FLOWERS AS A DEATH RITUAL IN ART

Abstract

This research focuses on making visible examples of the flower image, which has been prevalent throughout art history, in contemporary art. The flower image or depiction has been present in art history since myths due to many aesthetic, biological, or social dynamics. This research approaches the flower through the concept of death and, in this context, also questions the classical representations of the image. To limit the scope of the research, a selection of works from the exhibition *Flowers: Flora in Contemporary Art*, which opened at the Saatchi Gallery in London in May 2025, is presented. Within this framework, the concept of flowers and its prominent representations in art history are first examined, followed by an attempt to explain and interpret works featured in the exhibition that could serve as examples within concepts such as death/rebirth. During the research process, data was obtained through document review and evaluated through qualitative analysis.

Key words: Representation, flower, Saatchi Gallery.

Introduction

The broader social use of flowers is related to their symbolic meanings and also has a tendency to be conveyed through language. This research focuses on making visible works that reject the fresh and colourful presentation of flowers. When discussing flowers that are symbolically withered and fading in art, having lost their vitality in a way and thus being addressed in a vanitas language, the chrysanthemum flower, for example, is an autumn flower, and the season in which it blooms has given it a symbolic meaning through its demise. In some regions of France, Italy and Germany, this flower, which is used in autumn ceremonies for the dead, has the characteristic of not being offered to the living because it is associated with death. The fact that the chrysanthemum, a symbol of life in Chinese culture due to its abundance and longevity, is associated with death in a different culture also demonstrates the shifts in meaning and diversity in the relationship between humans and nature. Again in this context, the rose, especially in medieval Christian iconography, was associated with the blood of Jesus Christ and defined as the *mystic rose*. In the Baroque period, within the vanitas painting tradition, the rose, even when depicted as unfaded, can be interpreted as representing the concepts of nothingness and decay. The Wars of the Roses, also known as the Double Rose War (1455-1487), a political conflict between the monarchy and the nobility in English history, also features the rose as a symbol. The Houses of York and Lancaster were descended from the same royal lineage, with the House of Lancaster represented by a red rose and the House of York by a white rose. At the end of the war, which lasted approximately forty years, the new Tudor dynasty, with the idea of creating a basis for both political and symbolic reconciliation, combined these two roses into one and used the Tudor Rose as its emblem. In this sense, the rose found meaning as a symbol of both power and years of war, and this situation can be seen in more recent history as well. It is thought that certain flowers, whose meanings have been attributed to them since mythology, have carried these meanings into contemporary art. For example, the poppy flower is the symbol of Thanatos, the god of death in Greek mythology, and is among the flowers addressed in art through this representation. Not only in mythology, but also historically, during the First World War, the long battle of soldiers on French and Belgian soil, the intense movement on the fields, and the resulting upheaval of the soil caused the poppies, which had been dormant, to bloom more profusely than ever before after the war. In his poem *Flanders Fields*, Canadian soldier John McCrae refers to poppies as follows: '...If you break your faith with us who die... Though poppies grow, we shall not sleep. In Flanders fields' (https://www.britannica.com/topic/In-Flanders-Fields).

The Concept of Flowers and Gardens of Paradise

The term “flower” generally refers to the sprouting or blooming of plants, and thus describes the most elegant, aesthetic and magnificent stage of a process. Flowers belong to the highest group in the plant world; flowering plants, or the group classified by its Latin name *Phanerogamia*. From a botanical perspective, "Early plant life required direct access to water, and plants reproduced by fertilisation via sperm. The end of the reptilian era witnessed the emergence of angiosperms; these ‘seed-bearing plants’ were pollen-dispersing species, producing seeds instead of spores, which could be dispersed throughout nature by wind, animals, or birds" (Goody, 2010). This reproduction also provided the energy necessary for the life of burgeoning animals and the fruit needed for insects and larger animals. In the broadest sense, wild flowers pioneered the life cycles of land-dwelling mammals, their dominance in nature, and the initial formation of the human species. Beyond this comprehensive characteristic of wildflowers, in everyday life and art, the approach to them has generally progressed through an aesthetic language. From a linguistic perspective, one of the most common meanings of the English word “flower” is “essence”. Goody (2010) relates this to the fact that the flower of wheat is the essence of this plant. ‘The English word “flour” comes from the same root. In medieval French, there was the expression “flour de farine” for finely ground wheat, meaning the finest part of something; it is still possible to use “flour de farine”’ (Goody, 2010, p. 27). Nevertheless, in Latin languages, the flower is not only the essence of something, but also takes on the meaning of “bloom” as a surface. This concept, also used in the transition to early adolescence, is related to the flower having a reproductive organ, colouring, and shaping. In this context, the word *bloom* refers to a delicate flower, expressed through the surface of a living being. The surface is significant here; in both literature and visual arts, flowers have been represented primarily through their visual presence rather than through the subject of reproduction, which is often the first to be discussed. When the abundance of flowers in art is first addressed through myths and theology, it is possible to refer to the Gardens of Paradise. In other words, while establishing layers of meaning in art, flowers have been seen not as a single source of life, but as an area of grace after death, both in myths and in monotheistic religions. In this context, flowers possess a representational dimension belonging to an area where good spirits exist. The representational dimension of flowers in art was first established through this sanctity. Generally speaking, paradise, which in its dictionary meaning corresponds to the concepts of a peaceful place and flying, is a general name given to a place full of beauty and blessings, a peaceful place that describes where the sinless or those who have been cleansed of their sins will find happiness or peace after death in almost all religions. From a linguistic perspective, "Paradise is referred to by different names in Western languages, such as “paradise (English), paradis (French), paradiso (Italian)”. The English word “paradise” originates from the Greek “paradeisos”, which in turn comes from the Old Persian word “pairi-daēza”, meaning “enclosed place, tree-lined garden”, and has come to be used to mean heaven over time" (Harman, 2015). From the perspective of monotheistic religions, the Gardens of Paradise are not only an image but can also be seen as a place that strengthens man's connection with nature. ‘For example, according to heavenly religions, it is believed that paradise is a large place and that within it there is a more special, sacred garden’ (Cilacı, 1995, p.80). Once again, ‘The 56th Sura of the Qur'an takes the desert children, burning with longing for an oasis and having attained the grace of the Almighty God, to gardens filled with infinite delights’ (Mayer-Tasch, 2003). The origin of this description of paradise can be found in the Torah as follows: ‘The Almighty God created the gardens of paradise in the morning and placed man in them/ and made pleasant trees grow for him to eat, placing the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the very centre of the garden’ (Genesis 2:8-10). In the Holy Book, a river divided into four branches, namely the Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates, which flow through Turkey, marks the boundaries of the Garden of Eden or Paradise. In the centre of this place, where all kinds of plants, flowers and trees are found, stands the tree of life, which separates good from evil. Looking at the Gospel outside of the Torah, it can be said that their meanings are directly or indirectly similar. In this sense, the Garden of Eden or Paradise, from a theological perspective, encompasses various and reproducible metaphorical meanings in every religion, such as a state of perfect goodness, the state of being young and healthy, the fulfilment of all desires, ultimate salvation/eternal happiness, rather than merely being a green garden or a piece of nature. (Mayer-Tasch, 2003, pp. 11-14). These gardens also inspired medieval art. In terms of these meanings, flowers gained their first forms of representation in art as reflectors of beauty both in this world and in the afterlife.

The First Representations of Flowers in Western Art

Because flowers represent paradise in monotheistic religions, they have been predominantly addressed in art history in terms of abundance and fertility, and it is impossible to separate this representation from religious themes in art history. In painting, flowers and plants were carriers of theological language before they took on their own reality and were among the most common symbols used to explain events in sacred texts to the illiterate masses. Flowers, which appeared alongside religious figures in sacred texts, illuminated manuscripts, murals and stained glass, retained this representation until the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but from the Baroque period onwards, they began to reflect their own reality in still life paintings, where flowers were treated as an independent genre. In the Middle Ages, it can be said that there was a conception of nature influenced by the depiction of the Garden of Eden in sacred texts. The Medieval understanding of gardens carries semantic and symbolic qualities beyond visuality or systematicity (Akdoğan, 1974, p.7). Again, while the Garden of Eden was a source of infinite abundance and happiness in the Middle Ages, green grass, fruit trees and colourful flowers frequently appeared in these depictions. Artists detailed the beauties of Paradise and humanity's lost innocence through gardens in their works (Pace, 2021, p.708). Certain flowers were more commonly used to represent lost innocence. For example, in Christian literary descriptions, roses, violets and lilies regularly appear in depictions of Paradise. Among these flowers, which have a religious meaning, the rose represents self-sacrificing love, suffering on the cross and giving up one's own body. Again, in the Catholic faith, Mary is referred to as the Garden of Roses/*rosarium*. The lily represents innocence, purity and chastity. Once again, in the Flemish Christian book, floral motifs are prominently depicted in the border decorations. While the white lily was used in scenes of annunciation, the iris flower, evoking royalty, represented Mary, symbolising the Queen of Heaven. (Segal, 1982, p.21-26). As an example of this idea, the flowers carried by the Archangel Gabriel in the scene of the Annunciation to Mary are depicted as lilies. In early Christian illuminations, it is possible to see bouquets of flowers in the hands of saints or around their names. in Image 1. Saint Aetheldreda's devotion to God and the renunciation of the worldly in favour of the divine is symbolised by the lily. (F 1). However, in the 15th century, ornamentation or representation in art acquired another concept: identification.

Flowers, as objects of the external world, progressed beyond being mere decorative elements to become subjects that needed to be identified. In the field of architecture, depictions of nature were particularly encouraged. Initially in northern French cities and Italy, and later spreading to England, naturalistic style, with flower and plant motifs taken directly from nature, can be seen on the columns and capitals of cathedrals. For example, snapdragons and swallowtail leaves are striking in the Gothic ornamentation of Charles and Notre Dame cathedrals. This flower, a symbol of power and resistance, has also been imbued with a protective meaning. These flowers, widely used in the early stages, were joined by the pansy, violet, daisy, water lily, clover and rose, becoming the most fundamental elements of Gothic architecture. The naturalistic tradition represented, in a sense, the senses. A tradition of creating an empire of pleasure and representation began, appealing not only to the eye but also to different senses such as sight and smell. In this painting tradition, which appealed to the five senses—sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch—painters commonly depicted objects thought to reflect these five senses alongside female figures. An example of this can be found in the Cluny Museum in the form of the La Dame à la Licorne tapestries. Woven from wool and silk, these tapestries reflect the mille-fleurs (gold brocade workmanship) style. There are six of these tapestries, one for each sense, and the last one has a language shaped according to the wishes of the person who made it. On the left side of the tapestries is a unicorn and on the right side is a lion or monkey. In one of these works, the tapestry on the sense of smell, a standing female figure is depicted with a wreath. Her servant is holding a basket of flowers nearby, while the lion and unicorn surround the area holding flags. The monkey next to the central figure indicates the sense of smell with the flower in its hand. (F 2).

Figure 1. Saint Aetheldreda holding a lily, from the Benedictional of St. Aetheldreda.

While the five senses paintings can be described as secular still lifes with an allegorical language, the first examples of classical still lifes appear in Dutch painting. Moving away from the medieval approach centred on religion, art gained a new dimension with the development of botanical science and the rational view of the Renaissance, which sought to understand/define nature. Roland Barthes describes 17th-century still life painting in particular as an ‘empire of commodities’. "These paintings require a complete reading. One must start at one end of the painting and finish at the other... Because there, patiently evaluated in the painting, is another perfectly crafted object that is part of property or merchandise" (Leppert, 2002, p. 70). Still life, by its very nature, progresses through the gaze of power upon objects. That is to say, when we look at the language of still life, which is independent of paintings documenting the possessions of a feudal lord/noble/ruler or containing mythological/religious subjects and heroic tales, the perfection it attempts to capture visually also creates an uncanny situation within itself. Capturing the definition of ‘almost obsessive beauty’ (Scheider, p. 16), still life, in its attempt to create this illusion of reality, at some point overshadows the object depicted, transforming into a representation of what should be rather than what is depicted or what exists. Existing as ‘not a record of what is in still lifes, but of how things are represented in these paintings’ (Leppert, 2002, p. 71), it also appeals to a specific class socially and culturally. Still lifes, which exclude humans from the picture, make human pleasures and worldly delights their fundamental subject. While constructing the building blocks of ‘still life; the world of objects, in relation to the unseen but imagined human subject’ (Leppert, 2002, p. 71), it contains codings related to the material world and sociocultural power. For example, when viewed through the lens of a flower, the tulip plant was imported from Turkey to the West in the late 15th century and is a symbol of the aristocratic class. This exotic flower, cultivated in different colours, was priced according to its markings. Considering that ‘a tulip bulb with white and red stripes cost 5,500 Dutch florins, while a labourer's weekly wage was 2.8 florins’ (Leppert, 2002, p. 71), flowers and flower paintings were addressed in art from a perspective that defined a social, economic, and social class.

Figure 2. “Smell” from The Lady and the Unicorn series, 1500s, wool and silk, 368 x 322 cm, Musée de Cluny – Musée National du Moyen Âge, Paris Photo © RMN-GP / M Urtado

The still lifes created by Elder Jan Brueghel, a 16th-century Flemish painter, featuring tulips and exotic flowers, are among the most classic examples of this language. As part of nature, the flowers, with their wide colour palette and striking vibrancy, are compressed into a vase, transforming these paintings into a riot of colour, imbued with an uncanny language. The flowers, which constantly represent the bush in the painting, possess a reality that withers, dries, and falls in nature. Brueghel reflects the change of nature and the passage of time through flowers. This language, which we can also refer to as *Memento Mori* or remember death, has a warning tone that points to the mortality of all living things. Bruegel has established this language in art through objects that evoke transience, such as dried flowers, candles, butterflies, and skulls. The concepts of death/life and time are explored through these flowers, which are compressed into a single motif and rendered with an imperishable touch. (F 3).

Figure 3. Jan Brueghel the Elder, Bouquet of Flowers, 1607, oil on wood. 98 x 73 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Flowers as a Death Ritual in Contemporary Art

Flowers, with their vitality and transience, embody all the dynamics of life and feature in contemporary art with references to art history. Flowers, with their inherent meaning and the stories they carry from the past, create a new field of thought within this multi-layered structure, preparing the ground for reinterpreting the past through the lens of the present. When examining artists who address the image of flowers in contemporary art through references to the past and concepts of death/extinction, a single exhibition has been selected to set a limit for the research. These artists re-examine the symbolic meanings of flowers through the dynamics of contemporary art. The exhibition Flowers: Flora in Contemporary Art, which opened at the Saatchi Gallery in London in May 2025, focuses on flowers through myths and stories. When we explore the transience of flowers in the works featured in the exhibition, Rob and Nick Carter's work Flowers Transforming in a Vase, which references Dutch painting, can be cited as an example. Referencing the still lifes of Dutch Golden Age painters Rachel Rusych and Elder Jan Brueghel, the work initially shows flowers intensely alive in a vase, but it soon becomes clear that this is not a painting but a video. The flowers in the vase gradually wither and dry out under the viewer's gaze. Rather than depicting dead nature, this work reflects it directly through video, thereby critiquing the classical understanding of still life in art history. It criticises the language of classical still lifes, which served as a signifier of economic and social status for a certain class, by making time and death itself visible. (F 4-5).

Figures 4-5. Rob and Nick Carter, Transforming Flowers in a Vase, 2016, 70-minute looping film, player with monitor, frame, 66 x 61 x 10.8 cm, 26 x 24 x 4 1/4 inches.

Among artworks that position flowers in relation to death is a scene from the 2019 film Midsommer. Ari Aster's psychological drama focuses on traditional summer festivals held in an isolated village. The flowers in the film show Dani, who is grieving her loss, participating in these village rituals, and how what initially appears to be a fairy-tale event later turns into pagan rites, representing death and rebirth. At a festival resembling a ritual held in an isolated village in Sweden, the cyclical nature of the environment and all the dynamics of life are explored through flowers. The entire village gathers at a meeting place known as the Maypole, and people dance with flowers on their heads. At this point, the flower is a sign of belonging to this village and its rituals. The costume of the May Queen, covered in flowers, can be interpreted as a desire for self-sacrifice and becoming part of nature. The villagers dancing with flowers can be thought of as a way of conveying the vitality of nature through people. The flowers used by those dancing with flowers to influence outsiders (those from outside the village) (offering tea made from certain flowers and plants, which has a narcotic effect) later become part of

death rituals. Focusing on a scene featuring Christian, one of the film's main characters, the exhibition reflects the moment when he is decorated with flowers and sacrificed by being burned. A body surrounded by flowers and thrown into the fire is seen as an offering in this ritual. (F 6).

Figures 6. Ari Aster, Midsommer, 2019.

Another work that can be associated with the concept of death is the poster for the film Beauty and the Beast. In this work, written by French novelist Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve and later adapted for cinema, the red rose can be seen as representing the pendulum of time and death. To briefly summarise the plot of the film and story, a sorceress gives a rose to a prince, who rudely refuses to accept it. The sorceress then curses the prince, transforming him into a beast. The spell will be broken if the beast finds someone who will love him for who he is before the last petal of the rose falls; otherwise, when the last petal falls, the beast will lose his life. In this story, the rose represents the hopes of a character who loves himself deeply and is arrogant. Each petal that falls from the stem of this rose, preserved in a glass case, signifies the time of death. From an iconographic perspective in Western art history, the red rose is equated with the blood of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice of his own body. In the work The Birth of Venus by Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli, Aphrodite appears among roses falling from the sky. When viewed from a different context, however, the rose motifs in the hair of the female figures in D. Gabriel Rosseetti's The Blessed Damozel are associated with both love and loss; the loss felt after the death of a loved one. Another film poster in the exhibition has the same undertones. The roses in the film The Hours, which progresses through the lives of three different women, represent the dialectic of life and death, which is also the main theme of the film. One of the film's main characters, Clarissa Vaughan, played by Meryl Streep, is a character who deals with flowers in her daily life and eventually questions her life, but does not reflect these areas of questioning to the outside world. Her life, which is gradually slipping away, her inner silences, and her efforts to be compatible with the outside world are addressed through flowers, especially roses. The identity searches and life questions of these three women are conveyed through the flow of time, particularly through flowers, especially roses. Just like a vanitas painting, the all-encompassing nature of death, which encompasses all bodies and living things, becomes visible in this film. Another work in the exhibition that exemplifies this is Aberaldo Morell's photographic work Flowers for Lisa. This photograph, depicting a vase about to fall off a table and the flowers inside it falling to the ground, is positioned as a negation of classical still life paintings. The flowers fall to the ground in all their vitality. This movement can also be read as a metaphor. The fragile aspect of life, which can change in an instant, seems to be addressed through the flowers. The moment of the flowers' fall, which have been an indispensable part of magnificent tables in art history, suggests a re-reading of the entire history of art. (F 7).

Figure 7. Aberaldo Morell, Flowers for Lisa, 2018, mixed media.

Conclusion

Flowers, belonging to the highest group in the plant world, are among the most common images in art history, starting with myths, due to their biological characteristics and aesthetic appeal. In myths, flowers were first identified with gods and goddesses as visual narrators of fertility, rebirth, and the continuity of life. In Roman mythology, Flora was the goddess of flowers, signifying the arrival of spring, while Adonis, a demigod and symbol of botanical fertility, was identified with the anemone flower in most narratives. The anemone flower appears in Ancient Greek myths as a representation of death and rebirth. Similarly, in Ancient Egyptian myths, the lotus plant was considered sacred and was used on tombstones as it symbolised life after death. Flowers, which appear as metaphors in myths, have found meaning in an iconographic language in Western art history and have been approached with different theological characteristics. For example, the lily defines purity and divine light, while the rose is associated with sacred blood, the garden of paradise, or the concept of rebirth after death. In early Renaissance paintings, flowers are thought to have an allegorical narrative language. During this period, flowers were not only symbols but also met with a thoughtful approach and an effort to analyse nature as a value in itself. Flowers, which were approached through observation, anatomy and representation, were represented in the Baroque period in the vanitas painting tradition through ideas such as death, the transience of life and the disappearance of beauty. The aspects of flowers that are encoded through life and death, nature and spirit, matter and meaning continue to exist in contemporary art across different disciplines. At the Saatchi Gallery in London, the exhibition Flowers: Flora in Contemporary Art & Culture features works in which flowers evoke not only beauty but also concepts of life, death and time. For example, Law's spatial installation covered with dried flowers addresses beauty that is decaying. Unlike a classical painting, these flowers themselves cover the space and gradually allow the viewer to experience the moment of death. Again, this exhibition uses an ecological language to address the disappearance of flowers and nature, climate change, and the decline in biological diversity due to human actions on the environment. In this exhibition, flowers are evaluated on a ground that addresses social, ideological, cultural, political, environmental, and other issues, in addition to their theological meanings associated with God in the Garden of Eden. When viewed in general terms, the exhibition, which addresses the concepts of beauty/transience and vitality/decay in a multi-layered structure between flowers and death, creates a platform for re-examining humanity's relationship with nature, particularly by bringing environmental and social responsibilities to the forefront today.

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