The Herbarium



Over 1.1 million pressed, dried and mounted plant specimens are held in this prestigious archive.

Part of the Department of Plant Sciences, the Cambridge University Herbarium's (CGE) collection spans over 300 years of botanical history, with specimens dating back to at least 1703.

The Herbarium reflects global plant diversity, with specimens added as a result of purchases, exchanges and donations. The Mary Merrifield drawings were one such donation, and form part of the Herbarium's holdings of botanical illustrations. Currently, CGE is digitising its collections making them more accessible to researchers across a broad range of disciplines. The focus of this work is on British specimens, which are comprehensively represented in the collections.

Inspired by the exhibition?

Visit the Garden's water lilies and pond life in the Lake, Fen Display and Tropical Wetlands Glasshouse.





This is the first art exhibition arising from our recent Community Research Project, working in collaboration with the Cambridge University Herbarium and The Glasshouse Artists. We welcome your feedback, so please share your thoughts and reflections on the postcards provided.

Contributors: Juliet Anderson, Eve Campbell, Bee Carter, Clemi Lee, Kate Price Thomas, Tom Steer.
Lighting and sound design: CJ Steer

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE MUSEUMS & BOTANIC GARDEN

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

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The Struggle for Light

Exploring the life and work of artist Mary Merrifield

Bringing together visual art, botanical heritage and under-represented histories

24-30 August 2026
The Syndicate Room, Cambridge University Botanic Garden

Cambridge University Botanic Garden

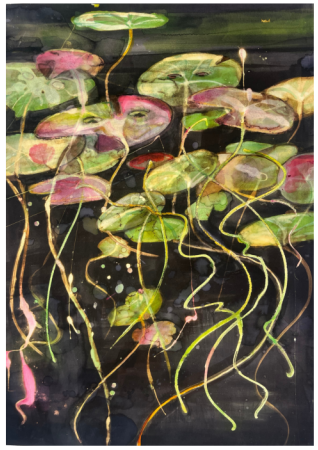
The Struggle for Light

Discover the story of Mary Merrifield through this immersive exhibition inspired by art, seaweed and the fight for creative freedom

THE REMARKABLE but little-known work of 19th-century artist, writer and scientist Mary Merrifield sparked The Glasshouse Artists' production of this exhibition, which explores creativity, resilience and the challenges women have faced in pursuing artistic careers across generations.

The project began with a simple question: Why did Mary Merrifield choose to paint and collect seaweed? Looking to her pioneering ideas on women's freedom and dress reform, The Glasshouse Artists imagine seaweed as a symbol of movement, possibility and liberation – a striking contrast to the social constraints placed on Victorian women. Merrifield's determination to balance artistic ambition with domestic expectations continues to resonate with the experiences of women artists today.





Step inside an atmospheric Victorian sitting room, reimagined through sculpture, lighting, sound and specially commissioned creative writing.

At the heart of the installation, large transparent tanks filled with aquatic plants evoke the Botanic Garden's glasshouses and waterways. Reaching towards the light, the plants weave around sculpted figures representing Mary Merrifield, her descendants and generations of women artists, creating a powerful visual metaphor for perseverance, growth and the pursuit of creative recognition.

Throughout the space, botanical imagery appears in unexpected places – from hidden details woven into wallpaper and textiles to striking artworks displayed around the room – inviting visitors to look closely and uncover the many layers of the story.

The Glasshouse Artists



Born out of our Community Research Project, The Glasshouse Artists create art inspired by the Garden. In this exhibition the artists celebrate the power of creativity, collaboration and community, while shining a light on the stories of women whose artistic contributions deserve to be better known.

THE ARTISTS: Joe Forsyth, Lynn Fraser, Melissa Fu, Annabel Lee, Hannah Migliari.

Left: seaweed illustration and artwork inspired by Mary Merrifield
Above: photograph of objects featured in the exhibition