



A History
of Plants in
Art



opposite

Detail of Lucian Freud, *Scotch Thistle*,
1944

below

Joachim von Sandrart
Zeuxis and Parrhasius, 1688
Engraving, 11 5/8 x 8 in. (29.7 x 20 cm)
The Wellcome Collection, London

Realism and Truth in Painting

DECEIVING THE EYE HAS BEEN A MUCH-CELEBRATED SKILL THROUGH-
out the history of Western painting. The philosophers of classical Greece
intensely debated the value of mimesis (imitation). Despite much
disagreement, general opinion settled on one important factor: copying
reality with impeccable accuracy wasn't just evidence of one's technical
virtuosity. Such craft also celebrated nature's innate beauty while extracting
order out of chaos, isolating what was good and ultimately true in life as a
positive reflection of humanity. When we hold a mirror to nature,
by implication, we see ourselves.

Realism in art has for centuries provided a lens through which we
have repeatedly inspected our human condition in the hopes of grasping its
essence; the more detailed the view, the closer we get to the truth. While
promising clarity, realism has trained our eye to relish the intricate, lavish
detail. But despite its apparent objective sincerity, realism has only woven a
web of deceit. In Plato's view, realism is "a sort of man-made dream pro-
duced for those who are awake."¹ It is the essence of classical representation
that to even attempt to begin telling some truth, painting must lie.

The artistic rivalry between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, as recounted by
Pliny the Elder in *Natural History*, confirms as much:

... Zeuxis, who represented some grapes, painted so naturally that
the birds flew towards the spot where the picture was exhibited.
Parrhasius, on the other hand, exhibited a curtain, drawn with
such singular truthfulness, that Zeuxis, elated with the judgment
which had been passed upon his work by the birds, haughtily





As in the Middle East and Europe, owning and painting plants and animals functioned as an extension of sovereign power. Mughal Emperor Jahangir developed a keen interest in the natural world and was the first Indian ruler to own an impressive menagerie. Over the first two decades of the seventeenth century, he spent a substantial amount of time and resources expanding his garden into a magnificent royal statement where flower varieties were painted by local artists. So fond was he of his collection that he asked his artists to paint it in a more realistic way, as each carefully detailed representation also reflected the extent of his wealth and power.³³ It was this relationship between sovereignty and nature that eventually came to fuel the colonialist thirst for collecting, archiving, and documenting. Knowledge is power, and, at this time, to know and subjugate nature stood for confidence and competence, an affirmation that the rulers' right to sovereignty was ultimately naturally inherited.³⁴

As Europe's colonialist ambitions grew along with advancements in naval technology in the eighteenth century, trade in spices, tea, coffee, chocolate, sugar, and tobacco dramatically increased, as did the demand for live exotic plants. European aristocrats relished the opportunity to impress their friends and guests with flourishing greenhouses—the ultimate status

opposite, left

Otto Eerelman

In the Greenhouse, undated

Oil on panel, 18½ × 13¾ in. (46.5 × 34 cm)

opposite, right

Karl Blechen

Interior of the Palm House at Potsdam,
1833

Oil on canvas, 13¾ × 22 in. (64 × 56 cm)

Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany

below

Caspar David Friedrich

Eichbaum im Schnee, 1829

Oil on canvas, 28 × 19 in. (71 × 48 cm)

Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen,
Berlin



symbol of the time. But greenhouses were expensive and difficult to maintain. Keeping the plants alive was the equivalent of a miracle. Species imported from the tropics required more light and heat than local varieties. Skylights soon became a necessity in otherwise bleak brick-and-mortar buildings, as did hot water pipes to heat the air. By the end of the eighteenth century, greenhouses would have glass roofs, large windows, and coal-burning iron stoves to maintain temperatures above 70°F (21°C) during winter months.³⁵ In Northern Europe, many of the exotic fruits painted at this time, including oranges and lemons, were grown in greenhouses. Louis XIV owned over a thousand orange trees. Exotic fruits and flowers helped define him and his court's identity, distancing royalty from the common man who could only afford to eat potatoes and onions.³⁶

Beyond colonial power and culture, greenhouses also emblemized gender biases. Paintings like Otto Eerelman's *In the Greenhouse* (nineteenth century), in which a well-dressed noblewoman tends to a caged canary, allude to notions of captivity and fragility—the existence of the plant, the bird, and the noblewoman were ultimately dependent upon the wealth and power provided by the men of colonialism. Eerelman's painting is only one example of the recurring association between plants, beauty, and frailty popularized by many Orientalist paintings from this period. Karl Blechen's representations of greenhouses associated the exoticism of plants with that of odalisque-like figures who mirrored the rare and passive plants surrounding them—both beautiful curiosities arranged to please the eyes of the West.

Victorian Plants: Longing for Nature

THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION INSPIRED ARTISTS TO EITHER CELEBRATE man's ability to rationalize, catalog, and domesticate nature, or to reflect the epic magnitude of natural landscapes drenched in religious and spiritual symbolism. The emotive dramas staged in the sublime paintings of artists like Caspar David Friedrich and the many Russian artists he influenced, such as Ivan Shishkin, presented nature as a pure and distant dimension out of which humanity arose but to which it could never return. In the context of the Industrial Revolution's relentless ravaging of the natural world, a thicket of pine trees reaching for the sky or a solitary aging oak tree withstanding the elements in the middle of a desolate field provoked truly melancholic, existentialist, and patriotic feelings.

Interest in plants grew just as quickly as the Industrial Revolution urbanized. The demand for exotic plants became fueled by colonialist propaganda photographs that deliberately accentuated the lushness of exotic paradises. Europe found itself gripped in nostalgia for an idealized



The Painter's Room, 1944
 Oil on canvas, 24½ × 30 in. (62.2 × 76.2 cm)
 Private collection

Freud expected from his art—that it should challenge the viewer with its uncoded openness. To accomplish this, Freud intentionally distanced himself from the more markedly surrealist canvases of his youth. He no longer was enticed by the implausibility of the fantastic, as seen in works like *The Painter's Room*, but become captivated by the *barely plausible*. This subtler type of tension is what made Freud's realism so original and deeply engaging. One can see this shift by following the yucca tree's movement from behind the sofa in *The Painter's Room* to the front of the room in *Interior at Paddington*, a double portrait of a man and a plant, both subjects similar in size, orientation, demeanor, and color.

Harry Diamond, the non-plant in the painting, was a friend of Freud's who "... was aggressive as he had a bad time being brought up in the East End and being persecuted."¹⁸ The disquiet in Diamond's gaze is central to the painting's tension: he seems to be squaring the plant in a gesture of recognition. This acknowledgment contributes to its humanization: a subtle implication, more than a pronounced statement. The unsettled carpet at the base of the pot seems to suggest the plant might have been moved by someone, or perhaps that it had moved itself in Diamond's absence. The image flickers between the rough banality of the unremarkable interior and the uncanny manner in which Diamond seems to regard the plant as either friend or foe. Is the plant casting an image of familiarity or does it stand in Diamond's way as a reminder of his inability to communicate? Whatever the transaction between these two long-standing acquaintances of the artist might be, it shall not be disclosed. Yet this transaction is one that only painting can allow us to contemplate.

This interpretative openness has always characterized Freud's oeuvre, allowing him to downplay the importance of narrative.¹⁹ Traditionally, stories and characters stretch the canvas beyond its material borders, but Freud's work tends to be restrained by a self-contained representational space devoid of classical symbolism. His canvases compress immense emotional capital, charging his paintings with an ambiguity the viewer is called upon to negotiate.

Since the Renaissance, and all through the Victorian era, plants have expressed human qualities and values through symbolism. On canvas, language has haunted plants for so long that we find it difficult to think of them as anything other than symbols. But Freud's plants bypass this imposition. They stand speechless but proud, owning their bareness. This representational condition, peculiar to Freud's approach to painting, is congenial to thinking about plants in art from new perspectives. David Dawson, the assistant who helped Freud over the last twenty years of his life, remarked that

"his approach to plants was very similar to how he handled his human sitters. He would let them be, and to a certain degree, choose the pose. The same applied to plants. He wasn't cutting





Plates

Seaside Garden

1944
Ink and crayon, dimensions unknown
Private collection



