

Ferguson on MacDonald and Merling, eds. (2013)

MacDonald, Heather, and Mitchell Merling, eds. *Working Among Flowers: Floral Still-Life Painting in Nineteenth-Century France*. Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art and Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Distributed by Yale University Press. 2014. Pp. xv + 184. ISBN: 978-0-300-20950-1

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Flower painting? One can hardly avoid the visions of more or less genteel ladies, brush in hand. Few of us, I hazard, would put stock in the modernity of this genre, which seemed old-fashioned even when it was new.

We would be wrong, at least if, as this work pushes us to do, we rethink floral painting in the larger scheme of things artistic. The sumptuously produced, thoughtfully analyzed and scrupulously annotated *Working among Flowers* (the title taken from a Van Gogh letter) will change your mind. True, the book explicitly does not consider the more purely decorative floral productions of the time—the paintings on porcelain, the rose-bedecked fans, the decorative panels, or even the greeting cards festooned with flowers that flourish still today. Yet, this world of floral decoration serves as the backdrop for the more “serious” work of the “big” painters of the nineteenth century. From Delacroix and Courbet to Cézanne, Redon, Matisse, and Gauguin via Manet, Fantin-Latour, Renoir, and Pissarro the painting of flowers in the nineteenth century redefined a genre. The nineteenth century inherited the floral still life from botanical painters and illustrators of earlier era (particularly from the North), transforming what was mostly niche painting into “real” painting. Even though both Delacroix and Courbet complained about the low status of the flower painting to which market demand compelled them, they along with others assimilated flowers in their visions of the world. The flowers of Matisse are very much Matisse flowers, and the same is true of the others.

Working among Flowers is the work of curators Heather MacDonald at the Dallas Art Museum and Mitchell Merling at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, which, along with the Denver Art Museum, exhibited the works reproduced here in 2014–2015. With borrowings from two continents, forty-one institutions, and assorted anonymous lenders, the organizational feats alone claim our respect and admiration.

So what does this work bring to the *dix-neuviémiste*? “Flowers in Nineteenth-Century Poetry: A Time to Bloom, a Time to Die” by Olivier Meslay (Dallas) makes the most evident connection. From Ronsard to Marceline Desbordes-Valmore the floral poetic background shows the *Fleurs du mal* in a new and even more emphatically modern light. Baudelaire tolled the death knell for the genial, increasingly domesticated genre, often conceived as an offering, rather like a nosegay. Post-Baudelaire flowers lost their innocence. Floral poetry would never be the same.

Especially striking is the transformation of scientific drawing into full-fledged floral painting. This culture of botanophilia drew on texts such as Rousseau’s *Lettres élémentaires sur la botanique* (1781) as well as the taxonomy of Linnaeus. In “Illustration and Illusion: Botany and Painting at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century,” Heather MacDonald locates the authority of these illustrators in their scientific ambitions. In an update of the traditional herbal, the immensely popular engravings of Pierre-Joseph Redouté, the protégé of Joséphine Bonaparte (*Les Lilacées*, 1802–16; *Les Roses*, 1817), promoted a hybrid of scientific illustration and the still life. As Mitchell Merling points out in “The Path to the Modern Still Life: Academy to Avant-Garde,” voluptuous florals of composed bouquets of many kinds of flowers—among many others see the 1796 painting by Redouté (18)—yielded to the single flowers “dissected” in his engravings. Botanical illustration even turned into a fashionable pursuit. Redouté’s classes at the Jardin des Plantes packed in (mostly) young women in search of an appropriate artistic enterprise.

Yet it is the evolution of the still life—Chardin’s example looms large—that is the true subject of *Working among Flowers*. Bouquets came back, flowers and their arrangements inspired sumptuous explorations of a genre whose name—*nature morte*—these artists sought to prove wrong. There is nothing dead in these vibrant works.

My only quibble is the (understandable) focus on the “great.” For a full sense of the range and popularity of floral painting, more needs to be said about Madeleine Lemaire (often cited as a model for Proust’s Mme Verdurin), for one, who may be dismissed today but who exhibited regularly in the Salon and painted so many roses that she was known as “l’impératrice des roses.” Lemaire is mentioned only once (35), by Sylvie Patry (Musée d’Orsay), in “Impressionist Flower Paintings and the Market.” But if some of the background is wanting, the foreground is superlatively seductive. My salon would welcome any of these vases and their flowers that never die.

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