History and Meaning of Flowers in Painting
Part One: The Tulip

There are tulips growing wild throughout Europe and Asia - indeed they may be the biblical lilies of the field that outdid Solomon in all his glory.

The tulips that appeared so widely in 17th Century flower paintings were complicated hybrids, originally cultivated in the gardens of Turkish sultans. These were known as Ottoman tulips and had petals with very pointed tips.

The Austrian ambassador to Istanbul, Ogier Busbecq, is credited with bringing them into Europe in 1556 together with their name. Tulip meant turban and referred to their shape, but in fact the Turks called them lilies.

In early paintings this oriental shape (still known as lily-flowered) appeared alongside the more rounded tulips admired in Europe - one description said the perfect tulip should be bolt upright on its stalk like a goblet.

Even more compelling to collectors and painters were the vivid colours of tulip petals. A virus caused these to ‘break’ into fascinating patterns. European plantsmen, led by the Dutch botanist Clusius, bred and classified them and from early in the 17th Century the different colour combinations appeared in paintings, arranged in vases of fabulous blooms.

In fact the artist would have made individual studies of each flower and then painted an artificial arrangement which best displayed their shapes and colours. Rose tulips were red and white; bizarres were red or purple and yellow, and bybloemens were purple and white.

Tulips in these groups were distinguished by their markings and given aristocratic names - the most famous was Semper Augustus - and collected across Europe. Prices rose accordingly because these were rare plants. In Holland the phenomenon of ‘tulipmania’ took over. Tulips were traded for profit, at auctions and taverns, in a feverish market that relied on credit and confidence. The crash came in 1637, when tulips became a moral issue and a dire warning about the excesses of capitalism. But their beauty was undimmed and continued to be celebrated in flower still lifes.

Still Life with Flowers
Georg Flegel
Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Undated
22.5 x 15 cm
oil on panel

Georg Flegel shows us very clearly that this is a so-called ‘vanitas’ painting: one illustrating that earthly beauty and treasures are only fleeting and to rely on them is vanity.

The beans in the foreground could have several meanings. They are thought to be castor beans, which can be extremely poisonous when not cooked properly and are thus a reminder of death. But because they can cause wind during digestion they could also be an allusion to a second life or the afterlife.

The Wakefield Tulip Society still grows the traditional striped tulips which have broken colours caused by a virus.

These can be exchanged among members and exhibited, but not sold because of EC regulations about plant disease.
Flowers in a Glass Vase
Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder
National Gallery, London
1614
26 x 20 cm
oil on copper

These flowers would never in reality have appeared together. They bloom in different seasons, and the cost of such a bouquet would have been prohibitive in 17th Century Holland.

At the pinnacle of the display is a white tulip feathered with red. These sought-after markings were characteristic of Semper Augustus, the most costly tulip ever sold. At the height of the tulip boom in the 17th Century a single Semper Augustus fetched sums equivalent to the cost of about fourteen Bosschaert paintings.

Bosschaert wants us to know that the earthly loveliness of the flowers is transient. A sense of passing beauty and decay are conveyed by the fly in the foreground, and by the caterpillar, which marches up the stalk of the red and yellow tulip, ready to devour it.

Basket of Flowers with Sea Shells
Gillis de Berg
Bowes Museum, Castle Barnard, Co Durham
Undated
38 x 47.7 cm
oil on panel

This arrangement includes roses and peonies alongside the tulips, which are casually arranged in a wicker basket on a table.

The persistent Dutch theme of the brevity of life is illustrated here not simply by the short-lived blooms - a mayfly also hovers above the flowers. Mayflies were used to illustrate the theme because of their extremely short life cycles.

Shells with exotic shapes and colours, such as those in the foreground, were highly prized in the early seventeenth century. The expanding Dutch republic enabled such curios to be brought in from far-flung parts of the world.
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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