

JAN FYT
*Vase of Flowers and two Bunches
of Asparagus*, ca. 1650 (detail)
Oil on canvas,
63.7 x 75.4 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, inv. no. 150 (1930.25)

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*Hortus conclusus soror mea, sponsa
hortus conclusus, fons signatus*

You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;
You are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.

The Song of Songs 4, 12



ANONYMOUS GERMAN ARTIST
The Virgin and Child in the Hortus Conclusus, ca. 1410
Oil on panel, 28.6 x 18.5 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, inv. no. 272 (1929.18.1)

THE THREAD THAT LINKS THE 12 PAINTINGS FROM THE THYSSEN Collection selected for this exhibition is the expression “hortus conclusus”, which appears in the Latin version of The Song of Songs. The word “hortus” translates into English as “garden”, while the adjective “conclusus” (“locked up” or “enclosed”) is actually a redundancy. By its very nature, a garden is enclosed, separate from the land around it and cultivated differently.

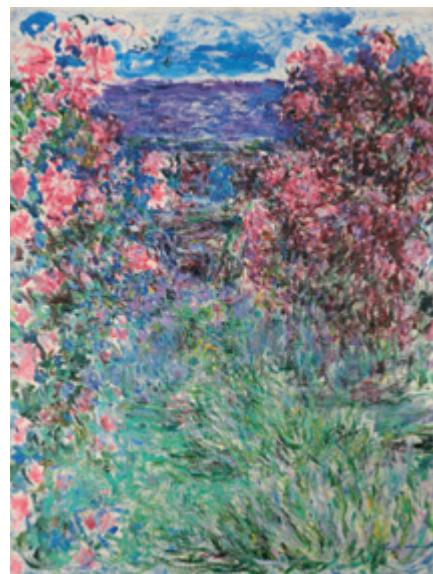
The *hortus* in The Song of Songs evokes the original garden, planted by God himself and in which he put the man he had just created: *Plantaverat autem Dominus Deus paradisum voluptatis a principio in quo posuit hominem quem formaverat.* (“Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden, and there he put the man he had formed.”) (Genesis 2, 8). Curiously, instead of translating the original Hebrew *gan be-eden*, Saint Jerome, to whom we owe this Latin version of the Bible, chose to use the neologism *paradisum*. This was a Latin transcription of the Greek word *paradeisos*, which in turn was a transcription of the old Persian word *pairi-daeza*, which meant none other than “enclosed space”, *hortus conclusus*. Adam and Eve knew that Paradise was an enclosed garden, to their misfortune, because when they were expelled they couldn’t get back in.

The desire to return to that *paradisum voluptatis*, or garden of Eden, is precisely what imbued the *hortus conclusus* with such a strong sense of poetry that the notion has endured through the ages. In a traditional Hebrew interpretation, the bridegroom in The Song of Songs is Yahweh and the bride is the chosen people, Israel. The oldest Christian interpretation is very similar, the only difference being that instead of the people of Israel the bride represents the congregation of the followers of Christ—in other words, the Church. In a later variation the bridegroom is Christ, who came into the world to repair the great trauma caused by the expulsion from Paradise, and the bride is his mother, the Virgin Mary, the ultimate enclosed garden.

This was the variation that prevailed in the pictorial tradition of medieval Europe. In the diptych with symbols of Mary's virginity and the Redemption, the left panel depicts the Virgin seated with the Child in her arms at the centre of an enclosed garden. Next to her, we see the sealed fountain of The Song of Songs, and around it other images that symbolise her virginity and her role as the Redeemer's mother. The full meaning of this small but complex diptych, intended for personal meditation, is rendered by the right panel, which represents the Crucifixion. The branches sprouting from the cross evoke the Tree of Life, which God had planted in the centre of Paradise.

The *Portrait of a Young Man Praying*, painted by Hans Memling circa 1485, is a devotional painting like the previous one but more sophisticated, evidenced by both the quality of the technique and the subtlety of the iconography. It must have formed part of a diptych or triptych which the owner could display either open or closed because the panels are painted on both sides. Due to the loss of the other panels we cannot know what the full iconographic programme was, but there is no doubt that the jug of lilies, aquilegias and purple irises painted on the back of the portrait are a reference to the Virgin Mary. The glazed ceramic vase is inscribed with the monogram of Jesus. Lilies are the flowers that are always associated with the Virgin, while purple irises are one of the most common symbols used to represent her grief at the death of Jesus. Behind these basic meanings we perceive subtle allusions to the *hortus conclusus*. Hence, the jug is a metonymy for the garden. The lily, of course, is one of the most frequent metaphors for the bride in The Song of Songs, while in the Middle Ages purple irises were thought to come from Palestine, in particular the highland areas of Lebanon, the source of the waters that flow down to the sealed fountain referenced in the same poem.

The next picture is a pictorial representation of Paradise. It was painted by Jan Brueghel the Elder circa 1610-1612. What first catches our eye is the absence of enclosure. The second thing that strikes us is the fact that Adam and Eve have been relegated to the background of the painting, surrounded by lush vegetation that renders them less identifiable. And the third element of note is the abundance of animals. Brueghel's painting reflects the taste and interests of the European courts



PIERRE-AUGUSTE RENOIR
Woman with a Parasol in a Garden, 1875
Oil on canvas,
54.5 × 65 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, inv. no. 724 (1974.43)

CLAUDE MONET
The House among the Roses, 1925
Oil on canvas,
92.3 × 73.3 cm
Colección Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza on loan at the
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, inv. no. CTB.1998.52

of his day. Between the 16th and 17th centuries, the botanical gardens that had been cultivated since the Middle Ages for medicinal uses began to embrace a radically different purpose. Their mission now was to underscore the marvellous nature of divine creation described in the Book of Genesis, and they therefore included all kinds of species, both plant and animal, from Asia, Africa and America. However, this fascination with the exotic concealed a burning curiosity for the nature that was at the root of modern science, which was just taking its first teetering steps.

The next two paintings bear witness to this curiosity: *Chinese Vase with Flowers, Shells and Insects*, painted by the Dutch artist Ambrosius Bosschaert I in 1609, and *Vase of Flowers and Two Bunches of Asparagus*, painted by the Flemish artist Jan Fyt circa 1650. They represent a new genre, still life. Although full of allusions to traditional moral wisdom, this genre also obeys a feeling of admiration for the beauty of nature and a desire to understand it.

In the next three paintings we take a leap in time. What we see in the painting by Pierre-August Renoir is a clearly delimited urban garden, although the boundaries are not shown in the picture. Technically, it was a space in the open air, but at the same time it operated for the painter as an extension of his studio: an *hortus conclusus* where he recovered the happiness of the original garden by immersing himself in painting. In the second half of the 1880s, as their interest in modern life waned, the Impressionists focused increasingly on painting for painting's sake. As part of this process, they developed a passion for gardening. The garden, planted and designed to be painted, became a metaphor for painting. To cultivate it was to cultivate painting itself. It was from Gustave Caillebotte that the Impressionists—or some of them, at least—picked up the passion for gardening, but it was Monet who took that passion to its paradigmatic conclusion when he started buying land in Giverny to build—as an extension to his studio—a garden designed, planted and tended by himself. *The House among the Roses*, painted in 1925, is a late fruit of that dual passion. But Monet was not alone. Other painters followed him, including the American Frederick Carl Frieseke, whose canvas *Hollyhocks*, painted circa 1912-1913 in the garden

of the house where he lived in Giverny, near Monet, is also on display in this exhibition.

The paintings produced in the early decades of the 20th century reveal different extrapolations of the drift that Monet had followed during the turn of the century. Just after he married, the German painter Emil Nolde decided to move to the country with his wife, Ada, to concentrate on painting. *Summer Afternoon* represents a scene from his first summer at the little rural retreat he had rented on the Baltic island of Alsen. The year was 1903. Remembering it many years later, Nolde wrote that the flowers we see in the painting had been planted by Ada. *Glowing Sunflowers*, from 1936, is another painting in which Nolde paints flowers he had planted himself, offering us yet another example of the garden as a metaphor for painting.

Flower-Shell, a small picture painted by the German Surrealist Max Ernst in 1927, could be interpreted as a tribute to 17th-century Dutch paintings of flowers and shells. What we see is pure, concentrated painting. And to a certain extent, that is his intention. But at the same time, the technique used—*grattage*—and the exaltation of the random quality associated with that technique—subvert it, making it instead a harsh, sarcastic attack against the advocates of pure painting. The aim of *White Iris No. 7*, a splendid picture painted in 1957 by the American artist Georgia O'Keeffe, could not be more different. Feminist art critics have repeatedly interpreted it as an exaltation of the female genital organ, but the artist categorically rejected this reading: “Well—I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower—and I don’t.”

Painting gardens and flowers has often been treated as a simple, pleasurable exercise for both painter and viewer. But underlying that is the memory of the first garden, Paradise, a nostalgia and a passion which are sometimes directed towards painting itself—in the sense of a closed discipline, untainted by any kind of earthly interest—and at other times are directed towards the opposite, to the myth of man's redemption in a radically new epoch.

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza
Paseo del Prado 8. 28014 Madrid
Tel. (+34) 917 911 370
mtb@museothyssen.org
www.museothyssen.org

DATES

June 28 to October 2, 2016.

VENUE

Context Exhibition Galleries.
First floor.
Direct access from the Main Hall.

TRANSPORT

Metro Station: Banco de España.
Buses: 1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 14, 15, 20, 27, 34, 37,
45, 51, 52, 53, 74, 146 and 150.
Train stations Atocha, Sol and Recoletos.

VISITOR SERVICES

Tel.: 917 911 370
cavthyssen@museothyssen.org

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