

HORTUS NITIDISSIMIS

W. L. Tjaden \*

Summary

Like many other 18th century natural history works produced primarily for their coloured copper-plate illustrations, this was published in instalments a few plates at a time, and the relevant text was not issued simultaneously. In consequence publication should not be quoted as consisting of three volumes, but as 188 (nominally, 190) plates published between 1750 and 1792 with text published in 1756, 1768 (? late 1767), 1772 and 1786. The dates of engraving the plates are given, where available.

*Hortus nitidissimis* has 188 coloured, copper-plate illustrations approximately life-size on sheets 50 cm x 30 cm of flowers grown for ornament, almost all hardy in temperate regions, but a few need frost protection. The plates are mainly of cultivars of popular plants such as hyacinths, tulips etc,<sup>1</sup> but there are also many species, especially of bulbous plants. Only towards the end of the series are Linnean binomials used. The work, while of small taxonomic significance has been quoted in at least one nomenclatural analysis.<sup>2</sup> The abbreviated title given above is that portion which is common to all four versions, 1750, 1768, 1772 and 1786, of the title page, and means 'The flower garden in finest bloom throughout the year, or, pictures of the most beautiful flowers.' The letter press was published in Latin and German. Soon after the work commenced it was wrongly quoted by some bibliographers as '*Hortus nitidissimus* ...'<sup>3</sup> and this occurs to the present day.<sup>4</sup>

The work was commenced in 1750 by the Nuremberg artist-engraver J. M. Seligmann (1720—1762). It was based on the collection of coloured flower drawings made by the wealthy physician and amateur botanist C. J. Trew (1695—1769), the principal artist being G. D. Ehret. Trew also employed several local artists, among whom N. F. Eisenberger and J. C. Keller were also engravers and publishers of coloured, copper-plate works. Trew's name figures prominently on the title pages of *Hortus nitidissimis*, and the work is commonly catalogued under his name rather than under Seligmann's where it properly belongs. Pritzel in *Thesaurus literaturae botanicae* quotes most of the title page published in 1768<sup>5</sup> by Seligmann's successors ('sumtibus Seligmanni Haeredum MDCCLXVIII'), and states the work as published between 1750 and 1786 in three volumes, folio, latin and german, vol. I 1750—1768 tab.col. 1—59, vol. II 1772 tab.col. 60—120, vol. III 1786 tab.col. 121—180, the last two volumes published by A. L. Wirsing. Nissen quotes the dates of vol. I thus '[1750]—1768.'<sup>6</sup>

The *Göttingische Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen* [hereafter ‘Anzeigen’] in the issue of 9 Nov. 1750 recorded that Seligmann had begun a new, very fine work under the title ‘Amoenissimum Florum Imagines...’, and said that the two plates received represented a tulip and a hyacinth. They were drawn from life and cleanly coloured. The large folio-sized plate cost 20 kreuzer or 24 kreuzer if on Dutch paper. The text cost 8 or 12 kreuzer a sheet respectively. I have found no further reviews. The ‘Anzeigen’ for 5 Dec. 1757 promised another, but it never appeared, possibly because production of *Hortus nitidissimus* had, for the time being, stopped. Seligmann himself did not press on with the work in its early days. In the Vorbericht or Praefatio (actually a prospectus) which he had issued with the title-page dated 1750, and presumably with the first two plates, he said that the great expense of the work did not allow one part, intended to be of 25 plates, to be issued at once. Only two plates a month could be supplied.<sup>7</sup> Seligmann dated the engraving in 1753 and 1754 respectively only of plates no. 27 and 28 out of his 43. His average output from the start had been thus only two plates every three months. Most of the fifteen which appeared from 1754 were probably produced by 1758.<sup>8</sup> He continued to collaborate closely with G. L. Huth (1705—1761) who provided translations of the text in German versions of a number of English, French, and Dutch works. Those in which engraved plates were a main feature and therefore of importance to Seligmann for issue in instalments, included a combined version of Catesby’s and G. Edwards’s works, mainly of the birds under the title *Sammlung Verschiedener Vögel*; Smellie’s *Anatomical Tables*; Knoop’s *Pomologia*; and Feuillée’s *Histoire des plantes médicinales*. There was nothing to stop progress on *Hortus nitidissimus*, if Seligmann had judged the demand to be sufficiently strong. Clearly he did not: there was also the depressing effect on demand caused by the Seven Years War (1756—1763) for what was essentially a luxury item.

It is unlikely then, as suggested by Nissen, that Trew was dissatisfied by the late 1750’s with the slow progress of the *Hortus*.<sup>9</sup> His own *Plantae selectae*, ten plates of which had appeared almost annually since 1750 was at a standstill after 1755. In the eulogy of himself which he wrote in Latin in that year, apparently for binding with *Plantae selectae*, he said that its continuation depended on there being sufficient demand.<sup>10</sup> While he was sometimes slow in providing text, lack of demand may have been the main reason why the sixth decade of his work did not appear until 1760 and the seventh not until 1765. He had little to do with the production of *Hortus nitidissimus*. In his eulogy he merely stated that he allowed drawings of flowers from his collection, noted for their beauty rather than for their use in medicine, to be engraved under Huth’s supervision, and that he made his advice freely available. The plates although well coloured, could not reproduce the beauty of the original drawings. Again, there is no worthwhile mention of the work in his voluminous correspondence.<sup>11</sup>

The 1750 preface, probably written by Huth, promised to give correct cultivar names and to number the flowers of one genus consecutively in order to facilitate reference to the plate when in the course of the work there was something to be said about it, and to enable those who wished to do so to arrange the plates systematically. It was not the publisher’s intention, he said, to add to existing botanical writings: the text would only give cultural details from the best sources and a history of each genus.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the preface said, the publishers could not promise to produce the text in a given time, but each part of 25 plates would have a fixed number of sheets of text, to be kept until the part

was ready. Text for only three genera, hyacinths, tulips and ranunculus covering 13 folio pages, was however written by Huth, and was probably first published in 1756.<sup>13</sup> It is not known if it was published by the sheet for each genus separately.

After Seligmann's early death after a short illness, on 25 December 1762, and the death of his widow within two months, his business was acquired by the engraver J. F. Mayer who continued it as 'J. M. Seligmann seel. Erben.'<sup>14</sup> The young engraver from Dresden, A. L. Wirsing (1734—1797), had set himself up in Nuremberg in 1760, acquiring from the heirs the business of the engraver J. D. Heumann who had died in 1759. Wirsing must have seen the post-war possibilities of the neglected *Hortus nitidissimis*. He was allowed to take it over, but he did not, apparently, acquire ownership of the stock of Seligmann's 43 plates.<sup>15</sup> From 1764 to 1786 Wirsing produced 135 plates without missing a year, and from 1790 to 1792, 10 more. How many he issued at a time is not known, but every one is numbered and dated, and must have been published either in the same year or early in the next.<sup>16</sup>

By the end of 1766, with plate no. 58 issued, Wirsing and Mayer must have agreed that the first 'volume' could be regarded as completed. Seligmann's original intention that 25 plates should form a part, had been long forgotten, but his successor in order either to sell sets of plates 1 to 43 or to maintain the good name of his firm needed to complete the promised text. The classical scholar and linguist, C. G. von Murr (1733—1811) agreed to write it, possibly at Trew's request. Huth's sections on three genera were reprinted with a few small footnote additions by Murr, who added lengthy sections on thirteen more genera. While borrowing heavily from P. Miller's *Gardeners Dictionary*, Murr's classical quotations and references place his text among the most learned of horticultural writings. The two texts, German and Latin in parallel columns, are inevitably not faithful versions one of the other. They were published under the cover of a title page, dated 1768 by the firm of Seligmann's successors, with a preface dated 1767. This preface was the 1750 version reworded in the present or past tenses as appropriate from the future tense used in 1750, and naturally omitted the unfulfilled promises, in particular that 25 plates would form one part. The index to plates 1 to 58 which then followed said that plates 44 to 58 were obtainable from the engraver A. L. Wirsing who would continue to produce both plates and description. Plate 59 of a tulip and dated 1767, was engraved by Wirsing after the preface and index had been printed, otherwise it would have been listed to make a nominal sixty pictures (Plate 6 has two carnations).

By late in 1771 Wirsing had published plate no. 92 and his customers lacked text for four genera, Cheiranthus (1767), Passiflora (1768 and 1770) and Impatiens (1770). He must have been anxious to produce his own title page as publisher, so decided then what were to be his next thirty plates, to include for the first time Jasminum, Papaver, Aster and Hesperis. Murr agreed to write, or may already have written the text on these genera, again without his authorship being stated.<sup>17</sup> The text was published by Wirsing with a title page dated 1772, an index and a short preface dated May. The index listed plates numbered 60—61 to 120, and suggested that flower lovers ('anthophili') should insert plate 59 in the first volume.<sup>18</sup> It was said that the second volume would contain these sixty plates, for which reason their names were given, and further plates to make a third volume were promised. The preface gave the names of the artists as Ehret, the Jungfer Dietzschin, Karell, Keller, Eisenberger and Siverts.

Wirsing had produced the plates needed to complete his 'Volumen II' by late in 1774. While his output fell thereafter, he missed no single year and in 1786 issued fourteen so that he could publish title page, preface and text for a third 'volume', nominally again of sixty plates. The text is, presumably, not by Murr: it is without allusions to the classics and is taken directly from Miller's Dictionary. It omits five genera which should have been covered. No doubt Wirsing intended to deal with them later, for in the preface he said he had available yet more of Trew's fine drawings, and he would reproduce these for enthusiasts in a fourth, concluding volume. However, a gap ensued until 1790 when six plates appeared, followed by two dated 1792 and two final undated plates which, it is assumed, also appeared in that year.

Publication by instalment over so many years means that some sets of the work are inevitably incomplete. Further, the break in production in the early 1760's and the change of publisher in 1764 resulted in sets with only 43 plates.<sup>19</sup> The break in production after 1786 meant that complete sets of 188 (nominally 190) plates are especially rare.<sup>20</sup> These sets, as well as of Seligmann's 43 plates, were, however, apparently available early in the 19th century from the publishers' successors.<sup>21</sup>

In conclusion, in order briefly to record the publication of this work and of others produced in similar fashion, only the first and last dates on which either letter press or plates appeared, should be quoted. The three 'volumes' of *Hortus nitidissimis...* are artificial divisions, made no more natural because their existence is asserted by the publisher.

#### Footnotes

- \* 85 Welling Way, Welling, Kent, England.
- 1. There are 28 plates of tulips, 25 of hyacinths, 18 of carnations, 16 of ranunculus 14 of roses (including species) etc.
- 2. J. R. Sealy, *Kew Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information* 56 (1939).
- 3. H. F. Delius, *Fränkische Sammlung* 1: 354 (1755).  
G. A. Will, *Nurnbergisches Gelehrten-Lexikon* 2 (H-M): 210 (1756).  
A. von Hailer, *Bibliotheca botanica* 2: 697 (1772).
- 4. C. Nissen, *Die Botanische Buchillustration* 1: 177 and 2: 184 (1966).  
The words 'Hortus Florum Imagines' appear on the spines of some bound sets. These words appear in largest type in the full title.
- 5. F. A. Stafleu, *Taxonomic literature* 474 § 1327 says that Vol. 1 was ready by 6 Nov. 1767.
- 6. l.c. 2: 184 § 1995.
- 7. C. W. Knorr supplied two plates in each of the few instalments he produced between 1747 and 1751 of Schmidel's *Icones Plantarum* (Casper, in *Taxon* 16: 375). The shortfall between promised and actual rates of issue may be due as much to the intensity of demand being less than expected, as to procrastination by the publisher.
- 8. T. Georgi, *Europäisches Bücher-Lexikon*, 3rd Supplement 328 (1758) says that 36 plates with text were available in 1757, and H. F. Delius *Fränkische Sammlungen* 6. 94, that 42 were available in 1761. Plate No. 40 has on it 'I. C. Keller pinx 1757' and it could have been engraved in that year. J. M. Stock's name as engraver is on No. 34. While he could have engraved other plates about the same time, because Seligmann's name only appears as printer ('excudit') on some of them, there is no support for Nissen's suggestion (l.c. 1: 178) that Stock engraved plates after Seligmann's death.
- 9. Nissen l.c. 1 : 178.
- 10. *Christophorus Jacobus Trew, Medicinae Doctor...* 6 fol. pages and portrait.

Peter Collinson presented the copy sent to him by Trew, to the British Museum 9 Nov. 1759.

11. J. Pirson, *Der Nürnberger Arzt und Naturforscher Christoph Jakob Trew* (1695— 1769) (in *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte der Stadt Nürnberg*, 44: 448—576 (1953).
12. This is what was done. A horticultural historian would have welcomed statements of the origin of some of the cultivars.
13. G. A. Wil— 3. above; T. Georgi — 8. above.
14. G. A. Wil. *Nurnbergisches Gelehrten-Lexikon* ed. by C. C. Nopitsch 8 (S—Z): 196 (1808), and G. F. C. von Schad, *Versuch einer brandenburgischen Pinacothek* 185, 206 (1793). The title pages of Parts 6 to 9 of *Catesby und Edwards Sammiung seltener Vogel* dated 1764, 1770, 1773 and 1776 were published by ‘J. M. Seeligmann seel. Erben’. The plates, even at the end of the work, have the words ‘I. M. Seligmann [or Seeligmann] excudit’ on each one. As Seligmann had died in 1762 the word ‘excudit’ or even ‘sculpsit et excudit’ can therefore only be held to refer to a business and not necessarily to the actual engraver.
15. Had he done so then he, not J. M. Seligmann seel. Erben, would have been stated as the publisher of the title page dated 1768. Wirsing was not Seligmann’s business successor as stated by Nissen, l.c. 1 : 177. He rescued the Seligmann business much later, according to Schad (Note 14). H. H. Füssli, *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon* 621 (1820) says that Wirsing bought Heumann’s engraving business, and includes *Plantae rariores* (text by B. C. Vogel, using Trew’s collection of drawings) among Wirsing’s publications. Füssli does not mention *Hortus nitidissimis*, nor does F. T. Schulz in the article on Wirsing in *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler* 36: 99 (1947). Schulz quotes two plates only, numbers 70 and 128, unaware of the long series of which they are part.
16. The dates are as follows. The numbers 60—61, 121—122 are combined on two larger plates.

Numbers	No. of plates	Numbers	No. of plates	Numbers	No. of plates			
44—49	(6)	1764	101—112	(12)	1773	151—153	(3)	1782
50—52	(3)	1765	113—120	(8)	1774	154—156	(3)	1783
53—58	(6)	1766	121—2—127	(6)	1775	157—160	(4)	1784
59, 60—61	(2)	1767	128—130	(3)	1776	161—166	(6)	1785
62—67	(6)	1768	131—134	(4)	1777	167—180	(14)	1786
68—76	(9)	1769	135—139	(5)	1778	181—186	(6)	1790
77—86	(10)	1770	140—143	(4)	1779	187—188	(2)	1792
87— 92	(6)	1771	144—147	(4)	1780	189—190	(2)	no date
93—100	(8)	1772	148—150	(3)	1781			

That the plates were issued in instalments is shown in the obituary of C. J. Trew, by E. Rumpel, *Nova Acta Nat. Cur.* 4 : 331 (1770), where it is stated that 66 plates of flower illustrations had been published at Wirsing’s expense. Rumpel would not necessarily have been up-to-date with the exact number.

17. Murr’s sections on ‘Leucoium’, ‘Flos Keiri’, ‘Cranadilla’ and ‘Papaver’ appear to have been written much earlier as they are based on the 6th Edition of Miller’s *Gardeners Dictionary*. Murr refers in a footnote on sheet signature N of the 1788 text, to the forthcoming 8th Edition, which was published in a German version 1769—1771. He used this version for the remaining sections published in 1772, and quoted Linnean binomials in them. The first plate of ‘Hesperis’, for which text was provided in 1772, was No 123, so Wirsing changed his mind on the contents of volume 2 after asking Murr for the text.
18. This would not be done with volumes already bound. The copy of volume I at the University of Erlangen has 58 plates.

19. Hortus nitidissimis... S. 59, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, has 43 plates and 8 leaves of text, presumably Huth's.
20. Those at British Museum (two sets, with incomplete text), BM(NH) and Royal Horticultural Society all have 178 plates. The set at Kew has 168 plates and lacks the text to volume 3, but has the 1750 title page and preface. I am indebted to Charles R. Long, Librarian of the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, for a detailed list of the last ten plates, numbered 181 to 190.
21. Heinsius, *Allgemeines Bücher-Lexikon* Vol. 4 111 (1813) *Hortus nitidissimis* in 3 volumes with 190 [=188] plates at 61 Reichsthaler 8 kr. from Widtmann, [Wirsing's successor], and Seligmann's 43 plates with 1768 text for 12 Rthlr. from Fr. Campe. Nürnberg. There is no mention of the work in Heinsius' edition of 1793.