

THE EARLIEST KNOWN BOTANICAL ILLUSTRATION DEPICTING THE ENTIRETY OF A COFFEE PLANT (*COFFEA ARABICA*, RUBIACEAE) (1666)

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ABSTRACT

Dominique Chabrée's book, *Stirpium icones et sciagraphia*, published in 1666 and in subsequent editions in 1677, and 1678, includes the first botanical illustration of an entire coffee plant (*Coffea arabica*), including the roots. Despite inaccurate botanical characters, the illustration is a milestone in the evolution of coffee botanical art.

RESUMEN

El libro de Dominique Chabrée, *Stirpium icones et sciagraphia*, publicado en 1666 y en ediciones posteriores en 1677 y 1678, incluye la primera ilustración botánica de una planta de café (*Coffea arabica*) entera, incluyendo las raíces. A pesar de la inexactitud de los caracteres botánicos, la ilustración constituye un hito en la evolución del arte botánico del café.

Knowledge about *Coffea arabica* L. (Arabica coffee) in the Western world first started to be gathered in the late 16th century, when the German physician and botanist Leonhart Rauwolf (1535–1596) described coffee as a social drink (Rauwolf 1582). Just 10 years later, the Venetian Prospero Alpino published *De plantis Aegypti liber* (Alpino 1592), which included the first illustration of a coffee plant (actually, a coffee branch) in a printed book.

Recently, while working on a coffee-related article, we came across a 1666 book by Dominique Chabrée, a Swiss physician and botanist, in which a depiction of an entire coffee plant was included in the appendix (Fig. 1). This is, to the best of our knowledge, the earliest botanical illustration of an entire coffee plant, including the roots, in a printed book. Chabrée's book, *Stirpium icones et sciagraphia*, is an abridgement of his Swiss colleagues Johann Bauhin and Johann Heinrich Cherler's book, *Historia plantarum universalis*, published in three volumes in 1650–1651, with coffee discussed in the first volume (Bauhin & Cherler 1650). Chabrée's book was re-issued in 1677 under a new title, and in 1678 with yet another title; the coffee plant woodcut illustration is depicted on p. 598 in all three editions of the books (Chabrée 1666, 1677, 1678).

The sole botanically accurate characteristic in Chabrée's coffee plant woodblock illustration is the depiction of opposite leaves (Fig. 1). The alternate branching is inaccurate (Fig. 1) as the branches in coffee plants are opposite from each other. As depicted in the illustration, the root-system does not at all resemble that of coffee plants, which has been visually illustrated and identified by Nutman (1933). This discrepancy is not surprising as it would have been impossible for Chabrée or a botanical illustrator to have examined a mature coffee plant in Switzerland in 1666 considering that the first coffee plant in Europe was brought by the Dutch from Java (Indonesia) to the Amsterdam Botanical Garden late in the 17th century (Ellis 1774). Thus, Chabrée's illustration was most likely not based on the observation of an actual coffee plant. It seems plausible that the illustrator drew inspiration from Alpino's work, which correctly portrays opposite leaves (Alpino 1592). Chabrée's coffee plant illustration does not appear in Bauhin and Cherler (1650), but the text next to Chabrée's illustration is an edited version of text from their book.

Despite its faults, Chabrée's illustration is a milestone in the evolution of botanical art involving the coffee plant. However, it was not mentioned in three important coffee bibliographies (Mueller 1960; Schnyder-v. Waldkirch 1988; Hünersdorff & Hasenkamp 2002). Misrepresentation of coffee botanical characters occurred once again in 1703 when Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli published various engravings of what were supposed to

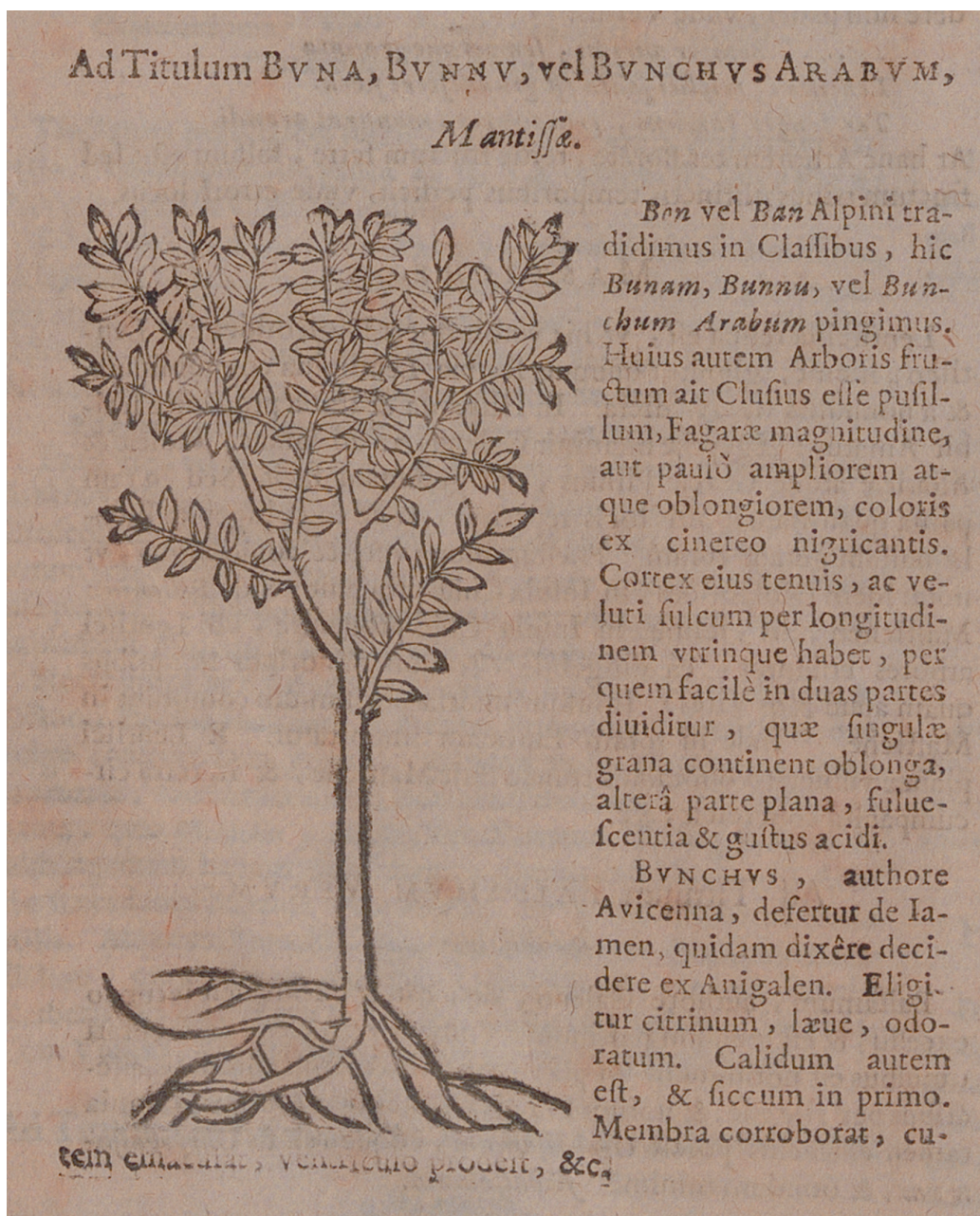


FIG. 1. Dominique Chabrée's woodcut illustration of an entire coffee plant, published in *Stirpium icones et sciagraphia* (1666). The plant is identified as buna, bunnū, and bunchus, words used at the time when referring to coffee. From the Collection of The Lloyd Library and Museum.

be different types of coffee plants (Marsigli 1703). Due to numerous inaccuracies, whoever created them was not actually drawing coffee plants but most likely something similar to a cherry tree (Vega & Davis 2025). Finally, in 1715, the Frenchman Jean de la Roque published *Voyage de l'Arabie heureuse* (de la Roque 1715), an immensely popular book published in French, German, Italian, and English, that includes accurate botanical illustrations of coffee leaves, a branch with leaves, flowers and fruits, coffee seeds, as well as an entire coffee plant (without the roots).

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