In April of this past year, a simple question appeared in my email inbox. Did Goethe actually say “you really do not see a plant until you draw it”? This seemingly minor post began a six-month search that has me wondering if I need counseling.

It all began simply enough, with a basic online search – many GNSI members came up with the same findings. An article published in The American Biology Teacher in 1995 made the statement “It was Goethe who observed that you really do not see a plant until you draw it.” The author, M.C. Flannery, was describing Agnes Arber’s interest in botanical illustrations and herbalists. Arber wrote a 60-page article on Goethe in 1946. Easy, right? Just find that article and confirm the statement.

Arber’s article is in a rather obscure journal, Chronica Botanica. Luckily, working at a large University, I have the most amazing librarians to help me procure rare journals. This one, I was assured, was fairly easy to get from a storage facility. Great!

But two problems arose: 1) Arber’s article didn’t have anything about Goethe’s views on drawing plants, and 2) Arber’s article made Goethe sound really interesting. I ended up checking out a couple of biographies on Goethe as well as other books which might address Goethe’s views on drawing and botany. Oh! And I learned that “Goethe” is pronounced like ‘gouda’ cheese except with a ‘t’ sound rather than ‘d’.

GOETHE’S LIFE (IN A NUTSHELL)
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe entered the world dramatically in 1749 – as a stillborn baby, delivered by an untrained midwife at the stroke of noon on a hot August day. The infant was revived and did fully recover. But this experience led his grandfather, influential in the German town of Frankfurt on the Main, to pass a law ensuring that midwives be properly trained. Goethe light-heartedly credits himself with saving countless infants’ lives.

When Goethe was a boy, the French invaded his town and commandeered his home for a French officer. This man, François de Théas, appreciated the realistic style of German painters so popular at that time. He commissioned local artists to paint 250 paintings, allowing young Goethe to accompany him to the artists’ studios or bringing them to the house to paint. Goethe observed as the artists created their paintings. Of course, the boy began creating his own drawings. Today, there are over 2000 known Goethe drawings. Many were drawn on scraps of paper (a habit started while Goethe was young) and given away to friends.

At 16, Goethe began studying law in Leipzig, Germany. But he was more interested in studying art. He became obsessed with etchings, but his practice (in art and law) came to an abrupt end when Goethe inhaled acid fumes used to etch the metal. His health suffered greatly and he returned home to recover. During his year-long convalescence, Goethe began writing.

Goethe became a household name at a mere 25 years of age, when he published The Sorrows of Young Werther, a tale of forbidden love and suicide. After the surprising fame this book brought, Goethe began dabbling in other hobbies. He traveled, drew and developed an interest in geology and anatomy. At the ripe old age of 27, he traveled to Weimar to become courtier for Duke Carl August. Over the next ten years, he managed civil projects and taught anatomy and drawing to fellow courtiers. Around the same time, Goethe began studying botany through herbalists who supplied the town’s apothecaries.

Of course, Goethe was learning about botany shortly after Linnaeus developed his taxonomic system. While Goethe began
as a devotee of Linnaeus, eventually Goethe began publishing on shortfalls of the Linnaean view. Mostly, these arguments revolved around the plasticity of plant structures – how they changed during the plant’s development. Goethe is credited for first using the word “morphology”.

During his ten years in Weimar, Goethe never published his writing, and apparently missed creativity in his life. He dreamed of an adventure… and of Italy.

Goethe’s father had been to Italy before his son was born. The halls of Goethe’s childhood home were lined with Italian landscapes and his dream of visiting Italy had begun with those paintings. One night, Goethe stole away from the Duke’s Court and headed south.

The Italian Journey was a two-year adventure, down the ‘boot’ of Italy, across the sea to Sicily, and back north again. During this time, Goethe enjoyed theatre (under an alias because his name was so well-known) in Venice, studied the Renaissance paintings of Rome, hiked up Mt. Vesuvius as it spewed rocks, lava, and ash, and reveled in the gardens of Palermo and Padua.

It was in these gardens, that Goethe supposedly developed his idea of the Urpflanze, a primitive plant upon which all other plants descended. This idea was phenomenal because Goethe determined that the flower structures of a plant all were modified leaves. Charles Darwin used Goethe’s observations as a piece of data in his *Origin of Species.*

After returning to Weimar, Goethe focused on the sciences. He published *The Metamorphosis of Plants* and entertained the famous naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt, who dedicated his 1806 book on plants to Goethe.

Shortly before his death, in 1831, Goethe returned to the mountains of Ilmenau, Germany where he’d traveled more than 50 years earlier.

BACK TO THE QUOTE

So now that I’d learned about Goethe’s life, I could narrow down the timeframes when he might’ve said the mysterious quote about plants and drawing. I checked Goethe’s *Italian Journey* – it had to be when he was in Palermo or Padua. No luck. Shockingly, there was only one letter in which Goethe mentioned his primordial plant. And from this letter, it was clear that the idea had developed earlier. I went back to Goethe’s autobiography, *Truth and Poetry,* to read his account of his early days in Weimar when he first began studying botany.

Nothing.

Now, proving that someone did NOT say something is a lot more difficult than proving they did (actually, I’d say it’s impossible). However, I’d be willing to make that bet because Goethe enjoyed drawing for pleasure. He loved art. He doodled for fun. He observed many aspects of his world very closely. But he didn’t need drawing to help him do that.

Arber wrote “His strong and wide-ranging artistic gift…was invaluable to him [Goethe] as a botanist.” (p80) – and “…Goethe’s actual visual impressions were peculiarly intense, and greatly influenced his mode of thought; indeed, his inclination always drew him to ‘picture thinking’” (p85). These were the closest quotes I could find from the infamous Arber article. Clearly, they’re not what we were looking for.

I’m not Goethe scholar, but I feel that I’ve gotten to know the man fairly well. But, I wanted to check one more source — actual Goethe scholars. So I contacted the Goethe Society of North America.

Nothing.

And how about Dr. Flannery, whose article started this excursion in to history? I emailed her too. She was very quick and helpful with her reply. But... she could not locate the quote.

Perhaps we’ll never know.

INTERESTED IN GOETHE & THE MYSTERIOUS QUOTE?


Goethe, J. W., 1790. *The Metamorphosis of Plants*

Goethe, J. W., 1816. *Italian Journey*


Proliferous Carnation: “Seeing no way to preserve this marvelous form, I attempted an exact drawing of it, whereby I deepened by insight into the fundamental concept of metamorphosis.” — Goethe