

Orchid Fascination

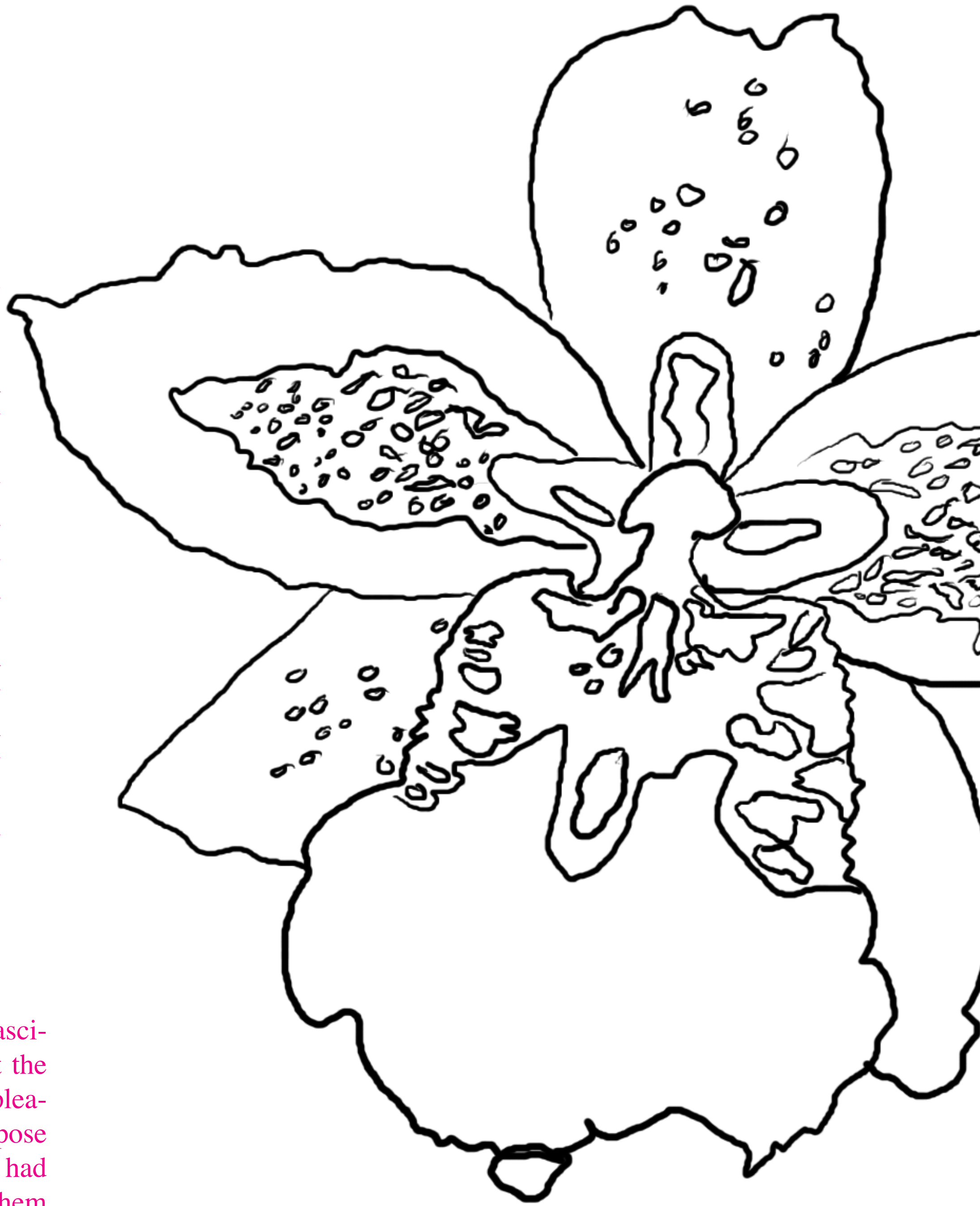
These strange, spectacular flowers have captured our imagination for centuries. They have been a symbol of love, luxury and beauty. Orchids were mentioned in Chinese literature from 800 B.C. Confucius extolled the virtues of the fragrance of the orchid. The Chinese thought Dendrobiums were thought to be a source of tonic, astringent, analgesic and anti-inflammatory substances. The ancient Greeks thought the orchid a symbol of virility. During the Middle Ages, the orchid was used as a remedy of illness. It was considered an aphrodisiac and was used in love potions. Samari soldiers grew orchids as a sign of bravery and prowess. Adventurers have trekked up mountains, into jungles and visited the most exotic places of the world to find new species to dazzle the collectors.

Collecting orchids became fashionable in the 18th century. In November, 1818 William Cattley, an English botanist became the first person to bloom an orchid after he received orchids as packing material around some rare plants sent to him from Brazil. He potted one of these plants and was pleasantly surprised when it bloomed a beautiful, fragrant flower. This event changed the flower forever. Orchids were imported by the thousands to England where most died quickly because the English tried to duplicate the hot, humid conditions of the tropics by placing them in stove houses with coal fires with no ventilation. Despite the quick demise, orchids were harvested with no mind to conservation. Forests were stripped of millions of orchids endangering many species and making others extinct. Techniques for growing improved. In the 19th century they were collected in the wild and transported by the ton back to England where they became the “rich man’s plant.” Prices became outrageously expensive with some plants fetching as much as 500 pounds at auctions

Scientists such as Charles Darwin were fascinated by orchids. Darwin discovered that the beauty of the orchid was not just for the pleasure of being seen but had a functional purpose in pollination. He predicted a moth that he had never seen after studying the Star of Bethlehem orchid. The moth was discovered twenty-one years after his death.

Today wild orchid collection is essentially banned. However, these once rare and exotic orchids now can commonly be found at local grocery stores and garden centers thanks to growers who breed and cultivate orchids specifically for sales around the world.

In the 17th century Jacob Breynius, a German botanist described the fascination of orchids, “If nature ever showed her playfulness in the formation of plants, this is visible in the most striking way among the orchids. They take on the form of little birds, of lizards, of insects. They look like a man, a woman, sometimes like a clown who excites our laughter. They represent the image of a lazy tortoise, a melancholy toad, an agile, ever-chattering monkey. Nature has formed orchid flowers in such a way that, unless they make us laugh, they surely excite our greatest admiration.”



Vanilla, a commercial product made from the vanilla orchid, also helped to increase this popularity of orchids when it was introduced to the English in 1739.