

This page:
"Nymphaeaceae:
*Nymphaea
norchali.*"
Opposite:
"Passifloraceae:
*Passiflora
alato-caerulea.*"

Fashion
photographer
Nick Knight
finds dazzling
beauty
in London's
Natural History
Museum.

Flora

flower photography is undergoing a renaissance, if the ever-growing stack of flower books in the corner of our office is any indication. But no new volume on botanicals we've seen is as unusual or as handsome as *Flora* (Abrams, \$30), the creation of English fashion photographer Nick Knight.

In 1992, Knight was shooting pictures for an exhibition at London's Natural History Museum when a resident botanist introduced him to a treasure: the museum's herbarium, a collection of more than six million pressed plant specimens amassed over hundreds of years. Knight was so dazzled by the beauty of these specimens that for almost four years he and his wife, Charlotte, stole as much time as they could from commercial assignments to sift through the collection, culling examples and making the exquisite photographs that appear in *Flora*. (To learn about Knight's technique, see



Below:
"Theaceae:
*Camellia x
williamsii*."
Opposite:
"Iridaceae:
*Crocus
corsicus*."



"On Set," page 84.)

"I was amazed at how the specimens had completely different qualities than you'd normally associate with plant life," says Knight, who estimates that he looked at 90 percent of the herbarium.

"Some were like steel constructions, architecturally precise. Others were like carefree children's paintings. Some of them were like feathers, but feathers of neon, laser-drawn, exquisitely refined and breathtakingly delicate."

Indeed, though plants and flowers have always been a staple of photographic still life, Knight was able to unearth a new aesthetic from these long-dead specimens. "Photographs of live flowers have a ready-made tragic quality because you know they're going to fade and die," he says. "Their beauty is transient. But these flowers were permanent, bold, and strong. They had escaped their fate." That discovery deeply excited Knight's artistic instincts. Says the photographer, "When I find a way of seeing something that goes against the common perception, it makes me very happy."—RUSSELL HART



