

BARBARA JOAN JEPPE (1921–1999): BOTANICAL ARTIST EXTRAORDINAIRE

Barbara Joan Jeppe (née Brereton) passed away on 19 June 1999, following complications after contracting pneumonia. Although she was diagnosed with lung cancer in 1998, her condition improved substantially for about seven months, enabling her to complete a beautifully illustrated, large-format book on selected species and cultivars of iris (Jeppe 1999).

Barbara was born on 21 May 1921 in the small gold mining town of Pilgrim's Rest in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa where her father was a land surveyor. At an early age she was introduced to wild flowers, pri-

marily through the efforts of her mother who taught her how to press them (Anon. 1999; Barron 1999). Her parents, Victor and Gladys Brereton, eventually moved to Johannesburg in 1928, where she matriculated some years later from Parktown Girls High School. During these years her love for nature, particular the flora, grew and blossomed. Her passion for painting flowers stayed with her for the rest of her life, even though she married at the young age of 20 and had a family to tend to. Four children, Leigh, Marie, Carl and David, all involved in the field of art, were born from her marriage to psychiatrist, Dr Carl Jeppe.

Some twenty-odd years after her wedding, she illustrated her first book, *Trees and shrubs of the Witwatersrand* (Tree Society of southern Africa 1964). This work established her career as a respected botanical artist and in the next 10 years it was followed by the books on the aloes of South Africa (Jeppe 1969) and the wild flowers of Natal (Jeppe 1975).

It was especially through her book on aloes that Barbara became well known amongst succulent plant enthusiasts and the popularity of the book ensured the production of updated editions in 1974 and 1977. The aloe books of both Jeppe and Reynolds (1950) were rapidly sold out and today any of the editions of both books are valuable Africana, items affordable only by wealthy collectors. She also produced a little book on aloes for inclusion in the *Pride of South Africa* series (Jeppe 1974), which was available in hard and soft cover editions and was also translated into Afrikaans.

Barbara was not only good at painting aloes. She produced numerous beautifully illustrated books on a range of botanical topics, such as the wild flowers of Natal which included four striking plates of aloes (Jeppe 1975), and spring and winter flowering bulbs of the Cape (Jeppe 1989; Pretorius 1989). Even though she preferred delicately detailed watercolours, she also illustrated a couple of books on, for instance, acacias (Davidson & Jeppe 1981) and cycads (Giddy 1984) by using pencil and pen and ink drawings.

The winter rainfall area of South Africa is home to one of the richest, most diverse and colourful bulbous floras in the world. Barbara's book on Cape bulbs (Jeppe 1989) includes watercolours and descriptions of 420 species, subspecies and varieties from this unique flora. Many of these bulbous inhabitants have, until Barbara Jeppe filled the void, been rather poorly known except to a handful of specialists. Although she had never studied either botany or art formally, the illustrations and text show her acute powers of observation, technical correctness and precise attention to detail.

It has been said that Barbara Jeppe's work is distinguished by an exceptional sense of colour. Her amazing ability to capture the elegance and beauty of plants in exuberant colours and also reproduce them with scientific accuracy led to her participating in projects such as Ciba-Geigy's (1975) illustrated handbook, *Effective weed control in maize and grain sorghum*. The book that contains 32 of her watercolours, today still serves as an authoritative guide to the identification of weeds commonly occurring with these crops in the field (Grabandt 1975). Moreover, it created an enormous demand from naturalists, agriculturists and horticulturists for a more comprehensive work. Consequently, Ciba-Geigy (1985) sponsored another publication, *Weeds of crops and gardens in southern Africa*, containing 134 full colour reproductions of paintings: 91 by Barbara Jeppe and 43 by Swiss artists from the Zürich School of Applied Art.

Sadly, Barbara did not live to see the publication of her iris book by Umdaus Press, Pretoria, which was launched on 24 August 1999 only some two months after she passed away. In many respects this was one of her finest



FIGURE 7.—Barbara Jeppe with a potted specimen of *Strumeria barbarae* Oberm. (Amaryllidaceae), the plant that was named in her honour.

productions. Barbara did not know much about irises when she started on the project, but true to her personality, she set about it with typical enthusiasm. The iris cultivars and species were painted with exceptional accuracy and in large format—the dimensions of the book are 420 × 297 mm portrait—with minute detail paid to the shape and colour of these striking Eurasian and North American garden plants. Although they are not indigenous to southern Africa, they are exceptionally versatile as garden subjects and have become so entrenched in local amenity horticulture that few gardeners give a second thought to the fact that they hail from foreign shores (Anon. 1982; Gardiner 1990). Indeed, in the words of Steve Bales, who wrote the foreword to the iris book (Jeppe 1999: 7), '...there certainly must be at least one (iris),...which will seduce the indigenous purist to set aside a suitable garden bed in which these plants may make their home'.

Another project in which she was involved will only be published posthumously, namely the one on the Amaryllidaceae of southern Africa. The text of this grandiose project is being written by Dr Piet Vorster of the Botany Department of the University of Stellenbosch. As with her previous works it is sure to be illustrated prolifically with her excellent paintings such as the *Clivia miniata* plate reproduced here (Plate 1).

A species of the family Amaryllidaceae, *Strumaria barbarae*, was named after her in 1981 (Figure 7). For her input to botany and horticulture she was awarded two



PLATE 1.—*Clivia miniata* (Lindl.) Regel, one of numerous Amaryllidaceae painted by Barbara Jeppe.

gold medals in 1990, one by the Botanical Society of South Africa—the Cythna Letty Gold Medal for contributing to botanical illustration in South Africa—and another by the South African Nurserymen's Association. The Transvaal Horticultural Society bestowed on her a silver medal in 1991.

We mourn the passing of an accomplished botanical artist who contributed extensively to popularise the magnificent flora of southern Africa.

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