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Press Release

South American Botanical Art comes to Kew Gardens

The Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art

8 May – 8 August 2010

Curated by Dr. Shirley Sherwood and Pilar de San Pío Aladren (Real Jardín Botánico of Madrid)

'Old and New South American Botanical Art' is a vibrant exhibition, bringing the Latin continent's exotic and lush plants to life at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. It comprises 62 paintings from the Real Jardín Botánico, Madrid's Mutis Collection (1783 – 1816) – none of which has ever been on display before – and 68 contemporary works from the Shirley Sherwood Collection. This is the first of two new exhibitions in the Gallery as part of RBG Kew's Biodiversity Year celebrations.

Professor Stephen Hopper, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, says "Kew Gardens has a long history of botanical and conservation work in South America, a continent well known for having the richest diversity in plant life and it is a delight to open this exhibition during Biodiversity Year at Kew. This exhibition will allow visitors to see the vivid and delicate plants of the region, while also highlighting the importance of botanical art as a timeless scientific tool, recording every aspect of a plant to help botanists with taxonomic research."

José Celestino Mutis arrived from Spain in 1761 and became Director of the Royal Botanical Expedition of the New Kingdom of Granada (present day Colombia) over 20 years later. The Expedition was sponsored by the Spanish Crown. His task was to record the plants of the Spanish colony and look for commercially valuable crops, timber and medicinal herbs. He established an art school at Mariquita to train local Creole men to illustrate the Expedition's findings. They were trained by an established local artist, Salvador Rizo, who instilled a highly defined and uniform style. This has made it difficult to attribute the life-sized drawings to particular artists. The Expedition continued until 1816 and during that period about 40 illustrators worked on the project. An outstanding artist was Francisco Xavier Matis Machecha. There are six works of his in the exhibition. One is an elegant study of an exotic pink passion flower with the flowers hanging through a cascade of leaves, beautifully executed with the finest detail.

While Mutis was not an artist himself, he paid great attention to the expedition's materials, and ensured that high quality paper was obtained from Europe. He experimented personally with pigments extracted from plants and local minerals which he mixed with oils, gums, ammonia and other solvents to produce the colours needed. His careful approach resulted in vividly coloured paintings in tempera which still retain their beauty today.

Over 6500 works were sent back to the archives of the Real Jardín Botánico in Madrid in 1816. None was published until 1952 and this is the first exhibition in Europe of the Mutis Collection outside Spain.

Complementing these works are treasures from the extensive Shirley Sherwood Collection, including works by Margaret Mee, Alvaro Núñez and Etienne Demonte.

Dr Shirley Sherwood says "South American artists have contributed greatly to the development of botanical art, and my collection has over a hundred works from the region. It is thrilling to exhibit paintings by such talented contemporary artists with artworks from the Mutis Collection which have never before been on show. This exhibition is a great introduction to the variety and beauty of South America's splendid plants. The works are so remarkable that they are bound to cause a stir in both botanical and artistic worlds."

Dr Sherwood started her worldwide collection of contemporary botanical art in 1990 and soon afterwards she acquired paintings in Brazil, first being by the famous Margaret Mee who moved to Brazil in the 1950s. Becoming fascinated by the exotic flora, Mee survived 15 challenging collecting trips into the Amazon, only to die in a car accident just after her major exhibition opened at Kew Gardens in 1988. She brought back and painted hundreds of valuable plants, and four previously unknown species were named after her. The first painting she produced in the Amazon, 'Cannonball Tree in Belem', is in the exhibition, together with some of her notebooks.

Margaret Mee influenced many Brazilian artists who also feature in the exhibition. These include the Demonte family, a dynasty of botanical painters, and the award winning Alvaro Núñez whose work focuses on the fruits of the trees of the savanna, Amazonia and Pantanal. Núñez spends up to eight months on solo expeditions to these remote areas. He has an impressive 29 paintings in The Shirley Sherwood Collection, of which 13 works are in the exhibition.

Ends

For more information please contact Bryony Phillips, Tarry Barrowman and Bronwyn Friedlander in the Kew Press office on 020 8332 5607 or pr@kew.org

Notes to Editors:

1. About 30 other works from the Mutis Collection were shown in Spain and Colombia in 2009 to commemorate the bi-centenary of his death.
2. Mutis Collection, number 2050
3. **The Demonte family** are made up of the late Etienne, his two sisters Rosalia and Yvonne and his sons Rodrigo and Andre. They have influenced a number of Brazilian artists while producing beautiful work. Etienne Demonte was considered the most important painter of hummingbirds in South America.

Visitor Information:

- **Opening Times** (Now until 29 August 2010):
- Monday - Friday: 9.30am - 6.30pm
- Weekends: 9.30am - 7.30pm
- Galleries, Glasshouses and Treetop Walkway all close an hour before the Gardens.
- **Admission:** Adults £13.50, Concessions £11.50, FREE for children under 17 (accompanied by an adult). Admission includes free entry to all Galleries, Glasshouses, and the Rhizotron and Xstrata Treetop Walkway.
- **Contact:** info@kew.org or call 020 8332 5655

The Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art, opened in spring 2008, and is the first public gallery in the world dedicated to botanical art. The gallery, designed by leading architects Walters and Cohen, exhibits precious works of art from the collections of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and Dr Shirley Sherwood. It recently won a Civic Trust Award for architecture.

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew holds one of the world's greatest collections of botanical art, totalling over 200,000 items. Dr Shirley Sherwood holds one of the world's most comprehensive collections of contemporary botanical drawings, over 750 from over 240 artists. The gallery adjoins the Marianne North Gallery, a display of botanical and landscape paintings by Victorian artist Marianne North

The Mutis Collection

The drawings of the Mutis Collection are exhibited through the generous support of Mr Julio Maria and Mrs Beatrice Santo Domingo, and through a complimentary loan by the Real Jardín Botánico, Spanish National Research Council (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas). More information on **José Celestino Mutis** is available online

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew is a world famous scientific organisation, internationally respected for its outstanding living collection of plants and world-class Herbarium as well as its scientific expertise in plant diversity, conservation and sustainable development in the UK and around the world. KewGardens is a major international visitor attraction. Its landscaped 132 hectares and RBG Kew's country estate, Wakehurst Place, attract nearly 2 million visitors every year. Kew was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2003 and celebrated its 250th anniversary in 2009. Wakehurst Place is home to Kew's Millennium Seed Bank, the largest wild plant seed bank in the world. RBG Kew and its partners have collected and conserved seeds from 10% of the world's wild flowering plant species (c.30, 000 species) and aim to conserve 25% by 2020.

'Biodiversity Year at Kew' in 2010 will celebrate the importance of plant diversity in underpinning biodiversity through a programme of themed and seasonal horticultural displays, art exhibitions, educational activities for all the family and scientific announcements. For a full programme of events see www.kew.org/press/2010.html or visit www.kew.org/biodiversity

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