

Delectable Deceptions Wax Fruit & Vegetable Models: 1920's –1940's

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Background

No trip to the Experiment Station during my youth would be complete without a walk-by of the portrait of my grandfather hanging with other past directors of the Station, and a visit to the wax model collection. I remember climbing the big stairs to the 2nd floor of Jordan Hall, and getting on tippy-toes to peer at the life-like fruits and vegetables in the high wood and glass display cases. Over the years the stairs got easier to climb, and I made fewer visits. When I did, the collection was beginning to look a little tired. And then it was gone! Deemed old-fashioned, and the space needed for other purposes, the pieces were packed away.

So when I was asked by Station Librarian, Marty Schlabach, if I wanted to work with the collection this summer, it was like meeting an old friend. And this is how some would say I spent my summer vacation!

Delectable Deceptions

James S. Lawson was a man of many talents. At various times he was a pharmacist, a minister, a mentor to young artists, and a librarian. He also had a life-long passion for creating replicas of fruit and vegetables in wax. Here at the Experiment Station, we are fortunate to have so many of his “delectable deceptions”, including many wax models of grapes.

In the days before photography and particularly color photography, wax models were an important teaching tool employed in horticulture and botany classes, and often displayed in libraries, museums and research institutions. James S. Lawson, born in Ontario, Canada became a master at this craft.

As a young man working in a pharmacy in Guelph, he had the opportunity to meet, and later work with Mrs. Stanley Potter (Sarah), the resident wax artist at the Ontario Agricultural College. Lawson was a quick study and very inventive. In 1920 two scientists from the Geneva Experiment Station, visited the College, and were so impressed by the wax models there that they hired Lawson to come to Geneva and develop a similar collection. His title was Chief Preparator, and he worked here in the summers as a wax artist from 1920 to 1935. Clara Barnes carried on the work from 1936 to 1942, also on a part time basis. Unfortunately, little is known about Barnes. Together these artists created more than 400 wax models of fruit, vegetables and fungi.

The fascinating thing about these wax models is their realism, particularly in color and texture. You may even be tempted to take a bite, especially if you didn't have enough to eat for lunch. It is reported that Lawson would go to great lengths to achieve this realism. He actually cut pieces of hair from his arms to create fine bristles on raspberries, for example. You can imagine that for the students of the day, these models were a popular teaching aid. This is particularly the case because the students could now have access to facsimiles of plants which might be rare, not available locally, or out of season.

Little is known about how the Lawson specimens were made. But there is documentation on how Sarah Potter worked. And, if indeed Lawson was her student, it would follow that he would employ similar methods. Two representative examples of each fruit or vegetable would be chosen. One would be used to make a plaster mold. The second example was used for coloring guidance. The finished pieces here in the Geneva Collection are for the most part mounted with wire on heavy cardstock mounts, to which the name of the variety and sometimes further notes are given in a legend beneath the specimen in letterpress or a stamped format. We know that Lawson learned other skills such as soldering, tin-smithing and printing in order to further enhance his works.

In the 1970s the collection was considered old-fashioned and was packed up in Styrofoam peanuts and stored in a non climate controlled warehouse. (A conservator's nightmare!) However, the Library and particularly Marty have recognized the uniqueness and artistic merit of the pieces and the relation to the current interest in heritage plants or such hot issues of biodiversity, climate change and food security. As a result we are now inventorying the collection. In the beginning we thought we were dealing with about 200, the count is now over 400. This includes a grouping of fungi in wall cases in the lobby of Barton Lab.

This inventory is helping us to determine storage and conservation issues, as well as exhibition strategies. Because of the unique composition of the models, combining paper and wax, the issues are complicated. Also during the inventory we found that the reverse of the mount is often signed, thus enabling us to compare the modeling skill of the two artists. Some of the specimens are also dated; thus we are able to say that in the summer of 1925 Lawson was busy making wax radishes and other root vegetables; and sometimes the provenance of a particular specimen is given. The goal is to photograph the models and put the images and cataloging data on the Library website.

The Grapes in the Collection

Since we are here because of grapes and wine, we should speak about the wax grapes. These represent the largest group in the Collection, with over 90 examples.

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Included are grape clusters as well as a series of stems and buds, which document pollination of different varieties of the fruit. There is some duplication.

Wax clusters exist for the following grape varieties:

Brighton
Brighton pollinated with Catawba
Brighton pollinated with Niagara
Brighton pollinated with Worden
Brocton
Chasselas Golden (“Nov 23/35”)
Dunkirk
Eldorado
Eldorado pollinated with Niagara
Fredonia
Golden Muscat
Hanover
Hector (“C.L. Barnes 1937”)
Herbert pollinated with Catawba
Herbert pollinated with Niagara
Herbert pollinated with Worden
Keuka (“JS Lawson 1929”)
Lindley
Lindley pollinated with Catawba
Lindley pollinated with Worden
Muscat Hamburg (“C.L. Barnes 1936”)
Pontiac
Ribier (“C.L. Barnes Nov 4 1937”)
Salem
Salem pollinated with Catawba
Salem pollinated with Niagara
Salem pollinated with Worden
Sheridan (“JS Lawson 1929”)
Urbana (“JS Lawson 1929”)
Van Buren
Wayne
Yates

Specimens showing pollination include the following:

Brighton pollinated with Aminia
Brighton pollinated with Brighton
Brighton pollinated with Creveling
Brighton pollinated with Lindley
Brighton pollinated with Wyoming
Catawba pollinated with Herbert
Eldorado pollinated with Brighton
Eldorado pollinated with Eldorado
Eldorado pollinated with Golden Grein
Eldorado pollinated with Herbert
Eldorado pollinated with Lindley

Eldorado pollinated with Merrimack
Eldorado pollinated with Salem
Herbert pollinated with Brighton
Herbert pollinated with Eldorado
Herbert pollinated with Herbert
Herbert pollinated with Lindley
Herbert pollinated with Merrimack
Herbert pollinated with Salem
Lindley pollinated with Brighton
Lindley pollinated with Herbert
Lindley pollinated with Lindley
Lindley pollinated with Merrimack
Lindley pollinated with Niagara
Lindley pollinated with Salem
Niagara pollinated with Salem
Salem pollinated with Brighton
Salem pollinated with Herbert
Salem pollinated with Lindley
Salem pollinated with Merrimack
Salem pollinated with Salem
Worden pollinated with Grein Golden

The condition of the grape clusters for the most part, is not as one would wish, there is usually over all cracking of the berries, often all the way through to the center. The surfaces of some are dusty, and a few have the tell-tale tiny white flecks from the ex-Styrofoam. Some even have small pieces of embedded Styrofoam. Some of the clusters also have detached or missing pieces.

As with these, and the other specimens in the collection it is hoped to get experts in the field from the Station in to appraise their scientific value.

The Future

It has been interesting to put together the story of the Station's Collection, and the personages involved, as well as its place in the history of wax model making. As far back as 18th century Florence modelers were already creating fruit in wax. The 19th century found the art of wax modeling introduced as a home recreation for ladies. This was also the time of famous modelers such as the Mintorn Family who fashioned a large scale model of the Victoria Regia for Kew Gardens. Even at the World's Fairs and international agricultural exhibitions it was a common practice to include wax fruit specimens as part of the displays.

What began as a "Tale Of two Collections" is today so much more! Our research has uncovered other like collections in Buffalo, Chicago, Florence and Sydney, to name just a few. Ironically for me, one of the largest is in Melbourne where I currently reside. The librarians and curators we have contacted have been very generous with information. Many were not aware of the other collections around the world, so we feel that there is an opportunity to build a network of wax model collections.

We are now putting together a list of these collections, an extensive bibliography on the subject as well as list of wax modelers. We hope that the Station collection can once again find appeal with a new generation of students and researchers in viticulture, horticulture, botany, agricultural economics and environmental science; and that this art will not be lost.

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