarely and only with great difficulty; a beginner could start with a presentable array, put together by his own unaided efforts and without any expenditure of money, while for the connoisseur there was a challenging hinterland of scarcity, conferring monetary value accordingly. For one of these Dutchmen, Pierre Lyonet, shell collecting was indeed no more and no less than a branch of art collecting, the finest specimens being purchased with all the care and discrimination that went into his buying of paintings.

By the early eighteenth century there were cabinets full of shells to be found in the houses of the wealthy over much of Europe. Two of the finest collections drawn from all parts of the then-known world, were those of the London physician, Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), and of an Amsterdam apothecary, Albert Seba (1665–1736). Some of these cabinet owners went to great lengths to arrange their specimens artistically (Figure 23.1) while others went further still by trying to improve on nature's efforts by paying to have individual specimens ‘beautified’ artificially (a fate similarly visited in the next century on the tougher kinds of birds' eggs) ‘Shell-doctoring’, as this was called, developed into quite a trade in the Netherlands, providing a living for numerous practitioners. Yet a very much fatter living was to be had by the specialist auctioneers: for collectors were continually dying, or simply tiring of their hobby, or disposing of one collection preparatory to starting all over afresh. At these sales impressively high prices, sometimes even absurdly high ones, were increasingly reached as the pursuit began to assume the proportions of a craze – the ‘*conchylomanie*’, as it was dubbed by the French.

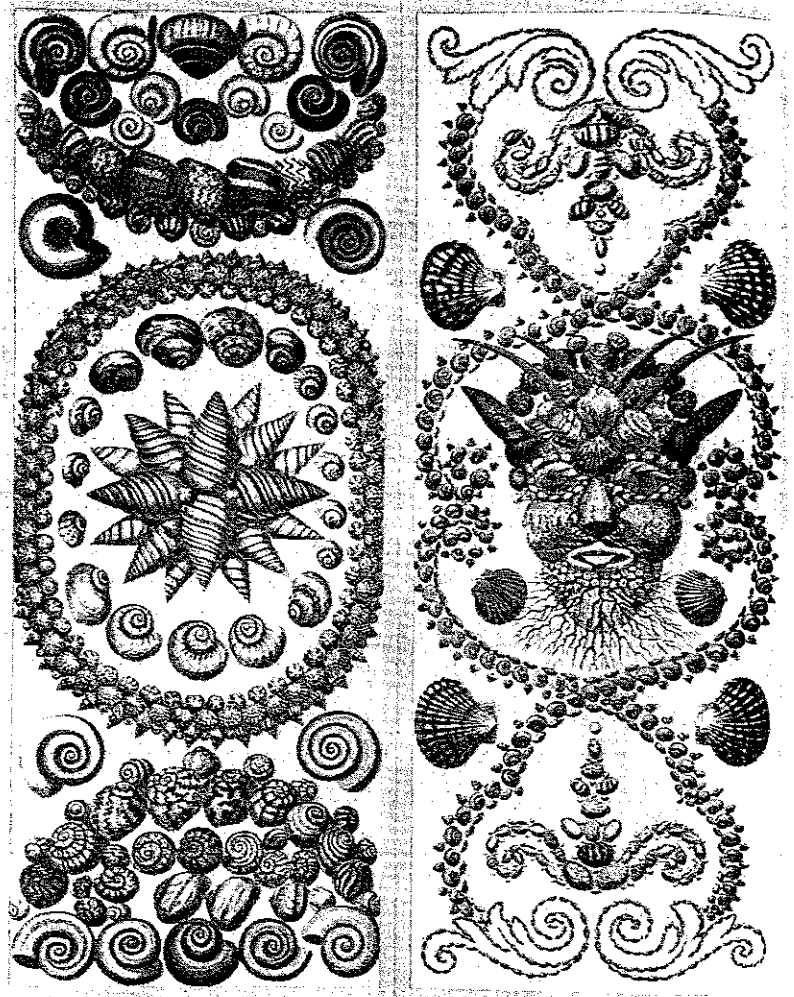


Figure 23.1 A shell 'portrait' in the cabinet of a Dutch collector Albertus Seba, *Thesaurus* (Leiden, 1758), vol. 3, plate 37.

Like the fern craze of the following century (of which more below), with its suggestive echoes of the Gothic Revival, the shell craze is under strong suspicion of having owed its super-normal vitality to acting as a side expression of a dominant trend in contemporary art. Indeed, one authority on the art of the period has gone so far as to claim that the craze precisely paralleled in its rises and falls the concurrent fashion for *rocaille*, the shell-like motif that became so ubiquitous from 1719 onwards.² However much truth there may be in that, it is certainly striking how suddenly the '*conchyliomanie*' came to an end: there was one final, immensely lucrative auction in 1757, that of the vast collection of the French ambassador at The Hague, the Marquis de Bonnac, and then prices abruptly dropped – and never afterwards recovered. 'All fashions end in excess', according to a dictum of the great couturier

Poiret, and maybe it was simply greed that did the shell collecting craze to death. Or maybe it was that the eyes of everyone in the salons had at last finally wearied of *rocaille* and of anything that resembled it.

Seaweeds

Closely akin to the shell craze, at least to the extent that it was similarly a product of the searching of beaches, was the somewhat later, but decidedly lower-key, fashionable concern with seaweeds. In this case, untypically, what began largely as an artistic vogue went on to open up a lasting field of serious study: more usually the reverse occurs, or the vogue and the study develop in tandem.

In 1751–2 John Ellis (1710–76), a London merchant active in botanical circles, began receiving collections of 'sea plants' and corallines from correspondents of his who lived on the coast. The reason for this is unclear, but it led him into making a pioneer classificatory study of those hitherto neglected groups, in the course of which he was to rediscover that corallines were animals, not plants (as generally supposed up till then) and, in a series of publications, to remove once and for all the misconception that they were an intermediate link between the two. This scientific work, however, had an unlikely by-product, for, apparently on a whim, he one day made a miniature seascape out of his specimens, giving this the modish name of 'grotto-work'³ – in evident allusion to the then fashionable taste for caves, crags and ruins and their 'picturesque' accompaniment of greenery. The existence of this came to the knowledge of one of his scientist friends, the Rev. Stephen Hales, who thereupon asked him to make something similar for the Princess Dowager of Wales, to whom Hales was Clerk of the Closet.⁴ After that a salon fashion seems to have arisen for this delicate type of fancy-work, a fashion which was to continue in some degree all through the century following (and to enjoy a revival in recent years as part of the taste for 'pressed-flower' pictures, in the guise of 'underwater scenes' in which seaweeds do duty as foliage).

It may have been this fashion and the demand for the necessary raw material that it generated that caused the Clerk to the Royal Society, Emanuel Mendes da Costa (1717–91), to write in those same months to a leading antiquary in Essex in the following (surprisingly peremptory) terms: 'Send me a small box of the seaweeds or corallines found on your coast. You have only need to lay them in a heap, damp as they are.'⁵ About the same time a Mrs Le Coq, down at Weymouth, was likewise being pressed into service by that inveterate collector of almost everything, the Duchess of Portland; and presently quite a few others were joining in.

In the surviving letter-book⁶ of Dru Drury, a wealthy London silversmith, are to be found, dated April 1764, some 'Directions given to Mr Warr, Cap. Mayle, etc to be sent into Devonshire and Cornwall for Collecting Sea Weeds'. While still crudely minimal, these at least improved on Da Costa's by insisting that the specimens be washed in fresh water on being gathered, before being put moist into a box or barrel and packed very tight.

It was this very simplicity that seaweeds shared with shells (and, later, ferns) as items to take up and preserve that doubtless accounted for a good deal of their popularity with collectors. In this respect they were notably different from so many other items with which naturalists found it necessary to concern themselves. Like shells, too, seaweeds could be sought after without embarrassment, for provided they were picked up off the foreshore – and did not have to be waded for or hammered off the side of a rock-pool – they did not involve unseemly postures or any stare-inducing equipment. Once collectors left the safety of the foreshore, by contrast, they were liable to meet with problems. 'When we first began Sea Weeds,' the Berwick naturalist Dr George Johnston (1797–1855) once confided to a correspondent, 'my wife carried a larger muff than the present fashion would commend, and many a heavy stone and well-filled bottle has therein been smuggled'.⁷ Not everyone, though, was willing to operate with such furtiveness. In the view of the no-nonsense Mrs Margaret Gatty (1807–73), 'any one really intending to *work* in the matter must lay aside for a time all thought of conventional appearances'. For her own forays along the edge of the tide she favoured a pair of boy's shooting boots, rendered waterproof with a thin coat of neat's-foot oil; above those merino rather than cotton stockings, and petticoats, also preferably of wool, that never reached below the ankle; over those a ladies' yachting costume (in her opinion, 'as near perfection for shore-work as anything that could be devised'); and, to complete the ensemble, a hat instead of a bonnet. Cloaks, shawls and all millinery she warned against as hopelessly impractical. Even she, though, otherwise dauntless though she was, was forced to admit that 'a low-water-mark expedition is more comfortably taken under the protection of a gentleman'.⁸

It was presumably because seaweeds were firmly associated in the public mind with a highly respectable kind of handicraft that so many women were emboldened to take up forming collections of them. Very much a minority fashion though this one remained all along, it was to become increasingly noteworthy for the prominence attained in it by that otherwise then so generally diffident sex. The fact that in its early stages the pursuit had gained a strong foothold among the landed gentry, and the male landed gentry at that, must also have conferred on it a certain social cachet which

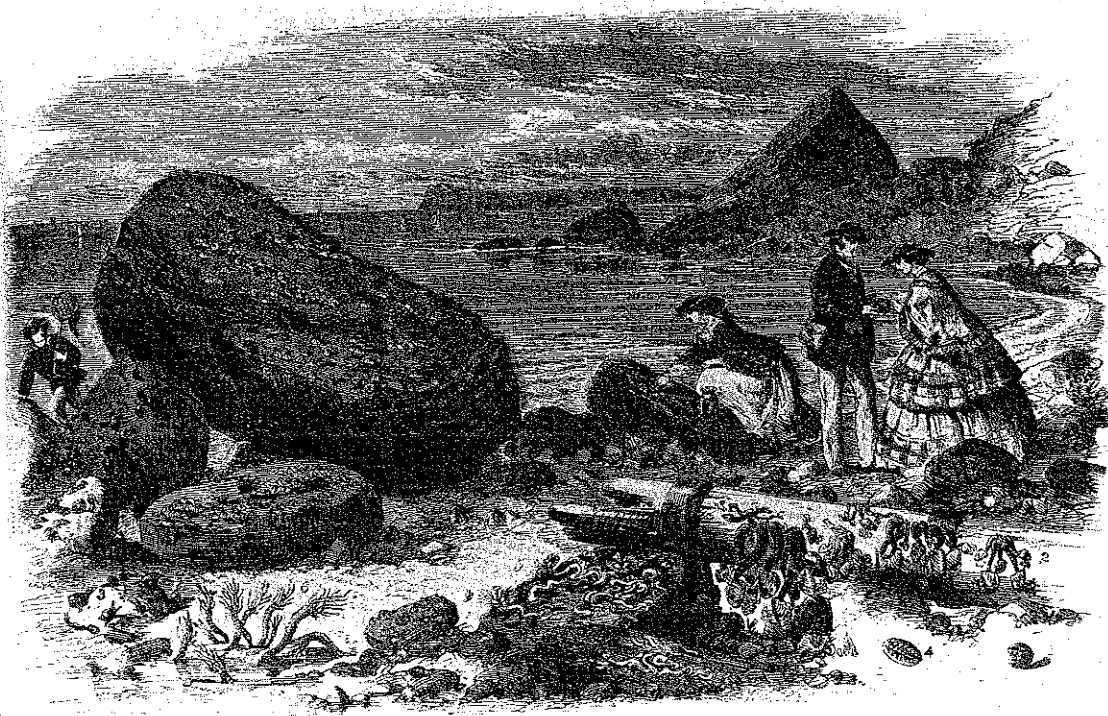


Figure 23.2 Shore collecting: 'a low-water-mark expedition is more comfortably taken under the protection of a gentleman'. G. H. Lewes, *Sea-side Studies* (London, 1868).

no doubt provided them with additional encouragement. That aristocratic influx, indeed, temporary though it proved, appears at first sight an even more striking and unexpected feature of the fashion than the later prominence of women. Those were the years, though, in which the uppermost layer of society was deeply in thrall to the earliest manifestations of Romanticism, in which a taste for a feathery green covering of stone or rocks (as in the grottoes which provided John Ellis with a kind of code-word to flourish as a cover) was one conspicuous ingredient. The connection between the modish mediaevalism and the focus on seaweeds is well exemplified by the action of one of those landowners, John Stackhouse (1742–1819), whose Cornish estates included some marine frontage, in having a castle-like folly put up to serve as a base while he worked on this group of plants specifically. Some twenty years later, in 1795, his *Neveis Britannica* appeared as the outcome, one of several superb folios to be devoted to the subject by affluent enthusiasts at that period.

The women collectors were all much too self-effacing to contemplate such feats; indeed, with only one or two exceptions none of them were ever to venture into any form of print. How then did it come about that so many of them achieved a considerable measure of genuine botanical renown, ending up with new species and

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even genera named after them? The answer to that question is to be found in the fact that most were condemned to lives of boring uneventfulness in small, relatively isolated seaside towns, in which a regular walk along the beach was one of the few kinds of outdoor recreation permissible. Short of dredging, an elaborate procedure which called for specialized equipment, the only way any collector had of acquiring specimens of the little-known kinds restricted to the deeper waters was to keep a watch on the beaches for any stray examples of them that happened to have been dislodged and cast up by storms. This elementary task was one for which such women were peculiarly well-situated. One by one, over the years, they were brought into touch as a result with specialists with monographs under way on these plants; and delighted to learn that their patrolling could be put to such wider and loftier ends, they scanned their local shores all the more diligently, periodically packing off by post consignments of their gleanings. In this way the seaweed fashion was to become the classic instance of the harnessing to the shafts of scholarship of what originally started out as no more than a tasteful diversion.

The fern craze

To a more limited extent such a claim could be put forward too in some mitigation of the greatest and ultimately most destructive natural history fashion of all: the Victorian fern craze.⁹ A British Isles phenomenon more or less exclusively, this was remarkable both for the hurricane-like force of its impact when it eventually took off and for the length of the preceding gestation. In some form or other, though at very different levels of popularity, ferns were the subject of fashionable interest throughout the whole of the nineteenth century. This was primarily horticultural in its inspiration and expression and can truly be ascribed to natural history only very secondarily. It is the classic case in its turn of how natural history has always been potentially subject to the powerful gravitational pull of neighbouring cultural realms, the boundary between gardening and field botany being one that is particularly ill-defined and porous.

Like seaweeds, ferns originally caught the fancy of cultivated circles when Romantic tastes were beginning to stir, and almost certainly because of the similar appeal of their fronds when clothing old walls and weathered rocks. Unlike seaweeds, however, at the outset they were frustratingly lacking in diversity. The species found wild in Britain were few in number and the larger of those were unspectacular and in the main insufficiently unlike. People consequently looked to the wealth of ferns in the tropics for greater aesthetic enrichment. Unfortunately, though, until the closing

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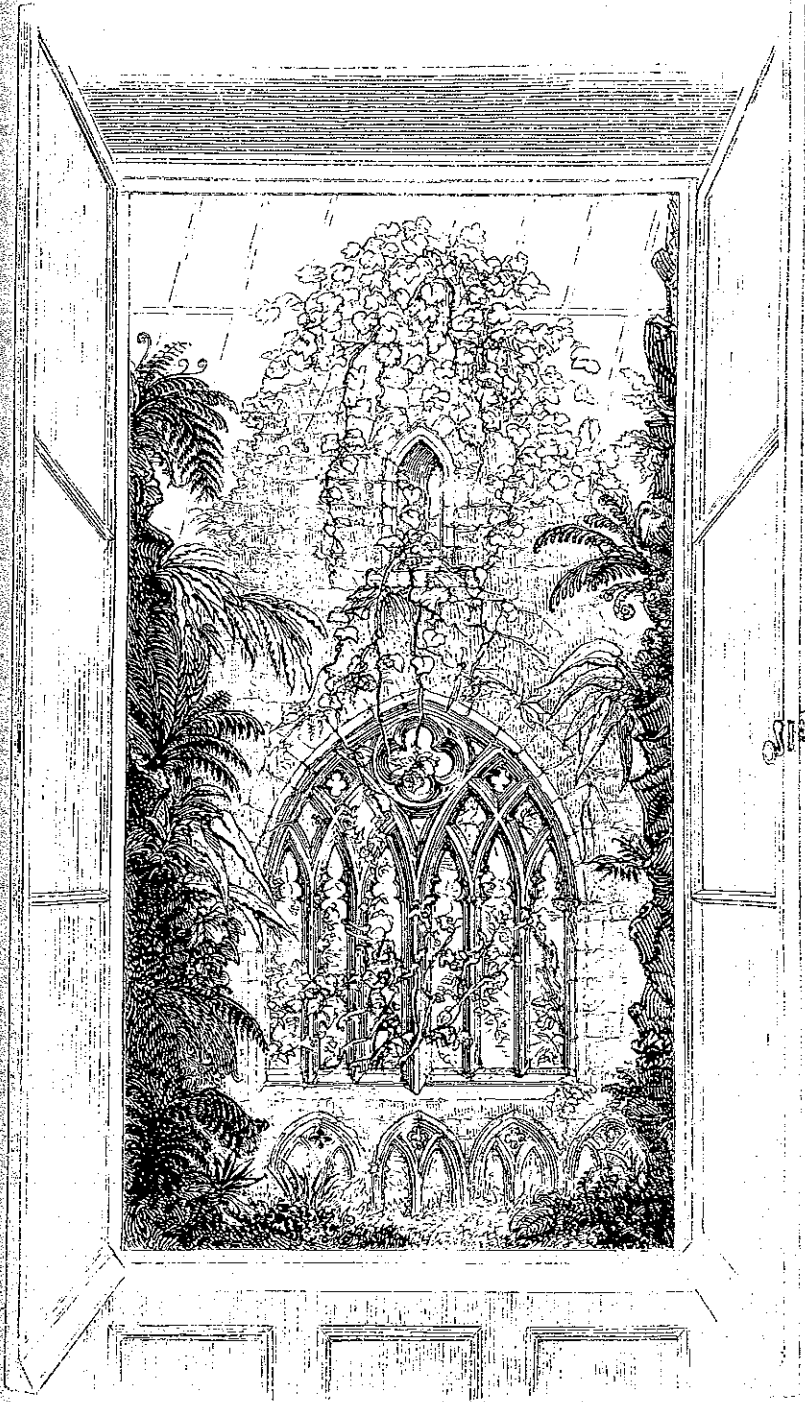


Figure 23.3 N. B. Ward's own personal fern-case, designed as a window of Tintern Abbey. Frontispiece to N. B. Ward, *On the Growth of Plants in Closely Glazed Cases* (2nd edn, London, 1852).

years of the eighteenth century hardly any of the tropical species had found their way into the hothouses of Britain, for the simple reason that till then no one had any idea how to raise ferns from spores and the vicissitudes of the sea voyages were generally fatal to the chances of successfully importing the living plants whether young or mature. Once the secret of spore reproduction was discovered and made known, in the 1790s, professional gardeners on the staff of some of the more horticulturally adventurous establishments started competing with one another in a race to grow the widest selection. Hothouses, however, were rich men's indulgences and that fashion seemed destined to be limited just to this tiny elite.

Then, early in the 1830s, the remarkable properties of more or less airtight glass cases were accidentally discovered by a London general practitioner, Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward (1791-1868). Wardian Cases (as they came to be called), the equivalent of today's 'bottle gardens', at last allowed living plants to be transferred without problems between regions with quite different climates; but, of more immediate importance, they provided micro-environments in which vegetation could flourish indoors (or on balconies) seemingly indefinitely, impervious to the fumes of the gas-lighting by then in increasingly general use. As the chief aim in having these cases was to brighten one's house with greenery all the year round, ferns were at once the favourites for this purpose, and would have been even had they not possessed a faintly Romantic resonance. At the same time glass at that period was formidably expensive, as a result of heavy duties originally imposed to help pay for defending the country against Napoleon, and that made ownership of such a case something of an extravagance. For a long time, therefore, this décor fashion stayed necessarily confined to the comparatively well-to-do.

Towards the end of the 1830s an enthusiasm for the native wild ferns arose in the ranks of field botany, at that time a suddenly fast-growing pursuit. For this, two books were mainly responsible, both by gifted freelance writers: *An Analysis of the British Ferns and their Allies* (1837), by George William Francis, which made up for a humdrum text with an attractive set of copperplate drawings, then a novelty in a work brought out at only a modest price; and *A History of British Ferns* (1840), by Edward Newman, which had first been published serially in a magazine and, despite making do with woodcuts, was written in a bubbling style which still reads irresistibly. Both books emphasized in their very titles that there was more scope than generally realized in learning to distinguish the relatively few native species and – as the justification for seeking these out was still primarily horticultural – in forming a collection of them on the garden rockery or, if Wardian Cases were

beyond one's means, in the living-room under inexpensive bell-glasses.

As the botanists poked around in the lanes and coombes of the more westerly parts of Britain (where the damper climate gives rise to ferns in greater profusion), they began to light upon districts where some of the species had 'sported' with unusual frequency, putting out fronds with gross irregularities, sometimes of considerable beauty. The fashion for collecting the wild species was thereupon rescued from dying of banality by a fresh surge of enthusiasm for hunting and growing these 'varieties' (as they were called, though in strict scientific terms they were merely monstrosities). Handbooks duly appeared in response, in which the variants were given Latin names and described and the places in which they had been found were reverently listed.

Then, just after 1850, this obscure and decidedly *recherché* little fashion exploded all of a sudden into a craze of nation-wide proportions, of quite extraordinary vehemence. Every other person in the country, it soon began to seem, wanted ferns to grow in their gardens or in the rooms of their houses; and as the supply of exotic species was as yet strictly limited, it was the ones that grew wild in Britain that were inevitably the principal victims. As new handbooks were rushed out and existing ones hurriedly reprinted, nurserymen signed up agents on commission to scour the countryside for every fern of sale value that they could find. Fern touts meanwhile sprang into existence, hawking the roots of choice rarities in the streets of cities and even on the summit of Snowdon. Half-starved country folk, seeing to their astonishment a source of ready money growing all around them, joined in with no less abandon and even less discretion. Whole hillsides were stripped bare; woods were cleared of every frond; even private estates were invaded and plundered. It has taken the best part of a century for the native fern flora to recover.

There were two main causes for this huge, dramatic outburst, one obvious, the other less so. The obvious one was the arrival on the market of mass-produced sheet glass, consequent upon the repeal of the glass duties (after persistent, high-level lobbying) in 1845. Those duties had not only made that material unduly expensive: they had also discouraged technical innovation throughout the industry. The Crystal Palace, housing the Great Exhibition of 1851, was the immediate, stunning outcome. All at once everyone wanted their own miniature versions of that – and greenhouse manufacturers and glaziers proceeded to make fortunes as a result.

The other cause was a major switch in taste. As the leading trade magazine, the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, observed in a perceptive editorial in 1856, a liking for 'exquisitely beautiful foliage' was rapidly replacing 'merely gaudy flowers' in the public favour. The latter

taste, by implication, was less sophisticated because less subtle. 'Lovers of plants', the editorial went on, 'begin to prefer graceful form to mere spots of colour'. Dress, furniture, architecture are all now moving upon the same road side by side' – in the direction of ornamental intricacy and the loving elaboration of detail. By no coincidence, 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition, had also been the year in which John Ruskin first championed the Pre-Raphaelites. In 1855, in the second edition of his *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, he had gone on to sound the opening trumpet-blast of what was to be the Gothic Revival.

It was not long before ferns were breaking out like a rash in almost every conceivable decorative medium. Meanwhile people pressed the actual fronds, fixed them on white paper and hung them up on walls in frames. They also arranged them in pleasing patterns, again on white paper, and then sprayed them with indian ink to obtain silhouettes of a pleasing delicacy – an accomplishment known as 'spatter-work'. This last was thus, ironically, a late by-product of the fashion, instead of its initiator, as the equivalent 'seaweed pictures' had been a century earlier.

So quintessentially were ferns sensed as embodying later Victorian taste that they were still being taken from the wilds in horrifying quantities right up until the time of the First World War. By then, though, the fashion had become vulgarized, and was largely being kept alive by a commerce determined to squeeze from it every last penny. As if in obedience to the rules identified by fashion theorists, nurserymen ended up by offering the horticultural equivalent of 'hypertrophy', 'over-extension' and 'sartorial hysteria': fern varieties exhibiting such an extreme of deformity as to be tantamount to caricatures. When such a point is reached, it is a signal that a fashion has exhausted its stylistic possibilities before it has fully exhausted its social energy, with no alternative then left to it but to waste itself in flailing against a barrier as invisible as it must be impassable.¹⁰

Aquaria

There was one further major fashion which descended on British natural history in the mid-nineteenth century – with a similarly jarring abruptness and leaving behind it a similar trail of damage. In some ways a side-branch of the fern craze, it sprang from one of the same roots as that, was equally dependent on relatively cheap glass and essentially consisted of introducing into the Wardian Case movement and animation. Unlike the other fashions already described, however, it had no discernible stylistic associations or symbolical import: it seems to have been purely the product of a technical development. And although it was in part a

décor fashion, that might well not have been the case had it not fitted into a niche prepared for it already by the fern craze. Much of the enthusiasm it engendered may have been owed, rather, to its sheer novelty and its impact as a curiosity.

The technical development in question was the extension to the animal world of the oxygenating principle which made possible the Wardian Case: the chemical effect produced by growing plants tightly enclosed in glass not only enables them to stay alive indefinitely, but also sustains any creatures that are placed in with them. Although Ward had taken this step himself as early as 1841, converting one of his plant-cases into what he called an 'aquarium',¹¹ he was not concerned to publicize it and it was not for another ten years that its existence was made generally known (in the official catalogue of the Great Exhibition). By that time a professional chemist, Robert Warington, had begun undertaking a series of experiments in which he succeeded in demonstrating, and reported in specialist journals with exemplary thoroughness, the scientific basis of the principle.¹² Additionally, he was able to prove that it held for salt water as well. After that it merely remained for someone with the necessary journalistic skill to alert the wider world to the exciting possibilities that this opened up.

Such a one quickly materialized in the person of Philip Henry Gosse (1810-88). Gosse wrote on natural history for a living and had already produced several of what was eventually to be a long line of beautifully illustrated books on the subject, some of which became bestsellers; he is better known today, though, as the oppressively religious parent in that classic of autobiography, *Father and Son* (1907). Apart from his skill as a writer, his special contribution was to identify the 'aquarium' - or the 'aquarium', to which that had speedily become contracted - with the study of marine life more or less exclusively: for he chanced just at that time to have lighted upon the fauna of rock-pools and promptly succumbed to a passion for this. In his very next book, *A Naturalist's Rambles on the Devonshire Coast* (1853), he not only trumpeted his delight in that newly discovered miniature world, but also provided instructions on how to create a marine aquarium.¹³

Another nation-wide craze thereupon followed. All around the coasts rock-pools were pounced on and stripped of their inhabitants. Shops specially catering for the aquarist sprang up. The wealthy had palatial tanks erected in their drawing-rooms. Marine menageries pulled in the crowds in city after city and town after town.

But like all exaggerated fashions, this one had too much energy invested in it to be capable of lasting very long. Unlike the ferneries, though, aquaria were not expressive of Victorianism:



Figure 23.4 The marine aquarium. Engraving by F. W. Keyl in George Kearley's *Links in the Chain, or Popular Chapters on the Curiosities of Animal Life* (London, 1862), facing p 111

they bore no burden of symbolism that dictated that they should vanish once that symbolism lost its force. Aquaria have consequently continued in use down to the present day more or less uninterrupted, though a good deal less ubiquitously and with that one-time halo of novelty long since forgotten.

For the scientific world there was one notable outcome: the renowned Stazione Zoologica at Naples, a bold speculative venture embarked upon in 1870 and the scene of much important work

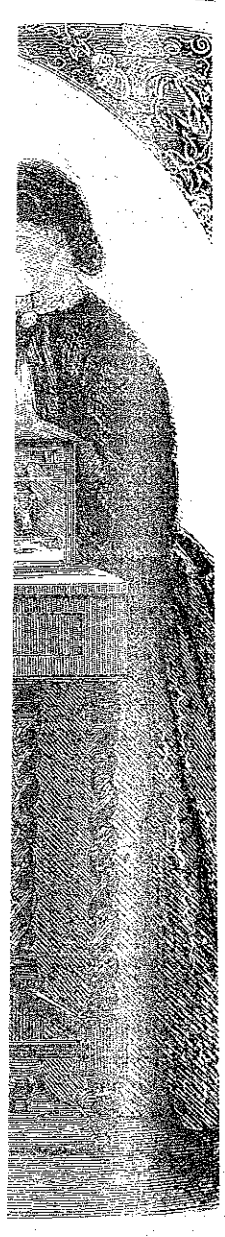
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at the cutting-edge of biology subsequently, was conceived on the assumption that it could be substantially financed from the fees charged for admission to a high-quality exhibition aquarium. Appropriately, the person engaged to build this was an Englishman, William Alford Lloyd, who owed his reputation and indeed his very career to the strong demand for the highly specialized form of construction work that the craze had engendered in Britain.

The fern craze, too, had its windfalls for science, albeit of a more modest character. They included the discovery of the value of spore characters for distinguishing between species, the proving of fern hybridity and the harnessing of nature-printing (a technique which the craze largely fostered) for the study of venation in fossil plants. Bud-propagation and apospory were similarly legacies to horticulture. All of these would doubtless have come to pass in time, but the intensity of focus that the craze induced caused such discoveries to be made much earlier than would otherwise have been the case. Whatever view one may hold of fashion as a process – and it has its admirers just as it has its detractors – there can be no denying that it does at least provide one good service to humanity in speeding up the adoption of useful practices and knowledge.

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- 29 Edward Forbes, *An Inaugural Lecture on Botany, Considered as a Science, and as a Branch of Medical Education* (London, 1843), pp 18-19.
- 30 Letter from William Bentley to W J. Hooker (21 January 1846), Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Directors' Correspondence, vol XXIV, letter 62; W J. Hooker to W. Wilson (26 November 1846), Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 'Letters from W. J. Hooker', fo. 101.
- 31 Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump. Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, 1985), pp. 76-9
- 32 For arguments that science should be regarded as sets of practices rather than a single conceptual network, see Andrew Pickering, 'From science as knowledge to science as practice', in Andrew Pickering (ed.), *Science as Practice and Culture* (Chicago, 1992), pp 1-26.
- 33 J. Ginstwick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales 1849-1851*, 3 vols (London, 1983), vol I, p 40.
- 34 Shiach, *Discourse on Popular Culture*, p. 33

23 Tastes and crazes

- 1 For a review of this and related concepts see my essay, 'Fashion as a social process', *Textile History*, 22 (1991), pp 347-58.
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We are grateful to Michael Clark for his revision of our English.

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