

Henry George Moon (1857-1905)

EXCEPT FOR THEIR DRIED SPECIMENS AND PUBLISHED WORKS, FEW OF THE botanists, naturalists, and collectors connected with the history of orchids left behind tangible beauty or aesthetic evidence of their work. It seems ironic, therefore, that many of the finest and most beautiful paintings of orchids were executed by a man who had marital ties to the Sander family of St. Albans, England, but who was not really an orchidist himself. The outstanding set of orchid portraits in the famed *Reichenbachia* speaks eloquently for the orchidological contributions of Henry George Moon.

He was born on 18 February 1857, at Barnet, England. He was the eldest son of Henry Moon, a parliamentary agent of Westminster. Until the death of the father in 1866, the son's school days were spent at Dr. Bell's, at Barnet. Even as a young lad he revealed a love of art. After his Barnet schooling he was for some years a student at the Birkbeck and St. Martin's schools of art, where his talent and skill won him numerous prizes.

In 1878 Moon went to the law offices of Messrs. Cole and Jackson, solicitors of Exeter Street, where he worked as a clerk with a view to the profession of barrister. Law, however, could not hold his interest over art, and in 1880 he joined the art department of *The Garden*, a popular horticultural publication. From that time on most of the colored plates illustrated in the magazine, including many orchids, were painted by him, and in later years he performed similar services for *The English Flower Garden*, *Wild Garden*, and *Flora and Sylva*. Through the encouragement of Mr. William Robinson, who had been influential in obtaining for Moon the position on the staff of *The Garden*, he went to his friend's beautiful garden and woods at Gravetye Manor where he developed an intense love for the English landscape and conveyed his impressions to canvas. Much of his spare time was spent in the further study of landscape painting, often in the company of Mr. W. E. Norton, an American painter to whom Moon attributed much of his own success in art.

Moon first visited St. Albans in 1884, going to H. F. C. Sander's orchid nurseries to make drawings for Mr. Robinson, then publisher of *The English Flower Garden*. In 1885 Mr. Sander asked him to illustrate the *Reichenbachia*, a magnificent work on orchids that came out in 1886 and continued until 1890. Concerning the artist and his work, Sander's grandson David stated years later:

In the studio at St. Albans, . . . there would stand painting many days in the year a man, Harry Moon, who had, as with most artists, great individuality. He would be given some subject, usually a newly imported species flowering for the first time, and asked to paint it. One can readily imagine the resulting painting which would, whether good or bad, represent the plant as seen by the artist. What is much more interesting, however, is the thought that the man who paid for the painting would criticise it and demand that it reproduce a plant grown to perfection. This Harry Moon was rarely willing to do.

Harry Moon spent four years painting these glorious pictures for the *Reichenbachia* and supervised the printing of this magnificent work. The printing was all done by hand in our own printing shops in the Camp Road, St. Albans. Mr. Moon made the woodcut etchings and our expert printer and engraver Mr. Moffat, with the help of one or two boys, effected the printing.

In the fall of 1892 Moon decided to settle permanently at St. Albans with his mother and sister, making frequent excursions to the Hertfordshire lanes and woods, painting direct from nature, and discovering fresh beauty in sky, leaf, and glen as the knowledge of his art developed. Commentaries years later attest to his skill. From Mr. R. E. Arnold:

H. G. Moon was very close to nature, and primarily, for this reason he stands out as, perhaps, the greatest of all British flower painters. . . . His plants live, there is an atmosphere of reality about them, and instantly, when viewing one of his pictures, is the plant's natural surroundings, its natural environment, cast vividly upon one's mind. . . . Moon, from his studies, envisaged his plants in their natural surroundings, and he put his mind, his very soul, to the task of producing a living thing; his imagination was of the keenest and, moreover, was a specialized gift. He was always striving to produce something essentially natural, he was rarely guilty of overcolouring, he bestowed equal care upon the minutiae and the salient characters. His backgrounds lent not a little to the beauty of his pictures; his perfect relationship of background to subject is little short of marvellous; and from this, perhaps instructive gift, his pictures gain immeasurably . . .

William Robinson, of course, had been interested in Moon's work from the beginning—particularly the landscapes. "I often thought," he mused, "that if less of his work had been given to plant drawing, how much better it would have been for landscape art." Orchidists would probably disagree, however, because the outstanding *Reichenbachia* remains itself as a monument to the artist. Moon actually did paint delightful Turner-like landscapes, and though he never had the time to be prolific in that vein, the Sander family knew of some twenty or thirty completed paintings.

Other interesting facets of Moon's work on the *Reichenbachia* were given by David Sander.

. . . He married Mr. (Frederick) Sander's only daughter (in January, 1894) and spent twenty years of his life painting orchids. How he found time to illustrate "The Garden," "The Orchid World" and several other current periodicals is not told, and yet, like all artists, he was frightfully independent. . . . George Moon painted what he saw. This—need I stress it?—conflicted considerably, and I should imagine consistently, with my grandfather's idea of business! . . . Take—just to mention a few of these lovely plates—the first one of all, that of *Odontoglossum crispum* var. *alexandrae*. Surely an absolutely perfect picture of an orchid! Or the delightful soft pink spray of *Odontoglossum rossii* var. *majus*, in Plate 4, proceeding from the relatively small imported "piece" of a plant. Look at the *Dendrobium wardianum* in Plate 9. I was able to take this plate . . . and place it on an easel in an art gallery in London. Adjacent to it I staged a single specimen of the love flowering plant itself. The truthfulness of the picture was truly remarkable, every detail being correct.

And the next plate, of *Cattleya dowiana*, which even shows the typical yellowing of the leaves and sheath and mosaicing of the backbulbs, which so often precedes collapse of a plant and perhaps accounts for its contemporary rarity in cultivation. I can imagine the argument George Moon had with his then employer Mr. Sander! How provoked to anger by Sander's insistence on a bigger pseudobulb and better portrayal of the "size to which it can be grown," and the artist's probable refusal to go on with the picture, except as he saw it. Equally strongminded, he held the card which proved throughout the work to have been a trump!

As an art judge and critic, Moon's opinions were always valued, and he was frequently called upon to criticize at the London sketching clubs—the Langholm, the Gilbert Garrett, Polytechnic, Birkbeck, etc. He helped many young artists through their difficulties, and those with whom he was acquainted treasured his friendship.

For some years he had been in frail health, and his death at forty-eight years of age, on 6 October 1905, was accompanied by profound regret and grief in the world of both art and horticulture. He left a widow and two small sons.