

Perspectives on coffee culture: Arcimboldo's bean

Insight into the early spread of coffee culture is hampered due to limited sources and uncertainty if they refer to *coffea*, or another plant. A playful source for debate in coffeaology (the study of *coffea*) is Arcimboldo's 1590 masterpiece: *Vertumnus*⁽¹⁾.

The earliest 'western' depictions of coffee appear to be in 1574 by Charles de l'Ecluse (Clusius), while botanist of Maximilian II ⁽²⁾, and 1592 by Venetian botanist Prospero Alpini⁽³⁾. Neither is detailed, but accompanying text enables identification of Alpini's berry-free coffee tree (observed in Cairo); Clusius mentions the 'furrow' in his beans (obtained from the Duke of Ferrara's physician).

Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the Habsburg court artist and accomplished natural history painter (who co-served with Clusius⁽⁴⁾) may have provided another. The surprising juxtapositions found in Arcimboldo's work though humorous, and eccentric, appear to accurately represent flora and fauna⁴. *Vertumnus* (1590) depicts Emperor Rudolf II (son of Maximilian II, and an avid collector, and naturalist) using fruit and vegetables. A sprig of olives is shown; beneath it, at first glance, is an olive pit, yet its histology is problematic⁽⁵⁾.

The endocarp morphology shows a clear longitudinal groove, and its shape suggests possibly a date, but particularly a coffee bean⁽⁶⁾. Did Arcimboldo wink at us by 'hiding' a coffee bean? Rudolf II knew about coffee from Clusius' works. Was Arcimboldo's double entendre intended subterfuge to ally contemporary suspicions of coffee.

References:

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