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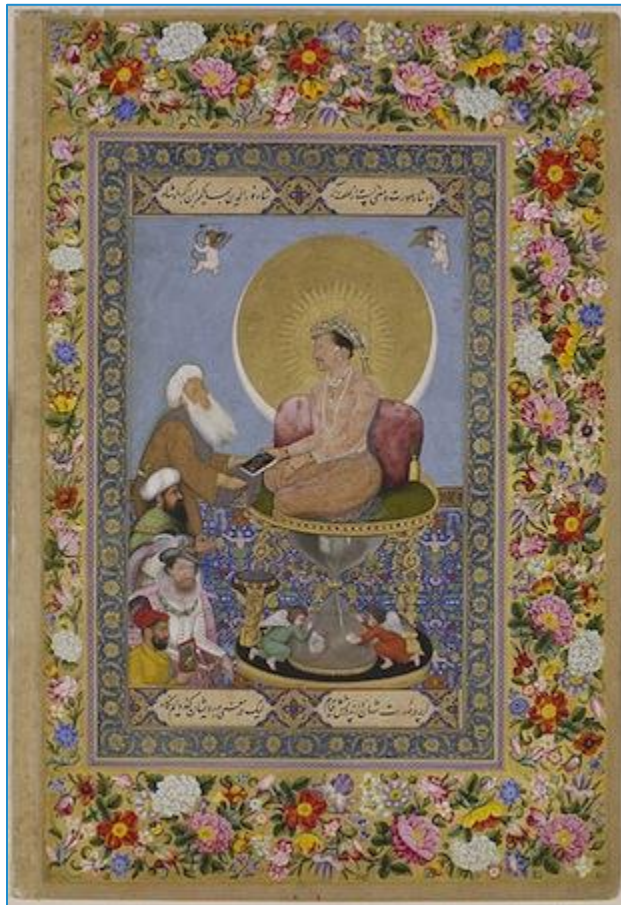
Dr. Rancour

AH 1500

Curate an Art Exhibit

Flora Influence

This colorful exhibit will explore the antiquity of flowers in various artistic periods from the 17th century Mughal Empire, the late Baroque style of Rococo, Impressionism, and a contemporary interpretation of Post Impressionism from today. By studying the different influences from antiquity and finding the iconographic meaning flowers hold in these famous works, a central theme emerges as to why artists find flowers a favored complement in the composition of the subjects of their works, and in some cases the central subject altogether.



Flowers in the Arts of Mughal South Asia

Bichitr, Jahangir, *Preferring a Sufi Shaykh to Kings* from the "St. Peterburg Album.", ca. 1615-1618, Opaque watercolor, gold and ink on paper, Mughal India, The Smithsonian's Museum of Asian Art.

In this miniature manuscript painting Emperor Jahangir of the Mughal Empire is seated on an elevated hourglass before four bearded men. Jahangir, the largest subject figure has a radiant gold disc sun surrounding him, this paired with his position, and dominating size represent his higher standing among these men. This order of hierocracy composition represents the importance of these men to the emperor, and as the title of

this work suggests, the highest man is a Sheek or religious leader, next an unnamed Ottoman

Sultan, then King James I of England, and finally the artist, Bichitr. The inclusion of the European King James I shows not only the social standing of the foreign leader compared to a holy man, but also highlights the rich trade of the region. Bichitr based his image of the English monarch on a portrait by John de Critz, which was likely given to the Mughal court as a diplomatic offering to establish trade from the east to the west.

Art thrived in the cosmopolitan court of the Mughal 17th century. Many Persian artists who were brought east to work for the Safavid court in modern day Iran came to Mughal India when the guilds were dissolved by the Sultan. This created a rich and vibrant art culture with many European influences. This rich artistic society led to artists often being sought after for their special talents. Bichitr was especially known for his superior hand rendering and botanical painting. The emperor often commissioned Bichitr to paint flowers from his garden and animals he was gifted. Here the association of flowers also represents surplus of fruit produced from those flowers, and the vast number of millefleur florals in the borders show how fruitful Emperor Jahangir was in his reign.

Here, Bichitr emphasizes the importance of woven textiles in the 17th century Mughal empire with the blue carpet embellished with arabesque flower designs. Note how the rug does not recede into the depth of space, rather the composition is flat throughout. This flatness is used to highlight the artistic talent of such an elaborate rug, a characteristic often seen in Mongolian influences of Safavid works. Paired with the large multi-framed golden borders, off center composition and the embellished blue carpet these direct influences of the 16th century Safavid antiquity are used to show the wealth of Jahangir as well as his interest in nature.



The Extravagance and Indulgence of Marie Antoinette

Vigée Le Brun, Elisabeth, *Marie Antoinette with a Rosa*, ca. 1783, Oil on canvas, Palace of Versailles, Versailles.

Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun achieved early success as an artist, by her teen years she became one of the most famous artists in France. Vigée's artist father encouraged her interest in arts and allowed her to study under well-known artist of the time. Though she tried to join the painter's guild (which meant she could legally sell her works) she was denied as women were not allowed in the

Royal Academy of Art. The Academy would eventually allow only four women to join by the 18th century, but by that time Vigée was beyond successful, having become the court painter to Marie Antoinette. The Queen helped Vigée be accepted into the academy, though they refused to give her a ranking. With her acceptance she was able to demand higher prices for her portraits. Marie Antoinette commissioned many paintings from Vigée while she was in court, who she stated was the only artist who could capture her so accurately. She often ordered several more copies of the same portrait, a rarity of the time, to be sent to her family. One such painting ordered for a Salon showing, depicted the queen in a favorite chemise dress holding a rose. Visitors were shocked upon seeing it, as it looked as if the queen was in her under garments. The painting was removed, and Vigée Le Brun painted a new portrait with the queen wearing the popular rich French silk, seen here. The flower holding contrapposto composition of both works look very similar to each other, but in the more regal depiction Antoinette appears less accessible, thus more fitting for a queen.

Roses were the queen's favorite flower, and the gardens of Versailles under Marie Antoinette were legendary for being extraordinary beautiful, she often wrote to her mother

about all the varieties of roses she had and listed how people would come to study them. In 1784, she had over two thousand dog roses delivered to be planted in her garden because she appreciated their "wild" appearance. Many of her portraits depict her holding roses as a symbol of her beauty but also a representation of her Austrian heritage and Christian faith. During this time, roses were also symbols for power, royalty, beauty, and sensuality. A very fitting depiction of Marie Antoinette.

Whereas the works discussed thus far are meant to show standing and power of leaders with the help, via the symbolism of flowers. The next two works are all about light and how it is expressed, which highlights the softness and beauty of their floral subjects.



The Impression of Water Lilies

Monet, Claude, *Bridge over a Pond of Water Lilies*, ca. 1899, Oil on Canvas, The Met Museum, New York.

Impressionist works are meant to express momentary sensations with short brush strokes. Artists do not blend colors into each other, because above all else colorito is central to these stylized works. Colorito, meaning blurry, hazy brushstrokes, and the importance of color over design, lighting is key. Claude Monet is

the master of momentary sensation. Able to capture impressionistic scenes with accuracy of perspective and light. In this work the space of the garden recedes into a vanishing point in the distance, while the bridge acts as a sort of horizon line to draw the eye further in. However, Chiaroscuro is the real star in the bright scene, or lack thereof. Monet intentionally avoids the stark contrast of lights and darks of Chiaroscuro, rather he uses the gradation of tones from lightest to darkest to produce the illusion of structured form. These tones result in the pop of

color expressed from the water lilies and their reflection on the pond. Monet, like Marie Antoinette, was a keen horticulturist, the garden and bridge shown here is his own. Later in his life he painted exclusively from his garden producing 18 such works of this bridge and water lilies through the seasons, this is summer.



Contemporary Art Influenced by Antiquity

Zimmerman, Mary Kate, *Interpretation of Impressionism*, ca.2022, Acrylic on Canvas.

The fleeting conditions of light seen in Impressionistic works were often depicted with outdoor compositions, many times with the inclusion of people. Here inspiration is drawn from Impressionism with the intersection of Dutch still lifes of the late Baroque period. The cropped focus of the flowers allows the work of light to create movement in the painting. A direct influence of interpretation of Mary Cassatt's, *Lilacs in a Window*, (seen below) this work does not quite capture the colorito of Cassatt's hazy brushstroke which is a defining characteristic of Impressionism. The artist tried to create the layered effect of short brush strokes of varying colors like Mary Cassatt, but the thickness of the medium used, acrylic, is likely the reason they were unable to create the depth of dimension in the work.



Cassatt, Mary, *Lilacs in the window*, ca. 1880-83, Oil on Canvas, The MET Museum, New York.

When compared to *Lilacs in a Window*, this work does succeed at creating some shadows thrown from the vase, indicating light coming from the top right of the work. However, there is not a sense of reflection through the glass windowpane in relation to the color of lilacs reflected in Cassatt's. In *Lilacs in a Window* Cassatt has created a sense of depth from the viewers point of view, even when someone is standing equal heights with the work, they would still be looking down

on to the windowsill. While in *Interpretation of Impressionism*, the viewer is looking at equal level with the vase of flowers, there is a slight depth of space beyond the open window panel, but it is a very shallow depth.

Overall, these works show the evolution of the use of flowers in artistic works through time. This exhibit shows the importance flowers can play in iconographic works, like *Preferring a Sufi Shaykh to Kings*. How the floral symbolism of roses was used to convey the message of power, royalty, beauty, and sensuality in *Marie Antoinette with a Rosa*. To the advancement of flowers becoming the central subjects of works, able to express motion, and the movement of light in new ways. As Claude Monet once said, "I perhaps owe having become a painter to flowers."

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