



In memoriam Jan van Os (1942 – 2021), great botanical illustrator

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On Sunday, 10 October 2021, Jan van Os (Fig. 1) passed away at the age of 79. After primary school, Jan started to work at the age of 14 as junior collection assistant (1 June 1957) in the Rijksherbarium of Leiden University (later part of the National Herbarium of the Netherlands, now part of Naturalis Biodiversity Center). As youngest staff member he was used to do any kind of menial jobs, but tedium was compensated for by many adventures with other very young colleagues (including one of us, CL). After his artistic talents were recognised, he attended evening classes at the Royal Academy of Arts in The Hague. He finished his education in 1970, and was initially appointed as botanical illustrator for two days per week, which was later changed into a full-time job as successor of Mr. Tammel. In 1982 Jan became head of the arts and photography department of the herbarium, a position he held till the end of his career.

Jan made many, perhaps thousands of line drawings of plants of high quality, whereby his dotting technique returned life to flat, dried, discoloured (ugly is a good word) plants from the herbarium holdings. His minute detailed dotting suggested depth and structure, resulting in very appealing and pleasing drawings with all the details researchers wanted to show and see. Still, his drawings remained light, as he kept the dotting to a minimum. An appealing illustration does not only depend on drawing skills, but also on composing a complete plate as the technical drawings usually show a general view of the plant (habit) with smaller detailed drawings of flowers, fruits and seeds. Many artists make the composition once they have finished all separate drawings, Jan often made his plan already after sketching, which is nicely demonstrated by drawings whereby the details are partly overlapping with the habit drawing of the plant and even cast their shadow on that habit (Fig. 2). The sketches were fun to see, a transparent plastic sheet with usually the habit and attached on it with sticky tape a jumble of details drawn on half-translucent paper. The sketch was placed on top of a glass plate with background lighting and on top of it a sheet of drawing paper was attached on which the inking of the final drawing took place.

Jan's technique gave him a well-earned fame, and also resulted in requests for teaching. Jan trained many botanical artists, but never as a superior but as a colleague. If asked for he would give comments and advice. As a result, most of his successors in Naturalis developed a style reminiscent of his work. Jan not only helped Dutch artists, but also artists from Japan, Indonesia, and Singapore who visited Leiden, sometimes for

long periods, to learn his technique. In 1993 Jan was invited to Bogor, Indonesia, to continue teaching and training Indonesian colleagues (whereby he escaped from a train accident as he was just in time to catch an earlier train from Bogor to Jakarta).

Jan was always weary of public appearances and thus never sent drawings to contests or exhibitions. In an attempt to give Jan the honour he deserved, one of us (PB) submitted some of Jan's drawings, including his fabulous plates of *Cucurbitaceae*



Fig. 1 Jan van Os (2015).

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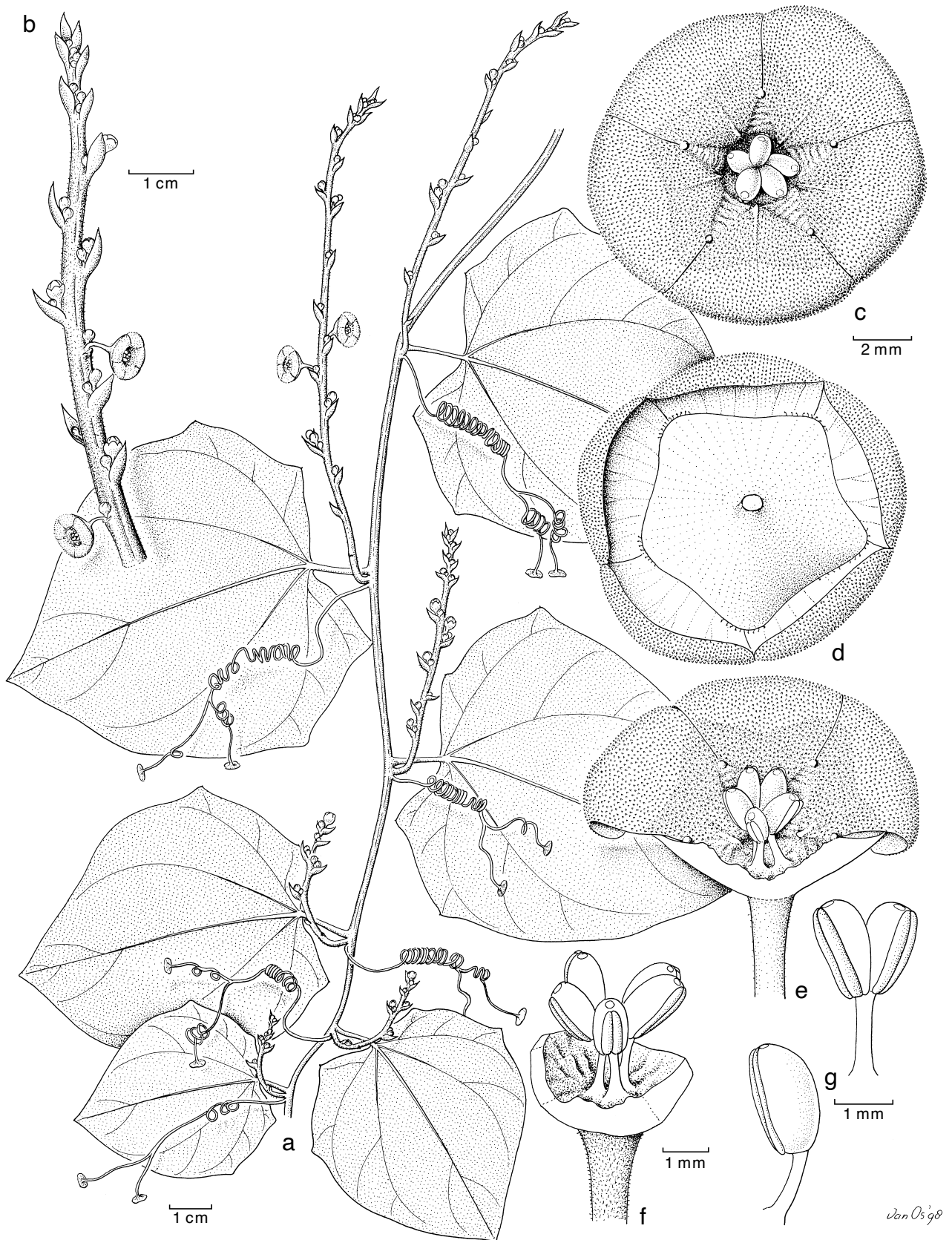


Fig. 2 *Bayabusua clarkei* (King) W.J. de Wilde (*Cucurbitaceae* – cucumber-likes). a. Male flowering twig; b. upper portion of inflorescence; c–d. male flowers seen from above and below; e. longitudinal section through male flower; f. androecium; g. detail of stamens. Reproduced with permission from Flora Malesiana, Ser. I, 19 (2010).

for Flora Malesiana (one of them in Fig. 2), to the Linnaean Society of London, where they were awarded the prestigious Jill Smythies medal for scientific botanical drawings in 2007. An extremely nervous Jan went to London to receive his award, and afterwards a very happy Jan had plenty of new stories to tell.

Jan not only made line drawings of plants, he was also a talented aquarellist and in his free time he made artistic drawings with often geometric patterns combined with attractively (un)dressed persons. For many years Jan also played lead guitar, first in Johnny & the Bell Boys, where he met his wife Tineke; secondly in The Devilish Strings (till 1966 when he went to the Academy). He never became a professional, but as a hobby continued playing with a group of friends, releasing several CDs, and regularly playing for and with a group of mentally less able people. Another hobby of Jan was filming, from animation to a feature form, but also more documentary like a Thai-Dutch wedding. Modern telephones with their ever improving cameras changed this hobby drastically.

Because of his artistry he was often asked to make designs for logos and exhibits, and one time, after the Rijksherbarium had moved to yet another facility, the old University Library at the Rapenburg, he was asked to help design an exhibition for 20 showcases in the central hall, which had to demonstrate the many facets of botanical work and research. Once the committee had decided on the content of each vitrine Jan was left as sole person to execute the ideas. Jan was seldom angry, but this was one of those moments. In the end, together with one of us (PvW), all showcases were filled within two weeks of fun and comradeship, leaving behind a worn-out lettering machine and blunt knives in the bookbinder's cutting machines.

Jan had a natural way with people. You could talk with him about all kinds of topics and have fun, he had many tales to tell. However, if you had problems he automatically became a good listener and tried to help. If he could have studied he might

have been a very good psychiatrist. Here an example. Once we had a tall and rather imposing man with a mental disability, who was trained by Jan to make drawings. One day, at the end of the afternoon, he walked into a meeting of the director with the heads of research groups and refused to leave as he wanted to give his opinion on various matters. Jan, then already home, was telephoned, came back, entered the meeting room and asked 'why are you still here, don't you know that it is late, your mother is already waiting with dinner'. 'Oh really Jan' and alarmed trainee left and went home.

After 40 years of service (1 June 1997) Jan could retire, but decided to continue till 65, then the official age for retirement, as he, always super active, had no idea how to spend his time at home as Tineke was still working. In 2003, at the age of 61, Jan was gently persuaded to take early retirement to help solve a budget problem of the Rijksherbarium. Graciously he agreed and continued work in an honorary capacity. As soon as Tineke also retired they increased their 'holidays' and travelled around the globe to exotic destinies like Thailand, Cuba, South Africa, etc. This angered one of the guest researchers as Jan 'was never around to finish his much needed drawings'. Jan finally stopped when the various institutes (including the herbarium), forming Naturalis, started to move to one locality, too big and too little personal contact and especially no lust for a working place in an open-plan office away from the botanists. A big social network, a new apartment and especially his grandchildren easily replaced scientific drawing.

We wish his wife Tineke, his son Hiddo, daughter-in-law Renske and grandchildren Olivier and Finou many happy memories of Jan, life must be enjoyed as the 'sun will dry tears and evaporate sadness' (citation of Jan van Os on his funeral card). He will be dearly missed in the botanical world as a creative, social and generous colleague and friend.