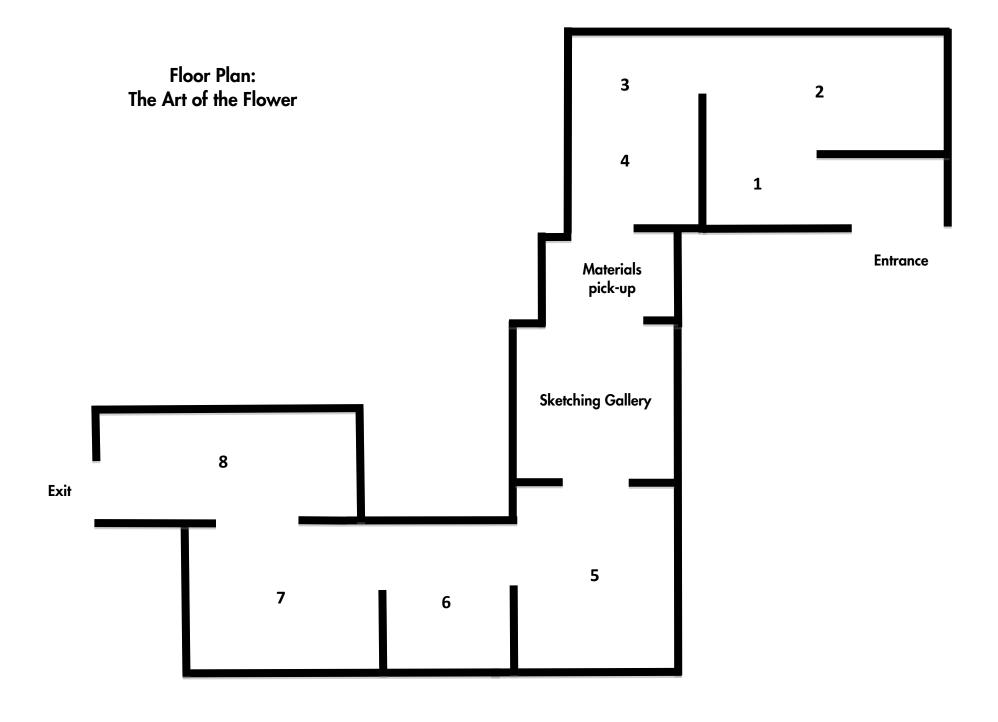


VAN GOGH, MANET, AND MATISSE: THE ART OF THE FLOWER traces the reinvention of a traditional form of painting, the floral still life, by French artists during the 19th century. Floral still life—usually an image of a bouquet in a more or less elaborate vase, set on a ledge or tabletop—emerged as an independent artistic form as early as the 16th century and was firmly established in France by the 17th century. For most of its history, though, flower painting remained bound by tradition, dependent on past precedent and granted little intellectual prestige by the French Academy. During the 19th century, however, artists proposed innovations that allowed this most traditional of genres to become an unexpected field of experimentation and exploration.

THIS EXHIBITION EXPLORES the wide-ranging artistic and cultural context in which these changes occurred. The broad

scope and surprising diversity of the works featured allows for a reassessment of a subject that has often been dismissed as merely decorative or as primarily commercial. Floral still lifes have always been appreciated for their beauty and visual appeal, but this exhibition seeks to reveal the complexity of the genre and explore its true range and ambition.

remained a central inquiry in literature, philosophy, and science as well as art. The genres most closely concerned with nature, particularly landscape and flower painting, flourished. At the same time, still life offered artists an escape from the conventions of literary or narrative subjects. By the beginning of the 20th century, the floral still life was established as a site of artistic meditation, deeply traditional yet unmistakably modern.



A New Vogue for Flowers

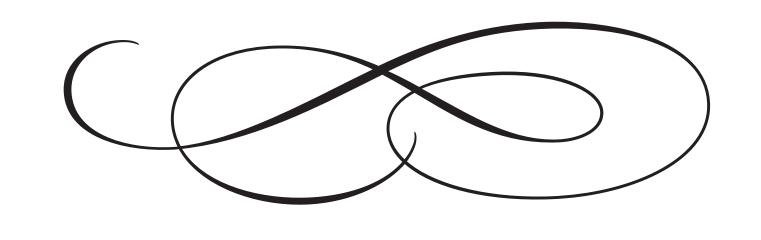
TESSIER TO REDOUTÉ

FLOWER PAINTING BECAME popular in France as early as the 17th century, with Dutch and Flemish artists initially providing the primary models for French artists. Many of these still-life painters also worked as botanical illustrators, and their close observation of flowers aided their precise representations of the elaborate floral displays that were then the fashion.

A CLOSE NETWORK of personal and professional alliances ensured that flower painting in the Northern manner continued in France into the early 19th century. This "Franco-Dutch" school was led by a number of Dutchor Belgian-born artists, including the brothers Gerard and Cornelis van Spaendonck, Jan Frans van Dael, and Pierre-Joseph Redouté. All of these painters trained numerous pupils, many of them women, who maintained the Franco-Dutch tradition of crisp illusionism and botanical precision.

MOST OF THESE ARTISTS participated in the official exhibitions, known as Salons, sponsored by the French Academy, but their careers were also nurtured in institutions as diverse as the royal botanical gardens, the Gobelins textile and furnishings manufactory in Paris, and the Sèvres porcelain manufactory. These painters explored the oppositions between exuberance and reserve, precise or free rendering, and private or public address, significant critical polarities that engaged subsequent artists for the remainder of the 19th century.

Flower Painting in Lyon

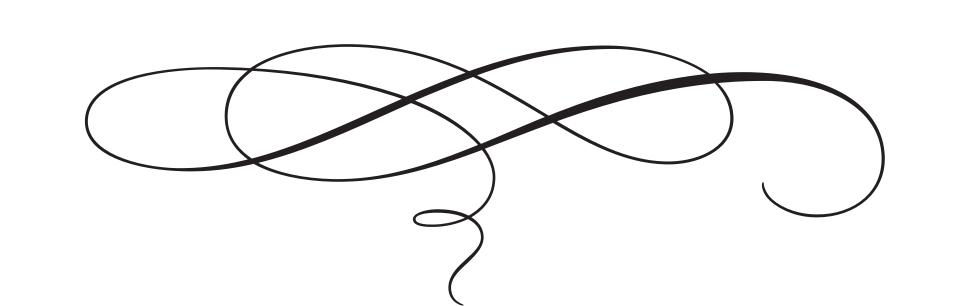


FROM THE RENAISSANCE to the 20th century, the French city of Lyon was a commercial capital, largely due to its textile industry. Lyon's silks and other exceptional fabrics often featured sophisticated floral motifs, designed by the many specialized local artists.

DURING THE 1790S, though, the silk industry collapsed from the upheavals of the French Revolution and only revived with the assistance of administrative reforms under Napoleon Bonaparte. Two direct results of these reforms were the foundation in 1800 of the Musée des Beaux-Arts (Museum of Fine Arts) and the creation in 1805 of an École des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts) in the city. Lyon's new museum launched an effort to gather prime examples of flower paintings, both historic and contemporary, for the instruction and inspiration of designers working in the textile industry.

ALL OF THE ARTISTS represented in this section of the exhibition were either professors or students of Lyon's École des Beaux-Arts. Collectively, they created a new style of flower painting that adapted the meticulous naturalism of the Northern tradition to the needs of the local textile industry for decorative floral imagery. These artists' interest in both precision and invention forged a distinctive mode of floral still life that evolved parallel to the emergence of an avant-garde approach to the genre during the mid-19th century.

Delacroix and Courbet



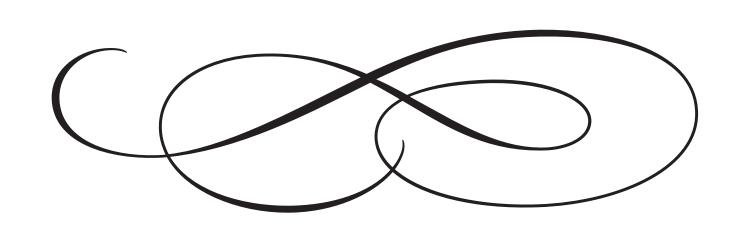
THE MODERN EXPERIENCE OF FLOWERS

BY THE 1830s floral still life had become a highly specialized, even technical, practice. In response, Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix, who emphasized the imagination and emotion in his work, formulated alternatives to the precision and finish that had become synonymous with the genre. Delacroix painted flowers largely in two separate moments: the first, a brief exploration of the genre around 1833, and the second, a more sustained effort in 1848 and 1849 culminating in four monumental paintings that were exhibited together at the Exposition Universelle of 1855.

of activity, during a visit to the country house of his patron, Étienne Baudry. Courbet painted at least fifteen floral still lifes while staying with Baudry in 1862 and 1863. Unlike Delacroix, whose foray into the genre responded primarily to contemporary French flower painting, Courbet used his brief campaign to enter into dialogue with the genre's historical roots.

FRÉDÉRIC BAZILLE WAS a friend and ally of the artists who would form the impressionist circle during the 1870s, but he was tragically killed in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War. His ambitious flower paintings demonstrate the decisive impact of Delacroix's and Courbet's explorations on younger artists, who were inspired by their example to treat the genre experimentally.

Fantin-Latour and Dubourg



A SHARED ENTERPRISE

TOGETHER, HENRI FANTIN-LATOUR and Victoria Dubourg were among the steadiest practitioners of floral still life in France during the second half of the 19th century. They met in 1866 while copying at the Louvre and were married ten years later.

FANTIN-LATOUR WAS ACTIVE in various avant-garde groups, English as well as French. He developed a large British clientele for his still lifes, encouraged by his close friend James McNeill Whistler. Fantin-Latour painted more than five hundred floral still lifes during his career, many of them for British collectors. With his characteristic unhurried and tenderly applied brushstrokes, Fantin-Latour painted everyday objects and modest bouquets of garden flowers seen against neutral backgrounds. The conscious repetitiveness in his work is often compared to variations in music, an art both he and Dubourg loved. Dubourg, who had exhibited still lifes even before meeting Fantin-Latour, likewise adopted and pursued this style, certainly a conscious decision not lightly undertaken.

FANTIN-LATOUR WAS SOMETIMES troubled by his considerable success as a painter of floral still life, since the genre was accorded little prestige in the mid-19th century. But, despite periods of doubt, Fantin-Latour returned again and again to still life, calling it "a marvelous thing." Only other painters, he believed, could truly understand his purpose in these quiet, deliberate works.

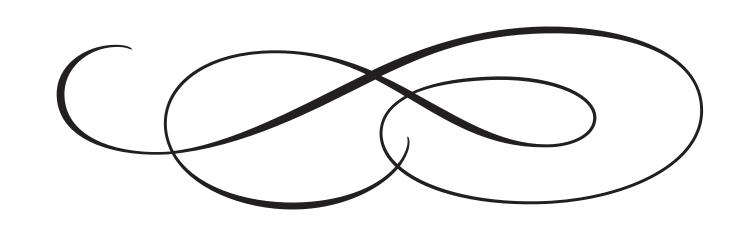
Degas and Renoir

THE NEW PAINTING OF FLOWERS

IN THE LATE 1860s, a group of young artists began planning for an independent exhibition, their own "realist Salon," as Edgar Degas described it to Henri Fantin-Latour. In 1874 they organized their first group exhibition. Degas was unable to persuade Fantin-Latour to show with the group, and he in turn convinced Édouard Manet not to participate. But, in the spring of that year, a group of ambitious, like-minded painters—including Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, and Paul Cézanne—showed their avantgarde work to sometimes admiring, sometimes incredulous audiences, who quickly dubbed them "impressionists."

"THE NEW PAINTING," the name given to the movement by a sympathetic critic, was dominated by landscapes, generally painted out of doors, and scenes of modern life set in the semipublic spaces of cafes and theaters. Still life, usually an art of private, domestic spaces, played only a secondary role in the eight impressionist exhibitions held between 1874 and 1886. Nevertheless, the genre attracted most of the impressionist artists, though more often as a private rather than as a public exercise. Of this group, Renoir was the most committed to the floral still life and painted a large number. The impressionists' floral still lifes were often highly original and experimental works that radically advanced the genre and its pictorial development.

Manet and His Influence

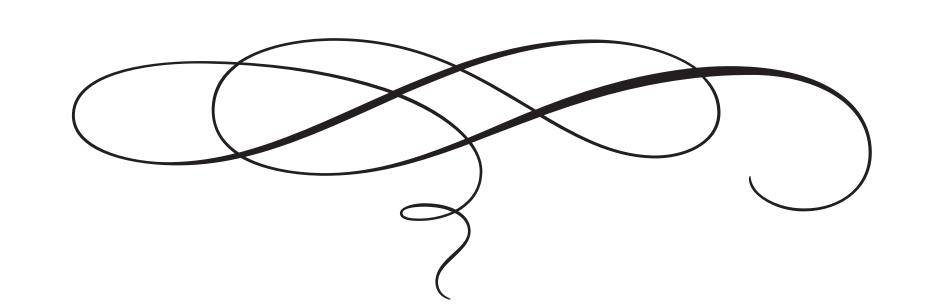


THE FLORAL STILL LIFE AROUND 1882

IN THE EARLY 1880s, a new consensus emerged about floral still life's importance as a forum for artistic experimentation and dialogue. One important contributor was Édouard Manet, who deeply explored the genre in 1882 and 1883. He had painted floral still lifes earlier in his career, but his renewed interest was largely dictated by personal concerns: his health was rapidly failing and he was increasingly able to work only on paintings of relatively small scale, mainly portraits of friends and still lifes of the bouquets they brought to his bedside. The flower paintings he made in the last months of his life looked back at the French floral still-life tradition as well as forward to a more minimalist approach to the genre at the end of the 19th century.

A NEW SENSE OF PURPOSE was also apparent in the impressionists' growing enthusiasm for exhibiting floral still lifes publicly. The seventh impressionist exhibition, in 1882, featured eleven flower paintings, a record number, including major examples by Paul Gauguin, Claude Monet, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Although landscapes and figure paintings still dominated the exhibition and impressionist production in general, the new visibility of floral subjects that year reflects serious collective interest in the genre's possibilities to convey formal, thematic, and even narrative complexity.

Van Gogh and the Avant-Garde

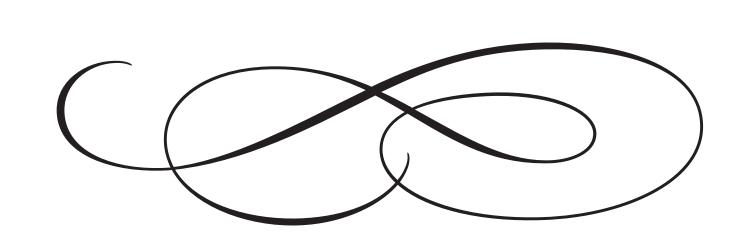


THE EXPERIMENTS OF THE 1890S

THE YOUNG DUTCH ARTIST Vincent van Gogh arrived in Paris in 1886, shortly before the final impressionist exhibition. "There is much to be seen here," he wrote to a friend, "for instance, Delacroix, to name only one master. In Antwerp I did not even know what the impressionists were, now I have seen them and though not being one of the club yet I have much admired certain impressionist pictures." One of van Gogh's first responses to his new environment was a major sequence of flower paintings, begun in the summer of 1886 and continued over the following year. Van Gogh reported that it was in making this series of still lifes that he learned to paint with color for the first time.

AT THE SAME MOMENT, however, the Parisian avant-garde was in the midst of a profound transformation, spurred in part by the emergence of new artistic movements, such as neo-impressionism—which had burst on to the scene at the final impressionist exhibition—and symbolism. The appreciation for highly individual approaches to painting, such as those of Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin, was also increasing, and these former impressionists found entirely new ways to paint the floral still life at the close of the 19th century.

Redon, Bonnard, Matisse



ROOTED IN TRADITION

THIS FINAL SECTION investigates three artists whose long engagements with the floral still life form a bridge between the work of the late 19th-century avant-garde and early 20th-century modernism.

ODILON REDON WAS a contemporary of the impressionists, but his early preference for working only in black and white distanced him from the main currents of modernist painting until his rediscovery of color around the turn of the 20th century, when flower painting became a major preoccupation. During his youth in Bordeaux, France, Redon had been mentored by the Darwinian botanist Armand Clavaud, whose ideas sparked Redon's highly idiosyncratic floral imagery.

PIERRE BONNARD, TOO, demonstrated an interest in floral still life at the beginning of his career, but returned to it only in his mid-forties, when he abandoned the small scale of his early paintings. His bouquets set in crowded interiors have a kind of optical complexity that reflects the slow method by which they were built up in the studio, from memory, sketches, or photographs.

THE CONSTANTLY EVOLVING and endlessly creative Henri Matisse began making floral still lifes in the first years of the 20th century, around the same time that Redon and Bonnard returned to the practice. Like them, he sustained his interest in the genre over the rest of his life, even as his stylistic and formal concerns changed radically.