

# History and Meaning of Flowers in Painting

## Part Two: The Rose

Roses, more than any other flower, have always been used by poets and artists to enhance the meaning of their work; to recollect the pleasures of a garden or evoke an awareness of the brevity of life. There is a huge variety of roses in existence, and many have gradually made their appearance in European art.

Two roses pervaded the culture of medieval Europe and its paintings. The red *Rosa gallica*, symbol of lovers, and its natural opposite the white *Rosa alba*. In 15th Century art two sweet-smelling climbers appeared - the sweetbriar or eglantine and the oriental musk rose - and 17th Century still life painters added several more. Among these was the damask rose, well known in the classical world and described by the Romans as 'centifolia' because of its doubleness. The damask was valued above all others for perfume. It was outclassed in flower still lifes by a new hybrid *Rosa centifolia*, a deep pink cabbage rose with tightly massed petals, which lolls at the rim of almost every vase.

Another novelty was the golden yellow *Rosa foetida*, introduced because there were no yellow roses in the European stock. It was brought over from Persia, but is confusingly known as the Austrian briar because that was where it was first introduced.

A century later, in the 1720s, Jan van Huysum proudly added double yellow roses (*Rosa hemisphaerica*) to his paintings.

These rose varieties were multiplied by collectors such as the Empress Josephine, and the next revolution came with the introduction of Chinese roses, from which Bourbon roses and hybrid teas were bred during the 19th Century. They were characterised by the recurved edges of their petals - a feature that can be spotted in the paintings of Fantin-Latour or Rossetti. But the secret of their popularity with rose fanciers was their ability to flower all summer, unlike the old European roses whose brief flowering added to the poignancy of poems and proverbs.



**Flowers in a Terracotta Vase**

Rachel Ruysch

McLellan Gallery, Glasgow

undated

39.4 x 31.4 cm

oil on canvas

One of the few female artists of the time, Rachel Ruysch produced fantastically detailed flower pieces. She used dark backgrounds, as earlier Dutch painters had done, which highlighted the flowers to dramatic effect.

This arrangement includes roses, honeysuckle and marigolds. At the heart of the composition are the roses that particularly mark out her skill out as a flower painter. Full-blown roses are known as one of the most complex flowers to capture. Ruysch used soft brown paint to outline the petals and centre of these roses, which makes them appear very tangible and three-dimensional.



The Virgin and Child  
c. 1515-25  
48.3 x 36.8 cm  
egg tempera on wood

Fiorenzo di Lorenzo (attrib)  
National Gallery, London

In this gentle depiction of the Virgin Mary and Child, Mary tenderly supports her son as he stands on a carpet in the foreground and wreaths of roses are strung behind her.

Roses have a long and close association with Mary: red roses represented Christ and Mary's suffering, white her purity. She was known as 'the rose without thorn'. The rose was associated with love, and Mary's love was thought to represent absolute perfection.

The looping of the garlands of roses in the painting may have been intended to reflect the rosary, the devotional beads which are often made of rose wood.



**Mrs Langtry**  
Sir Edward Poynter  
Jersey Museum  
1877  
66 x 76 cm  
oil on canvas

The actress Lillie Langtry was a celebrity of her time. She arrived in London from her native Jersey in 1876 and soon became a society figure. Shortly after arriving in the capital Lillie began a notorious affair with the Prince of Wales.

In the Victorian interpretation of flowers, the yellow rose held to her bosom meant jealous or adulterous love, while the white rose held away from her signified pure love and silence. The white rose speaks of Edward Langtry's silence in the face of Lillie's adultery, the yellow of her liaison outside marriage.



This is the Kingslan & Gibilisco Studio version of Dutch Old Master Artist Bosschaert, A varied bouquet, consisting of a columbine, tulips and a peony, has been neatly arranged in a small Wan-Li vase. The bright colours of the petals stand out against the dark background. A tulip and a cyclamen are lying beside the vase. There are insects on some of the flowers. Bosschaert's reasons for painting this bouquet were not solely aesthetic. Flame tulips were highly exotic in the seventeenth century, and therefore very costly. Bosschaert's depiction of flowers infested with vermin may well have been intended as a vanitas and is related to the word vanity and to transience. The term refers to the opening verse of Ecclesiastes in the Latin Bible 'Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas': vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Seventeenth-century Dutch paintings often feature symbols of transience, especially still lifes. Skulls, hourglasses, extinguished candles and similar elements refer to the evanescence of existence. Vanitas paintings are intended to remind the viewer of how short life is and that it should be lived with due regard to God's laws. painting, referring to the transience of beauty and wealth.

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