

## WHAT'S IN a name?

### THE CASE OF MR FLOWER POWER & SOLANDER

On Sunday 23 September the Museum commemorated the tercentenary of Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus' birth in the form of a public talk by historian of science Professor Sverker Sörlin, from the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. As the creator of a consistent binomial system of classification which granted each plant or animal a unique name, made up of two Latin terms, Linnaeus earned the title 'Father of Modern Taxonomy'. Revealing his more endearing Swedish nickname, 'Mr Flower Power', the Swedish Ambassador HE Mrs Karin Ehnbohm-Palmquist introduced the talk, while Dr Libby Robin from the Museum's Centre for Historical Research acted as MC.

Professor Sörlin began by premiering an excerpt from his intriguing film, *Linnaeus and His Disciples*. As a charismatic teacher at the University of Uppsala, Linnaeus attracted a large following; the brightest and hardest were chosen as Linnaean 'apostles' and sent on pioneering expeditions around the world. One of his favourite students was the Swede Daniel Solander (1733–1782), who travelled to England to promote the Linnaean system and worked as an assistant in the British Museum. Later he would be employed by Joseph Banks as a botanist on board Captain James Cook's *Endeavour* from 1786–1771. Even though Linnaeus never travelled to Australia himself, he named many Australian



*Banks' Florilegium*, Alecto Historical Editions (London) in association with the British Museum (Natural History), published in 35 parts, first edition, 1980–1990, set number 5/100. Parts 1–15, comprising 337 plates, are devoted to Australian plants. Each full set consists of 743 botanical line engravings, after the watercolours drawn from nature by Sydney Parkinson. Photo: George Serras

native species brought back to Europe by other such former pupils and explorers.

The *Endeavour* returned to England with over 30,000 plant specimens representing 3607 species, including an astounding 1400 previously unknown to European science. Banks wished to make these discoveries accessible to botanists throughout Europe by publishing the results, and from 1772 to 1784 he employed artists to work up Sydney Parkinson's unfinished *Endeavour* drawings and watercolours, and engravers to incise the final images onto copper plates. Solander added scientific descriptions but did not live to see the project completed, suffering a stroke in May 1782.

The entire undertaking was actually only published some 200 years later in the lead-up to Australia's bicentenary. Between 1980 and 1990, Alecto Historical Editions (London) in association with the British Museum printed the engravings under the direction of master printer Edward Egerton-Williams. Up to fifteen colours were inked by hand onto every plate, followed by watercolour additions by artists working directly from Banks' notes. As Museum curator Michelle Hetherington remarks, the 'extraordinary amount of work involved in producing 83,959 perfect impressions means that a second edition using eighteenth century printing techniques is most unlikely'.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the Museum is delighted with its recent acquisition of a full-set first edition of *Banks' Florilegium*, of which parts 1–15 (337 plates) are devoted to Australian plants. Happily, all are housed safely in thirty-five 'Solander cases', invented by Solander himself as a type of box for the preservation of specimens, prints and books during his time at the British Museum.

A smiling Linnaeus, a plump Solander and a reflective Cook are all captured in another new Museum acquisition – a group of Wedgwood & Bentley blue jasper portrait medallions, featuring white, high-relief profile busts. These complement the Banks portrait medallion already held by the Museum.

As part of the 'Heads of Illustrious Moderns' series modelled by John Flaxman circa 1775–1780, Wedgwood & Bentley responded to and encouraged the growing 'cult of celebrity' that sprang up with the Enlightenment and settled upon some of the *Endeavour* participants. Innovative pottery designer and manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795) actively sought candidates for the series amongst those he knew or admired, acknowledging for instance that Banks and Solander 'would be an acquisition to us'.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the medallions proved hugely popular and collectors could display hundreds of figures in bespoke cabinets with flat drawers, in a way referencing the idea of specimens. The Museum's medallions are all the more precious now due to their innate fragility, and the fact that the Wedgwood & Bentley mark was applied to them for only a limited period. Valuable too, are the inherited tools and methods of classifying life on earth. These remain so even in the face of massive technological and conceptual change, and the shifts in perspective as Australian institutions and individuals contribute their own research to international science. This legacy was appreciated by all those who later enjoyed a walk around Acton Peninsula alongside Professor Sörlin, Dr Libby Robin and others from the Centre for Historical Research, recognising plants and invoking the 300-year-old Linnaean system that remains instrumental to our understanding of the natural world today.

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Sir Joseph Banks, Wedgwood & Bentley medallion, modelled by John Flaxman, c. 1779, National Museum of Australia



Carolus Linnaeus, Wedgwood & Bentley medallion, modelled by John Flaxman, c. 1775–80, National Museum of Australia



Captain James Cook, Wedgwood & Bentley medallion, modelled by John Flaxman, c. 1779, National Museum of Australia.  
Photos: Lannon Harley



Daniel Solander, Wedgwood & Bentley medallion, modelled by John Flaxman, c. 1775–80, National Museum of Australia

<sup>1</sup> Michelle Hetherington, Offer of a Full Set of the *Banks' Florilegium*, (1980–1990), Set No. 5/100, Collections Committee Minute, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 4 July 2007, 1–5, 2.  
<sup>2</sup> MS. E-18617–25 July 1775. See Robin Reilly & George Savage, *Wedgwood: the Portrait Medallions*, London, Barrie & Jenkins, 1973, 55–56.