

THEMATIC TOUR

NATURE / PLANTS



MUSÉE
DES BEAUX-ARTS
de LYON
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Discover the world of plants via this thematic tour, which takes in twelve works from the museum's collections. From Antiquity to the 20th century and over the course of civilizations, learn more about the artistic importance of plants and flowers, which have always been an inexhaustible source of inspiration for artists. Localize the works with the help of the floor plans, the accompanying texts will highlight the different aspects of the works.



1

STELA DEDICATED TO OSIRIS AND THE GODS OF ABYDOS BY THE STANDARD BEARER OF KING AAKHEPEROU-MEN-SOU-IAM

Egypt, reign of Amenhotep II (ca. 1450-1425 BC),
Polychromatic limestone

The lotus appears on this funeral stela in various stages of development, such as a stalk, a bud or a blossom. It is a symbol of life and rebirth in Ancient Egypt, and, according to certain traditions, at the origin of the creation of Earth. The deceased, seated with his wife, smells the suave perfume of the lotus, which brings the promise of renewed vitality in the afterlife. The flower also decorates the feminine wigs and the recipients placed under the table of offerings.

In Ancient Egypt, the lotuses are in fact white water lilies. The blue variety opens up at daybreak, and the white one blossoms at night. The real lotus flower was not introduced into Egypt until the arrival of the Persians in 525 BC.



2

HYDRIA DEPICTING THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

Greece, Athens, 2nd quarter of the 4th century BC,
Attic red-figure ware, colour highlights.

The principal motif developed on the rear of this Hydra is the palmette, which is inspired by the leaves of palm trees. This abundant decoration contrasts with the static nature of the three divinities who are depicted on the front of the vase. The seated figure in the center is Demeter, the goddess of harvest and fertility. Next to her are her daughter, Persephone, who is holding two burning torches, and Dionysus, the god of grape harvest and wine, seated on a rock. Their presence evokes the cycle of the seasons as well as farming, wine and wheat.

The medicinal properties of plants were known to the Ancient Greeks. For example, Demeter used the opium poppy to help her forget the absence of her daughter, who had been abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld.



3

CHRIST IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE

Upper Rhine, 1460, Tempera on panel

Jesus, sensing that his death is approaching, is in an olive tree garden with his apostles asleep to his left. This biblical scene precedes his arrest, organized by Judas who can be seen accompanied by soldiers. Respecting the medieval tradition, the plants in this work were chosen mainly for their symbolic significance. White bellflowers that represent The Passion can be seen to the side of the rock, as well as a blooming tree enclosed by a braided barrier called a 'plessis'. The tree evokes spring and the celebration of Easter. Plant motifs decorate the golden sky which symbolize the presence of the Divinity.

Before having gold leaf applied to its background, flower motifs and acanthus leaves were engraved into the thick primer. They evoke the sumptuous fabrics made of embroidered velvet that were worn by the clergy.



4

FRAGMENT OF A FREIZE

Iran, beginning of the 13th century, Ceramic with metal luster decoration on opacified glazing

The motifs inspired by the world of flora are used for the background of this fragment of architecture. The floral motifs in Islamic art generally do not represent any real plants. The arabesque composition is organized around the use of stalks coiled around each other, with leaves and flowers being attached to them in echo to the calligraphy. This endless movement, which spreads beyond the confines of the object and the visible world, evokes the infinite nature of divine creation.

In the arts of Islam, the abundance of nature symbolizes life and evokes the Garden of Paradise to which those of the Muslim faith aspire. Of Persian origin and via its use in Greek, the word 'paradise' means 'enclosed space' and is a reminder of the luxurious royal gardens that were to be found in Antiquity.



5

ÉMILE GALLÉ VASE

1898–1900, Glass with two coats and applications

A desire for botanical accuracy can be found in this Art Nouveau vase, including details of the catkins on hazel trees, anemones and vegetable stems. Thanks to his perfect mastery of the materials and his technical innovations, Émile Gallé was able to give free rein to his creativity. Each color subtly takes on aspects of the adjacent color to offer a poetic vision of nature. Gallé's passion for flora developed during his walks in the countryside of Lorraine. He contemplated and studied it with the rigor of a scientist. He selected vegetal elements from his garden and around his glass factory in order to feed his creative instinct.

Gallé had the motto 'My root is deep within the wood' engraved on the door of his factory. The words were surrounded by the branches and leaves of horse chestnut trees.



6

GÉRARD DAVID THE LINEAGE OF SAINT ANN

1490–1500, Oil on panel

Foliated scrolls and their elegant curls fill the upper section of this painting. Like tree branches, they appear to be rooted to the trunk, against which is seated Saint Ann, her daughter Mary and the infant Jesus. Busts representing the saint's descendants can be seen in the corolla of flowers at the extremity of the curls. The corolla motif gives way to a celestial cloud underneath the Virgin Mary and her child at the top of the work. Ann's central position represents the renewal of the devotion to her which took place at the start of the 1500s.

This genealogical tree imitates the model of the tree of Jesse, an iconographic theme appeared in the early 12th century onwards and featuring the ascension of Christ, whose most celebrated ancestor was King David.



7

JAN BRUEGHEL THE ELDER EARTH

1610, Oil on panel

A large variety of fruit, vegetables, ornamental and nutritive plants is represented at the forefront of this painting. Jan Brueghel responds to the developing need of his time to learn more about the universe. The goddess Demeter and other figures with connections to nature can be seen in the center of the composition. There are several visions of nature within this work – antique Paganism, a scientific approach and Christian faith. Jan Brueghel uses them to express his talent as a landscape and still life painter, two disciplines which became autonomous at the start of the 17th century.

The plants which abound in this painting are described with an extremely detailed brush. This delicacy of execution caused the artist the nickname “Velvet Brueghel”.



8

JAN FRANS VAN DAEL, VASE OF FLOWERS WITH A BROKEN TUBEROSE

1807, Oil on panel

Painting flowers was a specialist form of art at the beginning of the 19th century. Like his contemporaries, Jan Frans van Dael painted from life or used etchings to propose a large palette of flowers such as peonies, roses, primroses, Indian roses... The white tuberosa with a broken stalk in the foreground of this work responds to the flame yellow and violet tulip and the poppy at the top of the bouquet. The artist offers a perfectly mastered composition, which invites the viewer to meditate upon the beauty of nature and the fragility of living things.

The motif of a broken flower was reused by the painter Antoine Berjon, who became a professor of flower drawing at the Fine Arts School of Lyon in 1810. In *Fruits and flowers in a wicker basket*, which can be seen in this room, the tuberosa is replaced by red peony poppies.



9

LOUIS JANMOT
FLOWER OF THE FIELDS

1845, Oil on panel

In this painting, which was inspired by Italian Renaissance portraits, a young woman with a melancholic expression sits in a vast country setting in which the Alps can be seen in the mist towards the horizon. She is wearing a crown of meadow bindweed, symbols of attachment, and has just picked a bouquet of wild flowers made of daisies, cornflowers and buttercups. Their luminous colors stand out against the red cloth covering her legs, assorted to the poppies she is holding in her left hand. Behind her, a blossoming briar and other wild plants can be seen.

Wild flowers evoke the freshness of youth and, just as butterflies, its ephemeral nature.



10

PAUL GAUGUIN
NAVE NAVE MAHANA

1896, Oil on canvas

In this painting a group of Tahitian women and a child are near a stream, sheltered by trees with slender trunks. One of them is wearing a crown of flowers, another has a flower behind her ear. The floral motif is repeated on a pareo. Time seems to have stopped in this idyllic place. The title of this work – *Nave nave Mahana* – is the translation of ‘delicious days’ in Maori. It evokes the concept of paradise that Paul Gauguin searched for in Tahiti. The work is ambiguous as the subjects are immobile, silent, and as their grave expressions evoke solitude and melancholy.

Noa Noa, a book in which Gauguin recounts his life in Tahiti, was published in 1901. An adjective, ‘*Noa Noa*’ means ‘fragrant’ in Tahitian Maori.



11

PIERRE BONNARD
FLOWERS ON A RED CARPET

1928, Oil on canvas

A luminous bouquet sprawls out of a blue vase. Pierre Bonnard dispenses with detail and concentrates his efforts on the contrast between the red tablecloth and the blue-grey wall. He makes the colors vibrate by superposing and juxtaposing layers of paint that develop subtle hues and tones.

He presents his enthralled vision of nature in his paintings. The artist would go walking each morning in the hills behind his home at Le Cannet, and upon returning to his studio he would consign his impressions onto canvases that he painted with short, quick and subsequently modified brushstrokes.

Charles Terrasse, Bonnard's nephew, wrote that "(the painter) loved the life of the fields and he loved to build fires, raking the garden in front of his house and digging to clear the ground around his cherry trees [...]"



12

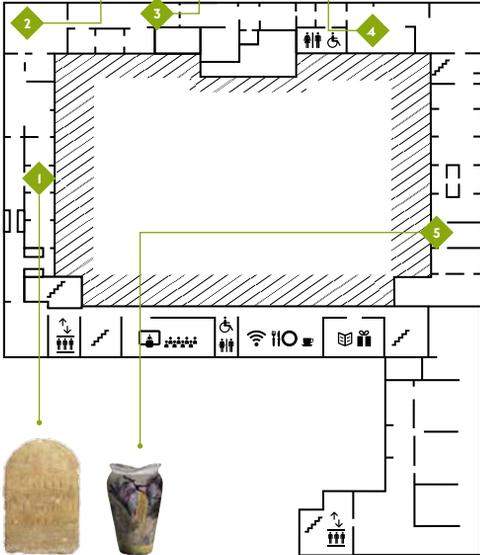
JEAN LE MOAL, FLORA

1960, Oil on canvas

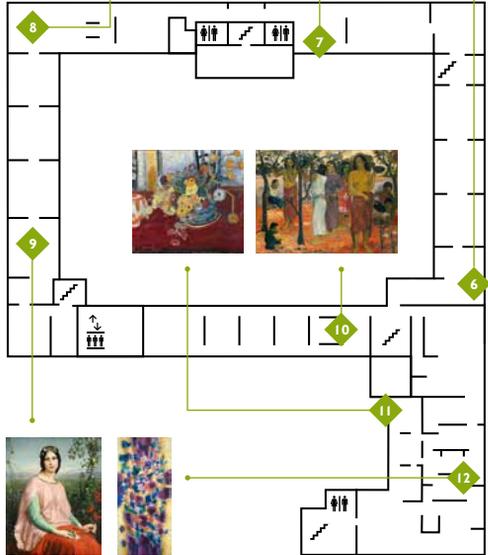
Vibrant colors enliven the surface of this canvas. This work, in which the artist's gestures are still visible, marks a departure from figurative representation. The energy and movement are created uniquely by the powerful colors and the effects of light. Jean Le Moal seeks here to express the emotions in front of the changing of the seasons regenerating nature. The word 'flora' designates the entirety of the plant life in a given place. In calling this work *Flora*, Le Moal opened up the space within it. He also expressed his sensorial and affective link with nature in other forms of artistic expression, such as stained glass.

After Jean Le Moal had rediscovered the landscapes of the Ardèche region where he spent his childhood, nature – in every sense – became one of the artist's favourite topics.

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Opening hours:
Daily except Tuesdays and holidays,
from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.,
Fridays from 10:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.

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