

# Florilegium of Fortunata Obrąpalska – iconography of biological diversity in natural phenomena

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**Abstract.** Botanical drawings of Fortunata Obrąpalska are an unknown part of work of this eminent Polish artist photographer. In the special collections of the Library of Botanical Garden of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, there are 523 drawings of Fortunata Obrąpalska that she created in the years 1955-1983. The simple Bristol board ink drawing technique depicts in schematic, but at the same time perfect way, plants and natural phenomena like withering of underground plant organs, frost-damaged shoots or impact of wind on plants in coastal areas. The drawings are a proof of her excellent knowledge of natural objects, impressive drawing skills and imagination. They also show this artist's great sensitivity to beauty.

**Key words:** botanical drawing, herbarium, botanical gardens, library collections

## 1. Introduction

The impressive output of Fortunata Obrąpalska (1909-2004) in the field of artistic photography has been repeatedly discussed in numerous publications concerning her works (e.g.: Makowiecki & Michałowska 1999; Jurecki 2004; Kozień & Piłakowska 2014). The unquestioned artistic talent, diligence and drawing skills place her at the forefront of contemporary photographers and her works still inspire art experts. Acknowledged by Polish and foreign artistic communities, she remains an icon of Polish photography.

Less well known are the achievements of Fortunata Obrąpalska in the field of scientific graphics. They deserve attention and dissemination not only because of their artistic qualities, but also documentary value. The aim of this paper is to show the examples of graphic works of this artist documenting the diversity of plants, especially their underground parts.

## 2. Artist's short biography

Fortunata Obrąpalska was born on October 14, 1909 in Włodzimierz Wołyński, as a daughter of Leonard and Albina Szurowska. There she graduated from primary and secondary schools and took up her first job as a

clerk at the Polish Bank. Her self-written biography (Obrąpalska, mscr.), reveals that artistic interests and „talent in fine art present in her family” encouraged her to study. In 1931, she passed the competitive entrance exams and started studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Financial problems forced her to quit. She continued studies on the Faculty of Chemistry at the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius, graduating in 1939, short before the war outbreak. In 1936, she concurrently studied botany.

She spent the years between 1939-45 with her husband Zygmunt Obrąpalski in Vilnius, earning a living from work in a chemical laboratory. Over this period, under the influence of Prof. Jan Bułhak, her photographic interests became crystallized (Banaszkiewicz 1999). She tended towards impressionism and realism.

After settling in Poznań in 1945, Obrąpalska continued her photographic passion. She got inspired by surrealism at that time, but later she committed herself to realistic photography. In Poznań, she developed her talents over a 2-year course organised by the School of Fine Arts, where, apart from drawing, history of art, sculpture and other subjects, she studied also lettering. She did not consider herself as a painter or drawer but as an amateur, as we can find in her self-written biography. Although she experimented with various

artistic movements, her photographic passion shaped by Jan Bułhak, was heading towards nature observation and photography.

### 3. Botanical drawing – documentation of plants and biological processes

Botanical drawings are a completely unknown part of her artistic output. Around 1955, when a long standing cooperation with Aleksander Łukasiewicz, later professor and director of the Botanical Garden in Poznań, started, probably none of them knew, what fruits their common passion, namely plants, will bring.

#### 3.1. Memories

In numerous memories of Profesor Aleksander Łukasiewicz and his wife Róża Łukasiewicz's (Kalinowska, mscr.), Fortunata Obrapalska is depicted as a modest, talented and diligent person. „Beautiful personality”! She drew masterfully and was able to capture a natural phenomenon and portray it in a drawing. Obrapalska's outstanding drawing skills were appreciated by Aleksander Łukasiewicz, the then post-graduate student, as well as his thesis supervisor – Profesor Zygmunt Czubiński.

Difficulties in capturing essential morphological features and differences between living and non-living

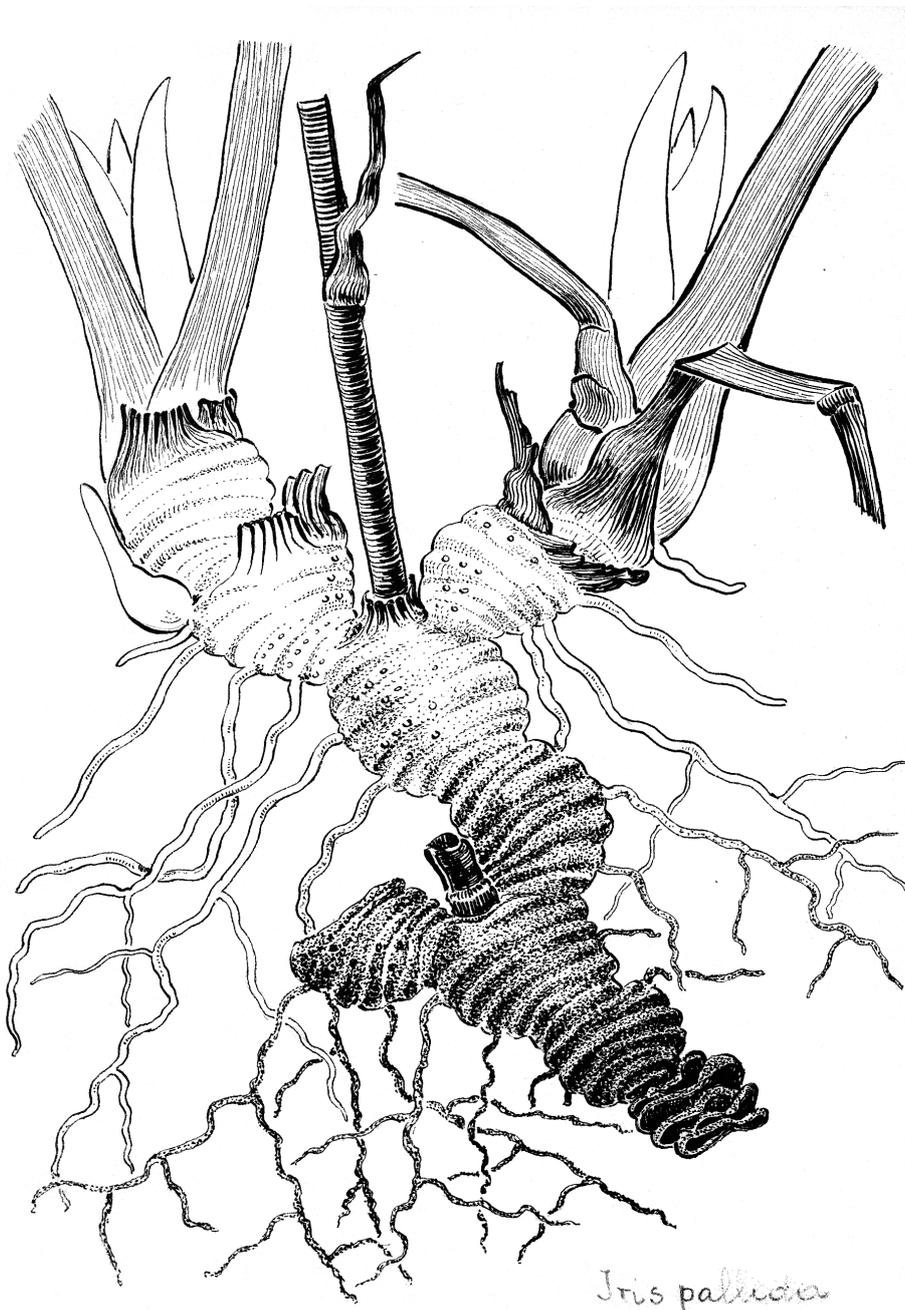


Fig. 1. *Iris pallida* Lam. (AMU Botanical Garden in Poznań, Sygn. JD004275, after Łukasiewicz 1966)

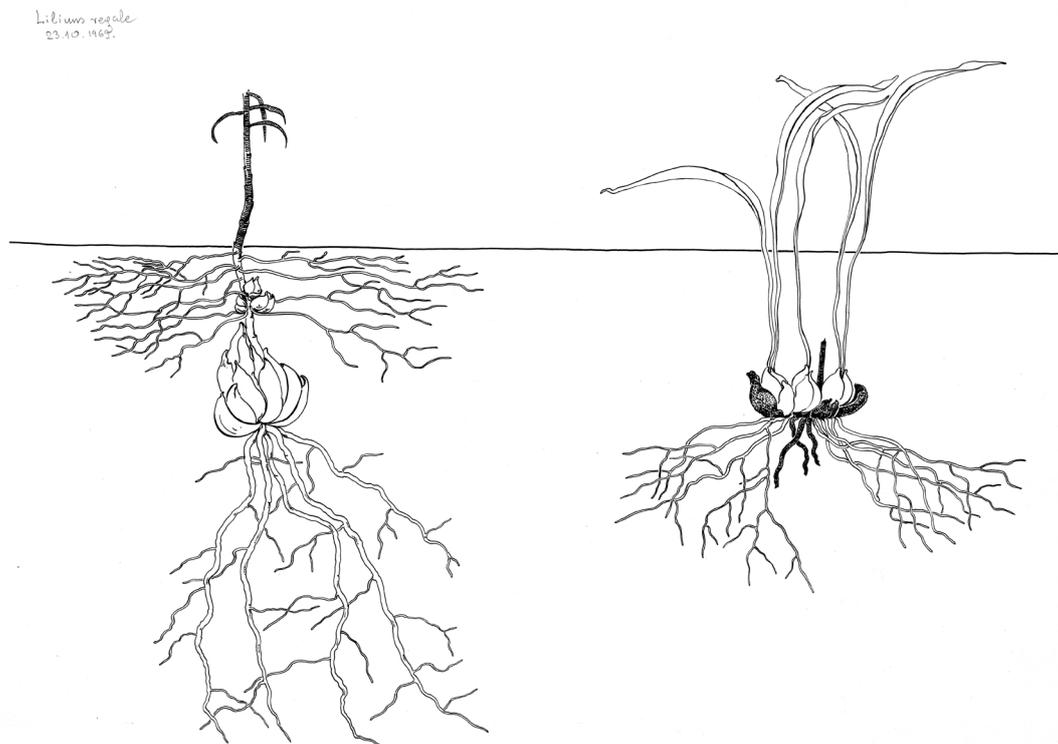


Fig. 2. *Lilium regale* E. H. Wilson (AMU Botanical Garden in Poznań, Sygn. JD003809)

parts of a plant by means of a camera were overcome by choosing the drawing as the technique to show details of underground and aboveground plant organs. A necessary element of these drawings were both three-dimensionality and legibility, consisting in emphasizing the significance of discussed plant features. Obrąpalska drew with ink on Bristol boards and she did that not only in a very precise way, but also very quickly. She

had a photographic memory. Thanks to that she was able to successfully finish drawings at home without taking the gritty and very heavy objects of the research work. She paid attention to the quality of paper she drew on. Within 4 hours, under the watchful eye of Professor Łukasiewicz, she was able to draw 3 to 4 pencil sketches. Consultations and corrections were interwoven in the process of drawing. She used to

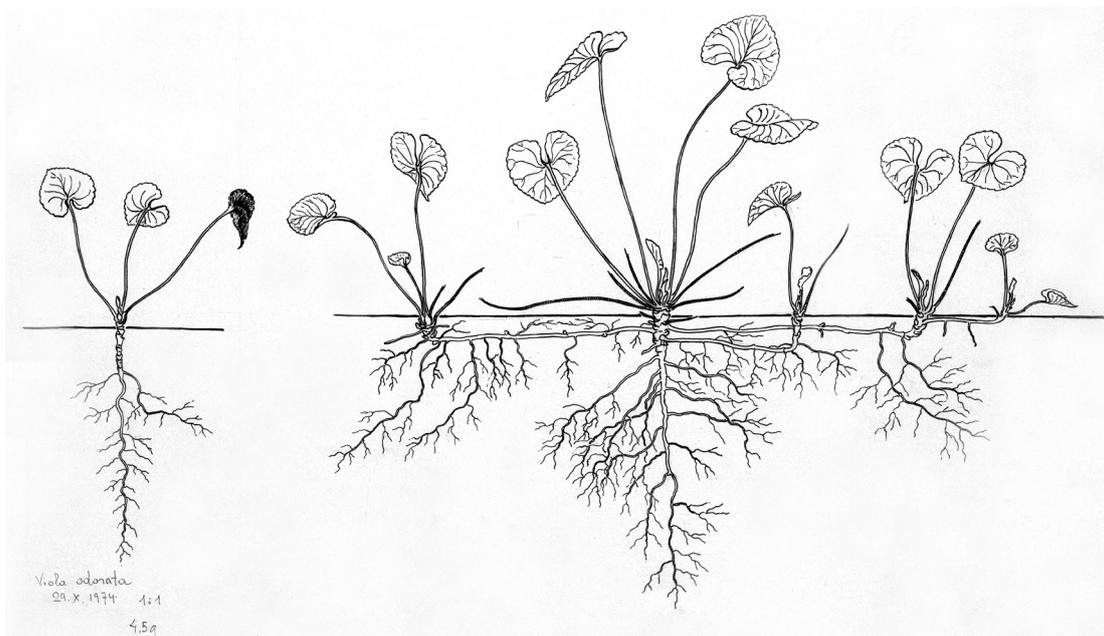


Fig. 3. *Viola odorata* L. (AMU Botanical Garden in Poznań, Sygn. JD003834)

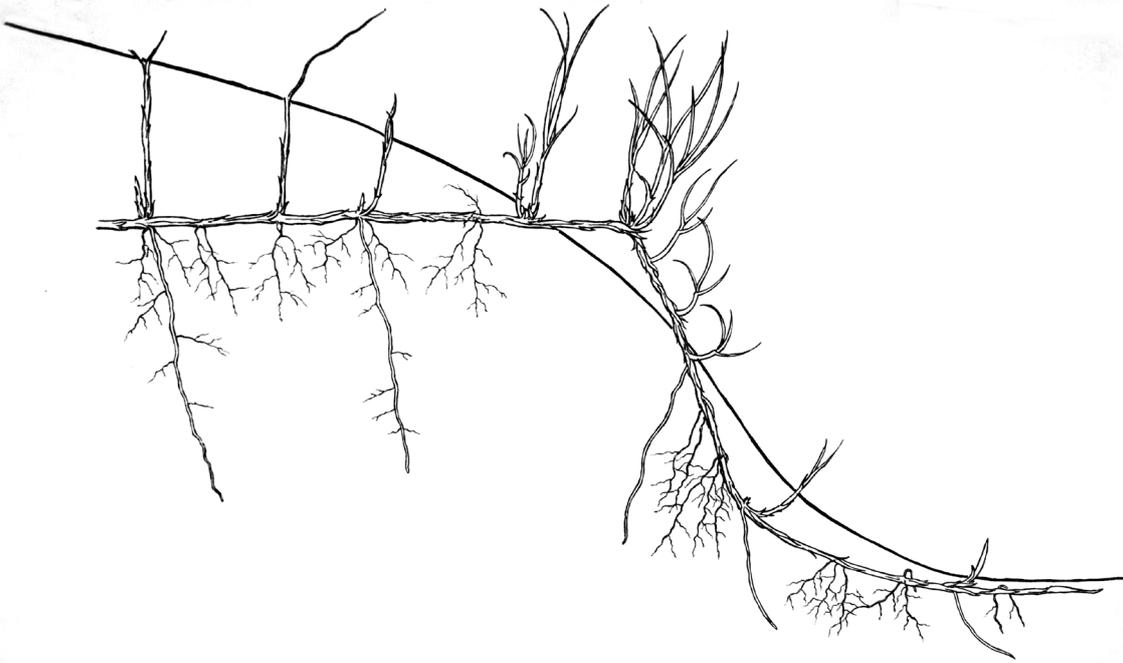


Fig. 4. *Carex arenaria* L. (AMU Botanical Garden in Poznań, Sygn. JD003879, after Łukasiewicz 1992)

come to the Garden between 9 and 13 a.m., always accompanied by her husband.

There is no way to separate technical questions of the creative process from the artist's personality, her way of life and personal interests, which she used to develop independently of timings set by employers or publishers of publications. Works of Fortunata Obrapalska are not only a scientific documentation. The combination of knowledge of plants, imagination and admiration for nature impresses not only a biologist but also an art expert and evokes emotions in both.

She drew mostly objects of nature. These were often roots, rhizomes, tubers and bulbs, rinsed or cleaned in the Garden's laboratory and in this way prepared for research (Figs. 1-2). Occasionally, she portrayed bigger parts of underground plant organs. Knowledge of morphology and great imagination were both necessary to properly show plant elements that were covered in the soil (Fig. 3). A particularly great talent and skills were needed to draw psammophytes (Łukasiewicz 1992). The plants were transported to the Garden from the dunes of the Baltic coast. For publication purposes, the root systems of these plants were to be drawn exactly as they looked in nature, on wind-blown sands (Figs. 4-5). Obrapalska did not take part in field studies, thus, the drawings are the result of close cooperation of the artist with Aleksander Łukasiewicz: they carefully watched together the objects of the study, he described the phenomenon, she was drawing, he accepted and she finished at home. "She drew masterfully" – Mr. and Mrs. Łukasiewicz repeatedly underscored her talent.

Obrapalska documented both plants and processes. She was familiar with rhizosphere, but she portrayed also aboveground parts of plants, like leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds or frost-damaged shoots of woody plants (Fig. 6). Many of her works were created for articles concerning the rhythm of plant development. She successfully managed to depict the germination process, as well as the growth and withering of plant fragments. She was able to draw also phenological diagrams. Additional virtue of Obrapalska's works of art are the legible, calligraphically written author's notes, mainly plant names, but also notes, e.g., concerning time spent on the drawing.

### 3.2 The artist's drawings in publications

The first publication of Aleksander Łukasiewicz with the photographs by Fortunata Obrapalska was printed in 1956 (Łukasiewicz 1956), and an article with her drawing two years later (Łukasiewicz 1958). Chronologically the last drawing in the Botanical Garden's collection is dated 6.10.1983, but publications with Obrapalska's illustrations were printed until 2002 (Łukasiewicz 2002). She drew also for other researchers working at the Botanical Garden. We can find her drawings in the article of Dr. Maria Górka (Górka 1975) and Dr. Wanda Wójtowicz (Wójtowicz 1991, 2000).

Some works ornament the cover of *Index Seminum*, a periodical publication published by the Botanical Garden (Łukasiewicz & Śmigla-Babula 1978). Most of the drawings were created only as research documen-



Fig. 5. *Festuca villosa* Schweigg. (AMU Botanical Garden in Poznań, Sygn. JD003892, after Łukasiewicz 1992)

tation for Profesor Aleksander Łukasiewicz and have never been published.

### 3.3. Collection of drawings

In the years 1955-1983, the artist created 523 drawings. 194 of them are not dated, which can imply

that they were drawn later. Most of the works were created on Bristol boards with ink, three on tracing paper, and one is a paper copy of a lost original. On some sheets, there is an embossed sign of the Schoeller paper company, the products of which were available in shops for artists in post-war Poland. Most of the

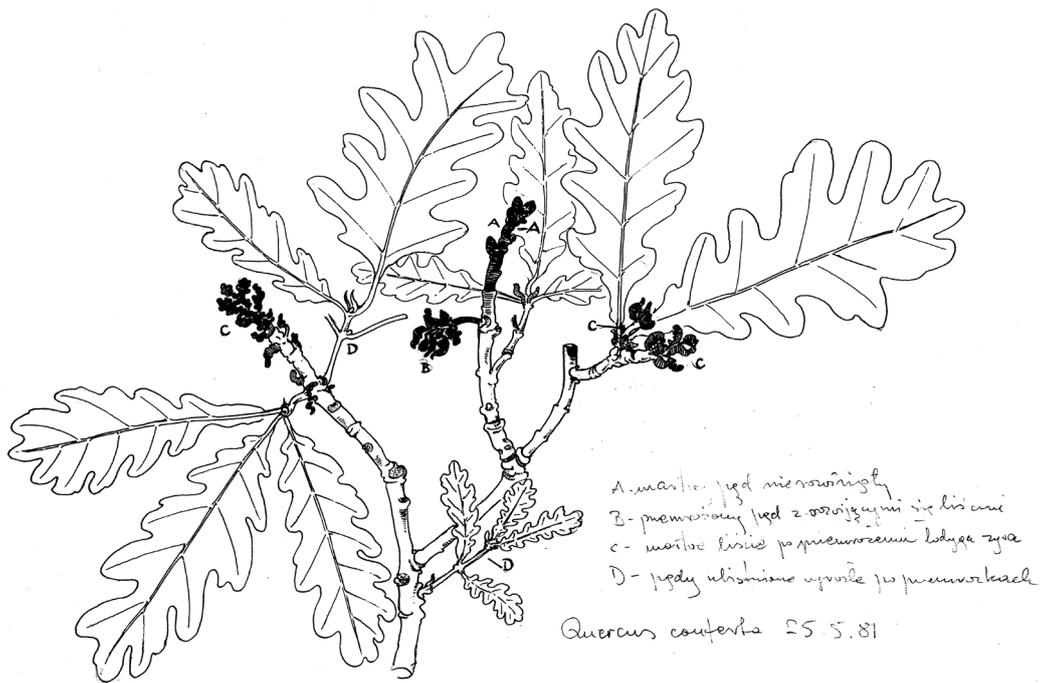


Fig. 6. *Quercus frainetto* Ten. (syn. *Quercus conferta* Kit.) (AMU Botanical Garden in Poznań, Sygn. JD003847)

drawings carry the Latin name of a plant written by the author with a pencil. Some are signed by Aleksander Łukasiewicz or Róża Łukasiewicz on the back or are accompanied by short notes.

Most of the drawings gathered in the Garden's collection measure from 16 × 23 cm up to 70 × 120 cm, and the time spent on their creation ranges from 1.30 to 10 hours.

The process of gathering, identification, verification and cataloguing of the iconography took place in the Library of Botanical Garden of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in the years 2000 to 2018. The vast majority of the collection was donated to the Botanical Garden's Library by Aleksander Łukasiewicz. A considerable part of the collection, earlier gathered in the several laboratories of the Garden or donated by the employees, was put together, verified and described and to a small degree even digitalized.

The output of Fortunata Obrąpalska is collected in 12 albums (portfolios). Tentative titles of some collections, given by Prof. Łukasiewicz, together with lists prepared

by Róża Łukasiewicz are retained, where it was possible. The drawings have the catalogue numbers XXIII-S-Ik-Rb/FO\_T1-12 (Zbiory specjalne\_Ikonografia\_Rysunek botaniczny/Fortunata Obrąpalska).

Fortunata Obrąpalska is the author of the prototype of the Botanical Garden's logo. Unfortunately, only a copy of the lost original is available. Her project was used to develop the final version of the logo, which is used by the Garden nowadays. In 1975, Fortunata Obrąpalska was awarded a medal during celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Botanical Garden of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

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