

Floral 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:

THE EPOCH OF THE RENAISSANCE AND THE RISE OF BOTANICAL ILLUSTRATION

In terms of floral art, Impressionism 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.

This epoch includes 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); naturalism of artists working in the manner of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) of Nuremberg, Germany; 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 Vivae Eicones ad Naturae Imitationem* (published in Strasbourg, 1530-36); so-called flora, a new kind of non-anthropocentric book that explained and illustrated plants for botanical science using binomial nomenclature.

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 16th and 17th centuries by Dutch and Flemish artists. The Baroque artist Jacques de Gheyn II (1565-1629) is said to have been the first to paint still life and flower paintings in Holland. There is a long list of others who followed, including 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), Willem van Aelst (1627-1683), and Jan van Huysum (1682-1749). Brueghel's sons Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601-1678) and Ambrosius Brueghel (1617-1675) also specialized in flowers. Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750) was another who also is regarded by many as the best female artist in Holland of her time. 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 AGE OF DISCOVERY AND ENLIGHTENMENT

American flora factored into the evolution of botanical illustration early in the eighteenth 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. 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.

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) which included many flowers. 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 through the painting of Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904), who is remembered today for his sumptuous paintings of hummingbirds and orchids of Brazil.

FRENCH-IMPRESSIONIST AND POST-IMPRESSIONIST FLORAL ART

In terms of floral art, Impressionism 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. 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.

MODERN FLORAL ART

Among the earliest movements of the twentieth century to feature flowers was Expressionism, a broad trend 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).

In America, modernism would absorb and preoccupy American art professionals for the majority of the 20th 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.

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.

Floral art has been represented in the Post-Modern age by, among others, Jane Jones, whose stunning *Parrot Party*, (Photo: 2010, Oil on Canvas, 20x20) was given an Award of Excellence from The Susan K. Black Foundation at the premiere of *Blossom II ~ Art of Flowers*, an international juried floral art competition, held at The Naples Museum of Art. 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.

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. In terms of space and time, 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.

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