A walk among flowers

Coro Millares AND **Teresa de la Vega**

Since antiquity, painting has made use of flowers in order to convey a wide range of meanings through their scent, vivid colours, endless variety of shapes and forms, cultivation methods and therapeutic properties. The present tour of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection offers a survey of Western art from the end of the Middle Ages to the present with the aim of analysing the numerous functions of floral symbols as indicators of heightened spirituality or extravagant display, conjugal fidelity or dynastic allegiance, and saintly innocence or exotic sensuality.

ROOM 3

ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN
Tournai, ca. 1399–Brussels, 1464

The Virgin and Child enthroned, ca. 1433

Oil on panel. 15.8 x 11.4 cm
INV. 435 (1930.125)

IN CONTRAST TO THE MARKED EMPHASIS on flowers in Greco-Roman culture, the Christian world was initially reluctant to make use of images from nature as a means to express spiritual beauty. Nonetheless, after the long, dark winter of the early Middle Ages, characterised by a scarcity of botanical representations, in the 13th century a new spring dawned when artists acknowledged the efficacy of floral images for transmitting the mysteries of the faith to the devout (many of whom were illiterate). Flowers once again came to occupy an important position in religious imagery as symbols of a transcendental truth.

This gallery includes various works by Early Netherlandish painters, which reveal the remarkable flowering of the cult of the Virgin, characterised as the *Bride in the Song of Solomon*, the Queen of Heaven, and man's intercessor in the salvation of humanity. During what has been termed "the waning of the Middle Ages", the hieratic depiction of the Virgin inherited from the Byzantine tradition gave way to more tender depictions that emphasise the relationship between mother and son.

Each image gave visual form to a spiritual truth and involved a universal code of meanings, the basic elements of which were common to both popular culture and also understood by erudite viewers who extracted more complex readings from these symbols.

In this panel by Van der Weyden we see the Virgin as the personification of the Church, located within an architectural structure that refers to her role as intercessor. The Prophets on either side of the niche support the scenes in the upper level: the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Adoration of the Magi, Resurrection and Pentecost, with the Coronation in the centre. An important detail is the presence of four painted, illusionistic holes for the supports for scaffolding, which may symbolically refer to the four Evangelists who were the mediators between the Old and New Testaments.

Despite the small size of this work the flowers depicted on the far right and left are perfectly recognisable, indicating that Van der Weyden aimed to associate specific species with Christian iconography. The flowers here can be identified as

columbines, hibiscus, mallows, peonies and irises. The decorative elements on the architectural surround also include plant motifs such as acanthus leaves, rosettes and the clover leaf, which refers to the Trinity.

Other works on display in this gallery make use of complex floral symbolism. They include *The Virgin of the Dry Tree* by Petrus Christus, in which the Virgin is the "rose among thorns", surrounded by a wreath alluding to the rosary; *The Virgin and Child with two Angels* by the Master of the Saint Ursula Legend, in which the pink symbolises the nails in Christ's cross and hence the Passion (as we see again in the tapestry on display in the next gallery, which depicts *The Lamentation over the dead Christ*); *The Virgin and Child between Angels*, by the Master of the André Madonna; and *The Virgin and Child* by a follower of Dirck Bouts, in which the Virgin is depicted in the *hortus conclusus* in reference to a passage from the *Song of Solomon*: "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed."

ROOM 5

HANS MEMLING
Seligenstadt, ca. 1435–Bruges, 1494

Vase of Flowers (reverse),
ca. 1485

Oil on panel. 29.2 x 22.5 cm
INV. 284B (1938.1B)

THE BACK OF MEMLING'S PANEL, WHICH may have been part of a diptych or triptych, has one of the first still lifes in the history of Western painting. While undoubtedly involving religious and moral connotations, it marks the transition towards an aesthetic vision of nature that emerged in the Renaissance.

On the other hand, the vase is decorated with the anagram of Christ, conveying the idea that a pure and fragrant soul can be housed in a perishable body, just as this humble earthenware vase contains a beautiful cluster of the symbolic flowers most commonly depicted in the Christian tradition: the white lily, iris and columbine. In addition, they are depicted in groups of three, referring to the Trinity. The purity and fragrance of the white lily inevitably refers to the Virgin Mary as a symbol of purity, innocence and chastity. The iris had a double meaning; on the one hand it is a symbol of Christ and of redemption while it is also alludes to the Virgin. The columbine represents the Holy Spirit as its flowers are shaped like doves.

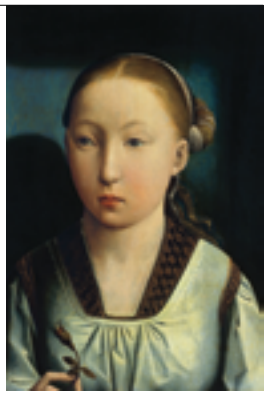
These flowers are also to be seen in *The Annunciation* by Jan de Beer in Room 10. Please also go to Room 11 where you will see *The Immaculate Conception* by El Greco and Jorge Manuel Theotokopoulos, which contains a wide range of Marian symbols.

ROOM 5

JUAN DE FLANDES
(?), ca. 1465–Palencia, 1519

Portrait of an Infanta. Catherine of Aragon (?), ca. 1496

Oil on panel. 31.5 x 21.7 cm
INV. 141 (1930.36)



DURING THE RENAISSANCE ARTISTS MADE use of various objects in order to make their portraits more eloquent. These accessories include jewels as symbols of social status and plants as the visual expression of specific virtues.

The rose held by this young woman may be a key element that will help to identify her. There is some evidence to indicate that she is Catherine of Aragon, including her obvious resemblance to a portrait of her sister Juana la Loca, also by Juan de Flandes (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). If this is the case, it has been suggested that the rose is the emblem of the Tudor dynasty, given that Catherine of Aragon married Arthur, Prince of Wales, before subsequently marrying his brother Henry VIII, whose portrait by Hans Holbein the Younger is also on display in this room.

Another interpretation argues that as the flower is a bud rather than an open bloom, it thus refers to the sitter's virginal status, which would correspond well to her evident youth in this image. Furthermore, at this date Catherine had not yet married into the English royal family and was being courted by various European houses. This painting may therefore have been used during matrimonial negotiations as part of the strategy of alliances pursued by the Spanish Catholic Kings.

A third option associates the flower with a nuptial portrait, which would strengthen the hypothesis that the sitter depicted here is the Infanta María, who became Queen of Portugal in 1500 on her marriage to Manuel I.

Another nuptial portrait on display in this gallery is Joos van Cleeve's *Self-portrait* in which he holds a pink, which is a symbol of conjugal love and fidelity due to its delicate scent and the fact that the flowers are long lasting. Normally, however, it was the wife who held this symbol of devotion while the husband would be accompanied by items referring to his power or social status. This is the case in the double portrait by Barthel Bruyn in Room 8. Floral symbols alluding to fidelity in works of this type include the thistle (known in colloquial German as "men's fidelity") and climbing plants such as ivy, vine and honeysuckle.

If you proceed to Room 9 you will see Hans Maler's *Portrait of Anne of Hungary and Bohemia*. It does not contain any flowers but modern restoration techniques have revealed one beneath the pictorial surface, a fact also suggested by the position of the hand. For some reason the sitter decided to have it removed.

ROOM 6

PARIS BORDONE
Treviso, 1500–Venice, 1571

Portrait of a young Woman, ca. 1543-50

Oil on canvas. 103 x 83 cm
INV. 55 (1936.5)

THE ROSE HAS BEEN A SYMBOL OF FEMALE beauty and of amorous matters since antiquity. The figure depicted here by Paris Bordone, who trained in Titian's studio, is presented as a woman-flower, wearing a dress that looks like a corolla. The vessel sculpted with a design of satyrs on the right contains open flowers (in contrast to the chaste rose bud held by the Infanta by Juan de Flandes in Room 5), while in the upper left corner is a monkey, considered an emblem of gluttony since the Middle Ages.

This painting could perhaps be interpreted in terms of the Senses, which were associated with male and female qualities in the pre-modern age. On a basic level, the intellect was associated with men, while women were associated with the body and the sensory world. Men were thus identified with the more rational senses of sight and hearing and women with the more basic, corporeal ones of touch, smell and taste.

This gallery also displays *The Rape of Europa* by Simon Vouet, in which Zeus in the form of a white bull wearing a garland of flowers flees with the beautiful Europa. Many of the Greek myths that recount the seduction of young girls by gods start with the act of picking flowers, as in the stories of Persephone and Hades, Thalia and Zeus, and Creusa and Apollo.

ROOM 7

VITTORE CARPACCIO
Venice (?), 1460/66–1525/26

Young Knight in a Landscape, 1510

Oil on canvas. 218.5 x 151.5 cm
INV. 82 (1935.3)

THERE HAS BEEN MUCH DEBATE ON THIS painting by Carpaccio, whose name appears on the *cartellino* hanging from a branch on the right, as does the date of the work's execution. It was created in the early sixteenth century and if it is in fact a portrait, it is the first known full-length example in Western painting. There has also been considerable discussion as to the sitter's identity, but it seems most likely that this young knight is Francesco Maria della Rovere, Duke of Urbino and Captain General of Venice.

Aside from the sitter's identity the canvas contains a message relating to the moral allegory of the *miles christianus* or Christian Knight, which is based on a dualistic conception that juxtaposes the notions of good and evil in a perpetual combat reflected here in the heron and falcon fighting in the sky.

The careful choice of the various plants in the painting is fundamental to its overall iconographic interpretation. Precisely depicted, they refer to the virtues of the Christian Knight: the white lily (purity and innocence); the iris (associated with the sword due to the shape of its leaves, while its blue colour symbolises nobility or royalty); the columbine (the Holy Spirit); the violet in the lower right corner (humility and modesty); the blue periwinkle in the opposite corner (fidelity and friendship); the camomile by the spring (rejuvenation or fortitude through virtue); while the plant with red berries next to the knight is an Italian arum (symbolising self sacrifice). The bare tree in the middle ground may be an oak in reference to spiritual renewal and strength or an allusion to the proposed sitter's name, Rovere (meaning oak in Italian).

More difficult to interpret is the lopped-off tree on the right, from which hangs the *cartellino* with the artist's signature. Growing from the ground next to it are some fruit bearing branches that have been interpreted as blackberries and thus as a negative symbol due to their thorns. However, the fruit on blackberry bushes clusters together and the leaves are different to those seen here. This may not be a shrub but a new shoot from the cut down tree that grows from the still living root and springs up vigorously in order to replace it. In that case the tree could be a mulberry to judge from its appearance. If the knight depicted is the young Duke of Urbino, the cut down tree would refer to the death without heir of the last Montefeltro and the passing of the ducal title to the della Roveres. Thus the new shoot of the tree would refer to the continuity of the title in the figure of the young Duke seen here. But why a mulberry and not an oak tree? Perhaps to emphasise the fruit (symbolising descendents) or in reference to the flourishing silk industry that was emerging in various parts of Italy at this date.

ROOM 15

ZURBARÁN
Fuente de Cantos, 1598–Madrid, 1664

Saint Casilda, ca. 1630-35

Oil on canvas. 171 x 107 cm
INV. 448 (1979.26)

FRANCISCO DE ZURBARÁN'S OEUVRE includes numerous paintings of female martyr saints, some of whom carry flowers. Examples of this type are his depictions of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, Saint Dorothy and Saint Casilda, the subject of this work. Casilda was a young Muslim girl who converted to Christianity and died for her faith in the 11th century. This image also refers to the concept of the odour of sanctity, which was part of a broader interpretation of smells that conceived of heaven and hell or salvation and perdition in terms of pleasant and unpleasant odours. These are particularly suitable metaphors as they are of an abstract nature like religious experience. This belief was based on the notion that Christians who lived in a state of grace would be impregnated with the divine odour of the Holy Spirit. As a result, a meritorious soul would take shape through different emanations, the pictorial equivalent of which is the subtle halo that crowns Casilda as a sign that she has been chosen.

A comparable interpretation can be made of Murillo's painting of *The Virgin and Child with Saint Rosa of Viterbo*, on display in the next room.

ROOM 17

GIAMBATTISTA TIEPOLO
Venice, 1696–Madrid, 1770

The Death of Hyacinthus,
ca. 1752-53

Oil on canvas. 282 x 232 cm
INV. 394 (1934.29)

ACCORDING TO THE CLASSICAL STORY, Hyacinthus was a beautiful youth whom the god Apollo loved. While he was playing with the discus the wind god Zephyrus was seized with jealousy and diverted the course of the discus so that it killed Hyacinthus. The flower that sprung from his blood that had spilled onto the ground has on occasions been identified as a delphinium (*delphinium ajacis*; *hyakinthos* in Greek) or as an iris rather than as the plant known today as a hyacinth (*hyacinthus orientalis*). The latter is depicted in the lower right corner in its two varieties, a single flower and a double one that was particularly fashionable when this work was painted.

A metaphor of death and the renewal of nature, the story of Hyacinthus contains a promise of resurrection like the cycle of nature, although his story can also be interpreted as an image of pederasty in the Greek world as this institutionalised practice decreed that the relationship between the older lover and his beloved ended when the latter reached maturity.

Tiepolo's style falls within the last glorious phase of the heroic Baroque. Here he depicts the episode of Hyacinthus in a setting that could be described as operatic. Bathed in a soft, diffused light, the figures make declamatory gestures under the mocking gaze of a sculpture of a satyr. In addition, the artist took various liberties with the text, such as replacing the discus with the balls and racket of the game of *pallacorda* (the forerunner of tennis), and including a hyacinth macaw, an exotic bird that takes its name from the colour of its plumage.

ROOM 25

GERRIT ADRIAENSZ. BERCKHEYDE
Haarlem, 1638–1698

The Nieuwezijds Voorburgswal with the Flower Market in Amsterdam, 1686

Óleo sobre lienzo. 53.7 x 63.9 cm
INV. 42 (1959.3)

BERCKHEYDE SPECIALISED IN URBAN views and here depicts the canal in the centre of Amsterdam next to which the flower market was held. In the 17th-century the city's appearance was transformed through Holland's unprecedented overseas expansion. Dutch ships arrived in Amsterdam from distant countries, loaded with fabulous cargoes of natural specimens. Lilies, hyacinths, crown imperials, fritillaries, red lilies, double narcissi and tulips began to arrive from the Ottoman Empire. They immediately became status symbols and manifestations of Dutch overseas and maritime dominance. In addition, their presence reflects a new interest in plants as striking elements in gardens where their new colours, shapes and scents astonished visitors.

The astronomical prices that these exotic plants achieved reflected an extravagant passion for flowers of ever more outlandish shapes and forms. This botanical fever in a country with a population traditionally considered the embodiment of moderation and common sense has been explained in terms of the role played by the concept of luxury in a newly rich society that lacked the traditions of sumptuary expenditure associated with the great monarchies or with ecclesiastical patronage.

ROOM 26

AMBROSIUS BOSSCHAERT I
Antwerp, 1573–The Hague, 1621

Chinese Vase with Flowers, Shells and Insects, ca. 1609

Oil on copper. 68.6 x 50.8 cm
INV. 56 (1958.4)

THIS GALLERY DISPLAYS A BEAUTIFUL group of still-life paintings produced during the golden age of that genre in Holland. Liberated from their subsidiary role within religious compositions and mythological or allegorical scenes, depictions of flowers no longer involved a symbolic content and instead became the principal subject of the work.

In the 16th century botany started to become a modern science with a greater emphasis given to the morphological and classificatory aspects of plants rather than their pharmaceutical properties. This shift of focus was favoured by the invention of the microscope in the late 16th or early 17th century, which opened up the possibility of exploring a new and previously unknown universe.

Flower painting now reflected an interest in the collecting of exotic objects that was enthusiastically embraced by the mercantile and aristocratic classes. The choice of flowers depicted in these still lifes was not solely determined by their aesthetic merits as prominence tended to be given to the most valuable and exotic species at the time the work was painted, mixed in with flowers that had traditionally been appreciated in gardens. This is the case with crown imperials, which appear in this painting by Bosschaert but which would fall out of favour some years later due to their unpleasant smell.

Tulips were equally appreciated and were also imported from Turkey. This flower was responsible for a curious social phenomenon known as "Tulipmania" in which the variants with ragged edges and variegated colours, such as the *Semper Augustus*, were the most appreciated. Those who paid up to 5,000 florins (the price of a sizeable house) for a single bulb were unaware that the exotic patterns and colours of the flowers were actually caused by a virus, a fact that was only discovered much later with the invention of the electronic microscope.

All these floral still lifes are characterised by a negation of the passing of time, given that they depict flowers that never bloom together in their natural state. As a result, art surpasses nature in these works.

Given that paintings of this type seem to lack an overt narrative, some scholars have chosen to read a hidden meaning into them close to that of the *vanitas*, in which the ephemeral nature of the flowers would encourage a reflection on the fragility of human life. Another more direct interpretation, however, sees their beauty as a celebration of nature's bounty and of the immortality of art in contrast to the perishable nature of human beings.

Worth noting are the tiny creatures that artists frequently included in these compositions, including dragonflies, flies and snails. Also striking are the beautiful Chinese vases and the shells, which allude to Holland's mercantile might. A universe of sensations encourages the visitor to pause in this gallery and admire the works of artists such as Balthasar van der Ast, Jan Davidsz. de Heem and Jacques Linard.

ROOM 31

HENRI FANTIN-LATOUR
Grenoble, 1836–Orne, 1904

Vase of Chrysanthemums, undated

Oil on canvas. 42.5 x 39.5 cm
INV. 541 (1971.10)

HENRI FANTIN-LATOUR FOCUSED intensively on the genres of portraiture and flower painting. The latter were painted for British clients while his portraits were extremely successful in France. So markedly separate were these two facets of his artistic activities that jokes were made about it and the artist was referred to as "Monsieur Fantin" and "Mister Latour".

Fantin-Latour spent an increasing amount of time in the countryside, far from the bustle of Paris, and flowers eventually became the principal subject of his works. Although a contemporary of the Impressionists, he did not depict lush gardens or rural scenes but chose to focus on cut flowers. He carefully arranged the stalks and branches that he would then paint in the dim light of his studio, almost always against plain backgrounds in the manner of the great 17th century flower paintings. The Impressionist works on display in Rooms 32 and 33 thus offer an interesting comparison and contrast to Fantin-Latour's compositions.

In one respect Fantin-Latour's paintings differ from the Dutch depictions of vases filled with flowers, which present a wide range of varieties that are not to be found blooming together in their natural state. In contrast, Fantin-Latour selected a limited range of flowers given that his principal interest was the chromatic aspect of the painting. In the present canvas he chose a large bunch of yellow, white, lilac, pink and red chrysanthemums; a harmonious combination inspired by his love of music.

It should also be remembered that the 19th century saw the organisation of the first floral exhibitions and that interest in botany reached a new height, particularly with regard to oriental species thanks to the prevailing fashion known as *japonisme*. Chrysanthemums are Far Eastern flowers that symbolise beauty and vitality in their native region. In the West, however, they have become a symbol of mourning due to the fact that the flowers appear in the autumn.

ROOM 34

HENRI MATISSE
Le Cateau-Cambrésis, 1869–Nice, 1954

Yellow Flowers, 1902

Oil on canvas. 46 x 54.5 cm
INV. 664 (1968.9)

LIBERATED BY THE INVENTION OF photography from the obligation to represent the visible world in an objective manner, artists enthusiastically embarked on the great adventure of modern art, exploring different directions within the depiction of the perceptible.

In this sense, Impressionism can be seen to have formulated a new approach to the representation of flowers as it replaced the traditional still life with a radically different vision. Such works were now emptied of any narrative or anecdotal content and no longer involved concealed messages relating to religion or to the transitory nature of beauty. Flowers were now used as a surface on which to project the artist's emotions and impressions or as the ideal vehicle for daring chromatic experiments. In contrast to the minutely detailed depiction of cut flowers in the 17th century, flowers now metamorphosed into patches of pigment and light that are at times so imprecise as to make identification of the particular species impossible.

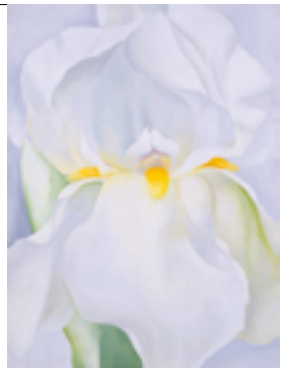
This is the case with the present painting by Matisse, which was painted prior to the emergence of the Fauve movement. Here the reflection in the mirror of a simple bunch of flowers, possibly ranunculi, conveys a sensation of vibrant colour. The effect is comparable to the one achieved by Emile Nolde in *Glowing Sunflowers*, also on display in this room.

ROOM 34

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE
Sun Prairie, 1887–Santa Fe, 1986

White Iris No. 7, 1957

Oil on canvas. 102 x 76.2 cm
INV. 697 (1979.36)



ON HER DEATH GEORGIA O'KEEFFE LEFT more than two hundred depictions of flowers, many of them painted in monochrome. The shapes of her giant, swollen flowers have been compared to those of a varied landscape or have been seen in terms of barely concealed self-portraits. Always ambivalent, these images oscillate between realism and abstraction, between immaculate purity and a powerful sexual charge, as if the petals of this iris were starched petticoats that allow access to the female genitalia or as if our gaze, swept along by the imagination, could penetrate their nooks and crannies in the manner of an insect.

O'Keeffe herself, however, rejected such interpretations, as she stated, for example, in a catalogue text of 1939: "Well, I have managed to get you to see what I have seen and when you take the time to really see my flower you will attribute to it all your own associations about flowers, and you will write about my flower as if I were thinking and seeing what you think and see in that flower, but which I don't see."

ROOM 48

RICHARD ESTES
Kewanee, 1932

People's Flowers, 1971

Oil on canvas. 153 x 101.2 cm
INV. 1975.24

LIKE GEORGIA O'KEEFFE, WHO DERIVED numerous ideas from photography and who in turn influenced the sensual floral photographs taken by artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Richard Estes made use of the photographic aesthetic in his compositions, as we see here in this depiction of a florist's shop. The stickers on the door are particularly telling: human relationships often start with flowers and end with them. And flowers, as the images on credit cards and the name of this shop convey, are serially produced goods that have become available on a mass scale.

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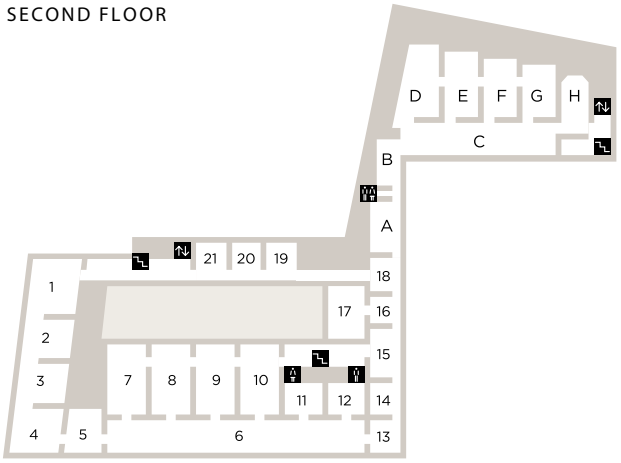
SECOND FLOOR



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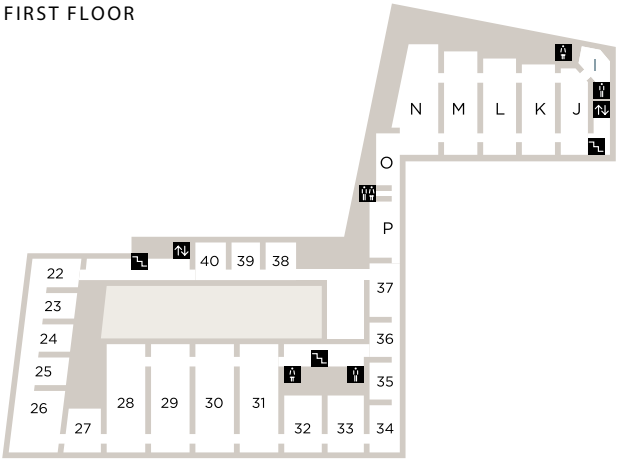

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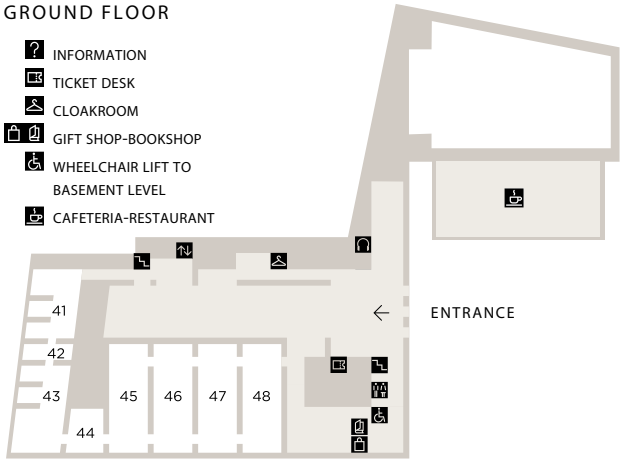

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