THE HERBAL OF "PSEUDO-APULEIUS"

BY WILLIAM M. IVINS, JR.

Curator of Prints

Just at the time the gay new catalogues of the seedsmen began to come in there took its place upon the shelves in the Museum's print room a little woodcut book, the text of which has no literary interest and but the vaguest informational value, the illustrations in which are so far removed from accuracy that the objects they are supposed to represent are not recognizable, and which, all told, is rather a hasty and sorry piece of bookmaking. And yet of all the books in the Museum there are few or none that are as precious to sentiment or that pluck harder at the heartstrings of thought and memory. The history of its text and pictures is long and complicated, and about it there clings such a wealth of associations as cluster about few other books that have neither religious nor literary values. Undated, it was printed at Rome shortly after 1480. Its Hain number is 1922. It was the first illustrated book devoted to plants and flowers and their medicinal uses, and its illustrations were the first prints that reproduced ancient works of art. Lacking a title, like most early books, it goes under the name of the "Pseudo-Apuleius."

When it was printed the Gutenberg Bible was only about twenty-five years old, and the first illustrated book, the Bamberg Edelstein, was only about twenty years old. The first book to contain reproductions of pictures, Turrecremata's Meditations, had been printed at Rome in 1467. Five years after that, at Verona, in 1472, there appeared the first book with pictures of machinery, the De Re Militari of Valturius. In 1477, another five years past, there was issued at Bologna a Ptolemy, which was the first book to contain printed maps. Then, in 1481 perhaps, there appeared our Pseudo-Apuleius, the first picture book on botany. The next year, 1482, saw the publication of the Venetian Euclid, the first book to contain geometrical figures. Prints, from being merely amulets and pretty things, had become an integral part of the intellectual and scientific apparatus of Europe. And Columbus was not to set sail from Palos for another ten years.

The pictures in all these other books were very new; as we would say today, they were "modern art." The Pseudo-Apuleius, however, contained pictures that were very ancient works of art, for they were as nearly as was then psychologically possible reproductions of the miniatures in a manuscript of the ninth century, which were degraded copies of pictures that had been made at least five centuries earlier and that in turn had in all probability through continued copying been taken from originals made in the first century B.C. Short of a long and detailed account and a critical examination of conflicting evidence and divergent opinion, it is not possible to tell the story more clearly than that. To put it briefly, the original illustrator of our little book was possibly a Greek who might have known Mithridates the Great.

Just before 1480 Philip de Lignamine, a papal courtier and official who had what we might call a private press, discovered in the monastery at Monte Cassino an ancient illuminated manuscript of a herbal by an otherwise unknown Apuleius, who is not to be confounded with the author of The Golden Ass. It had been perhaps the most popular of the mediaeval texts of its kind, and many manuscripts of it have survived. Leaving aside a fragment of papyrus, it may be that the earliest
Woodcuts in the Roman "Pseudo-Apuleius" and the miniatures in the IX century manuscript (Casinensis 97) from which they were copied.
of these manuscripts now known is one that a few years ago was at Leiden. In the British Museum there is an Anglo-Saxon manuscript of it. Lignamine was so pleased with his find at Monte Cassino that just like any modern owner of a private press he edited it, had blocks made from its miniatures, and printed it up. The usual history of ancient manuscripts to which this kind of thing happened was that they vanished and were never seen again. In this particular instance, however, there is reason to think that it did not vanish, that it got back to Monte Cassino, and that it is MS Casinensis 97, which a few years ago was still in its proper place in the monastic library, to which, please God! it may soon return.

In 1935 Dr. F. W. T. Hunger, the learned Dutch botanist, published a collotype facsimile of Casinensis 97, with an introduction and commentary, and faced the pages of the reproduction with reproductions of the pages of the Pseudo-Apuleius. The woodcuts in the Pseudo-Apuleius are very rough and ready, but there can be no question of their relationship to the pictures in the manuscript. It is obvious in the accompanying half-tones.

To explain how pictures such as these came to be seriously made and seriously accepted would require a serious dissertation of a kind quite unfit for these pages. It would probably start somewhere in the writings of Aristotle, would wind a complicated trail through what is known about Theophrastus, Kratæus, and Dioscorides, would require serious consideration of some very remarkable passages in Pliny's Natural History, would pick up the story of the surviving monuments of classical botanical illustration as exhibited in the famous manuscript written for Anicia Juliana about A.D. 512, which was one of the proudest possessions of the old Imperial Library at Vienna, and bring it down in a sort of series of family trees of existing manuscripts arranged in the order of their copying one from another through the Middle Ages. It would discuss the difference between a botany and a herbal, would pick up the story of botanical illustration again at Rome in 1481 and at Mainz in 1484, 1485, and 1491, and would show how the manufacturers and pirates of illustrated books in the fifty following years played fast and loose with the pictures they copied, so that the rather competent portraits of plants made at Mainz in 1485 became the mere cross-stitch designs that appear in the Grete Herbal of 1526, the earliest English illustrated herbal. It would discuss the techniques of the graphic reproductive arts, and it would have to consider the history of the search for logical methods of classification in the descriptive biological sciences. It would deal with the practice and psychology of copying under conditions such that the copyist knew only the picture he was copying and not the things that were represented in it. It would point out the tragedies that await the man who tries to reconstruct a picture of an object he has never seen from a mere verbal description of it. It would show how the ignorant copyist applies reason to the peculiarities of the picture before him and reduces its brute irrationalities of actual form to the smooth meaninglessness of abstract rationality. And if the author of this competent, proper, and utterly hypothetical explanation didn't watch his step he would find himself writing a chapter on the psychology and philosophy of modern science with all its physical and mathematical models of things that no scientist has ever yet seen with his own eyes. He might even append a short supplemental chapter about the practice of archaeology and Kunstwissenschaft in their more advanced stages of postulational development. And when he was all through he would have written a combined treatise and case book on how we know what we think we know, that would stagger under the weight of a thousand illustrations and bog down in a deep quicksand of footnotes and citations in all the table d'hôte languages and a few more besides. He would have had a lovely and exciting time for fifty laborious years and no one but the proof readers would ever read his book.

If anyone can think of any better reason than all that for adding the little Pseudo-Apuleius of 1481 to the Museum's collection he is a much more imaginative man than the present writer.
Woodcuts in the "Pseudo-Apuleius" which, according to its text, represent one common vegetable and three common flowers.