

EXHIBITS



National Gallery of Art, Library

‘God Is Revealed in the Smallest Work of His Creation’

While the chill winds of January still blustered outside, giving little hint of the spring to come, an exhibit at Washington’s National Gallery of Art gave hope that the delightful forms, hues, and scents of the season of rebirth could not be too far off. The show, “From Botany to Bouquets: Flowers in Northern Art,” an exhibit of 61 works by the greatest Dutch and Flemish still-life artists of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries, includes watercolors, manuscripts, paintings, and botanical books, which celebrate the beauty of exotic flowers, as well as discoveries in botany and related scientific fields.* The exhibit will remain open until May 31.

It was not until the Sixteenth-centu-

ry Northern Renaissance that still-life painting was accepted as an appropriate subject for a work of art. Up to that time, “still-lives” were to be found only as details of Northern, as well as Italian Renaissance paintings. But, inspired by Fifteenth-century botanical studies, especially those of Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer, and by depictions of flowers and other botanicals as decorative elements in Books of Hours (prayer books), the early 1500’s began to see a veritable explosion of still-life flower painting—an interest that was fed by the discovery, in the New World and the Near East, of many botanicals previously unknown in western Europe.

In fact, one ironic feature of the coming of age of flower painting is, that this most secular of painting subjects grew in part out of the most fervent of religious endeavors: the pilgrimages of the pious to the Holy Land. On their travels, pilgrims often collected mementos, which they placed in small prayer

Adriaen van de Venne, “God is revealed in the smallest work of his Creation,” 1623.

books. While many of these objects were of a devotional nature, some were natural objects such as flowers and insects, which were pressed between the pages.

Observation of Nature

It was the discovery of many plant species that had been unknown to the ancients, which inspired Renaissance scholars to observe nature directly, rather than merely relying on such sources as Pliny and the other botanical studies of antiquity. As a result, during the Sixteenth century, the number of plants identified by botanists increase six-fold, from about one thousand, to six thousand species.

In his *Four Books on Human Proportion* (1528), Albrecht Dürer argues for the importance of observing nature:

“But life in nature manifests the truth of these things. Therefore, observe it diligently; go by it and do not depart from nature arbitrarily, imagining to find the better by thyself, for thou wouldst be misled. For, verily ‘art’ [i.e., knowledge] is embedded in nature, he who can extract it, has it.”

Dürer’s nature studies, which were widely copied and emulated, fathered a new field of highly-accurate and visually pleasing plant studies. One of his studies included in the “Botany to Bouquets” show is “Tuft of Cowslips” (1526) [SEE inside back cover, this issue], in which Dürer presents the humble primrose so that we almost see it grow before our eyes.

Encyclopedia of Florals

This fascination with increasing man’s knowledge of the botanical world, led to the cultivation of extravagant gardens by wealthy burghers and members of the nobility. Artists were commissioned to draw and paint these gardens, and this in turn led to the production of the *florilegium*, a kind of encyclopedia of florals, shown for their beauty alone,

* I am indebted to the exhibit catalogue, “From Botany to Bouquets,” by Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., the National Gallery of Art’s Curator for Northern Baroque Painting, for much of the background material in this review.



Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, “Damask Rose and a Purple-and-Blue Pansy (Heartease),” probably 1570’s.

and drawn from exotic and rare flowers found in the gardens.

One of the first artists to create a florilegium was Jacques LeMoyne de Morgues, a French Huguenot from Dieppe, who is best known for his renderings of the people, flora, and fauna of Florida (North America), which he drew during a French expedition of the mid-1560’s. Two examples of Le Moyne de Morgues flower paintings, done in miniature-style, are a “Damask Rose” and a “Purple-and-Blue Wild Pansy.”

Man, the ‘Little Creator’

At about the turn of the century, the representation of flower bouquets arranged artfully in vases emerged as a genre in its own right throughout The Netherlands, Antwerp, Middelburg, Amsterdam, and Leiden. These early Seventeenth-century works, by such artists as Jacques de Gheyn II, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, and Jan Brueghel the Elder, are, in my opinion, the high point of Dutch and Flemish flower painting. For, even though the later Seventeenth century is known as the “Golden Age” of flower painting, these early works display a marvelous quality of refined exuberance—perhaps derived from the marriage of rigorous scientific observation and extravagant loveliness.

There is a paradox created in these still-lives, between the glory of God’s creation (the flower), and man’s

improvement on nature, through Art. The paradox is resolved by the metaphor of the painting itself, wherein man—who was himself created by God—becomes himself a “little creator” by means of his art. Embedded in this is another idea: that man, through his voyages of exploration and the discovery of new lands—each with its own exotic flora and fauna—exerts his will over ever-greater portions of the universe.

Flower painters of the 1600’s were commissioned by botanists to record specimens for their research. For example, Carolus Clusius, who laid out the famous botanical garden at the University of Leiden in the 1590’s, engaged the artist Jacques de Gheyn II to portray the bounty of his gardens. In his *Hortus Botanicus*, Clusius grew many of the exotic species he had discovered on his travels abroad, including the tulip, the daffodil, and the hyacinth.

One of the most

Jacques de Gheyn II, “Still Life with Flowers,” c. 1602/04.

delightful of the early flower paintings is “Still Life with Flowers” (c.1602/04), by de Gheyn II, which was inspired by Clusius. For the modern gardener, each of these flowers will be instantly recognizable: a huge pink rose, whose size and shape mirror the globe of the vase, pink carnations, tiny violets (which look like today’s “johnny-jump-ups”), and a purple Turk’s cap lily. A window is reflected in the glass vase—a little joke by the artist, who turns reality on its head: Here you must look into the flower vase to see the window, whereas, in “reality,” one must look out the window to see the flowers!

At about the same time, certain artists became obsessed with a kind of realism that actually excludes metaphor, by attempting to imply tangible attributes, such as the sweet scents of the flowers, through the introduction of insects, butterflies, and even small snails and lizards into the composition. This trend is evident in a painting by Roelandt Savery, “Flowers in a Roemer” (1603), in which the host of beetles and lizards conveys a menacing quality, while the flowers themselves project an air of decadence, as though they were nearly spent—especially the large blue iris, which looks as if it were about to expire.

Exotic Flora

The city of Middelburg, the capital of Zeeland, was the second home of the Dutch East India Company—which,





Roeland Savery, "Flowers in a Roemer," 1603.

among the treasures it looted from its colonies, were many unusual and exotic flora. As a result, the city was renowned for its botanical gardens, the most important of which was established in the 1590's by the famous botanist Matthias Lobelius. It was Lobelius's garden which is supposed to have inspired Adriaen van de Venne's engraving entitled, "God is revealed in the smallest work of his Creation."

The "Still Life with Flowers" (1612-14) of Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder [SEE inside back cover, this issue], Middelburg's most famous painter of the period, features a single butterfly perched on a pristine white rose, which is surrounded by brilliant red, yellow, orange, and purple tulips, anemones, pansies, etc. This, and other works by Bosschaert, are notable for their sheer delight in the beauty of the natural world, as it was organized and improved by art. A later painting by Bosschaert, "Roses in an Arched Window" (1618-1619), displays an echo of Renaissance themes, as the arched window opens onto an extensive landscape

of the type seen in both Italian and Northern Renaissance works—but here, a bouquet of roses, at once sumptuous and refined, replaces what would have been the primary, religious scene, perhaps an Annunciation.

'The Lightness of Nature Itself'

With Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625), the second son of the great Dutch painter Peter Brueghel the Elder, we encounter flower painting at its zenith. Brueghel had travelled extensively throughout Europe's artistic centers, including Cologne, Rome, Naples, and Milan, before visiting the court of Rudolf II in Prague, one of the great patrons and collectors of flower painting. In Milan, he met Cardinal Federico Borromeo, who would become his patron for life. Borromeo considered Brueghel's works to be

"the lightness of nature itself."

In the exhibition catalogue, Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., the National Gallery's Curator for Northern Baroque Painting, notes that Brueghel's letters to Cardinal Borromeo provide "rare insights into the working method of this early Seventeenth-century flower specialist. They indicate not only that he made trips to distant cities to find rare and unusual blossoms, but also that he waited entire seasons for flowers to grow."

Brueghel writes that he painted flowers from nature, without benefit of preliminary sketches, so as to capture their fleeting beauty. An example of his work, "A Basket of Mixed Flowers and a Vase of Flowers" [SEE inside back cover, this issue], delights in the sheer abundance of gor-

geous blooms, gathered in the basket fresh from the garden, some of which have been selected for the vase.

Yet, as any gardener would immediately recognize, no matter how skilled the grower, these blooms could never have been gathered during any one season of the year! While the artist is celebrating the abundance and beauty of God's Creation, he is also extolling man's freedom to appropriate this bounty for his physical, as well as spiritual needs. As Cardinal Borromeo himself observed, these painted flowers, seen "when winter encumbers and restricts everything with ice," would continue to blossom and provide enjoyment, "even imagined odor," long after nature's own flowers had withered and died.

It was this spirit that the Dutch humanist and poet Constantijn Huyghens, father of the scientist Christian Huyghens, captured in a poem written in 1645, in which an envisioned contest between Mother Nature and the flower painter Daniel Seghers takes place. Here—wonder of wonders!—it is the artist who wins, for his painted flowers produce a "fragrance of roses" so excellent, that it "renders the real one a shadow."

—Bonnie James



Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, "Roses in an Arched Window," 1618-1619.