

**Lindsay Wells**, Independent Scholar

“Portrait of a Colonial Botanist: Joseph Dalton Hooker and the Visual Politics of Plant Science”

Abstract:

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed not only the rise of botany as a popular pastime in Britain, but also its crystallization into a discrete branch of science. While anyone with a passion for collecting plants at this time could technically call themselves a botanist, only a select handful were respected as legitimate scientists. My talk explores how imperial expansion informed assumptions about amateur and professional botany in the Victorian period, as disclosed through two pictures of a famous plant collector: Frank Stone’s *Portrait of Dr. Hooker* (1852) and Walter Hood Fitch’s *Sir Joseph Hooker Receiving Rhododendrons* (1849). Set among the Himalayan foothills, both compositions depict British botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker sitting with the Lepcha men and women who helped him collect Indian flora in the 1840s for his scientific publications. Whereas Stone’s painting transforms this scene into an allegory of colonial conquest, Fitch’s version inadvertently documents how Indigenous knowledge and artistry made Hooker’s botanical research possible in the first place. By reading these two works against the grain of their own production, my talk situates the colonial politics of botanical collecting alongside the contributions that nineteenth-century Indian artists made to the advent of modern plant science.

Bio:

Lindsay Wells is a specialist in nineteenth-century British visual culture based in Los Angeles, where she is writing a book on Victorian art and imperial plant hunting. Grounded within the emerging field of the plant humanities, her research explores how colonial expansion shaped artistic production and cultivated landscapes across the former British empire. She earned her PhD in art history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2021 and recently completed postdoctoral fellowships at the Getty Research Institute and UCLA’s Clark Memorial Library. She has also held fellowships at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Yale Center for British Art, and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. Her essays on nineteenth-century horticulture and botany have appeared in *Victorian Studies*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, and *Literature Compass*.