FOREFRONT

LARGER THAN LIFE

FROM THE EDITOR

Amid the phenomenal depth and breadth of The Huntington, there are some things that loom very large indeed. In this issue, we take a close look at two outsized entities that have garnered accolades for The Huntington over the past decade and more.

Susan Turner-Lowe, The Huntington’s vice president for communications and marketing, gives us an intimate view of a beloved institutional icon—Steve Koblik, who has been the president of The Huntington since 2001 and retires on June 30. Turner-Lowe captures the essence of Koblik’s personality and dynamic leadership style, interweaving his love of sports, dedication to the humanities, and humane mentoring of everyone he meets. By the end of her retrospective (see pg. 16), you will better understand the man who has powered this institution’s astonishing growth for nearly 14 years.

Next comes Amorphophallus titanum, a powerful presence that commands the sort of attention one usually associates with a Hollywood star—not a tropical flower. Tall, imposing, and potently stinky when in bloom, this plant leads a secret life at The Huntington that few visitors have witnessed. Freelance writer and former Los Angeles Times reporter Lynne Hefley takes us into the greenhouse and conservatory with scientists and botanical staff to tell the life story of a plant that has sparked the imaginations of people across the nation and around the world (see pg. 22).

Get ready to encounter curators’ perspectives on a range of other intriguing topics, including three African-American artists with strikingly different styles (see pg. 11) and a new catalogue based on our major Civil War photographs exhibition (see pg. 28). The Huntington is an extraordinary place for discovery, especially in the way it provides evidence about, and insights into, our nation’s complicated history. We say, periodically, “Only at The Huntington.” And that continues to ring true, day after day.

Kevin Durkin

Kevin Durkin is editor of Huntington Frontiers and managing editor at The Huntington’s Office of Communications and Marketing.

Correction: In our Fall/Winter 2014 issue, a line was inadvertently dropped from the penultimate paragraph of Richard W. Fox’s interview “Lincoln’s Body, in Life and in Death” (pg. 23). The full sentence should have read: “But his martyrdom—on Good Friday—at the hands of an assassin sympathetic to the Confederacy created an immediate collision between the Republican assessment of his service and a religious understanding of it.”
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THE BOGEY MAN
Life, learning, leadership, and legacy according to Steve Koblik
By Susan Turner-Lowe

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Top: Detail from Doyle Lane’s Mutual Savings and Loan Mural, 1964, a 17-foot-long matrix of ceramic tiles. Photograph by Joshua White. Center: In its initial growing phase, before it becomes more tree-like, Amorphophallus titanum, or Corpse Flower, sprouts a dark green leaf from a bulbous corm. Photograph by Kate Lain. Bottom: Steve Koblik, president of The Huntington. Photograph by Bill Youngblood.
Four seventeenth-century European artists—El Greco, Rembrandt, Pérugin, and Caravaggio—were celebrated in a recent exhibition at the Huntington called "Art. Appreciation."

Seems we have quite a lot in common.

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**News Bytes**

**A TASTE OF THE HUNTINGTON’S BLOG, VERSO**

More Than Meets the Eyes

The Huntington’s The Three Witches (also known as The Wretched Sisters), by Anglo-Swiss painter Henry Fuseli (1741–1825), appears to be a finished, full-size study for one of the artist’s best-known compositions. The painting depicts the pivotal moment in Shakespeare’s tragedy Macbeth when the protagonist encounters a demonic trio of witches who foretell his fate: “All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!”

Christina O’Connell, cleaned the painting soon after its arrival, stabilizing some flaking paint and removing layers of dirt and discolored varnish. During the cleaning process, a surprise emerged: in the upper left corner, she found a small red moon-like shape. She has lots of questions about this mysterious moon, including whether it was intended as part of The Three Witches, or if it was part of an earlier canvas that was reused.

With a Wave of Her Wand...

As The Huntington’s propagator of succulent plants, Karen Zimmerman has had amazing success breeding striking, jagged-toothed specimens of aloe hybrids permeated with red, orange, or yellow that produce delectable contrasts with the aloes’ green to bluish-green leaves. To generate a hybrid, Zimmerman takes the pollen from one aloe—using the tip of her finger or a pencil—and applies it to the stigma of another. Then she waits for the pods to ripen, collects the seeds, and grows them to see what she’s bred. She applies a cultivar name only to plants that achieve the characteristics she’s after. Often, if a plant merits a name, it’s distributed through The Huntington’s International Succulent Introductions (ISI) program. Started in 1958 and incorporated into The Huntington in 1989, ISI propagates and sells new or rare succulents to collectors, nurseries, and institutions. So far, Zimmerman has developed nine spectacular aloe hybrids for ISI.

Culture à La Carte

You’re walking in the Chinese Garden. First you hear wheels crunching over gravel, and then you see a curious red-and-cream box approach. The intricate lattice design of the cart invites you to peek inside, but the fiery red sides shield its contents. What is this contraption? A food cart with Asian-inspired treats? Guess again. When you open this peculiar box, you get a glimpse into the complex culture of China. The Chinese Garden Discovery Cart is the newest incarnation of a long-standing Huntington tradition—mobile interactive exhibits that focus on the theme of a particular garden. The activities on the cart include making Chinese paper lanterns and Beijing opera masks, using brush pens to practice Chinese calligraphy, and exploring a Chinese apothecary box.

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**Newton’s Lost Works, Found**

One Friday afternoon in the Ahmanson Reading Room, Stephen Snobelen, a Dibner Research Fellow in the History of Science and Technology at The Huntington, suddenly realized he had discovered a lost book that once belonged to the famous physicist Isaac Newton. Joseph Mede’s (1581–1648) — a 1,000-page book of exceptional erudition on biblical prophecy written in English, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—served as a major inspiration for Newton, who wrote extensively about biblical prophecy and adopted Mede’s historicist interpretation of the Apocalypse. The discovery helps to strengthen Snobelen’s argument that, despite the common myth, Newton did not believe in a clockwork universe but held to a dynamic cosmology similar to, and perhaps informed by, the arrow of time Newton encountered in biblical prophecy and Mede’s writings. Read more on our blog.

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The Huntington continues to fill in gaps in its collecting areas, most recently by homing in on works by African-American artists. Since the Art Collectors’ Council acquired an organ screen by Sargent Claude Johnson in 2011, the collection of African-American art has continued to grow through gifts and purchases. Bram and Sandra Dijkstra donated Charles White’s Soldier (1944) and Robert S. Duncanson’s Landscape with Ruin (ca. 1853); a brilliant red-orange ceramic mural by Doyle Lane went on public display in the recently opened Steven S. Koblik Education and Visitor Center; and to celebrate the opening of an addition to the Lois and Robert F. Erburu Gallery, Faye and Robert Davidson loaned a powerful Charles White painting, Preacher (1940), as well as an exquisite hammered copper mask by Johnson. These artists demonstrate widely different approaches to making art—from Duncanson’s oil paintings of European-inspired landscapes to Charles White’s pained, expressive figures to Doyle Lane’s luminously glazed ceramic tiles.

Robert S. Duncanson (1821–1872)
Duncanson was from a family of what were then called “free colored people.” The family settled in the Finger Lakes region of New York sometime after 1790. His grandfather was born a slave in Virginia but was freed and eventually traveled north. Duncanson, who came from a family of skilled craftsmen, opened a house-painting business in Munroe, Mich., and then moved to Cincinnati, the “Athens of the West,” as it was called, to seek better opportunities. With a community of black freedmen and abolitionists, not to mention a vibrant cultural life with art galleries and schools, Cincinnati offered...
him resources to launch his career as an artist. And so, although he had no formal fine art training, he became the first African-American artist to gain an international reputation. He visited Europe at least four times and exhibited in Montreal, Dublin, and London. While in Montreal during the early years of the Civil War, he was represented by a gallery and is thought to have influenced Canadian landscape painters with his meticulously rendered depictions of the Quebec countryside. And, he was lavishly praised in the British press.

Throughout his career, Duncanson took up subjects from poetry and literature—in particular, the novels of Sir Walter Scott. However, The Huntington’s Duncanson painting, bathed in rosy crepuscular light, is a moody imagined landscape that does not appear to derive from any specific literary source. With its ruined castle balanced on a sheer cliff, it is an American’s dream of Europe taken from Gothic novels and epic poems. Perhaps the foreground figures immersed in shadows relate to his experience of crossing the Alps on his way from France to Italy. The picture likely dates to the period after Duncanson’s return from Italy to Cincinnati. Rather than referring to a Hudson River School artist like John Frederick Kensett, whose Rocky Landscape (1853) hangs at The Huntington, Duncanson’s dark picture looks to Salvator Rosa, an Italian landscape painter. This indicates Duncanson’s wish to demonstrate his cosmopolitan sophistication.

Charles White (1918–1979)

Created by an artist committed to using his talent to address racism and bring about social change, Charles White’s Soldier depicts a black Army sergeant holding a gun with expressive and powerful hands. Growing up on Chicago’s South Side, where African Americans from the South had journeyed during the Great Migration, White took an early interest in art and won not one but two art scholarships. However, in both cases, when he and his mother went to collect his prize and register for courses, the award committees falsely claimed to have made a mistake once they realized his race. Undaunted, he enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago on a third scholarship and finished his two years of coursework in only one. Fresh out of art school, he painted the mural Five Great American Negroes for the Federal Art Project in Illinois, exhibited his work at the Library of Congress, and was commissioned to do another mural on the history of African-American publishing. Shortly after enlisting in the Army during World War II, he contracted tuberculosis, then nearly incurable, and was discharged. During his long convalescence, he stopped painting but read extensively. Soldier likely comes from after this period and may reflect on the cruel paradox that black soldiers, while fighting racist and fascist regimes abroad, were subjected to racism at home and in the U.S. Armed Forces, which remained segregated until 1948. Across many decades, White addressed the terrible history of racial inequality in the United States through portraiture, painting historical figures—such as Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Tubman, and Booker T. Washington—and generalized types, such as Soldier and Preacher. These “types” fight the hateful stereotypes that once filled Hollywood films, comic strips, and even cartoon movies. Both Soldier and Preacher present black men gazing heavenward, as if lost in thought or prayer. By putting their interiority on display, White forces the viewer to empathize with these men and shows our common humanity while acknowledging race.

Doyle Lane (1925–2002)

Active as a ceramic artist in Los Angeles, Doyle Lane started out making traditional functional objects—such as cups, bowls, pots, and vases—thrown on a wheel and fired in a kiln. However, like other ceramists in Southern California—such as Peter Voulkos, who took a cue from abstract sculpture and created shattered and fractured forms—Lane resisted the association of ceramics with functionality by transforming his work into what he called “clay paintings.” Lane employed various colored glazes and glaze techniques to achieve textures that ranged from blistered to icy smooth. The Huntington’s Lane mural was

Charles White addressed the terrible history of racial inequality in the United States through portraiture, painting historical figures and generalized types, such as his Soldier, 1944 (top), and Preacher, 1940 (bottom).

Doyle Lane transformed his ceramic works into what he called “clay paintings,” as seen in his Mutual Savings and Loan Mural, 1964 (details below). Photographs by Joshua White.
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definitely a fact then [in the 1950s and 1960s] that
the galleries weren't accepting and giving black
artists a chance or the breaks they needed.” (Indeed,
beyond the Brockman Gallery and a handful of
other black-owned galleries, there were few spaces
in Los Angeles where black artists were invited to
exhibit their work, although LACMA mounted
the occasional show.) Lane was pessimistic about
the future. He cited a recent exhibition of early
California potters that did not include a single
black artist as more evidence that museums “seem
to be continuing the same trend, not necessarily
discriminating but just ignoring black artists.” In
light of Lane’s comments, the installation of his
mural at The Huntington, where thousands of
visitors are able to see and enjoy his artistry, takes
on extra poignancy. Its public display helps spread
the word about his tremendous technical skills and
experiments in transforming the ceramic medium
into something that is not quite painting and not
quite sculpture, but something unique to Doyle Lane.

James Glisson is the Bradford and Christine
Mishler Assistant Curator of American Art at
The Huntington.

Unlike Charles White’s portraits, Lane’s work
does not overtly engage in questions of race and civil
rights. However, he did address racial prejudice in a
thoughtful interview conducted for Studio Potter
in the early 1980s. When the interviewer asked
Lane about his relative lack of success compared
to Peter Voulkos or Ken Price, who were widely
renowned sculptors at the time, Lane said, “It was

RESTORING TILES
Sculptor and freelance conservator Morgan MacLean
spent four months at The Huntington—documenting,
treating, and installing the Lane mural in the new
Steven S. Koblik Education and Visitor Center. In this
photograph, MacLean uses an artist knife to apply a
thin coat of a treatment comprising acetone, Paraloid
B-72 (a clear acrylic resin), marble powder, and dry
pigment to a damaged section of a tile. Out of the
4,876 tiles that make up the mural, MacLean restored
256 tiles that showed some evidence of damage.
Koblik often peppers his speech with sports metaphors (bogey is a golf term, although in this case, he’s using it loosely). “OK, sports fans. Here we go. This is important.” That’s how he sometimes addresses his senior staff group at one of its raucous Tuesday morning meetings.

He’s the consummate coach, always guiding his team to perform at the top of their game. And his coaching isn’t limited to his direct reports. He happily engages everyone he meets with an intense yet friendly mentoring style, from vice president to security officer, curator, donor, prospective donor, post doc, or tenured professor. “He’s got the type of charisma that instantly brings people close,” says Stewart Smith, the Huntington’s chair of the Board of Trustees. You just so desperately want to be on his team. So much so, that Koblik has succeeded in raising more than $700 million in support of his cause: to further enhance one of the most significant collections-based research and educational institutions in the world.

An avid golfer today, Koblik comes from a wide-ranging athletic background. At UC Berkeley, he played 16 intramural sports, “including ping pong,” he quips. Everybody at Kappa Nu—the nerdy fraternity—had a job. Says Koblik, “Mine was to be the resident jock.” As a history professor at Pomona College, he was tapped in 1979 to work with newly named basketball coach Gregg Popovich to provide academic assistance to the men’s basketball team. “Steve monitored their grades and made sure each one of them was doing all right,” says Popovich.

“The Bogey Man”

LIFE, LEARNING, LEADERSHIP, AND LEGACY ACCORDING TO STEVE KOBLIK

By Susan Turner-Lowe

“OK, give me a number. And then once you do that, I’ll figure out the bogey.” This is Steve Koblik. He’s asking for an estimate of how much a certain project will cost. It could be the amount needed to refurbish the Huntington Art Gallery, or to finish the Chinese Garden, or to revamp the Huntington’s vast irrigation system. It’s the number against which he’ll consider a range of factors—whether he thinks the project’s worth it; whether he can raise the money; whether he can get that number down to a level he finds more palatable.

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Koblik worked alongside Popovich for nine years. “He was intense, rough, focused, demanding,”
IT WAS ABOUT COACHING STUDENTS then, it’s about coaching everyone around him now. What’s happened at The Huntington during his time as a president has been nothing short of a complete transformation. The institution is on vastly improved footing financially, with expanded programs, new gardens, pristine facilities, and the prospects for a productive, vital future.

Says Stewart Smith: “I tell people that Steve’s the kind of leader that goes from mountaintop to mountaintop. It’s invigorating just trying to stay on the same horse with the guy.”

When he took the job in 2001, Koblik inherited a renowned institution with a history of fiscal instability. The search committee that interviewed him let on that his first order of business would be to get the institution’s finances in order. “It wasn’t the most exciting thing to do, but he was enthusiastic about it, he got people on board, coaching and teaching,” says Smith. “He was highly qualified to do the job—we knew that. But we didn’t really know about his ability to bring people along and to build camaraderie in the way that he did. People quickly wanted to hitch their wagons to him.”

Koblik’s mantra right out of the gate was fiscal discipline. He says: “We froze salaries, began raising considerably more money, and at the same time, we were incredibly transparent. And if staff or anyone, really, wondered why things were so tough, and why times were so lean, they had the information right at their fingertips. No secrets.”

It was simple: The Huntington had been spending more than it was bringing in—a common problem for many a cultural institution. With no regular government subsidy and an endowment of about a third the size needed to run the place adequately, the institution was on the verge of bankruptcy. With government subsidy and an endowment of about a third the size needed to run the place adequately, the institution was on the verge of bankruptcy. But “If people were noticing it and were concerned, they didn’t say anything,” says Smith. “But I think we were on the verge of it.”

Says former Chief Financial Officer Alison Sowden: “it came down to Steve’s showing great respect for staff at all levels of the institution. And they responded with loyalty and enthusiasm to his leadership. People trusted him, and so they trusted the institution.”

Students knew he expected them to work hard. “If in doubt occurred,” Koblik says, “it was my job not to take them off the floor or the field, but to encourage them to learn from their failure.” He was a notoriously tough grader. But, when he asked students to grade their own work, it turned out was a notoriously tough grader. But, when he asked students to grade their own work, it turned out he was a notoriously tough grader. But, when he asked students to grade their own work, it turned out he was also a notoriously tough grader. But, when he asked students to grade their own work, it turned out he was a notoriously tough grader. But, when he asked students to grade their own work, it turned out he was a notoriously tough grader. He also showed a deep loyalty to his players. All of this impressed him deeply and he was a deep dive into the subjects he taught. For a course he was developing at the University of Stockholm, and holds a Ph.D. from Northwestern. As a graduate student, he homed in on Sweden’s role in World War II and focused his dissertation there; later, he dug into Sweden’s role in the Holocaust and wrote a highly acclaimed book on the topic: The Stories Cry Out. It was in Sweden that he met his future wife, Kerstin Olseni. They have been married 47 years and have two children and four grandchildren.

After living on and off for nine years in Sweden, he returned to Southern California to teach at Pomona. And over time, he became deeply familiar with, and a bit obsessed by, The Huntington.

In the ’60s, I walked through the doors of the Library with bushy hair and a mustache, wearing clogs. And they took one look at me and said, “Steve, you’re a nice guy. But we don’t let people like you in this place.”

A bit of a bohemian by looks, he was nevertheless a serious scholar, interested in the history of Southern California and wanting to do some research on Henry Huntington himself. The close-knit atmosphere—one that suggested clubbiness and exclusivity—irked him. He wouldn’t let it go. He remembers telling friends, “I’d like to be president of The Huntington one day.”

In the meantime, he won one teaching prize after another at Pomona, became dean of the faculty at Scuips, and then went on to take the helm at Reed College in Portland, Ore. He held the presidency there for nine years. And then, by a remarkable confluence of events, The Huntington presidency opened up, and Koblik was in perfect position for the job.

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On the origins of World War I, he sent us to the deep dive into the subjects he taught. For a course a former Koblik student. “Steve made students do

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KOBLIK SET HIS SIGHTS ON THE HUNTINGTON DECADES AGO. He was born and raised in Sacramento. His father was an architect; his mother, a homemaker, had been a self-proclaimed flapper in the 1920s—fun-loving, high-spirited, bathtub gin drinking, always in search of adventure, says her only son.


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was the day of Koblik's first board meeting. One might have seen this as a really bad omen, but Koblik saw it as a time for strength and courage, and a time to pull together in the wake of the terrorist acts. So instead of closing The Huntington for the day and sending people home, he kept the gates open and watched as visitors came by the dozens, then the hundreds—searching for solace, for comfort, for meaning.

It is the essence of the place, and something Koblik realizes deeply. It’s sometimes hard to articulate exactly what The Huntington does for people. It doesn’t cure cancer; it isn’t in the business of providing meals to the homeless; it doesn’t take in stray animals; it’s not the kind of nonprofit that pulls at one’s heartstrings the way the Red Cross does. It’s not trying to be that. And it’s not like a college or university in the conventional sense, even though it is involved in research and education. But, it does not award degrees; it has no alumni. So it can be a little challenging to articulate what The Huntington is and what it does.

Koblik explains his own passion for it in this way: “The Huntington is the keeper of the flame. We collect and preserve culture, and we celebrate human achievement, and that is fundamental if you want to know who we are as a people and where we might be going.”

The Huntington’s collections explain so much about how the United States came to be—warts and all—with historical, literary, and artistic documentation that speaks to the early formulations of the rule of law (think Magna Carta); the Founding Fathers, slavery and the Civil War, the mission period and Native Americans, exploration and discovery, railroads, women’s suffrage, immigration, exclusion, innovation and invention, exploitation and emancipation. And the breadth and depth of The Huntington’s collections is simply astonishing: from micro to macro. Here is a library with nine million items, and a European and American art collection that spans six centuries. And all this is set among beautiful, world-renowned botanical gardens with 15,000 species, many of them rare and endangered.

Back when Koblik was organizing The Huntington’s first comprehensive fundraising campaign, the renowned AIDS researcher David Ho said, “We give people life. You give people meaning in life.”

THE AFTERNOON BEFORE KOBLIK’S FIRST DAY ON THE JOB, he walked over to the mausoleum, the gravesite of Henry and Arabella Huntington. “He wanted some quiet time there,” says Kerstin. “He had said he wanted to think deeply about what Henry Huntington might do, and how he would want the institution run.”

In some respects, Koblik’s game has been a collaboration, in part, with Henry Huntington himself—constantly thinking about what the founder’s intentions might have been and whether Koblik’s decisions and the institution’s direction have lined up with those intentions. But the collaborative spirit goes deeper and wider than that—with area institutions, disparate groups of donors, his boards, the staff. “Together,” he says, “we did this.”

“He can come on strong, totally take over a room,” says one staff member. “But he’s also one of the softest, most compassionate people I’ve ever met. At one particularly low point for me, he had some spot-on advice. He said, ‘It’s not what you get in life; it’s what you do with what you get.’ It changed my entire perspective. And I will miss him terribly.”

Meanwhile, Gregg Popovich has something on his mind, touched in a very different way by Koblik’s retirement. “I’m just afraid Steve’s going to show up on my doorstep, looking for a job!”

Susan Turner-Lowe is vice president for communications and marketing at The Huntington.
The Secret Life of Stinky

THERE’S MORE TO THE CORPSE FLOWER THAN ITS GIANT BLOOM

By Lynne Heffley

Behind the scenes at The Huntington, in a quiet greenhouse tucked away from public view, something big is brewing. There, among orchids of every description, thrive 43 representatives of one of the wonders of the plant kingdom: the Corpse Flower. Scientific name: Amorphophallus titanum, or A. titanum for short.

At this stage, each plant is simply a single leaf with a trunk-like stalk, dark green, patterned with lichens-like splotches, smooth and slightly yielding to the touch, topped by an array of leaflets. Stretching tall from large pots, some press their crowns against netting suspended from the ceiling high overhead.

They give no hint that they may one day die back to make way for the next step in their potential development: gargantuan stinky blooms that have brought visitors flocking to The Huntington since the first A. titanum flowered here in 1999.

“You could call it our ‘giant panda,’” says Kathy Musial, curator of living collections and collections manager for The Huntington’s botanical division.

If all 43 of the A. titanum were to bloom at once, the distinctive odor of rotting meat that gives the Corpse Flower its informal name would be overpowering. Just now, only the pleasant scent of loamy soil is apparent in the humid greenhouse air.

Meanwhile, over in The Rose Hills Foundation Conservatory for Botanical Science, last year’s bloom, the fifth A. titanum to flower at The Huntington—offspring of the 1999 plant—is on display in its final fruit-bearing stage.

The successful cultivation of such a large number of these exotic plants so far from their natural habitat in the rain forests of Sumatra attests not only to unflagging public interest in the stinky bloom, but also to the breadth and depth of The Huntington’s ongoing research into its ecology, physiology, and biology, and to the institution’s mission of plant conservation.

“These are not just fabulous, wonderful, super-cool plants,” Musial says. “Many tropical areas are being cleared for palm oil plantations, so everywhere you turn, there’s something being wiped out. We want to share these things and, hopefully, inspire younger generations to get interested in the natural world,” she says, “and to perhaps consider it as a career or a course of study, and as something that they feel is worth saving.”

One of more than 3,000 aroid species, A. titanum is the megastar of the 200 species of plants within the Amorphophallus genus. Found in the tropics of Asia and Africa, some of these plant species are as impressive in size and appearance as the infamous Corpse Flower; many others are small tuberous herbs.

At the beginning of the plant’s initial growing phase, during which it appears more and more tree-like, a leaf sprouts from a corm—a bulbous tuber that can weigh upwards of 250 pounds and
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At the beginning of the plant’s initial growing phase, during which it appears more and more tree-like, a leaf sprouts from a corm—a bulbous tuber that can weigh upwards of 250 pounds and
looks something like a misshapen potato. (The largest corm to develop at The Huntington thus far weighed an estimated 50 pounds.)

Despite its size, it is a misnomer to call it the world's largest flower. What appears to be a velvety, ruffled petal structure in A. titanum's malodorous, enormous blooming phase is actually a spathe (a modified leaf) that sheathes the inflorescence—the flower-bearing part of the plant. Jutting several feet up above the spathe, a baguette-shaped spike called a spadix bears the clusters of small male flowers in order to have pollen to work with, and combining science and everyday practicality, Trager cut some of the flowers off the spadix, took them home, put them in a bag of rotting apples and set the bag on his stovetop overnight, hoping that the ethylene gas generated by the apples would speed up the maturation process. It worked up to a point, he says. “Normally when the male flowers are on the plant, the pollen is extruded out of the flower and hangs down in gummy strings. That didn’t happen on my stovetop, so I had to cut open the anthers to extract the pollen.” Using a dissecting scope, Trager was then able to pollinate several still-receptive female flowers. The process ultimately yielded 10 fertile seeds.

That’s where John Trager, curator of The Huntington’s desert gardens and collections, comes in. In 1999, after the Huntington’s historic first bloom made headlines worldwide, Musial suggested self-pollination of the A. titanum—thought to be impossible—to see if it could be done. As it turned out, it wasn’t a stretch for Trager, drawing from his years of experience with the active propagation of diverse desert plants, to pioneer an experimental pollination technique that would work on the tropical A. titanum.

Knowing that he had to hasten the maturation of the male flowers in order to have pollen to work with, and combining science and everyday practicality, Trager cut some of the flowers off the spadix, took them home, put them in a bag of rotting apples and set the bag on his stovetop overnight, hoping that the ethylene gas generated by the apples would speed up the maturation process. It worked up to a point, he says. “Normally when the male flowers are on the plant, the pollen is extruded out of the flower and hangs down in gummy strings. That didn’t happen on my stovetop, so I had to cut open the anthers to extract the pollen.” Using a dissecting scope, Trager was then able to pollinate several still-receptive female flowers. The process ultimately yielded 10 fertile seeds.

To my knowledge,” Musial observes, “nobody else has done this. If they have, they haven’t pub- licated it.”

When the same plant flowered again in 2002 (subsequently but unsuccessfully fertilized with frozen pollen donated by Fullerton Arboretum and fresh pollen Fed-Exed in from the University of Michigan), The Huntington sent its fresh pollen to UC Santa Barbara, where an A. titanum would shortly bloom. This pollen sharing produced a bountiful crop of fertile seed that, coming full circle, is the source of the 43 plants now growing vigorously in The Huntington’s orchid greenhouse.

The study of A. titanum at The Huntington includes numerous seed and pollen shari- ngs among various institutions and universities and has sparked surprisingly diverse areas of research.

In 2009, Brazilian atmospheric chemist and botanical volunteer Antonio H. Miguel, together with John Trager, collected samples of volatile emissions from the inflorescence of “Son of Stinky,” the nearly 7-foot bloom that grew that year from seed produced by The Huntington’s original 1999 plant. The composition of the collected inflorescence vapors was analyzed by research scientist Ji-Yi Lee (Chosun University, Department of Environmental Engineering, South Korea) and Douglas A. Lane (Environment Canada, Toronto), using a state-of-the-art instrument called a gas chromatograph–mass spectrometer, capable of detecting upwards of 10,000 chemical compounds. Hundreds of compounds were identified and quantified, including the key “smelly” chemicals dimethyl disulfide and dimethyl trisulfide. Miguel presented the find- ings (co-authored with Lane, Lee, and Trager) at a re- search conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2011 under the title “Inflorescence Composition of Volatile Emissions of Amorphophallus titanum (Araceae).”

“Worthy of note,” the report summary states, “was a ‘nose-detection’ in the change of the smelly odor, from rotten eggs at the beginning, to boiled asparagus several hours after the start of the plant’s bloom. Another interesting observation during
The Titan Arum is awesome. It’s an enormous corpse flower that smells like rotting meat.

The Titan Arum is officially known as Amorphophallus titanum. It is the plant kingdom’s “most massive un-blooming flower.” This species is known for its enormous size and unique smell. Each plant can grow up to six inches a day, making it a fascinating sight to watch as it blooms.

Despite its size, it is a misnomer to call it the world’s largest flower. What appears to be a velvety, ruffled petal structure in A. titanum’s malodorous, enormous blooming phase is actually a spathe (a modified leaf) that sheaths the inflorescence—the flowers-bearing part of the plant. Jutting several feet up above the spathe, a baguette-shaped spike called a spadix bears the clusters of small male and female flowers in segregated spirals at its base. When the spadix of the plant kingdom’s “most massive un-branched inflorescence,” says Dylan Hannon, curator of the conservatory and tropical collections, the flower will develop a thumb-sized, red-orange berry containing up to three seeds.

One major challenge, however, is the plant’s self-pollination. Without the natural pollen sources and insect pollinators of Sumatra’s equatorial rain forest, the A. titanum fruit can’t develop. The female flowers on the spadix open first; the male flowers in order to have pollen to work with. Combining science and everyday practicality, Trager cut some of the flowers off the spadix, took them home, put them in a bag of rotting apples and set the bag on his stovetop overnight, hoping that the ethylene gas generated by the apples would speed up the maturation process. It worked up to a point, he says. “Normally when the male flowers are on the plant, the pollen is extruded out of the flower and hangs down in gummy strings. That didn’t happen on my stovetop, so I had to cut open the anthers to extract the pollen.” Using a dissecting scope, Trager was then able to pollinate several still-receptive female flowers. The process ultimately yielded 10 fertile seeds.

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the early hours after the opening of the spathe,” the summary concludes, “was the occurrence of a gas-to-particle process which produced fine light-scattering particles.”

“Basically,” Miguel says, “it’s the sulfur compounds that attract the insects.” In the wild, “they come in thinking it’s a dead piece of meat,” he says, “they do what the plants like them to do.”

( buscar: Miguel, whose professional focus is air pollution in large urban centers, was “quite familiar with the compounds we found,” he says, “because you find a lot of those in the atmosphere.”)

For Hannon, a further area of interest is just how A. titanum found its way to its native habitat. The specimen that bloomed at The Huntington in 1999, for instance, came from Arizona botanist Mark Dimmitt, who had obtained three seeds or cormlets from the Palmengarten in Frankfurt, Germany. These had been collected previously by the late James R. Symon in Sumatra in 1953.

“It seems probable that at least a couple of different introductions from the wild have resulted in all the cultivated plants of this species that we know of,” says Hannon, adding that the provenance of many collected species is an undereported area. A. titanum’s unusual properties have also recently fallen within the purview of cryopreservation scientist Raquel Folgado. A research fellow at The Huntington, Folgado is working to develop protocols for the conservation of plant germplasm (genetic material) by freezing it in liquid nitrogen. Cryopreservation’s main advantage, she says, is “that you can store plant material for the long term, theoretically forever, because all biochemical reactions in the plant are stopped.”

The day after she arrived at The Huntington last August to begin her two-year fellowship, Folgado helped Trager collect pollen from the most recent A. titanum bloom to freeze for future use. It had been pollinated earlier using frozen pollen obtained from Orange Coast College, but whether frozen pollen will prove viable in A. titanum’s case has yet to be determined, as far as Trager is aware. An attempt to pollinate one of The Huntington’s previous blooms using both fresh and frozen pollen failed.

“So it was time to try again,” Trager says, “and prove that it can be done.” So far, he is optimistic. In its pot in the Conservatory, the plant’s fruit has formed exclusively on the side of the inflorescence where the frozen pollen was applied, he notes. “The fact that the fruiting structure has been getting heavier and heavier, yet still hasn’t collapsed, is a good sign that something is still going on there. I suspect that it will have a combination of some fertile and some non-fertile fruits,” Trager says, “because even when they’re not fertilized, the red pericap will develop to some extent. That’s one reason we left it on display in the Conservatory, so that people could see this process.”

After all, there is much more to the A. titanum than its unusual appearance and eye-watering stench, Trager stresses. “There’s a whole ecology associated with it. Not just in the common vernacular sense of conservation, but in the interrelations of all of the other life forms that grow with it. There’s a lot we can learn from this, and from the fact that it has such a different pollination strategy than people are used to: the typical birds and bees pollinators. Even the spotty red pattern on the leaf blade has significance, he observes.

It is thought to be “a self-preservation thing,” he says. “The theory is that it catches the eye of large animals running through the forest, so that they would think it was a lichen-encrusted tree and would avoid running into it.”

People often ask Hannon how they can grow their own A. titanum, he says. “You could,” he tells them, “but you’d have to maintain warmth and humidity all year round, and you’d have to have a fairly big greenhouse, or maybe a big sun porch. Once it’s growing, when it’s leafed out, it’s pretty standard care for a tropical plant.”

“The tricky part is when it goes dormant,” Hannon says. “What do you do with it when you’re just looking at a pot with no leaf, no flower, no bud, nothing, just soil. You have to determine how much it should get watered. Should you keep it dry? How dry?”

And while the Corpse Flower can no longer be called rare in the United States “because lots of people have flowered it now,” Hannon says, it remains uncommon and unpredictable. If home growers prefer to try something smaller and less temperamental, other members of the aroid family, he points out, “are even more beautiful and inter- esting looking.”

Still, “this thing is so outsized that it gets people’s minds focused on plants, and that’s a good thing,” Hannon says. “From there they can learn about other plants and give a little more thought to botany and horticulture.” (For more information about the aroid family, Hannon urges people to check out the International Aroid Society’s website: aroid.org.)

At The Huntington, home so far to five Corpse Flowers in all their full-blown, pungent glory, it is only a matter of time before there is a sixth—and more, Trager says.

“Perhaps the reason that we haven’t flowered them more frequently is because of space limitations,” he says, “apparently the bigger you pot ‘em, the faster they grow and the quicker they flower.”

But with the impressive number of A. titanum now growing in The Huntington’s greenhouse, “at some point,” Trager says, “we’ll probably have multiple plants flowering at once and have a really big stink.”

“That’s what we’re hoping for,” Musial agrees, “a mass flowering. I joked back in the early days that I wanted to have an ‘Amarophoballus Stonehenge’ down on the Australian garden lawn. Or, as John would more aptly call it, ‘Stinkhenge.’”

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If you missed The Huntington’s unprecedented exhibition of 200 rare Civil War photographs in 2013, you will be pleased to learn that the Huntington Library Press has just published a powerful book based on the show—A Strange and Fearful Interest: Death, Mourning, and Memory in the American Civil War. Author Jennifer Watts, curator of photographs for The Huntington, explores the toll the war took on the nation’s psyche, providing thoughtful and moving context to the work of such famous war photographers as Mathew Brady, Timothy O’Sullivan, George Barnard, Alexander Gardner, and Andrew J. Russell, among others.

The book takes its title from a statement made in 1863 by the physician, poet, and professor Oliver Wendell Holmes regarding images of Antietam, where his son, a future U.S. Supreme Court justice, was wounded in one of the bloodiest battles of the war: “The field of photography is extending itself to embrace subjects of strange and sometimes of fearful interest.” The war coincided with the rise of photographic and printing technologies that enabled the dissemination of war imagery to the homes of ordinary Americans and profoundly affected their experience of the conflict.

Watts first began work on the exhibition in 2008, when she and her fellow curators at The Huntington were planning exhibits in anticipation of the sesquicentennial of the outbreak of the Civil War. At around the time that Watts was conceiving the exhibition, Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University, came to The Huntington to give a lecture on This Republic of Suffering, her acclaimed book about how the nation’s understanding of death was affected by the high number of casualties during the Civil War.

“She spoke about what the war meant for women,” Watts recalls. “She discussed the omnipresence of death in women’s diaries and rising casualty counts. She said that roughly 3 percent of the population of the United States died—or what would be today’s equivalent of 7 million people. Many men left home and never came back, and their families did not know where they were.”

There was no infrastructure at the beginning of the war to deal with the massive carnage. Bodies were often left to rot unburied on battlefields. Before the Civil War, most people had died at home, tended by their loved ones. The impact of knowing that many young men had died in their 20s among strangers and could not be located struck a terrible blow to those they left behind.

“As a mother, wife, and sister, I found her talk very moving,” says Watts. “From that night forward, I knew I wanted the exhibitor to focus on death, mourning, and memory. I also decided to limit it to items drawn only from The Huntington’s collections.” The book preserves the show’s threefold focus and reproduces indelible images in The Huntington’s collections.

Henry Huntington was a boy of 15 when the Civil War broke out, and like many people of his
The book includes a complete checklist and thumbnail images of all the items that appeared in the exhibit, as well as elements created since the exhibit closed. One of these is a fascinating interview by Watts of Barrett Oliver, an artist who employs Civil War-era photographic and darkroom techniques. For the exhibition, he worked with film artist Kate Lain, new media developer at The Huntington’s Office of Communications and Marketing, to create In the Usual Manner, a short film that provides viewers with a window into the intricate and laborious photographic processes used in the 19th century. In the interview, Oliver shares his insights into the challenges that pioneering photographers faced working in the field with cumbersome equipment and delicate glass plates. Watts also includes a “score” by artist Steve Roden that diagrams an original sound work for the exhibition that he created in response to battlefield images of Antietam. Roden’s sonic palette—composed of antique instruments, crickets, birds, and interludes of silence—invokes an aural space in which to contemplate the deep pain and persistent natural beauty of the site. (The film In the Usual Manner is available at tinyurl.com/pobmgh, and an excerpt from Roden’s sound work can be found at tinyurl.com/au6s5yr.)

Reflecting on the aftermath of the bloodshed near the end of the book, Watts writes: “What are we to make of the American Civil War in our 21st-century world? Historians continue to have their say. Documentarians, writers, pundits, and reenactors do, too. Even so, there is often a troubling disconnect between the head and the heart in confronting such incomprehensible loss. Photographs provide documentation and clues, but as [an] unknown sage reminds us, they are ciphers at best... ‘All of this desolation imagination must paint—broken hearts cannot be photographed.’”

Kevin Durkin is editor of Huntington Frontiers and managing editor at The Huntington’s Office of Communications and Marketing.

generation, he was fascinated by the war. He later amassed one of the greatest Civil War collections in existence, primarily by purchasing several of the largest and most notable collections of others, including the Judd Stewart collection of Lincoln materials.

Battlefront photographs featured in the book include Alexander Gardner’s views of the dead at Antietam; rare photographs from Andrew J. Russell’s U.S. Military Railroad Album, which include haunting scenes of battlefield devastation and newly established military cemeteries; and George Barnard’s album Photographic Views of Sherman’s Campaign (1865–66).

In a chapter devoted to the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, readers encounter a rare “Wanted” poster seeking the capture of John Wilkes Booth and his accomplices, and mementos of grief, such as a Lincoln mourning ribbon, as well as lithographs of Lincoln deathbed scenes and photographs of the large public displays of mourning associated with his funeral. There is even a set of stark photographs by Alexander Gardner depicting the execution of the Lincoln conspirators.

Watts also provides a chapter on the commemoration of the war, which includes images drawn from John P. Nicholson’s collection related to the establishment of the Gettysburg National Monument. In addition, there are images preserved by Civil War veterans and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper illustrator James E. Taylor, whose work—“broken hearts cannot be photographed.”

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When it comes to the study of Hawaiian birds, few scientists can rival Sheila Conant, professor emerita and former chair of the zoology department at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, who has studied that state’s native and endangered species for nearly 50 years. In 2013, she was given the Ralph W. Schreiber Award by the American Ornithologists’ Union in recognition of her extraordinary contributions to the conservation, restoration, and preservation of birds and their habitats. A native Hawaiian, Conant has devoted her life to researching the history, ecology, and conservation of Hawaiian birds. She has investigated the distribution of birds across their ranges, conducted ornithological surveys of large natural areas, and developed avian census techniques. Her more recent work has included studies of geographic variation in morphology, the genetics and behavior of endangered passerines in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands, and the ways in which birds were used in Hawaiian material culture.

Conant has sought to document the ecologies of threatened species and, through basic ecological research, provide a sound biological basis for bringing about their recovery. One of her resounding success stories has involved the Nihoa millerbird. Conant helped establish the scientific basis for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s Nihoa Millerbird Translocation Project, which brought a population of the endangered birds from Nihoa to Laysan to prevent their potential extinction. Conant herself took part in a second translocation expedition in 2012. The birds have been thriving in their new home ever since.

She has not been shy about stressing the importance of ecological research. “Hawaii has lost more species than any other geographic area on Earth,” Conant writes. “This extinction crisis continues today, as biologists and managers work to prevent the loss of hundreds of endangered species, including more than 30 birds, 300 plants, and at least 150 species of invertebrates.”

The Huntington has begun acquiring Conant’s papers, which include a wealth of information spanning her half-century of research to save the native birds and other fauna and flora in her home state. This collection of one of the nation’s most significant conservation biologists will join other important collections in environmental history at The Huntington, such as the Frank Wheat papers, which include extensive materials about the effects of mining on the environment; the papers of Warren Lee Rogers about the Pacific Crest Trail; and the papers of James and Katherine Clover concerning land tenure and water use in California. In addition, staff are currently processing the papers of another important Hawaiian ornithologist, J. Michael Scott, whose materials will strongly complement Conant’s. The historical study of birds provides an excellent framework within the natural sciences for studying issues that meet at the resonant intersections of history, culture, and biology. Places matter, and specific places—like Hawaii—have proven to be of critical importance to biologists and to the future of species. The Hawaiian Islands, the world’s most isolated archipelago, hold more endangered species per square mile than any other region of the world. The Earth itself is an island. Despite our beloved notions of the open range, the limitless frontier, and the idea of paradise, we are all on the same island, and as the world grows smaller, we grow closer. As a result, our relationship with the natural world becomes more important with each passing year. The Conant collection at The Huntington will help ensure that the study of that relationship—and the Hawaiian birds that form such an integral part of it—will not go extinct.

Daniel Lewis is the Dibner Senior Curator for the History of Science and Technology at The Huntington.
In Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire (Yale University Press, 2015), Abigail L. Swingen, assistant professor of history at Texas Tech University and a 2011–12 Barbara Thom Postdoctoral Fellow at The Huntington, investigates how English politics and ideas of political economy affected the development of African slavery and other forms of coerced labor in England’s West Indies colonies during the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

Historian Lindsay O’Neill, assistant professor of history at the University of Southern California, explores the importance and impact of networking via letter writing among members of the elite from England, Ireland, and the colonies in The Opened Letter: Networking in the Early Modern British World (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). Combining extensive archival research with social network digital technology, The Opened Letter, says Sarah M. S. Pearsall, university lecturer in history at the University of Cambridge, “marks a useful intervention, especially in debates about Atlantic integration, social cohesion, and the circulation of information.”

In Doppelgänger Dilemmas: Anglo-Dutch Relations in Early Modern English Literature and Culture (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), Marjorie Rubright, associate professor of English at the University of Toronto, exposes the tensions of Anglo-Dutch relations. Through readings of London’s stage plays and civic pageantry, English and Continental polyglot and bilingual dictionaries and grammars, and travel accounts of Anglo-Dutch rivalries and friendships in the Spice Islands, Rubright reveals how representations of Dutchness played a vital role in shaping Englishness in almost every aspect of social life during the Renaissance.


Motoring West, Volume 1: Automobile Pioneers, 1900–1909 (Arthur H. Clark Co., 2015), edited by Peter J. Blodgett, the H. Russell Smith Foundation Curator of Western American Manuscripts at The Huntington, documents the very beginning of Americans’ love affair with the automobile. The first of a planned multivolume series, Motoring West presents a panorama of motoring travelers’ visions of the American West through sources ranging from forgotten archives to company brochures, and magazines such as Harper’s Monthly, Sunset, and Outing.

Novelist, memoirist, diarist, and gay pioneer Christopher Isherwood gained fame for his Berlin Stories, which served as source material for the hit stage musical and Academy Award–winning film Cabaret. The American Isherwood (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), a collection of essays edited by James J. Berg, dean of arts and sciences at College of the Desert in Palm Desert, and Chris Freeman, associate professor of English at the University of Southern California, offers a multifaceted appreciation of a writer who spent more than half his life in Southern California.
For many of us who grew up in Southern California, Millard Sheets’ mid-20th century public murals are among the indelible images of our childhoods. The mosaics’ active, stylized mashups of iconic Californians—from Native Americans to farmers to typical middle-class families—glittered in glass tiles and flashed before us daily, glimpsed from the back seat of Mom’s car, at the local mall, or in the neighborhood bank. They were packed with moving shapes, lines, and colors, and always upbeat—depicting the California dream of a cultural melting pot with its own character and legacy.

In his feature article “Paying Dividends,” which appeared in the Fall/Winter 2011-12 issue of Huntington Frontiers, Adam Arenson, a 2012 Haynes Foundation Fellow at The Huntington, wrote glowingly of Sheets: “[He] was a Pomona Valley native and an art wunderkind who started teaching at art school even before he graduated.”

At the Los Angeles County Fair, Sheets created the first major annual art and design exhibition in the region. He also established the art program at the Claremont colleges, and, by serving on the board of the Virginia Steele Scott Foundation, helped form what would later become the core of The Huntington’s American art collection. Most notably, his studio would team up with financier Howard Ahmanson to create more than 100 mosaics for Home Savings & Loan buildings throughout Southern California and beyond.

But in an essay for the 1935 book Millard Sheets, produced when the artist was only 28, Los Angeles Times art critic Arthur Millier wrote about another important aspect of Sheets’ oeuvre, one less public and thus less well known: “While [Sheets] was winning the prizes and painting the pictures which proved so popular, he was decorating houses inside and out, choosing furniture for them, painting murals on their walls.” One of these rarely seen residential paintings, Mural for the Home of Fred H. and Bessie Ranke, 1934, has now found a permanent home in The Huntington’s new Stewart R. Smith Board Room, part of the recently opened Steven S. Koblik Education and Visitor Center.

The Rankes commissioned the mural for the dining room of their Hollywood Hills home. The elegant painting depicts, in soft and subtle tones, a pastoral California panorama with rolling hills, a lake and its tributaries, and a shepherd tending his flock. Larry McFarland and M. Todd Williamson, the current owners of the Ranke home, donated the mural to The Huntington to preserve the work of a man whose native landscape inspired and shaped his artistic vision, and to draw attention to a long-hidden side of an artist we thought we knew so well.

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