

# CYTHNA LETTY BIOGRAPHY

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**Letty, [later Forssman,] Dr Cythna Lindenberg (1895–1985)— a most distinguished and prolific botanical artist with over 700 plates contributed to the botanical journal/magazine *Flowering Plants of Africa*—and a major contributor of water color drawings in the 1937 *The Stapelieae* and 1941 *The Succulent Euphorbieae* books.**



Born in Pretoria, South African on 1 January 1895, Cythna Letty became a doyenne of South African botanical art due to the quality and quantity of her meticulously executed paintings and pencil sketches over a period of 40 years with the National Herbarium in Pretoria. Cythna was the eldest of 5 children born to Walter Edward Letty and Josina Christina Lindenberg—Josina with 6 children of her own by a previous marriage. From her talented mother, Cythna began her first lessons in water color painting of wild flowers of the veld in 1905.

By 1925 Cythna had her first job in Pretoria requiring her to record in water color post mortem specimens of various animal diseases and abnormalities. In 1927 Dr Iltyd Buller Pole Evans (1879–1968) saw her artistic talent and gave her a job with the National Herbarium in Pretoria where she started her long association with over 700 of her superb paintings and line drawings of African plants that became the mainstay of the journal/magazine *Flowering Plants of Africa*. However, she resigned a short period of time after her marriage to Oscar William Alric Forssman in 1938 with one son born in 1940. She returned to the herbarium in 1945 with her artistic talent until her retirement in 1968. During this time Cythna was asked to submit several floral designs of South African coinage depicting indigenous birds, animals and plants. Among designs accepted, the one most interesting to succulentophiles was the 10c *Aloe aculeata* coin (see Images for copy). This coin was issued between 1965 and 1988.

Cythna was one of the major artists with water color and line drawings in the 1937 *The Stapelieae* 3-volume book by Alain Campbell White (1880-1951) and Boyd Lincoln Sloane (1885-1955) and in the 1941 *The Succulent Euphorbieae (Southern Africa)* 2-volume book by Alain White, Dr Robert Allen Dyer (1900-1987) and Boyd Sloane. She was the artist in the 1962 *Wild Flowers of the Transvaal* book, text by Dr Dyer, Dr Inez Clare Verdoorn (1896–1989) and Dr Leslie Edward Wostall Codd (1908–1999), with 362 pages and 174 color plates.

Cythna was the discoverer of *Aloe lettyae* in 1935 that was named in her honor by Dr Gilbert Westacott Reynolds (1895–1967) in 1937. She also described a few succulent species in the 1930s—an *Aloe*, a *Caralluma (Orbea)*, 2 *Euphorbias* (one with Dr Herold Georg Wilhelm Johannes Schweickerdt (1903–1977)) and 2 *Hoodias* (both with Anna Amelia Obermeyer (1907–2001))—species still accepted today.

Cythna visited the United States in 1966 when some of her paintings were included in an international exhibition of botanical art at the Hunt Botanical Institute in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—again to London, England in 1970 when she received the Grenfell Silver Medal for an exhibit of her paintings of wild flowers. She received an honorary LL.D. degree from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1974. In 1974 she was given the title of 'Woman of the Year' in the Johannesburg, South Africa newspaper *The Star*. Cythna received the prestigious CSSA Fellow award in 1977 for a longtime leading botanical illustrator for White and Sloane and for 'Flowering Plants of South Africa' and describer of various taxa. A Certificate of Merit was awarded to her by the South African Association of Botanists in 1981.

During her lifetime, Cythna was also a poet—maybe this verse of hers gives us a view of her life:

"I hitched my wagon to a daisy  
Direction vague and destination hazy  
But, could any star have guided me  
more exactly to where I most dearly loved to be?"

Cythna was physically frail during the last years of her life. She died on 3 May 1985. Her ashes were scattered in the Cythna Letty Nature Reserve near Barberton, Eastern Transvaal (Mpumalanga), South Africa.

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