

Artists in the garden, museum and library

John Newton FRCP, garden fellow and Anita Simonds FRCP, Harveian librarian

The RCP's garden, museum and library provide a rich and intricate insight into medical practice past and present. The garden contains over 1,000 different plants with a connection to medicine. Many are sources of modern medicines, others were used by physicians in the past or are still used in other traditions of healing around the world. The archives and objects in the museum and library also provide a unique link to the way that medicine was practised, the people and plants involved and the cultural context.

The garden, museum and library are not only of interest to doctors and historians, they are a powerful source of inspiration to artists. Flowers and plants have long held a special significance in art. The exhibition '[Flowers](#)' last year at the Saatchi Gallery in London on the role of flowers in contemporary art and culture, displayed over 500 works. More specifically, there seems to be increasing interest in the professional art world in the role of plants in health and illness. Many currently active artists are inspired by the natural world and concerned about the threats to it from climate change. They are producing work that explores the relationship between the natural environment and human health.

Previous artistic collaborations at the RCP

The Archive, Heritage Library and Museum services team (AMS) has worked with a number of artists in recent years. A project, funded by the Wellcome Trust in 2019, produced the exhibition '[Catch your breath](#)' combining research, artist commissions and objects from the RCP's collections. In 2023, photographer Theo Deproost challenged our understanding and impressions of museum objects in the exhibition '[Unfamiliar](#).' AMS has also commissioned artworks for display, such as the elegant '[A heart of glass](#)' by Angela Palmer. In the Dorchester Library until August 2026, visitors can see the conceptual work '[Making visible](#)' by Catherine James which strikingly demonstrates the overlooked contributions of women to the college library. This includes crucial donations from Grace Pierrepont, Dorchester's daughter, whose portrait is featured.

In the garden, the distinguished botanical artist [Gillian Barlow](#) was the RCP's artist in residence in 2012, followed by Patrice Moore in 2013. Patrice speaks powerfully in [this video](#) about being inspired by the garden, as

was [Nina Krauzewicz](#), artist in residence in 2014. We also published and exhibited a series of specially commissioned botanical paintings in 2018 as [The Illustrated College Herbal](#).

New artist in residence in the garden

Since 2021, our own Karl Simmons (artist and one of our garden volunteers) has been producing beautiful annotated portraits of the plants in the garden to illustrate our publications and other outputs including three calendars.

Karl's work can also be seen in the garden itself and in the cabinet opposite the Hoffbrand collection of apothecary jars on the lower ground floor of the RCP at Regent's Park. Karl has been a professional artist and art teacher for many years and continues to be active in the wider art world. Karl has been appointed artist in residence in the garden from 2025–2027 in recognition of his continuing contribution.

New visiting artist scheme

From 2026, working with the RCP Philanthropy team, we will be formally appointing 'visiting artists' at the RCP. The visiting artist scheme aims to attract established contemporary artists (working in any medium) with a view to creating specific work for display or performance at the RCP buildings (London and Liverpool) and elsewhere. Their work will be inspired by their interactions with the garden, museum and library and discussions with relevant experts at the RCP. The artists will be invited to attend garden and museum events and to explore the collections in depth. The goal of the collaborations will be to develop creative ideas that are inspired by what they see and experience.

For 2026, we have appointed two exceptional contemporary artists to kick-start the scheme.

[Amy Shelton](#) is a visual artist whose work explores the role that plants play in tracing climate change and its implications for health, while also highlighting the historical, aesthetic, cultural and ethnobotanical value of plants. She has recently created commissioned work for the NHS at University College London Hospital, Dyson Cancer Centre at the Royal United Hospitals Bath, University Hospital Southampton and Great Ormond Street Hospital. The Crown Estate and many private collectors have also commissioned Amy's artworks. Her work was featured in the Saatchi Gallery's 'Flowers' exhibition last year, has been exhibited widely across

the UK and Europe and was the subject of a very recent *Lancet* profile. Amy plans to create a herbarium from plants in the RCP Medicinal Garden, which will serve as a palette for a series of illuminated artworks.

Jane Hayes Greenwood works in painting, alongside sculpture, video and installation. She draws on landscape and natural motifs to explore life, death, desire and embodiment, combining the familiar and the otherworldly to create heightened visual forms. She has exhibited in the UK, Germany, China and USA – including at the Saatchi Gallery, Stuart Shave Modern Art and Mana Contemporary. She plans to use drawing, painting and archival research to bring to life the layered scientific, cultural, personal and collective histories embedded in the RCP's archive, museum collections and garden.

Call for support

To make this scheme work, members and fellows are invited to make charitable donations to a dedicated fund at the RCP. This will be used to cover the expenses of the visiting artists, to commission work and support subsequent displays, performances or exhibitions. The more funds that we can raise, the more productive we can make the collaboration.

Anyone wishing to donate should contact Sally Williams, RCP head of philanthropy at Sally.williams@rcp.ac.uk. Those who donate will receive updates and invitations to relevant events. When we receive sufficient donations we will also be able to apply for matching external grant support (for example, Art Fund Commission grants).

We are confident that this scheme will generate new and exciting ideas and outputs. It will improve access and engagement with our collections and the garden from wider and more diverse audiences. It will expand the potential of our public programmes in ways that we may not be able to anticipate. If you would like to know more about the visiting artist scheme please email john.newton@rcp.ac.uk.

This feature was produced for the April 2026 edition of *Commentary* magazine. You can read a web-based version, which includes images.

