

# Margaret Neilson Armstrong

Designer, Artist, Botanist, from the collections of NYBG and MET

STORY BY *Bobbi Angell*

SERIES COORDINATOR *Jody Williams*

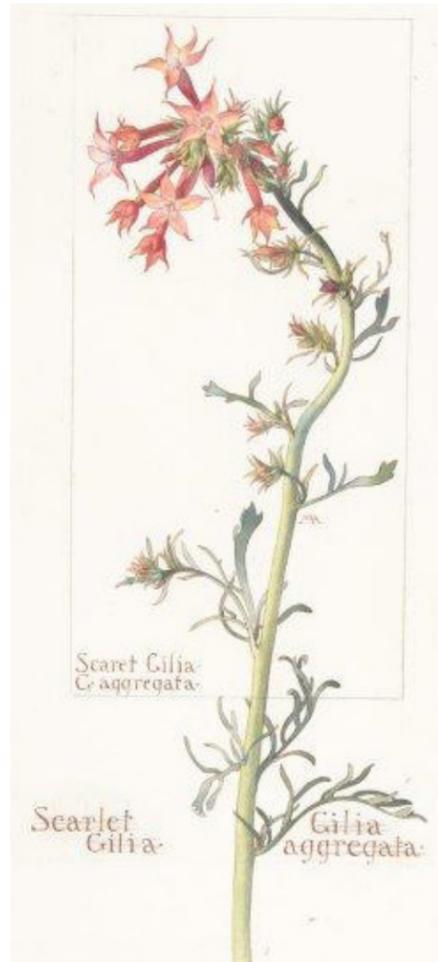
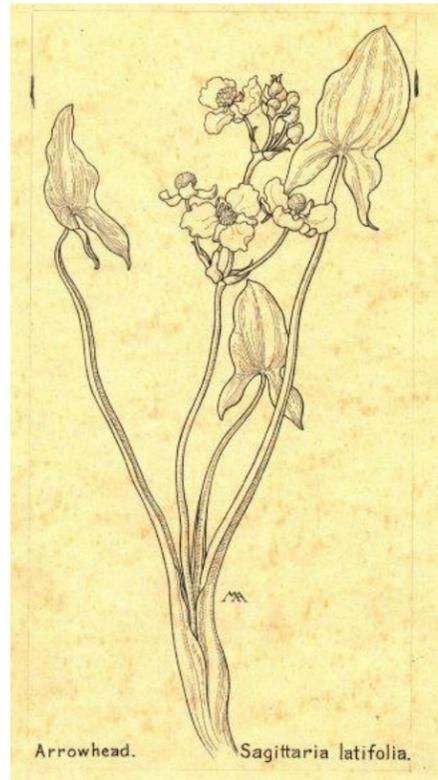
THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY was an era when wildflower field guides fostered an interest in the natural world. Women took on a leading role, with 13 field guides written and/or illustrated by women in the US between 1887 and 1916. Prominent among these was *Field Book of Western Wildflowers*, by Margaret Nielsen Armstrong (1867- 1944), published in 1915 by G.P. Putnam and Sons. Until then, popular field guides covered primarily eastern wildflowers, most notably F. Schuyler Matthews' *Field Book of American Wildflowers*, and California wildflowers were depicted in

*Wildflowers of California*, by Mary Elizabeth Parsons. Armstrong had traveled as a tourist and recognized the need for a field guide for western wildflowers, so she decided to create one, taking on the task of writing the text as well as creating the illustrations. She and two, sometimes three, female companions traveled from 1911 to 1914, exploring and seeking out plants in Canada and states west of the Rockies. The women hired guides and hiked across glaciers in Alberta, Canada, and Mount Rainer in Washington in search of plants in bloom at the edge of snowfields; they explored remote Arizona and Utah deserts for spring wildflowers and cactus in bloom. Margaret was allegedly the first white woman to have traveled

down into the Grand Canyon, where she found species that had never been illustrated or adequately described.

Armstrong collected and pressed 1,000 specimens, 188 of which are in the herbarium of The New York Botanical Garden. Clearly well-connected, she relied on a prestigious group of botanists for determinations of her collections, including Alice Eastwood, W.L. Jepson, Marcus Jones, and Nathaniel Lord Britton. Botanist J.J. Thornber served as adviser for the botanical accuracy of her text. The text is informative and delightful, with precise species descriptions, distribution, and habitat information, discussions of common names and tales of local lore including Native Americans' uses of plants. But it is her illustrations that make the book so appealing. Five hundred plants are illustrated in pen and ink and 48 in watercolor. She drew and painted on site and there is an impressive style to her illustrations, with both the watercolors and line drawings capturing distinguishing characteristics and personality of the plants. Her pen and ink technique uses fine curvaceous lines for shadows and detail, and bold outlines to depict the plants. Her elegant watercolor work is outlined in soft brown ink, with seemingly simple and flat watercolor work relying on subtle shades of color to give depth and richness to individual leaflets and petals, all drawn in perfect perspective.

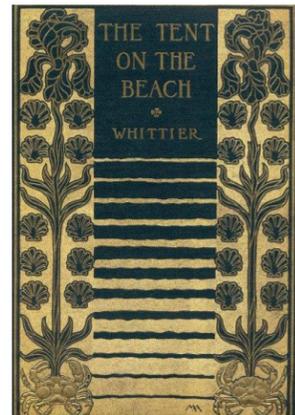
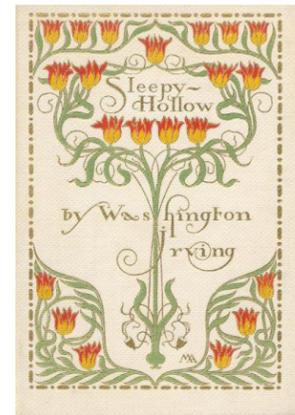
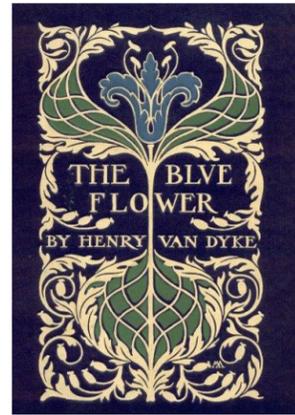
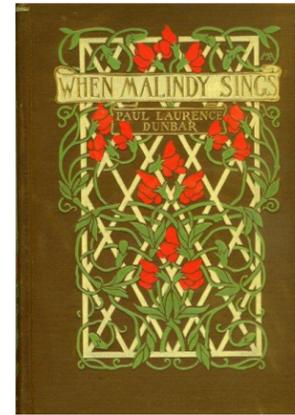
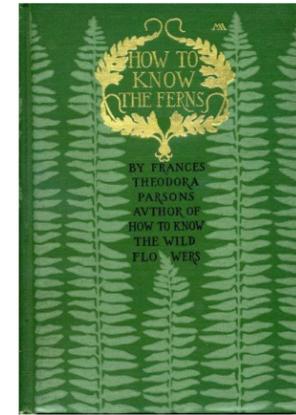
The New York Botanical Garden has 52 of her original line drawings, donated in 1986 by her niece, Gregor A. Gamble. The heavyweight paper of the illustrations is yellowed and foxed, but the artwork is beautiful, stronger and sharper than the reproductions in the book. A letter from her niece makes note of her work: "She told me that she wanted to camp at the bottom of the Grand Canyon but the rangers would not give them permission. So the group, all women, camped



on the rim, and in a couple of days the rangers gave them permission, saying they certainly knew what they were doing." This becomes ever more relevant looking at notes on her artwork—several of her illustrations are identified as having been done on the "Grand Canyon plateau," so clearly she made good use of her time on the rim.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has two portfolios of Armstrong's artwork, donated to the Drawings and Prints Collection in 2010 by Helena Bienstock, Cynthia MacKay Keegan, and Frank E. Johnson. One portfolio has 71 pen and ink drawings, bound into a 14x11-inch book. The other has 73 watercolor paintings, most from her trips to the western US, but also including 12 plants from an earlier trip to Florida. The originals are remarkably brighter and finer than the published reproductions, but that is not unexpected. The paintings have all been digitized and generously made available in public domain.

The field guide is just one aspect of Armstrong's life. Born in 1867 to a wealthy artistic family and raised in rural New York along the Hudson River, she developed an early interest in the natural world and became an amateur botanist. She painted dinner cards and menus at age 16 to sell through the Women's Exchange in NYC, and designed her first book cover in 1890. Working out of her family home in Greenwich Village, she went on to become one of the most influential book designers of her time, creating 314 covers. As a woman, resistance from publishers early on was overcome at World's Colombia Exposition in Chicago in 1892 when she won an award for work displayed in the premier Women's Building. She then worked regularly with major publishing houses in New York and Chicago, designing covers for novels and poetry and essay collections, and decorating frontispieces and interior pages. A pioneer in decorative detail, by 1895 she had developed her own alphabet with distinctive letters A, E, F and R, and signed all her work with a stylized MA. Her artwork balanced the deliberative lines of Arts and Crafts style with the natural motifs of Art Nouveau and achieved further distinction with the influence of her sister, Helen Armstrong, who she often collaborated with, and her father, stained glass artist D. Maitland Armstrong.



In her creations, disjointed parts of leaves and flowers and geometric patterns were designed as if "leaded" by a gold stamp or the background color of cloth binding. Her botanical knowledge further enhanced her designs and her design work gave her a connection to field guides in advance of her own publication – she designed covers for the popular books *How to Know the Wildflowers* by Mrs. William Starr Dana and *How to Know the Ferns* by Frances Theodora Parsons.

Armstrong's book cover work tapered off with the introduction of paper book jackets in 1910 and opened up the chance for her to pursue her lifelong interest in botany. Hence the field guide. The field guide was apparently quite popular—an old edition I bought in a used book store is a "21st printing." The book has recently been reissued by Skyhorse Publishing Co., subtitled *The Ultimate Guide to Wildflowers Growing West of the Rocky Mountains*, ironically with a photograph of generic tulips on the cover.

After publication of her field guide, Armstrong edited family papers, wrote two successful biographies and three murder mysteries. Her prominence as a book jacket



designer has continued, with collections displayed and highlighted at institutions including The MET, University of California-Los Angeles, University of Cincinnati, University of Virginia, George Mason University, and The Library of Congress Special Collections.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT.** *Lathyrus splendens*, watercolor **TOP** *Sagittaria latifolia*, arrowhead, pen & ink **BOTTOM.** *Gilia aggregata*, scarlet gilia, watercolor **THIS PAGE, UPPER RIGHT.** Six of the beautiful book covers designed and illustrated by Margaret Armstrong. **AT RIGHT, ABOVE.** *Cactus grahami*, pincushion cactus, watercolor All artwork ©Margaret Armstrong