When sunflowers were introduced from America in the mid 16th Century, news of their vast height and radiant flowers spread rapidly through Europe. The first description, written by the Spanish botanist Monardes, reached England in a book entitled ‘Joyful news out of the new found world’.

The name sunflower was already used for related flowers, especially marigolds, and the idea of opening to face the sun and following its course across the sky also applied to daisies - originally ‘day’s-eyes’.

A flower motif inspired by daisies or marigolds, but exaggerated to look more like the sun and its rays, appeared in Roman mosaics and medieval church carvings long before sunflowers themselves arrived. In this sense the new sunflowers seemed to embody ancient traditions, and this was echoed in the Latin name Helianthus, deriving from the name of the Greek sun god Helios.

Meanwhile, in America, the Incas had made sunflowers the symbol of their god, but in 17th Century Europe sunflowers came to represent kingship at its most vainglorious. For instance, Charles I of England and later Louis XIV of France were referred to as the Sun King.

Like royalty, sunflowers lost favour and 18th Century gardening manuals suggested banning these oversized plants from flowerbeds. Instead they became useful crops, producing oil from the seeds, and also fibres, dyes and medicines.

But sunflowers were to rise again in artistic status. In the 19th Century the aesthetic movement, led by fashionable figures such as Oscar Wilde, popularised the sunflower as a motif in decorative art. Far more enduringly, Van Gogh imparted new heights of meaning and popularity with his series of sunflower paintings. In these he sought to reflect the heat of the sun during the summer at Arles, and its creative energy.

At first glance this tiny painting (about the size of a man’s hand) appears charming and lighthearted. But Dutch art from this period is often about the brevity of life and this image is no exception.

A snail crawls over the date - 1663 - at the bottom of the painting. Snails and insects, because of their short life cycles, illustrated the shortness of life theme and were often used in Dutch art. In the centre, the bubble represents something which is perfectly formed and can disappear in an instant.

Finally the sunflower itself, sitting on the window sill, is used because it is a flower which shows astonishing beauty for a short space of time.
A single sunflower blazes out from the centre of this late Victorian painting.

At first glance this may seem a fairly ordinary still life, but a closer look reveals clues to the artist’s aesthetic loyalties.

During the late Victorian era the ‘art for art’s sake’ aesthetic movement reached its pinnacle. Devotees of the style valued rarity over practicality and many of the objects in Frohawk’s painting are motifs of this artistic movement. The peacock’s feather and the Japanese vase were valued for their exotic delicacy, the sunflower for its bright showiness.

Vincent van Gogh painted these sunflowers after leaving his native Holland for the south of France with the dream of starting an artistic community. He began to paint sunflowers to decorate a bedroom for his friend Paul Gauguin.

The series of paintings was made possible by the innovations in manufactured pigments in the 19th Century. Without the vibrancy of the new colours, such as chrome yellow, Van Gogh may never have achieved the intensity of Sunflowers.

These most famous of all sunflowers in art hold at their heart a simple parable about the brevity of life; they are at varying stages in the life cycle, from withered and wilting to vibrant full bloom.
A Girl Seated Outside a House
1867
32.7 x 20.9 cm
oil on mahogany

Jacob Maris
National Gallery, London

The girl in the painting is sitting in the garret of a house, with a view of Montigny-sur-Loing in the background.

Although the girl is dressed in plain, poor clothes, she is trimming her hat with bright flowers.

The sunflowers in this painting appear to be an emblem of hope, the prospect of a brighter future.

The Dutch artist Maris worked in Paris in the 1870s. Van Gogh painted his sunflowers in the same era, and although the artists may even have been acquainted, Van Gogh’s vision of sunflowers is remarkably different from this quiet, traditional scene.

A painting in the National Gallery by PT van Brussel shows several flowers originally from America, including a sunflower, falling from the vase onto the ledge beneath. This may be a reference to the American War of Independence.

Sun and Moonflowers
1889
71.25 x 71.25 cm
oil on canvas

George Leslie Dunlop
Guildhall Art Gallery, London

In the late 19th Century sunflowers became very fashionable. In particular they came to represent the aesthetic movement that championed ‘art for art’s sake’ and was headed by Oscar Wilde. When Sun and Moonflowers was painted the aesthetic movement was all the rage.

Firstly, the two languid girls in the painting show their affiliation to the movement with the lovingly snipped and tended sunflowers. Secondly the colours blue and white, through their association with Japanese porcelain, were considered alongside yellow to be the signature colours of this artistic movement.

Not only do the flowers stand in a blue and white Japanese vase but the women sit, perfectly poised, in blue and white dresses.

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