

## The New York Times

# *Jessica Tcherepnine, Exacting Botanical Artist, Is Dead at 80*

By **Richard Sandomir**

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Jessica Tcherepnine, a British-born watercolorist whose meticulous, naturalistic depictions of flowers, fruits and vegetables established her as one of the world's leading creators of botanical art, died on Dec. 31 at her home in Manhattan. She was 80.

Her husband, Peter Tcherepnine (pronounced CHER-ep-neen), said the cause was complications of corticobasal degeneration, a progressive neurological disease, which caused her to stop painting four years ago.

Her portraits — of pumpkins and peppers, mushrooms and morels, coconuts and quinces and more — combined a delicate artistic sensibility with superb technique, and scientific accuracy with a passion for nearly anything that grows out of the ground.

Her joy in exploring her subjects was evident in a question she posed in an article for the American Society of Botanical Artists in 2014.



Ms. Tcherepnine in 2013. “What could be more wonderfully weird, or more weirdly wonderful,” she wrote, “than the seed pod of the *Strelitzia nicolai*?”  
The Horticultural Society of New York

“What could be more wonderfully weird, or more weirdly wonderful, than the seed pod of the *Strelitzia nicolai*?” Ms. Tcherepnine wrote about the tropical plant better known as the white bird of paradise, which has banana-like leaves and clumping stalks. “I have painted these seed pods several times. Each time I see new and exciting details of the shapes and colors.”

She recalled searching in Florida for the group of black seeds that would provide the ideal finishing touch to one of her bird of paradise watercolors.

Ms. Tcherepnine was a star of her corner of the art world. She won two gold medals from the Royal Horticultural Society, the British gardening charity. She was also invited to paint the beet (beta vulgaris) for “The Highgrove Florilegium,” a 2008 book that records all the plants in Prince Charles’s garden in Gloucestershire, England.

Her paintings are in the collections of the state Peterhof Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, and the Natural History Museum in London, among other places. Some of her artwork is also in the expansive private collection of Shirley Sherwood, a British botanist, writer and philanthropist.



“Skunk Cabbage: *Symplocarpus foetidus*,” 1991. Ms. Tcherepnine was a star of her corner of the art world. via Shirley Sherwood Collection

“She produced strong, individual plant portraits which were arresting,” Ms. Sherwood said in an email. “She also chose interesting subjects at a time when there were far fewer botanical artists than today and there was a tendency to paint only pretty, popular subjects like roses.”

Beginning in 1983, Ms. Tcherepnine was the subject of several successful exhibitions at the Shepherd Gallery in Manhattan, which stepped out of its specialty in 19th century art to showcase her paintings.

“The reason we show her work — she’s the only botanical artist we do show — is that it is not old-fashioned,” Robert Kashey, the gallery’s director, said in an interview with The New York Times in 1997. “The lines, the clarity, the magic she creates, the emotion she has for the plants. That’s why she’s one of the best.”

Ms. Tcherepnine was also a longtime board member of the Horticultural Society of New York, for whom she taught botanical drawing to prisoners at Rikers Island, the city’s main jail.

“Coconut: *Cocos nucifera*,” 2005. Ms. Tcherepnine taught botanical drawing to prisoners at Rikers Island in New York. via Shirley Sherwood Collection

“She’d come out several times a year and talk to the inmates about the colors and elements of a flower,” Sara Hobel, the society’s executive director, said in a telephone interview. “Once, she conducted a fantastic discussion with them about pepper plants.”

Jessica Elizabeth Harris was born on May 14, 1938, in Sussex, England, and grew up in the countryside there and in London. Her father, William Barclay Harris, was a lawyer, and her mother, Elizabeth (Milnes Coates) Harris, was a homemaker.

As a child, Jessica drew and painted flowers — blossoms in particular — in her family’s garden. After attending a girls boarding school in England, she studied drawing and watercolors for several months in Florence with the noted teacher Nerina Simi.

She found work in the art world in the 1960s, mostly as an assistant in various departments of Christie’s, the auction house, in London and in its Manhattan office. She married Mr. Tcherepnine, an investment manager, in 1973 while living in the United States.

In 1982, she left her job to focus full-time on botanical painting.

“When I am doing a painting, my subject is the last thing I look at before I go to bed and the first thing I look at when I get up in the morning,” Ms. Tcherepnine wrote in the article for the American Society of Botanical Artists. “And I am thinking about it in between.”

She painted in her apartment in Manhattan and in her home in Millbrook, in Dutchess County, N.Y., sometimes with a flower in one hand and a brush in the other. Her subjects included flowers from her garden and exotic plants she found in Florida and the West Indies.

“I have painted practically everything I can get hold of, from magnolias to beets to dandelions and skunk cabbage,” Ms. Tcherepnine wrote, adding that her focus had evolved to depicting sculptural elements, like the seed pod of the West Indian fruit ackee. “You have to paint what speaks to you.”

In addition to her husband, she is survived by a sister, Hermione Karlin; a brother, Jonathan Harris; a stepdaughter, Samantha Tcherepnine, and three step-grandchildren.

Last year, Ms. Tcherepnine donated the use of her portraits of a garden beet, quince, apple, hydrangea, banana and a woods' rose for note cards by CurePSP, an advocacy organization that seeks to combat so-called prime of life neurodegenerative diseases like corticobasal degeneration and progressive supranuclear palsy.

“Even as her physical capabilities diminished, her intellect remained crystalline and her sly English sense of humor intact,” David Kemp, president of CurePSP, wrote in an email, recalling his visits with her. “She was the Audubon of plant life.”

**Correction:** January 14, 2019

*An earlier version of this obituary misstated part of the name of a museum in London whose collection includes paintings by Ms. Tcherepnine. It is the Natural History Museum, not the National History Museum.*

**Correction:** January 16, 2019

*An earlier version of a picture caption with this obituary, using information from the Shepherd Gallery in Manhattan, misidentified the subject of one of Ms. Tcherepnine's paintings. It is an ackee, not a magnolia.*

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 12, 2019, on Page D8 of the New York edition with the headline: Jessica Tcherepnine, 80, Botanical Artist Who Painted 'Practically Everything'