

# Floral Art History

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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. The following are some of the more significant highlights of floral art history.

## 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 Vivae 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.

## 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 Counties 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-lives that went further than most, featuring, for example, wilting leaves or leafage cut by insects.

## New World Developments

### THE AGE OF DISCOVERY AND THE 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. 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.

### 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.

## French-Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Floral Art

Impressionism was the first major art movement after Romanticism. 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.

## Modern Floral Art

### 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.

## 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.

## 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.

## POST-MODERNISM AND MULTICULTURALISM

Floral art has been represented in the Post-Modern age by, among others, Jane Jones (b. 1954, Denver, CO) whose floral paintings exude modern simplicity and proportion yet pay tribute to the tradition of Dutch floral still lifes, e.g., *Parrot Party* (2011, Oil on Canvas, 20x20) selected by jury and honored with an Award of Excellence from some 2,300 world-wide entries for *BLOSSOM ~ Art of Flowers II*, which premiered at The Naples Museum of Art in 2011. 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.” 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.

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.

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