



## Object List

Dioscorides Pedanius. Codex Vindobonensis: Med. Gr. 1 der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek / Dioscurides. Graz: Akademische Druck u. Verlagsanstalt, 1970. Facsimile edition, courtesy of Vassar College Archives and Special Collections.

Aloe vera specimen, courtesy of Olmsted Greenhouse at Vassar College.

*Iris versicolor* illustration from *Book of Flower Studies*, attributed to Master of Claude de France. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Mandrake illustrations from Kitāb al-Ḥašā'ish fī hāyulā al-'ilāğ al-ṭibbī Or. 289. Courtesy of Leiden University Libraries.

*Eryngium campestre* illustrations from the Morgan Dioscorides. Courtesy of the Morgan Library, New York City.

“Warrior and Physician with the Plant Kestron” illustration from a thirteenth-century Arabic Dioscorides. Courtesy of the Harvard Art Museums.

## ARCANE BOTANICALS

Natural Imagery and  
Dioscorides' *Materia  
Medica*

Senior Thesis Exhibition  
Curated by Natalia Fay '24

Vassar College Art Library  
*On View From:* Thursday,  
February 15, 2024



“Botany is the key.” John Scarborough, *De Materia Medica*.

This exhibition can be seen as thousands of years in the making, as it discusses Pedanius Dioscorides—known mononymously as Dioscorides—through his seminal work *Περὶ ὕλης ἰατρικῆς*, better known from its Latin title, *De Materia Medica*. Dioscorides, a Greek man from Asia Minor, wrote his pharmacological treatise probably as an active physician in the first century CE, though he is assumed to have traveled widely as part of the Roman legions and subsequently drew from oral traditions and folklore, previous scholarly works, and his own experience and empirical observations throughout the empire.

Pharmacological texts and herbals had existed for centuries before Dioscorides, as fragments known as ‘drug lore’ persist from the ancient civilization of Mycenae, and even passages from the poet Homer suggest some general knowledge of plants and their subsequent medicinal properties. Dioscorides, however, introduced a higher level of organization and accuracy to the field, which resulted in innumerable copies of his work in Greek, Latin, and Arabic across the Middle Ages.

Most surviving *De materia medica* manuscripts are unillustrated, with the exception of magnificent works such as the Anicia Juliana Codex, also known as the Vienna Dioscorides, as it currently resides in the Austrian National Library in Vienna. Vassar College’s own Archives and Special Collections Library possesses a wonderful five-volume facsimile of this codex, included as part of this exhibition. The manuscript on its own has lived a thousand lives: it was commissioned in Istanbul (then, Constantinople) for the Byzantine imperial princess Anicia Juliana, around 512 CE. Over the thousand-plus years of its lifespan, it fell into Western European hands as war booty



in 1204, was returned to Byzantium in 1261, was used by Arab doctors after the capture of the city by Ottoman Turks in 1453, and finally was obtained by Austrian royalty in 1569 for use in the imperial court library. Over these centuries, the original Greek text was mixed with smaller annotations in Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish.

For the centuries following its creation, this codex inspired and affected numerous copies of Dioscorides’ work, along with later herbals and medicinal manuscripts. Throughout this exhibition, folios of the Anicia Juliana Codex will be compared and displayed alongside images of folios from “Book of Flower Studies,” currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Leiden Dioscorides, named after its current home in the Leiden University Library in the Netherlands; the Morgan Dioscorides, which rests nearby at the Morgan Library in New York City; and a page from an Arabic codex from a later Dioscorides, currently at Harvard University Library.

Alongside these examples is a plant specimen lent from Vassar’s Olmsted Greenhouse, meant to stir thoughts about naturalism versus exaggeration, and originality versus archetypes.

This exhibition, as part of the visualization of my senior thesis in art history, came to light with an investigation into late antique and early medieval depictions of nature. Scholarship within the field of art history is quick to grasp onto the figural narratives within the objects it analyzes, which often ignores or pushes aside anything not resembling a human. Within the medieval world, though, botanical symbolism and depictions acted as intermediaries within the human and the natural realms, and thus the natural and the divine; they intersect all levels of medieval understanding to help humans make sense of the eternal quest: fathoming their own place within the cosmos they, and we, call home.