

Reflections in a Red Cage:
**THE MUSHROOM ILLUSTRATIONS
 OF CLAUDE AUBRIET**

I wonder not at the French, for their dishes of frogges, snailles, and toadstooles, ... but being amongst them, make them my common viands.

– Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*

The Age of Enlightenment was the Age of Fungus-Plants. The organisms we so easily classify as mushrooms were only beginning in the 17th century to emerge as a distinctive grouping from a structure of perception that posited the centrality of plants around which a host of inexplicable life forms seemed constantly encroaching. Yet the challenge of the inexplicable is to impel explication. The principles of the Enlightenment centered on reason and empiricism, extending back to the scientific revolution of the 1620s, and whether one posits a “pre-enlightenment” that precedes the developments of the 18th century proper depends on how one prefers to carve history into discrete parcels of time. The final decades of the 17th century in France saw the studies of several natural historians (today we call them botanists) that began to shake loose the allegorical predicaments of fungi from the kingdom of plants in order to affirm the primacy of a scientific

classification. Botany began to loosen its long-established connection to medicine, yet mycology was gestating in the womb of wonder, from which issued the unusual, the uncanny, and even the monstrous. One of these fungal monstrosities was the putrid “red cage” (*Clathrus ruber*) whose malodorous structure of engorged latticework seemed an affront both to the senses and to the mind. How to explain this oddity? With a macro-structure more architectural than organic, *Clathrus ruber* defied the dictates of reason even as it attracted the fascinated gaze of the naturalists. But it was left to an industrious French illustrator – a prodigiously talented painter to King Louis XIV – to help unravel the pretzel-like conformations of this unlovely gasteromycete to give mycological endeavor a small push toward becoming a distinct science.

The Enlightenment eventually brought forward the Swedish naturalist Carl von Linné, best known today as Linnaeus (1707-1778), to sort the fungi from plants, but he did so by consigning the fungi to the basement level of a fixed hierarchical structure. In his system of nature Linnaeus classified the fungi as *cryptogamia* (i.e., secret marriage) because their mechanism

of reproduction was then unknown: hidden and secretive. In this designation there lingered a fascination for a world that remained largely mysterious, even as the fungi were being classified, named, enumerated, and exposed to the pure light of reason. Prior to Linnaeus, Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1656-1708) and Antoine de Jussieu (1686-1758), among other naturalists, broached the colossal project of systematizing the plant kingdom, with increasing attention to the fungi as the years progressed. Tournefort was established as professor of botany at the *Jardin de Roi* in 1683, and he focused on a system of botanical classification based on the structure of the flower. His *Elements of Botany* (*Éléments de Botanique*, 1694) garnered great influence, and late in his career he even became interested in the cultivation of edible mushrooms. But his interest in the classification and depiction of mushrooms was most evident in his collaboration with an illustrator by the name of Claude Aubriet.

Claude Aubriet (c. 1665-1742) was a French illustrator and botanical artist, born in Moncetz near Châlons-en-Champagne. He succeeded his teacher Jean Joubert (1648-1707) as the royal botanical painter to King Louis XIV, and from 1706 to 1735 he was not only painter to the Sun King himself, but to the king's cabinet and his garden, the illustrious *Jardin de Roi*, now known as the *Jardin des Plantes*, the main botanical garden of France and one of the most popular attractions of Paris to this day. Aubriet also held an appointment as a painter of miniatures on vellum, or calf's skin, which he had learned in the



Plate 89 – *Hericium (Creolophus) cirrhatum*

studio of Joubert. His career paralleled that of Tournefort, who commissioned Aubriet to illustrate his *Éléments de Botanique*, a work that influenced plant classification for nearly half a century until superseded by Linnaeus. Tournefort's magnum opus included Aubriet's first illustrations of historical renown. He later accompanied Tournefort on a botanical expedition to the Middle East to illustrate the endemic flora of the Levant. Over a career of 35 years, Aubriet created 600 vellums for the royal collection and drew accurate scientific illustrations for the Royal Academy of Sciences that were exemplary depictions directly from nature. In fact, in his royal appointment and commissions from France's leading naturalists, Aubriet sought to illustrate all of nature, as his work encompassed the fields of entomology, ichthyology, ornithology, botany, and – our special subject – mycology.

In addition to his illustrations of plants, Aubriet illustrated the fungi. His mushroom paintings date from 1730 under the direction of Antoine de Jussieu, the botanist succeeding Tournefort at the *Jardin de Roi*. Aubriet created nearly 800 drawings for Jussieu in return for scant recognition of his art and artistry. A select portion of Aubriet's mushroom illustrations are available today in a bilingual volume published in 2010 by the University of Chicago Press in conjunction with the French National Museum of Natural History (*Muséum national d'histoire naturelle*). This volume – *Les dessins de Champignons de Claude Aubriet (The Drawings of Mushrooms by Claude Aubriet)* – presents the formidable artistry of this

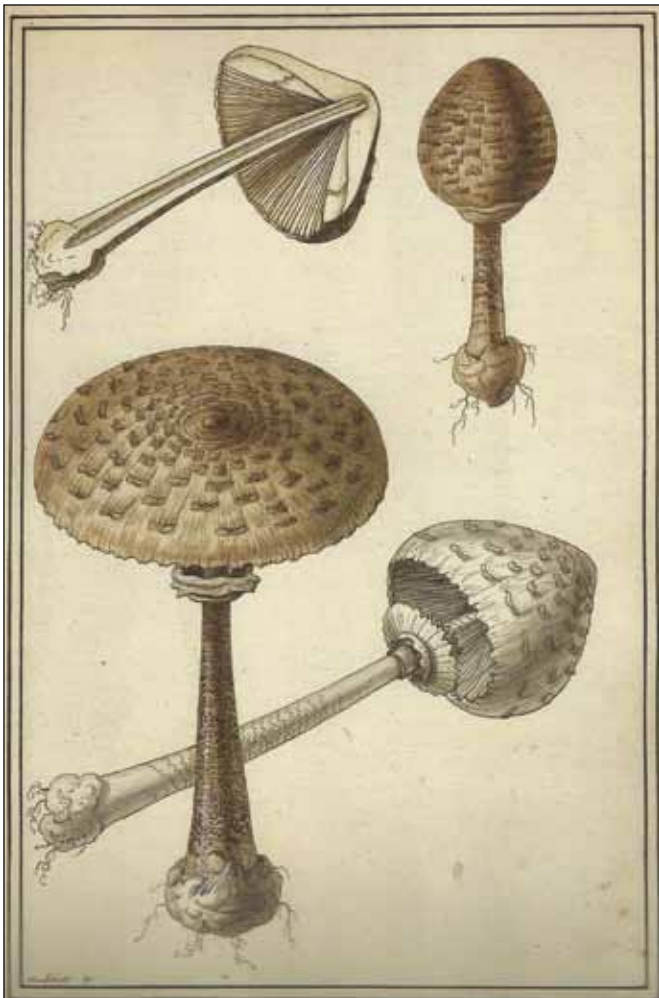


Plate 78 – *Macrolepiota procera*



Plate 90 – *Fistulina hepatica*

overlooked figure in the history of mycological illustration. Despite a few minor infelicities in the English translation Aubriet's *Les dessins de Champignons* is a triumph of painterly representation in the service of scientific observation. It returns us to a moment in which the perception of the fungi remained connected to the dominant misconception from Antiquity and the Renaissance that mushrooms were indeed plants, or variations intrinsic to the plant kingdom. Aubriet's mushrooms were drawn from nature, but certain peculiarities of visual interpretation betray the philosophical uncertainty of where the fungi might stand in relation to vascular plants. The drawings also reveal that, at that moment in the 1730s, natural history was not yet biology.

Les dessins de Champignons de Claude Aubriet presents 97 plates, reproductions of original mushroom illustrations, commissioned by de Jussieu to Aubriet, intended to assist in the former's own mycological study. All are macromycetes, with agarics and polypores holding conspicuous prominence. Some of Aubriet's illustrations seem perfunctory and unconvincing yet others are remarkably vibrant (recall that this is two centuries prior to the sublime artistry of Louis C. C. Krieger). There is an unequal level of quality overall, but the eye is rewarded with many familiar and positive attributes of anatomy, geometry, color gradation, and gill attachment to warrant this collection an enlightened advance to the maturation of mycological illustration. He covers the common genera as well as might be expected: *Agaricus*, *Cortinarius*,

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Plate 22 – *Ramaria botrytis*

Entoloma, *Hydnum*, *Mycena*, *Pleurotus*, and *Tricholoma* are all represented. There is a surreal *Otidea alutacea*, a robust *Coprinus picaceus*, *Helvella crispa* (with the peculiar designation of “mushroom-lichen”), *Amanita muscaria* with overly symmetrical veil remnants, and a *Hericium cirrhatum* whose fruiting body lurches laterally from a tree as if Aubriet had captured the action of the fungus shapeshifting into a grotesque otter or weasel. But the thematic discrepancy that catches our attention most are the rootlets, or rhizoids, that incorrectly adorn the base of the stipe of several species. Far too many of Aubriet’s agarics are portrayed with this “clod-root system” (“*system motte-racine*”) that implicitly projects the vegetal influence of roots, bulbs, and flowers onto the mushrooms. Even in otherwise accurate depictions of the agarics these pseudo-roots presume to situate the fungi as plant-like entities. Some plates are even more farfetched, e.g., a *Ramaria botrytis* whose fractal extremities seem perfectly nuanced but whose pseudo-trunk and trailing rhizoids are contrary to the species we know. These discrepancies undermine Aubriet’s stated method of a “strict scientific execution” in his overall approach to drawing mushrooms, and his realism suffers accordingly.

But what of the infamous *red cage*? Unfortunately, this wonderfully spectacular fungus is absent from *Les dessins de Champignons*. Aubriet indeed had drawn *Clathrus ruber*, aka the “reddish-orange latticed-body morel,” as early as 1713 in *Mémoires de l’Académie royale des sciences* for Antoine de Réaumur (creator of the Réaumur temperature scale), who remarked “I was surprised to see that he could stand the stench while drawing it” (*Les dessins*, p. 31). Aside from this swipe at the illustrator, Réaumur, in his own writing on *Clathrus*

ruber, could scarcely extricate his own sense of amazement and wonder from the scientific exactitude he was struggling to attain. In his 1713 writing Réaumur described *C. ruber* as “*Boletus ramosus, coralloides foetidus*,” and this is not to suggest that he mistook it for a bolete, for he called it a “*morille*” as well. The names are not at issue; the salient point is that just as Aubriet had attempted to provide a certain distinctiveness to the fungi (vis-à-vis plants) by drawing them from nature, their reputation as inexplicable, as mysterious, as representatives of an alien world in our midst yet beyond imagination often compromised the capability of seeing them clearly. Thus, in Aubriet’s illustration of *C. ruber* for Réaumur’s essay, he illustrated what Réaumur had actually described (but what Aubriet had *not* himself seen) – a gross, tentacular monster crawling out of a garden wall; an exploded version of the red cage whose arms “scattered like a repulsive octopus” (p. 68) and that shimmered in the imagination as an image of the unknowable. The red cage was one of the most depicted mushrooms of this period precisely because it was teratological – it beggared description: it was a monster.

Tournefort, too, expressed appreciation of another “*champignon extraordinaire*” that stood out as a confounding spectacle among the 80 different kinds of gilled mushrooms that he knew at the time (1733). Mycology and its wondrous



Convulsionnaires of Saint-Médard: There goes the neighborhood.

anomalies had not yet been completely regularized in the “tree of knowledge” during the general ferment of the Enlightenment. In spite of this, Claude Aubriet’s mushroom illustrations have helped teach us to visualize what is before our eyes. He was a vital participant in the scientific-artistic endeavor in a process of regularization, of demystification, of strenuous depiction of the fungi. Aubriet died on December 3, 1742 and was interred in the Saint-Médard parish of Paris, whose cemetery was the site where the *convulsionnaires of Saint-Médard* had ten years earlier writhed in ecstasy and fought a “war of miracles” at the grave of the Jansenist deacon François de Paris. One wonders at all the more of what he might have revealed to us of his neighborhood, of his labors for the Parisian botanists, and of the exquisite fungi like the red cage whose mysterious form he sought to understand.

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Stack a rock & make a cairn
in honor of the late Paul Klite

Plein air impressario of roguish
insights. Bemushroomed Picasso

of impish play. Remember not just
the sleek dome of that capital wit

but his wry mustachio'd grin
Never nasty but sly

Gone the booming voice
The basso profundo of words

that healed, a mind that raced
at the speed of a surgeon's slice

Standing under the terra infirma
of this fallen roof in the woods

I can hear his gypsy fiddle
aflame in the subterranean

realms of mycelia & laughter
And growing through the floor

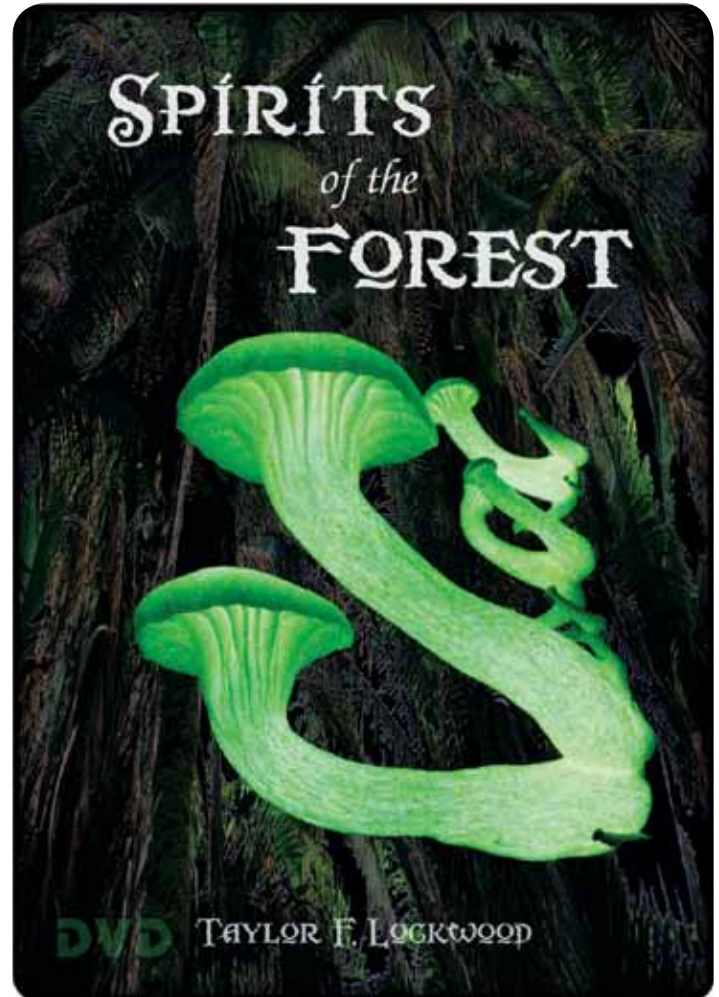
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Clathrus ruber, the "red cage." Photo courtesy E.P. Blanchard.