

In Search of the Garden of Pursuits

Within the peaceful Meise Botanic Garden, it seems improbable that 150 years ago discovering new plant species was a discipline comparable to gold-digging, in terms of both profitability and danger. Yet, the life of Benedikt Roezl (1824 – 1885) proved exactly that. From a small town in the territory of modern-day Czechia moving on to Belgium and South America, this immensely influential explorer was a giant of his generation, having recorded several hundred new plant species, but has since been lost to time. Until Rudolf Samohejl, a Czech artist living in Belgium, stumbled across Roezl's statue at Charles' Square in Prague. As Rudolf's work focuses on the theme of public memory, the large statue of a widely-unknown man at this incredibly prestigious site caught his attention. He conducted artistic research spanning several years, followed by a journey from Czechia to Belgium to Colombia, just as Roezl did, documenting the places where Roezl wrote botanical history. These places, just like Roezl's statue, seem to have been wiped clean of any traces of his presence. But... have they? The exhibition "In Search of the Garden of Pursuits" tackles the theme of the resilience of memory, and invites us to examine the connection between the historical outline of Roezl's life and discipline and Rudolf Samohejl's contemporary interpretation of Roezl's legacy.

Plant Hunters

Over the course of the 19th century, what were initially scientific journeys to explore and acquire exotic plants increasingly turned into "hunting" them for commercial purposes. This was driven by a burgeoning knowledge of cultivation and propagation techniques, as well as an increasing commercial interest, which led wealthy aristocrats - and, later, entrepreneurs - to build exclusive plant collections.

From the mid-19th century onwards, several large horticultural companies established themselves in Europe to export, produce and sell exotic plants. Their business relied on so-called Plant Hunters who travelled to remote, exotic locations to collect plants in the wilderness. Their task was to find as many plants as possible that were in demand in Europe - mainly orchids. The plants were also supposed to be unknown on the old continent, or with little to no cultivation there. The hunters' task was to obtain and prepare them for shipping to Europe. This transfer often lasted more than a month; only fifteen plants out of a hundred are estimated to have survived such journeys. This is why many of the shipments contained large quantities of plants and seeds. An example of this is the shipment made by the Czech plant hunter Eduard Klaboch (1852-1915) from Ecuador to the English horticultural firm Sander & Co: in August 1876, he sent the firm 7,732 plants in forty-two boxes.

The plants that survived the journey were acclimatised in the first few days after arrival. Once their good vigour was confirmed, they were graded. The most valuable of them, usually newly discovered or rarely cultivated in Europe, were sold by horticultural enterprises through exchanges in several cities in England, Belgium and Germany, with their prices often reaching astronomical heights. The less valuable plants were kept by the companies for further propagation and sold directly in their shops or through print catalogues.

Among the most important European horticultural companies involved in the export and sale of exotic plants in the 19th century were those founded in 1839 in Ghent, Belgium, by Louis Benoît van Houtte (1810-1876), and in 1881 in St. Albans, England, by Henry Frederick Conrad Sander (1847-1920).

Sander's English firm that employed the biggest number of plant hunters. Between 1884 and 1894, more than twenty botanists, gardeners and travellers set out from St. Albans in search of exotic plants. Of these twenty, seven were from Bohemia. However, being a plant hunter brought with it great hardship and danger, often even endangering the men's lives. Of the twenty-three Sander's Hunters, eight lost their lives while journeying in search of plants. Among them was one Czech, František Klaboch (1856-1879), who was less than twenty-three years old at the time.

Benedikt Roezl (1824-1885)

Among the most significant plant hunters was Czech gardener and traveller Benedikt Roezl, known in Europe as the Orchid Master Hunter.

Born in Bohemia in 1824, he came from a horticultural family and first received education in this field from his father Vincent. At the age of twelve, he began his apprenticeship in the Děčín Castle gardens in northern Bohemia. Here, under the supervision of castle gardener Franz Josst Sr. (1815-1862) one of the greatest experts on exotic plants (especially orchids), Roezl was initiated into this world, which enchanted and influenced him for the rest of his life.

Between 1840 and 1846, Benedikt Roezl worked as a gardener in several aristocratic gardens in present-day Poland, Austria and Moravia.

In September 1846, Roezl accepted a position in the horticultural company founded by Louis Benoît van Houtte in Ghent, where he worked until 1855. He then decided to follow his calling and explore exotic plant collecting in their natural environments. He first set out on plant collecting expeditions to Mexico, where he established a horticultural business on the east coast. After his arm was amputated in January 1868 following an accident, he handed over his property in Mexico to relatives he had invited from Bohemia and set out to collect plants. By 1872, he had travelled the American continent from the Canadian border in the north to the west coast of Peru in the south.

After many years on the continent, he returned to Europe for a few months in 1872. He used his stay both to visit his homeland and, above all, to book new orders for plants. He returned to the Americas in August 1872 in the company of his nephew, František Klaboch (1856-1879). Together they travelled the United States of America, and then continued to Mexico, where they were joined by František's brother Eduard (1852-1915). The uncle and his nephews continued their journey to collect plants in the forests of Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Ecuador. From there, Benedikt Roezl set out for Europe in April 1874, this time alone, without his nephews.

A couple of months later, he returned to America accompanied by another nephew of his, Bohumil Houda (1855-1916). From July to December 1874, they travelled through part of the United States. In the following year, they undertook plant collecting trips to Mexico, from where Roezl returned to Europe at the beginning of May. He never came back to the American continent after that.

Until his death in 1885, Benedikt Roezl lived in Prague, where he founded the first Czech horticultural and botanical magazine and supported horticultural society activities. However, he remained in contact with the world of exotic plants and their hunters, working as an advisor to Sander's English horticultural company and several prominent European orchid growers. He

attended horticultural and botanical exhibitions in major European cities as juror. At one of these, in St. Petersburg, Russia, Roezl received his only official honour when the Tsar awarded him the Order of St. Stanislaus in December 1884.

Benedikt Roezl remained acclaimed even after his death. In August 1889, an international committee was established to erect a monument to him in Prague. The committee, which included Roezl's friends from England, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Germany, Russia and Bohemia (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), managed to raise funds from around the world, thanks to which the monument was unveiled in Prague's Charles Square in 1898.

The monument to the gardener, traveller and plant hunter, better known abroad than in his homeland, sparked controversy and partial condemnation. This helped create the legend that the monument was made by mistake. Instead of the one dedicated to Benedikt Roezl, a monument to the naturalist Jan Svatopluk Presl (1791-1849) - and later to the inventor Josef Resl (1793-1857) - were, according to hearsay, supposed to have been erected in Prague first.

Benedikt Roezl and Belgium

Benedikt Roezl first came to Belgium in September 1846, when he joined Louis Benoît van Houtte's horticultural company in Ghent. Thanks to his diligence and knowledge, he gradually rose in the hierarchy of van Houtte's business. From being just one of many gardeners, Roezl worked his way up to the position of head gardener of the so-called warm greenhouses, having successfully returned from buying plants in England, where he had been sent by van Houtte. Half a year later, van Houtte entrusted him with maintaining his gardens; in 1849, he appointed Roezl head gardener of the entire enterprise.

In 1849, for the first time but not the last, the plant *Rogiera roezlii* Planch. (syn. *Rogiera amoena* Planch.) was named after Roezl.

Save for a few months in 1850, when he worked as the administrator of a nobleman's estate in Russia, Benedikt Roezl was employed in van Houtte's company in Ghent. This lasted until 1855, when he left for the Americas. However, he never forgot his former employer and friend. Two years after his departure, while in Mexico, Roezl published a catalogue of the conifers he had discovered and offered for purchase. One of them was named *Pinus van-houttei* Roezl (syn. *Pinus montezumae* Lamb.). In 1875, Roezl also used his friend's name to nomenclate exotic plant *Tigridia vanhouttei* Roezl ex Van Houtte.

Even after the death of van Houtte in 1876, the businessman's family stayed in touch with Roezl and maintained friendly relations. This can be proven by a telegram sent to Roezl at the end of 1884, congratulating him for having been awarded the Order of St. Stanislaus.

Following Roezl's passing in October 1885, telegrams and condolences were sent from Belgium as well as other countries. They were addressed to the Prague editorial office of the horticultural magazine *Flora*, which had been founded by Roezl in 1883. Among the telegrams was one from Charles Jacques Édouard Morren (1833-1886), a botany professor at the University of Liège and editor of the horticultural magazine *La Belgique Horticole*. Another letter came from the owners of

the Ghent horticultural business De Smet frères. These were the heirs of another one of Roezl's friends, botanist Louis De Smet (1813-1887). Last but not least, the van Houtte family also sent condolences.

After the international committee for the erection of Roezl's Prague monument was established in August 1889, three personalities represented Belgium on the 15-member board. One of them was Lucien Linden (1817-1898), a botanist, horticulturist, traveller, orchid expert and grower, and owner of extensive horticultural enterprises in Ghent and Brussels. Benedikt Roezl had collected orchids for Linden in Colombia in 1871. Linden was accompanied by Édouard-Christophe Pynaert-van Geert (1835-1900), a botanist and horticulturist specialising in pomology. He was one of the most significant contributors to the monument's construction, along with the owners of the horticultural shop De Smet frères, based in Ghent. The third Belgian in the international committee, Louis van Houtte jr., was a gardener and heir to a large horticultural estate in Ghent.

Benedikt Roezl thus represents one of the many links between Czechia and Belgium, which has had a subtle yet lasting impact. The art installation by Rudolf Samohejl evoking Benedikt Roezl at the premises of Château Bouchout brings Rozel back to his favourite kind of environment: the abundance and beauty of flora.

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