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The Ganga Singh and P. N. Sharma collection of watercolors at the Forest Research Institute, Dehra Dun

James J. White

Established in 1906, the Forest Research Institute (F.R.I.), Dehra Dun, houses laboratories, a library, an herbarium, arboreta, museums, a printing press and experimental field areas for conducting forestry research. The F.R.I. holds an impressive collection of well over 300 watercolors and ink drawings of plant subjects. Its most significant collection was created between 1930 and 1960 by Thakur Ganga (Rai Sahib) Singh (1895–1970) and his student P. Sharma (born 1922) and consists of 188 watercolors, plus at least 20 frames of four watercolors each depicting fungi and wood, by Ganga Singh in the museum of the Forest Pathology Division.

The plant families of the 187 paintings (with number of watercolors in parentheses), courteously provided by Dr. Sas. Biswas of the F.R.I., include the following: Acanthaceae (3), Apocynaceae (11), Araceae (1), Aristolochiaceae (1), Asclepiadaceae (2), Bignoniaceae (4), Bombacaceae (6), Cannaceae (1), Capparidaceae (3), Caprifoliaceae (2), Cochlospermaceae (1), Compositae (5), Convolvulaceae (3), Dilleniaceae (2), Dipterocarpaceae (5), Ericaceae (2), Euphorbiaceae (3), Fagaceae (1), Geraniaceae (2), Gramineae (mostly bamboos) (37), Guttiferae (1), Iridaceae (1), Leguminosae (25), Liliaceae (3), Linaceae (1), Loranthaceae (1), Lythraceae (3), Magnoliaceae (4), Malvaceae (3), Menispermaceae (1), Moraceae (1), Myrtaceae (1), Nyctaginaceae (1), Oleaceae (1), Orchidaceae (5), Oxalidaceae (1), Passifloraceae (1), Pinaceae (2), Polygalaceae (1), Polygonaceae (1), Primulaceae (1), Ranunculaceae (3), Rosaceae (2), Rubiaceae (7), Scrophulariaceae (1), Solanaceae (6), Stercu-

liaceae (4), Tiliaceae (3), Turneraceae (1), Verbenaceae (3) and Zingiberaceae (3). A list of genera is available upon request from the Hunt Institute.

Singh received a scholarship from His Highness Tehri Garhwal and graduated in 1931 from the Slade School of Fine Arts, London. He was employed as a senior artist at the F.R.I. between 1911 and 1945. Afterwards he went to Patiala to serve for 20 years as an artist for the Maharaja of Patiala. Sharma (who was a freelance botanical artist in 1945) was an artist in the botany branch between 1946 and 1980. Today he is living in Dehra Dun and actively painting botanical subjects.

The Hunt Institute's International Exhibitions of Botanical Art & Illustration in 1988 and 1992 respectively contained entries for P. Sharma and Ganga Singh. Although we found little biographical information for our catalogue entry on Ganga Singh, M. S. Randhawa, in *Beautiful trees and gardens*, wrote glowingly of his work:

Ganga Singh's paintings of flowering branches of beautiful trees of India faithfully depict the shape and colour of flowers, leaves and branches. For their accuracy and freshness of colour, his paintings stand unrivalled.

Ganga Singh, who was attached to the Forest Research Institute, Dehra Dun, as its official artist, is admittedly one of the best plant artists of the world. He was mainly patronized by British officers and their wives. Lady Willingdon acquired a collection of his paintings which decorate her home in England. In Delhi, a small but representative collection of his sketches of flowering trees, shrubs and creepers can be seen in the Botany Division of the Indian Agricultural Research Institute.



Figure 1. Bungalows at Dehra Dun, Company School, ca. 1830. Watercolor on paper, 7½ in. × 19¼ in. Private Collection.

A larger collection of his paintings can be seen in the Forest Research Institute, Dehra Dun. It is said that some of these paintings are so life-like that they even attract bees and butterflies. Most of the plant sketches of Ganga Singh are botanical in character and are painted in water colours. Recently, he

has adopted the oil medium and has painted flowering branches of *asoka* trees and red flowers of *Rhododendron arboreum*. The Flame of the Forest, which has provided themes to so many plant artists, has been painted by Ganga Singh so vividly that one actually feels the presence of a living tree.



Figure 2. Forest Research Institute. Photo courtesy of Forest Research Institute.

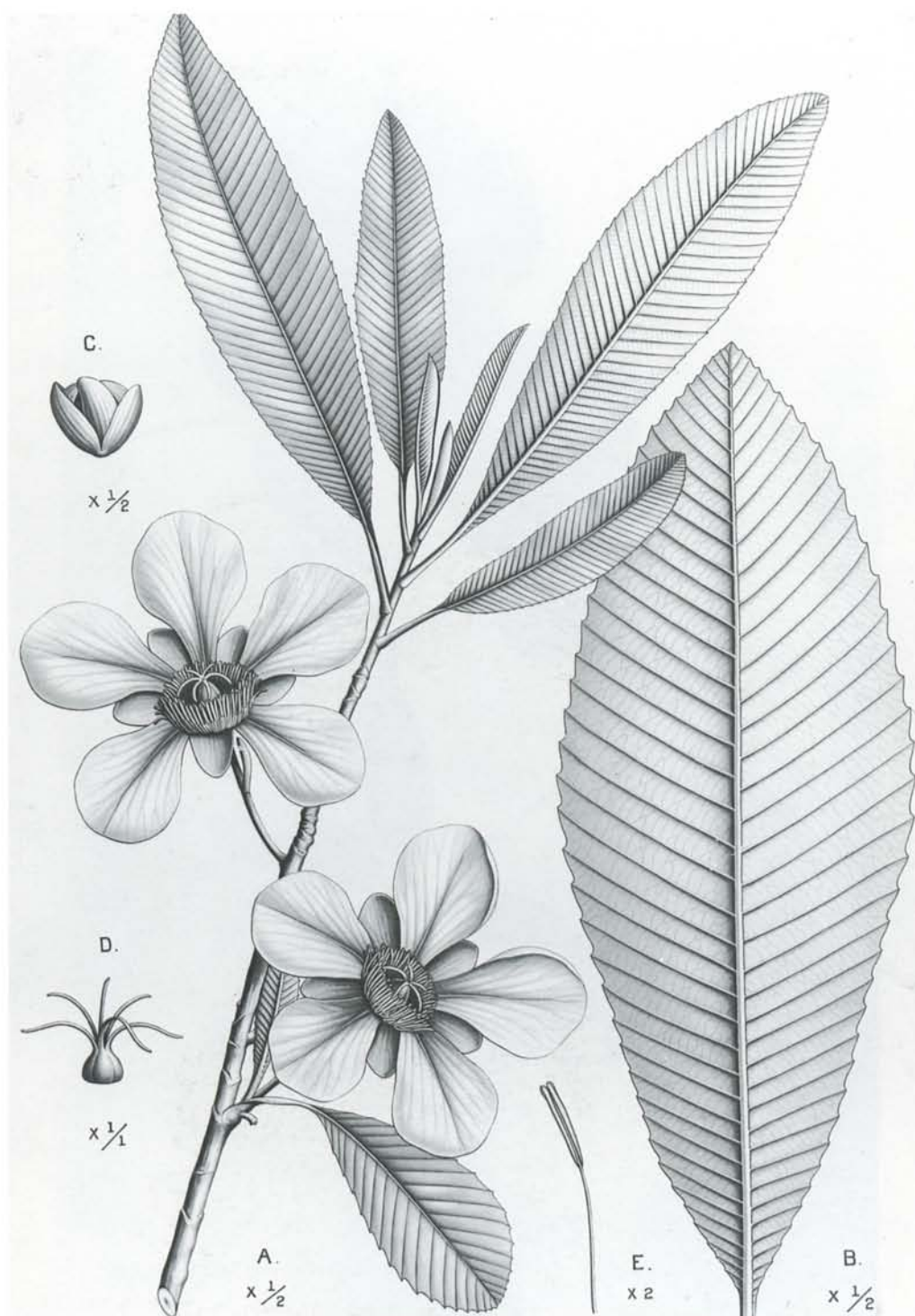
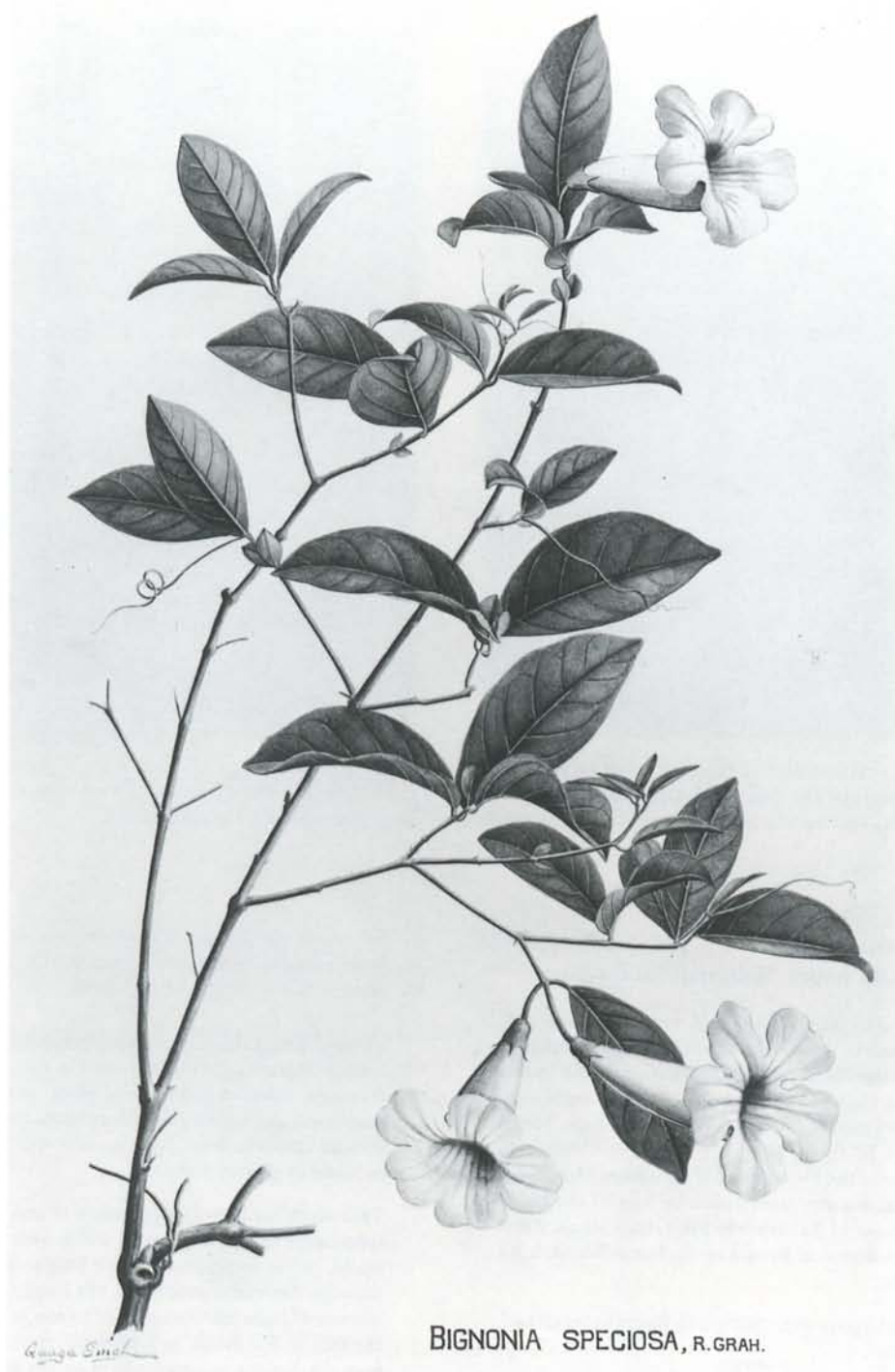


Figure 3. Ink and wash of "*Dillenia parkinsonii* M. B. Raizada et R. N. Chatterji" by Ganga Singh. Courtesy of P. Sharma.



Figure 4. Watercolor of "*Bombax malabaricum*" by Ganga Singh. Courtesy of P. Sharma.



BIGNONIA SPECIOSA, R. GRAH.

Figure 5. Watercolor of "*Bignonia speciosa* R. Grah." by Ganga Singh. Courtesy of P. Sharma.



Figure 6. Watercolor of "*Bombax ceiba*" by P. Sharma (1956) from the FRI Collection, Dehra Dun, reproduced as greeting card by *The Indian forester*.



Figure 7. Watercolor of "*Cassia fistula*" by P. Sharma (1956) from the FRI Collection, Dehra Dun, reproduced as greeting card by *The Indian forester*.

The Indian forester (July 1944) included the following under "Editorial Notes":

Rai Sahib Ganga Singh.—A very interesting preliminary to the award of the Diplomas, Certificates and Prizes at the joint Convocation of the Indian Forest College and the Indian Forest Ranger College by the Honourable Sir Jogendra Singh, Member of H. E. the Viceroy's Executive Council, in charge of the Department of Education, Health and Lands, was the presentation by him of the badge and *sanad* of Rai Sahib to Mr. Ganga Singh, Artist in the Botanical Branch of the Forest Research Institute.

In making the presentation, sir Jogendra Singh said:
"Rai Sahib Ganga Singh,

You have worked as the Artist of the Botany Branch of the Forest Research Institute for the last twenty-

five years, and during this period your drawings have appeared in numerous journals and publications of this Institute and elsewhere.

Through these publications, your illustrations, which cover a wide range of subjects, such as silvicultural drawings, coloured paintings of plant specimens, anatomical and mycological illustrations, requiring accurate scientific detail, have become well known to botanists all over India.

Your work has been highly spoken of and greatly appreciated by scientists from other parts of the world, and in recognition of your long service and the high standard of your work, His Excellency the Viceroy of India has been pleased to confer on you the title of Rai Sahib, as a personal distinction. I have the honour to invest you with the badge of Rai Sahib and to present you with the *sanad* on behalf of His Excellency the Viceroy of India."



Figure 8. Watercolor of "*Butea monosperma*" by Ganga Singh (1946) from the FRI Collection, Dehra Dun, reproduced as greeting card by *The Indian forester*.

All who know Rai Sahib, Ganga Singh or who are acquainted with his work will join with us in extending to him congratulations, and in expressing pleasure at this public recognition of his work.

The Indian forester (February 1970) included the following obituary:

Rai Sahib Thakur Ganga Singh, 1895–1970

Rai Sahib Thakur Ganga Singh, who served the Forest Research Institute, Dehra Dun as a Senior Artist for well over 30 years, died at the Safdarjang Hospital, New Delhi on the 12th January 1970, after a long illness patiently borne. He joined the Institute in 1911 and retired in 1945.

The outstanding merit of his artistic work, particularly in the field of botanical studies won for him a good deal of acclaim not only in India but also



Figure 9. Watercolor of "*Lagerstroemia flos-reginae*" by Ganga Singh (1945) from the FRI Collection, Dehra Dun, reproduced as greeting card by *The Indian forester*.

abroad. His ability to depict things in their transparent naturalness and the subtle touch of his brush endowed him with the gift of a true genius. His work in the museums of the Forest Research Institute even today constitute the masterpieces among the artistic galaxies.

Besides being a gifted artist he was also an ambitious scholar of fine arts. In 1931 he took long leave and joined the Slade School of Fine Arts, London University of London and did a Special Course of one year in Fine Arts. In 1943 the title of Rai Sahib was conferred upon him in recognition of his meritorious services and outstanding contributions in the field of fine arts.

Thakur Ganga Singh was also a keen Sportsman, for several years he captained the football team of the Forest Research Institute. As a centre-forward his acrobatics were often dazzling and a real treat to the multitudes of spectators.



Figure 10. (Upper left) Watercolor of "*Rhododendron arboreum*" by Ganga Singh (1946) from the FRI Collection, Dehra Dun, reproduced as greeting card by *The Indian forester*.

Figure 11. (Upper right) Watercolor of "*Beaumontia grandiflora*" by Ganga Singh (1945) from the FRI Collection, Dehra Dun, reproduced as greeting card by *The Indian forester*.

Figure 12. (Lower right) Watercolor of "*Beaumontia grandiflora*" by Ganga Singh (1943). Courtesy of Dr. E. C. Nelson. Photograph by Davison and Associates, Dublin.





Figure 13. Watercolor of "*Beaumontia grandiflora*" by P. Sharma. Hunt Institute collection.

In the early thirties [*sic*] he was elected to the office of Chairman of the F.R.I. Cooperative Society and for a number of years he discharged his onerous duties with brilliant success. In the death of Thakur Ganga Singh a great international artist and a noble citizen has been lost.

We offer our condolences to his bereaved wife, sons and daughters.

May God give peace to his soul.

M.B.R.

Reproductions of Singh's and Sharma's works can be found in R. N. Parker's *Common Indian trees and how to know them* (1933), N. L. Bor and M. B. Raizada's *Some beautiful Indian climbers and shrubs* (1954), S. K. Seth, M. B. Raizada and M. A. Waheed Khan's *Trees for Vana Mahotsava* (1962), D. N. Tewari's *Important plants of India* (1994) and countless publications of the F.R.I.

The herbarium of the F.R.I. contains the works of other artists, including Ummed Singh, H. Hormusji and I. C. Prazer. A watercolor titled "*Strychnos nux-vomica* Linn." by Anand Devi (Mrs. N. S. Bisht, daughter of Ganga Singh, presently living in New Delhi) is displayed in the F.R.I.'s Non-Wood Forest Products Museum.

Current artists at the F.R.I. include Mr. Gyanendra Kumar (born 1941), chief artist in the botany branch, whose ink drawings are reproduced in *Food from forests*; Mr. Bandari; Mrs. Bansal (wood anatomy); Mr. N. S. Rama (publicity branch); Mr. Shantosh (entomology); and Mr. Tapa (silviculture division).

Acknowledgments

Dr. D. N. Tewari, director general; Dr. N. K. Joshi, director; Dr. Sas. Biswas, botanist; and other staff members of the Forest Research Institute cordially received me during my visit in 1994. Mr. and Mrs. G. S. Gahlot took excellent care of me on this and an earlier trip. Mr. Shri Dhar of Calcutta generously arranged my transportation with horticulturist Mr. Roychowhury to Dehra Dun where Professor and Ms. Som Deva Sharma of Dehra Dun provided exceptional hospitality.

Biographical information was supplied by Ganga Singh's son Virendra Singh of Dehra Dun and his daughter Mrs. A. D. Visht of New Delhi. I am grateful for assistance from the Smithsonian Special Foreign Currency Program and the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation
Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15213