

Charles Faxon

Botanical draftsman and interpreter of trees.

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THE ARNOLD ARBORETUM OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S MEADOW ROAD winds between three ponds near the Bradley Collection of Rosaceous Plants. These prominent waters commemorate three staff members from the early years of the Arboretum: Jackson Dawson (propagator and superintendent), Alfred Rehder (taxonomist), and Charles Faxon (assistant director and botanical illustrator). These men, along with founding director Charles Sprague Sargent and explorer-botanist Ernest Henry Wilson, played central roles in shaping the Arboretum into what it remains today. Faxon's mark – in indelible ink no less – is the one we celebrate here.

Charles Edward Faxon was born in the Jamaica Plain portion of Boston, MA in 1846, not far from the land that was to become the Arnold Arboretum in 1872. As a child, he developed dual interests in natural history and art. Much of his schooling in natural history was provided by his



older brother Edwin Faxon (1823-1898), who was an accomplished naturalist, with particular interest on the cryptogams of New England. Edwin took Charles and younger brother Walter under his wing, teaching them the flora and fauna of the surrounding Boston countryside. Around the same time period, English artist James D. Harding published *Lessons on Trees*, a manual that Charles studied to learn the basics of illustration. Apparently as a teenager, he was known to proficiently reproduce Audubon's illustrations of birds.

A love of nature might lead to happy avocation, but as a career, even now it doesn't always pay the bills. Thus, following his public school education, Charles enrolled in the Lawrence Scientific School (now the School of Engineering and Applied

Sciences at Harvard), graduating in 1867 with a degree in civil engineering. He then took up work clerking in the family business of leather procurement and merchandising.

In the late 1870s, a pivotal event for the Faxon brothers occurred when Yale Professor Daniel Cady Eaton called upon them to make collections for Eaton's two-volume *Ferns of North America* (published in 1879 and 1880). It was in this work that Charles' illustrations (watercolors) first appeared in print, wonderfully complementing Eaton's erudite text.

In 1879, Faxon became a botany instructor at Harvard's Bussey Institution, a school adjacent the Arboretum dedicated to the agricultural and natural sciences. In 1882, C. S. Sargent hired him on a part-time basis as Assistant Director. In this position he was to curate the herbarium and organize the library – both of which were growing



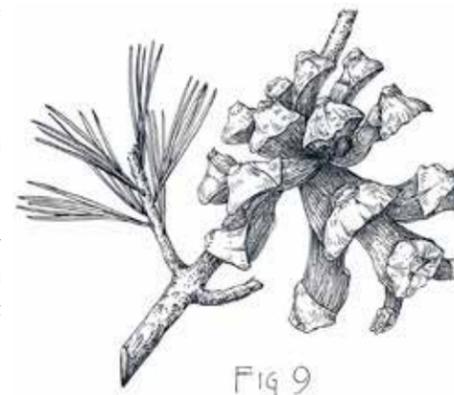
as quickly as the living collections. However, his primary charge was to assist Sargent with the *Silva of North America* by producing its illustrations. This seminal treatment, written by Sargent, spanned 14 volumes published between 1891 and 1902, and covered the known woody plants of the US and Canada. Sargent – the then “dean of American dendrology” – wrote eloquently and assertively about the various ligneous species, while Faxon brought the plants to reality and life with painstaking detail and beauty in pen-and-ink. By the end of the project, some 744 plates had been produced from ink drawings.

One fine example is his illustration of the vine maple, *Acer circinatum*, of the Pacific Northwest. Faxon captured the full array of diagnostic characteristics necessary for identification, without whimsy, yet with an astonishing delicacy and grace. In the forefront, the eyes are drawn to a rounded leaf, the margins and primary veins boldly and prominently outlined, as are the striking fruits from the same plane. The remaining leaf of this branch, and those shown on the flowering and sterile branches in the background, are drawn in lighter weights.

THIS PAGE: LEFT, TOP. *Acer circinatum* from *Silva of North America*. LEFT, BOTTOM. Charles Faxon. ABOVE. *Aspidium bootii* from *Ferns of North America*. OPPOSITE PAGE: *Pinus cembroides* from *Manual of Trees of N.A.* Courtesy of Arnold Arboretum.

When coupled to his subtle use of shading, the variable line weights effectively create a depth of field, a sense of realism that does not detract from the scientific purpose. His drawings were created first as botanical tools; that they are beautiful works of art is a bonus. Faxon's training as an engineer, where the rules of technical drawing and drafting were crucial, certainly was put to great use as a botanical illustrator, and he possessed an artist's eye for composition which served to raise his work beyond that of his peers.

Perhaps no finer praise exists than that provided by naturalist John Muir, who reviewed the *Silva* in *Atlantic Monthly* (July, 1903). He writes, "At the first glance through the book, everyone must admire the fullness and beauty of the plates. They were made in Paris, from drawings from life, by Faxon, the foremost botanical artist in America... these are so tellingly drawn and arranged, [that] any one with the slightest smattering of botany is enabled to identify each tree, even without referring to the text." While the text was important, it was nothing without Faxon's illustrations. Professor John George Jack, a friendly colleague of Faxon's at the Arboretum, felt similarly. Writing in an unpublished reflection (Archives of the Arnold Arboretum), Jack notes that without Faxon, the *Silva* "would never have grown to its final importance." And, interestingly, he observed



that while Sargent “possessed financial means, a strong will and a liking for gardening and trees... he was a poor observer of details in nature, a deficiency which was abundantly supplied by Mr. Faxon.” It may well be that it was through Faxon's ability to recreate natural phenomena that Sargent was able to truly grasp the plants he was charged with describing.

Faxon also produced several hundred illustrations for *Garden and Forest*, the *Forest Flora of Japan* (1894), and many other books and journals. Some of the best examples of his work were 34 drawings in John Donnell Smith's descriptions of Guatemalan plants that appeared in the *Botanical Gazette* from 1888 to 1894. Nearly 2000 of Faxon's illustrations were published over a 34-year period, an impressive record!

Faxon died in 1918, shortly after suffering a fall at home. In a tribute written in *Rhodora* of that same year, Sargent (not one to lavish much praise) writes that “Faxon united accuracy with graceful composition and softness of outline. He worked with a sure hand and a great rapidity, and few botanical draftsmen have produced more. Certainly none of them have drawn the flowers, fruits and leaves of as many trees. Among the very few who in all time have excelled in the art of botanical draftsmanship Faxon's position is secure, and his name will live with those of the great masters of his art as long as plants are studied.”

The Archives of the Arnold Arboretum hold all of Faxon's original ink drawings for the *Silva* and Sargent's *Manual of Trees*, as well as many of his initial pencil sketches, in addition to a notable collection of eighteen- and nineteenth-century floras. The Library and Archives are open to the public Monday through Friday; for information, visit <http://arboretum.harvard.edu/library/>.

For further reading:

Sargent, C.S. 1918. Charles Edward Faxon. *Rhodora* 20: 117-122

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Robert McNeill on his contemporary paintings of trees

My interest in trees stems from many childhood walks exploring the forestry in and around Kinneil Estate, Bo'ness Scotland, adjacent to where I used to live. The estate was granted to Sir Walter Fitz Gilbert of Cadzow, by Robert the Bruce in 1323 and has a long and varied history.

Just over two and a half years ago, having spent thirty-one years in art education, I took early retirement. I was captivated by the idea of becoming a botanical artist and embarked upon my first attempts at this genre. The *Abies koreana* was my second painting; it allowed me to explore and record some of the dynamic qualities of this beautiful tree, one of which I have growing in my garden.

My process always begins with rigorous objective inquiry through observation, to interrogate my subject matter. The subject is rotated in every direction to ascertain which compositional elements will best reveal and convey the essence and dynamic nature of the plant form. Before committing my watercolour to paper, I always experiment with the light source allowing it to play across the subject, illuminating its complex array of shapes, surface textures, forms, colours and perspective. Only when I have satisfied my inquisitive nature regarding these elements do I allow myself to begin recording the final composition.

The drawing is done using a 0.3 mechanical pencil with 3H lead. I use Winsor & Newton traditional quality watercolour, on Fabriano Artistic Traditional White 640 gsm hot-pressed paper, as it does not require to be stretched.



From the 17th Annual International: *Abies koreana* 'Carron', Korean Fir, watercolor on paper, 19" x 24", ©Robert McNeill, 2013