

Introduction

by David J. Wagner, Ph.D.



I. NEED: In the summer of 2004, the Susan K. Black Foundation adopted my proposal to sponsor an international competition and exhibition entitled *Blossom ~ Art of Flowers* to survey, recognize, and showcase achievement and diversity in floral art produced early in the twenty-first century because there were no competitions or exhibitions that surveyed contemporary floral art in the broad sense, though there were regular competitions and exhibitions sponsored by organizations of botanical illustrators, noteworthy exhibitions of historical floral painting (e.g., *Reflections of Nature: Flowers in American Art* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1984 or *Exquisite Dutch and Flemish Flower Still Lifes* at the National Gallery of Art in 1999), and, of course, other themed-exhibitions featuring animals, birds, and national parks, for example, which contained some floral imagery.

II. FULFILLMENT: Almost 1750 entries from 970 artists of 14 countries were submitted to *Blossom I*. *Blossom I* premiered at the Houston Museum of Natural Science on St. Patrick's Day of 2007. *Blossom I* recognized achievement and diversity in floral art produced between 2004 and 2006, with 62 artworks selected for the premiere exhibit and 55 selected to tour to eight venues nationwide thereafter. Encouraged by *Blossom I*, and the opportunity for recognition, not to mention generous awards offered by the Susan Kathleen Black Foundation, nearly 1,350 artists from 35 countries submitted some 2,300 entries for the sequel of *Blossom I*. *Blossom II* recognizes achievement and diversity in floral art produced between 2008 and 2010. *Blossom II*, which contains 100 works of art, premiered at the Naples Museum of Art on February 1, 2011. At the time that this catalogue went to press, the *Blossom II* traveling exhibition, consisting of 50 artworks, was scheduled for display at six venues nationwide with the possibility that more might be added later.

III. CONCEPT: Flowers were a favorite theme of artist Susan K. Black (1946–2000). The mission of the Susan Kathleen Black Foundation is art education. The concept of an international juried art competition and exhibition, the purpose of which is to recognize creativity in art with a floral theme, was a natural outgrowth of this fortuitous combination. To encourage participation, the Susan Kathleen Black Foundation opened the competition to anyone, promoted it worldwide, and offered generous awards. To ensure quality selections, it assembled not one, but two juries of top-notch experts: a selection jury which reviewed and selected works for the exhibition from digital photographs, and an awards jury which selected award winners from original works of art. To share original artworks selected for *Blossom II* with audiences nationwide, a premiere exhibition and traveling exhibition were organized. To document and extend the exhibition, all artworks included in the premiere have been published in this catalogue and in a virtual on-line exhibition which also included artworks given honorary mention.

IV. DEFINITION: During initial preparations for *Blossom I*, one of the first questions that came up was, "Just what is a flower?" Definitions seemed as abundant as types and varieties of flowers themselves. Wikipedia, the open-editable, web-based encyclopedia offered the following definition of the word, FLOWER, at the time this catalogue was being produced:

A flower, sometimes known as a bloom or blossom, is the reproductive structure found in flowering plants (plants of the division Magnoliophyta, also called angiosperms). The biological function of a flower is to mediate the union of male sperm with female ovum in order to produce seeds. The process begins with pollination, is followed by fertilization, leading to the formation and dispersal of the seeds. For the higher plants, seeds are the next generation, and serve as the primary means by which individuals of a species are dispersed across the landscape. The grouping of flowers on a plant is called the inflorescence. In addition to serving as the reproductive organs of flowering plants, flowers have long been admired and used by humans, mainly to beautify their environment but also as a source of food. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flower>)

while the on-line Merriam-Webster Dictionary offered this definition, which included literary metaphor as well as scientific meaning:

- 1a: the part of a seed plant that normally bears reproductive organs : blossom, inflorescence
- b: a shoot of the sporophyte of a higher plant that is modified for reproduction and consists of a shortened axis bearing modified leaves; especially : one of a seed plant differentiated into a calyx, corolla, stamens, and carpels
- c: a plant cultivated for its blossoms

- 2a: the best part or example <the flower of our youth>
b: the finest most vigorous period
c: a state of blooming or flourishing <in full flower>
(<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/flower>)

V. ELIGIBILITY AND SELECTION CRITERIA: To be eligible for *Blossom II*, only flat, two-dimensional art could be submitted in a range of media including: oil, acrylic, watercolor, pastel, gouache, mixed media, pencil, pen and ink, tempura, batik, alkyd, scratchboard, and hand-pulled lithographs, etchings, engravings, and serigraphs. Size restrictions were also placed on entries (due to gallery space limitations). To guide members of the jury in their selections, the following instructions were given to them just before they began their task of narrowing the field down to the top 100:

A. Quality should be given first priority. This should be based at least in part on:

- 1.) creative composition and design
- 2.) competent technique and handling of media
- 3.) overall strength of individual artworks
- 4.) ability to capture the essence of the floral subject

B. Diversity of final selections should be prioritized next, with consideration given to:

- 1.) inclusion of different types and varieties of flowers
- 2.) worldwide geographic distribution
- 3.) diversity of medium and styles and techniques
- 4.) diversity of imagery

C. Flowers may be combined with other subject matter including portraiture, landscapes, still lifes, animals, historical subjects, etc., but the essence of selected artworks must be floral in nature.

VI. ART HISTORY: Flowers have been portrayed by artists for centuries if not millennia. In the arch of western art history, there are a number of epochs, each of which comprise certain advances that demonstrate how floral art has evolved. Though by no means comprehensive, the following are some of the more significant highlights of floral art history:

A. The Epoch of the Renaissance and the Rise of Botanical Illustration

This epoch includes: a.) pictorial traditions such as floral borders and illumination in devotional manuscripts known as *Books of Hours* (e.g., the *Warburg Book of Hours*, c. 1500); b.) naturalism of artists working in the manner of Albrecht Dürer (1471 - 1528) of Nuremberg, Germany; c.) botanical woodcuts such as those of Hans Weiditz (1495-1537) which illustrate Otto Brunfels' herbal (a collection of plant descriptions and medicinal virtues), entitled *Herbarum Viva Eicones ad Nature Imitationem* (published in Strasbourg, 1530-36); d.) so-called flora, a new kind of non-anthropocentric book that explained and illustrated plants for botanical science using binomial nomenclature, though a scientific method of systematic binomial naming of plants would not occur until 1754 with the publication of *Systema naturae* by Swedish botanist and taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778); e.) florilegium (catalogues of floral illustrations the purpose of which was to showcase beauty for enjoyment of the viewer, rather than herbal utility), one of the first of which was published by Dutchman Emmanuel Sweet, in Germany in 1612; another that contained 159 sheets of particularly exquisite plants and flowers was begun in England around 1650 by Alexander Marshal (1620-1682) who was still producing more at the time of his death; all of which contributed to the rise of, f.) the art of depicting form, color, and minute details of plant species in watercolor, which is widely known today as botanical illustration. The art of miniature painting also grew out of this epoch, with illumination serving in part as precedent.

B. Dutch and Flemish Floral Still Life Paintings from the 16th and 17th Centuries

Perhaps the most lovely and revered floral paintings in classical western art are those that were created in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries by Dutch and Flemish artists. Paintings from this epoch known as Vanitas contained imagery that was generally understood as allegory for various themes such as, beauty is fleeting and can fade, life is transient, etc. The Baroque artist Jacques de Gheyn II (1565-1629) is said to be the first to paint still life and flower paintings in Holland, inspired by Carolus Clusius, a botanist who designed a botanical garden at the university in Leiden. There is a long list of others who followed, the most noteworthy of which include Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625), Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (1573-1621), Roelandt Savery (1576-1639), Osias Beert (1580-1624), Jan Davidsz. de Heem (1606-1684), and Jan van Huysum (1682-1749). Brueghel's sons Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601-1678) and Ambrosius Brueghel (1617-1675) also specialized in flowers. An innovation of Jan Brueghel the Younger was to portray flowers in bloom at different times of the year. Flowers and paintings of flowers were extremely popular throughout the Low Countries during the seventeenth century, and were continuously re-introduced in new and interesting ways, e.g. the virtuosic paintings of tulips that dominated the 1630's. Men were not the only ones to achieve success painting flowers. Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750) was another Dutch Baroque artist who enjoyed a long career, and is regarded by many as the best female artist in Holland of her time. Ruysch's passion for flowers is understandable considering that her father was a professor of anatomy and botany, and that her art instructor, Willem van Aelst (1627-1683), was one of the most prominent still life painters of his generation. Ruysch possessed exceptional technical mastery which she effectively used to create vibrant floral still-lifes that went further than most, featuring, for example, wilting leaves or leafage cut by insects.

C. New World Developments

1. The Age of Discovery and The Enlightenment

American flora factored into the evolution of botanical illustration early in the eighteen century during The Enlightenment and Age of Discovery with the work of Mark Catesby (1683-1749). Catesby was introduced to the world of botany by William Byrd II, who inherited a plantation near Williamsburg. As a planter, Byrd not only experimented with plants, but also assembled the largest library in the colonies at the time and explored the region with Catesby in search of flora and fauna in 1712. In 1713, Catesby began collecting seeds and other specimens to supply to various interested people in America and England, including members of The Royal Society of London for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge. This would lead Catesby to write, illustrate, print, and publish *Natural History of Florida, The Carolinas, and The Bahama Islands*, a seminal work which would include 220 etched and hand-colored plates (as illustrations in large books are known) in two volumes completed respectively in 1732 and 1743. Catesby's Natural History plates feature images of 171 plants. Interestingly, twelve years after Catesby completed his second volume, botanical illustration was transformed from art for science to avocation in England, with the publication of *The Lady's Drawing Book and Compleat Florist*, a "how to" book that established botanical drawing as a proper avocation befitting genteel women. Botanical drawing quickly took root and subsequently climaxed in popularity during the Victorian Age of the nineteenth century.

2. Romantic Floral Art in the Americas

In the nineteenth century, the tradition begun by Catesby was romanticized when John James Audubon (1775-1851) published *Birds of America* (1826-1838). Audubon's achievement reflects an aesthetic shift away from the stiff didacticism of Enlightenment science to an aesthetic of emotional and painterly expression in art. Many of the plates in *Birds of America* feature botanical imagery created by Audubon and others, particularly Maria Martin, sister-in-law of Reverend John Bachman who collaborated with Audubon to produce *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*. Audubon began drawing and painting flowers in the United States as early as 1806. Fifteen years later, while he was working at Oakley Plantation in Louisiana prior to the publication of *Birds of America*, Audubon produced *American Redstart* (1821). It prefigured the role that botany would play later in Audubon's composition and design. In *American Redstart*, the curve of the ironwood branch and the number and pointed shapes of its leaves generate a strong visual rhythm. By incorporating contrasting elements and principles into his composition and design, Audubon developed more formal complexity than his American predecessors. Romanticism and floral imagery blossomed full-force with the painting of Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904), who is remembered today for his sumptuous paintings of hummingbirds and orchids of Brazil, where he traveled in 1863-64 to discover new source material and inspiration for a book entitled *The Gems of Brazil* that was never published. Two years later, he traveled to

Nicaragua, and in 1870 to Colombia, Panama, and Jamaica, where he continued to paint tropical birds and luscious foliage. In addition to extending the romance and range of floral art throughout the Americas, Heade was one of a group who painted in a new style, later labeled “luminism.” Heade can be credited, as much as anyone, with marrying floral and landscape painting during the height of Romanticism.

D. French-Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Floral Art

The first major art movement after Romanticism was Impressionism. In terms of floral art, it is best represented by Claude Monet (1840-1926) and the series of approximately 250 oils of water lilies he painted in his garden in Giverny, France, during the last third of his life. Monet painted “plein air” (directly from nature) relying on broken color to achieve brilliance and luminosity for visual impression. The aesthetic goal of Monet and the other artists painting in this style was to loosen academic standards and eliminate romantic emphasis on emotion, in order to observe and portray nature more closely and accurately. Because seeing, for them, was a function of color and light, the impressionists avoided black and white in their works preferring instead to paint bright, vibrant colors, laid on side by side rather than fully blended together. It was not artists but hostile journalists who dubbed the style Impressionism. The antithesis of Monet’s work can be seen in the exuberant, idiosyncratic irises, poppies, and sunflowers of the post-impressionist painter, Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890). Van Gogh combined color with enormously powerful line to express his feelings. Artists like Van Gogh realized that their inner world, the world of emotions, fantasies, and dreams very much colored people’s view of the outer world, and this realization led directly to the next major development in art history.

E. Modern Floral Art

1. German Expressionism

A century of “ism’s” followed Romanticism, as styles antithesized, synthesized, and evolved in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among the earliest of the twentieth century to feature flowers was Expressionism, a broad movement begun in Germany in which artists sought to present the world subjectively in order to convey individual, humanistic emotions and elicit an emotional response in such a way as if to create a visceral dialogue about what it felt like to be alive. An early expressionist who produced a large body of floral paintings using an expressive palette of somber but luminous tones and vigorous brushwork, was Emil Nolde (1867-1956). Nolde admired Van Gogh, which is evident in his flower paintings. That he was “an artist’s artist,” is evident from the fact that he was a member of Die Brücke, the Berlin Secession of 1908-1910, and Der Blaue Reiter, which was led by Kandinsky. Though he initially supported the Nazis, Nolde’s art was later banned by the Nazis because they considered it degenerate.

2. Early American Modernism

The first exhibition in the United States of art by Americans aware of the aesthetic philosophies and possibilities that had emerged in Europe with the impressionists and post-impressionists occurred in 1908 at MacBeth Gallery in New York. The art on display there represented a kind that would become known as “modern,” and modern art would absorb and preoccupy American art professionals for the rest of the twentieth century. In addition to its stylistic shift, modern art signaled an attitudinal shift away from nature toward humanism. The quintessential artist of American modernism and floral imagery has to be Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986), for it was she who synthesized abstraction and floral representation. O’Keeffe was born on a farm near Madison, Wisconsin, and attended high school there until age 16 when she relocated to Williamsburg, Virginia, with her family. At 18, she returned to the Midwest and enrolled in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Two years later, she attended the Art Students League in New York where she studied with William Merritt Chase. By the mid-1920s, O’Keeffe began making large-scale paintings of natural forms at close range. Beginning in 1923, Alfred Stieglitz (1864 – 1946), who was a force in the New York art scene, began organizing annual exhibitions of O’Keeffe’s work. In 1924 O’Keeffe painted her first large-scale flower painting *Petunia, No. 2*. O’Keeffe contoured her floral imagery in subtle tonal transitions, and in the process transformed her subject matter into powerful abstract images, though in the case of flowers, with not so subtle overtones. In 1926, she produced *Black Iris III*, which was generally viewed as guise for female genitalia. Alfred Stieglitz, who was 30 years O’Keeffe’s senior, divorced his wife and married O’Keeffe in 1924. O’Keeffe went on to become one of America’s most beloved female artists of all time, and one of the most powerful in American Modernism, regardless of gender.

3. Abstract Expressionism

An artist who abstracted floral art after mid-century during the years of a movement known as Abstract Expressionism is Ellsworth Kelly (b. 1923). Kelly is generally associated with a style of modern art known as color field painting, which emphasized minimalization of form. In 1964, Kelly began producing botanical lithographs which led to his 1983-85 series of minimal plant and flower lithographs. Another abstract expressionist, albeit one at the painterly end of the spectrum, is Paul Jenkins (b. 1923) who painted flowers along with other nature forms in large-scale exuberant veils of color.

4. Post-Modernism

Floral art has been represented in the Post-Modern age by, among others, Sherrie Wolf (b. 1952, Portland, OR) whose dramatic 36"x18" oil *Tulips with Horseshoe Falls* ('Tulipa, Hybrid Cultivar, Black Parrot & Parrot Orange Favorite) was selected for *Blossom I*. Postmodernism can be defined as a synthesis in the cycle of art history that moves between syntheses and antitheses. Whereas modernism was the antithesis of classicism, postmodernism synthesized modernism and classicism along with other broad movements, styles, and trends. Postmodernism has not, however, been embraced by everyone. In his 1980 essay "The Notion of 'Postmodernism,'" art critic Clement Greenberg referred to the movement as a "new rationalization for the lowering of standards." Hilton Kramer went further, branding practitioners of postmodernism as "philistines," and defensively claiming that attacks on modernism were not only attacks on individualism but also antidemocratic. Whatever the case, postmodern floral art proves one thing for sure: that floral subject matter has been a constant presence in the arch of western art history from the Renaissance to the present.

F. Multiculturalism

Of course, flowers have been prominent in art of other cultures and traditions, too. Floral art of The Far East comes to mind in particular. But I must leave that to others since the history of Asian art is beyond my level of expertise. My point here is, flowers have been a subject of art and a source of inspiration for artists around the world for time immemorial. These days, flowers inspire artists as much as ever, as evidenced by the 2,300 entries from 1,350 artists of 35 countries submitted to *Blossom II*.

VII. CONCLUSION: I hope the information contained in this brief introduction will add to your enjoyment of the artworks depicted in this catalogue. As Curator and Tour Director, I also hope that you are one of the privileged few who will have the opportunity to view *Blossom II ~ Art of Flowers* firsthand at the Naples Museum of Art or at any of the venues on the Tour, so that you will have the kind of authentic, memorable experience I was so fortunate to have at the exhibition's premiere.

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Curator/Tour Director

David J. Wagner is the recipient of the 2010 Susan K. Black Foundation, Black-Parkman Award for Art Industry Leadership. Dr. Wagner serves as President of a limited liability corporation that produces traveling exhibitions, and provides curatorial, educational, and museum management services nationwide. In addition to *Blossom ~ Art of Flowers*, David J. Wagner, L.L.C. has produced the annual *Art and the Animal* traveling exhibitions for the prestigious Society of Animal Artists in New York City for over twenty years, and the *The Horse in Fine Art* exhibition for the American Academy of Equine Art. Dr. Wagner is author of *American Wildlife Art* (american-wildlife-art.com). He is also an educator, having taught Museum Studies at Björklunden, Lawrence University's Campus in Door County, WI; Colorado College; and the Museum Studies Department of the Graduate School of New York University. Among his upcoming exhibitions are *American's Parks Through the Beauty of Art*, *Art of the Dive/Portraits of the Deep*, *Environmental Impact*, and *The Sea of Cortez* which will premiere at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum and is sponsored by the Susan Kathleen Black Foundation.