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For Immediate Release

HUNT INSTITUTE PRESENTS
*VIRTUES AND PLEASURES OF HERBS THROUGH HISTORY:
PHYSIC, FLAVOR, FRAGRANCE AND DYE*
22 March–29 June 2007

Through history the virtues and pleasures of herbs have enhanced our daily lives and connected us to the natural world through all of our senses. Although botanists consider an herb to be a small seed-bearing, non-woody plant that dies back to the ground, for this exhibition we are using the broader horticultural description of any plant that is useful for many purposes. From the countless cultivated or wild herbs with overlapping applications, we have chosen a selection within the four categories of physic, flavor, fragrance and dye. Each topic provides highlights of the usage of five herbs at specific points in history. For physic—comfrey, ginger, mint, sage, and thyme—we will discuss herbs that were considered a panacea for health in ancient medicinal texts, those that continue to be used for their therapeutic properties as in earlier times, and those with components that are considered medicinally promising or now deemed toxic. For flavor—basil, coriander, fennel, garlic, and marjoram/oregano—we will discuss herbs now used to enhance our culinary pursuits that were once only used symbolically, were reviled for their pungency, or were introduced from other cultures. For fragrance—lavender, monarda, rosemary, scented geraniums, and southernwood—we will discuss herbs that were used for the first perfumes, as protectors from the plague, and as substitutes for imported teas following the Boston Tea Party. For dye—bloodroot, madder, saffron, tansy, and woad—we will discuss familiar European herbs that were cultivated in colonists' kitchen gardens for everyday use in the New World and unfamiliar herbs about which they learned from Native Americans, those that were part of the powerful Italian dye and woolen guild systems, and those that strongly affected economies and trade. All twenty herbs are illustrated by original watercolors and prints, rare books, or manuscript pages from the Hunt Institute's Art, Library, and Archives collections.

Ancient medicinal traditions of China, India, Egypt, and Greece held that herbs contained virtuous properties that could alleviate any health imbalance. Herbs were used not only for medicinal purposes but also to flavor and preserve food, to scent and protect household environments, and to dye or stain the skin and textiles. Records of superstitions and more provable usage in manuscript form were copied or translated into various languages and transmitted to many cultures. With the invention of moveable type in the mid-15th century, information became more readily available. Even though the copying of earlier texts persisted, the 15th and 16th centuries brought new ideas about the use of herbs. They were cultivated in monastery and physic gardens for use and study, and later apothecaries became dispensaries of simples (or combinations of herbs) to treat particular ailments. Through voyages of exploration and the establishment of trade routes, exotic herbs and spices became available throughout many parts of the world, and luxuries were no longer restricted to royalty or the wealthiest classes. Kitchen gardens provided households with the herbs necessary for everyday needs. Herbs began to be acknowledged for their nonessential and pleasurable uses as early as the 13th century and proliferated in the 16th century. Pleasure gardens were established for their beauty—emphasizing color, scent and texture—and elaborately designed knot gardens and labyrinths became popular public attractions. Herbs were used for

perfumes and nosegays and as symbols in poetry and prose. Interest in the use of herbs has waxed and waned in modern times, but in recent decades there is recognition of the importance of the role these plants play in all aspects of our lives. As the naturalist Henry Beston aptly noted in his 1935 *Herbs and the Earth*, “A garden of herbs gives more months of garden pleasure and more kinds of pleasure than any other. Its interest is independent of flowers, its fragrances are taken from the first leaf to the last, its uses make it a part of the amenities of the whole year, and its history and traditions touch all nations and all times.”

In conjunction with the *Virtues and Pleasures of Herbs through History: Physic, Flavor, Fragrance and Dye*, the Hunt Institute will hold an open house on 3 and 4 June 2007. We will offer herb-themed talks, a guided gallery tour of the exhibition by our assistant curator of art, tours of our departments and reading room, and opportunities to meet one-on-one with our staff to ask questions and see items in the collections. We encourage everyone to consider visiting us during this open house. It will be a good time to see the new exhibition and an opportunity to have an inside look at our collections and our work. A schedule of events will be available soon on our Web site. We are looking forward to your visit.

The exhibition will be on display on the fifth floor of the Hunt Library building at Carnegie Mellon University. Hours: Monday–Friday, 9 a.m.–noon and 1–5 p.m.; Sunday, 1–4 p.m. (except 6–8 April, 20 and 27–28 May). The exhibition is open to the public free of charge. For further information, contact the Hunt Institute at 412-268-2434.

The Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, a research division of Carnegie Mellon University, specializes in the history of botany and all aspects of plant science and serves the international scientific community through research and documentation. To this end, the Institute acquires and maintains authoritative collections of books, plant images, manuscripts, portraits and data files, and provides publications and other modes of information service. The Institute meets the reference needs of botanists, biologists, historians, conservationists, librarians, bibliographers and the public at large, especially those concerned with any aspect of the North American flora.

Hunt Institute was founded in 1961 as the Rachel McMasters Miller Hunt Botanical Library, an international center for bibliographical research and service in the interests of botany and horticulture, as well as a center for the study of all aspects of the history of the plant sciences. By 1971 the Library’s activities had so diversified that the name was changed to Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation. Growth in collections and research projects led to the establishment of four programmatic departments: Archives, Art, Bibliography, and the Library. The current collections include approximately 29,000 books; 25,000 portraits; 30,000 watercolors, drawings and prints; and 2,000 autograph letters and manuscripts. Including artworks dating from the Renaissance, the Art Department’s collection now focuses on contemporary botanical art and illustration, where the coverage is unmatched. The Art Department organizes and stages exhibitions, including the triennial *International Exhibition of Botanical Art & Illustration*.

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