

Notes on the Physic Garden

Acanthus is so ubiquitous a plant in ornamentation that I wasn't even sure it had a name or existed as a real plant; it's the curly leaves you see on the top of any column, deeply cut and somewhat similar to a fleur.

A year and a half ago, on a research trip in Italy, I paused to photograph a bushy plant in the Palatine Garden, not sure what caught my eye about it. The next day, when visiting the Painted Garden in the Villa of Livia, I recognized the same plant. I ran my photograph of the living plant from the previous day through an identification app - and there it was, Acanthus, in life, and in pigmented plaster. I feel like I see it everywhere now, atop tin architectural ornamentation in decrepit buildings in Queens, carved into the wooden door of my home. I had never noticed it there before, like so many weeds.

Dioscorides, author of one of the earliest herbals, "De Materia Medica", recommended acanthus roots to form a plaster to treat burns, and to wrap around dislocated joints. As an infusion, acanthus was thought to be a diuretic. It was also used to relieve wind and spasms and to soothe damaged nerves. Mucilage and tannin found in acanthus can be used externally to ease irritation, and internally to "heal and protect". *A. Mollis* is currently classified by the FDA as poisonous, but the agency simultaneously acknowledges prior medicinal uses.

Studying herbalism leads to identification and classification, naming and dividing, understanding to different usages, potential effects and malefices of different dosages. Coursing from invisible ubiquity and ornamentation into healing and poisoning, and back around - botanicals course a conduit of décor, symbol and salve.

When foraging, one learns to use soft eyes and different lenses - shifting between shape, pattern, texture, color, to see through thickets and briars, sometimes losing the forest for the trees. The sensual can override the analytic, only to snap back into a delighted surge of dopamine, when one recognizes it: there, it is.

And then comes the bigger revelation: All we see above ground is sustained through a vast network of mineral, mycelium, decomposition and exchange in the rhizosphere: the only place on earth where death becomes life again.

Ibex, stinging nettle, dandelions, dang shen, ginger, alchemical plants, laponite, alembics, dissolution, vapors, magical thinking, chunked rocks, and light.