

Flowers. Passion. Pain. Nation.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the current exhibition at Adelaide's David Roche Foundation House Museum, *Flowers. Passion. Pain. Nation.* has been closed since March but will reopen on 9 June. At least three elements of the exhibition's title are apposite reminders of the times, and perhaps the fourth – flowers – offers an antidote.

To enable our members to experience an overview of the exhibition virtually, The David Roche Foundation supplied nine images of works in the exhibition, as well as a photograph of David Roche in his garden. The images range from a traditional still life from the nineteenth century, to Nora Heysen's *Spring Flowers*, created in the 1950s, and Ah Xian's beautiful *Human human – cloisonné bust 3* of 2001.

A Q&A between Robert Reason, Director of the museum, and Barnaby Smith from *Art Guide Australia* is reproduced below, with the following comment taken from Barnaby's introduction to the Q&A:

An exhibition focussed on so well-worn an artistic motif as flowers might, on the face of it, appear to be swimming against the tide of the current zeitgeist. As artists confront things like gender, sexuality, colonialism, technology and climate in increasingly innovative and brave ways, some might considerate it an odd moment to pause and consider the tradition of floral art.

FLOWERS: PASSION. PAIN. NATION.

Q & A with Barnaby Smith, Art Guide Australia, and Robert Reason, Museum Director, The David Roche Foundation House Museum

How and when did the idea take shape for an exhibition of floral works from David Roche's collection and elsewhere?

David Roche's house is surrounded by beautiful gardens and in our archive I kept coming across photographs of David visiting famous gardens around the world. Flowering potted plants featured prominently in his home and I remembered from my earlier visits how exotic and beautiful it always looked. This encouraged me to re-evaluate his collection of floral art in early 2019 and to think how it could be linked more broadly to Australian art.

With flowers being an incredibly broad and common theme in art history, how did you want to position this show to make it unique, and original?

The start point was David's own unique collection of nineteenth-century European floral paintings and his porcelain, textiles and naïve art. The parameters were Western art – European and Australian – and because of David's love of portraiture it was critical that the symbolism of flowers be linked to the narratives of life.

Simply, what are some of the main themes that run through the exhibition?

I wanted the title of the exhibition to encapsulate the major themes – Passion. Pain. Nation. These inform the big narratives of life such as devotional and physical love, the pain of loss and our temporal existence, and how we belong to a place or country.

The more I looked into the themes, the more I was struck by the incredible symbolic power of flowers.

With love and eroticism being a central idea around flowers in art, which paintings depict these things in the most exciting or interesting ways?

C. Douglas Richardson (Australia 1853–1932), *Acrasia or the Enchanted Bower*, 1889, is rather beguiling. At first glance it looks like lovers romping in the garden, but like much Victorian art it comes from a literary source and contains a moral message warning against the wiles of the femme fatale. I don't think you can go past Max Dupain's (Australia 1911–1992), *The Debussy Quartet in G*, 1937, this was a defining photograph that caused a huge stir in Australia. Nude woman and flower were superimposed and suddenly the erotic nature of both could not be ignored.

What are some of the most experimental or avant-garde works in the collection?

It might not look it today, but Elise Blumann's (Germany/Australia 1897–1990), *Sunflowers*, 1939, when painted in Perth in the late 1930s, was incredibly avant-garde. Here was a female painter, taught by Max Liebermann and Kathe Kollwitz at the Berlin Academy of Art, exhibiting modernist art in Western Australia. Look at how boldly it is painted – raw, energetic and simplified. What must have traditionalists thought when they saw in 1939?

Which pieces are you most excited about?

I'm a bit biased, as I'm enjoying having Michael Zavros's (Australia b. 1974) *The Phoenix*, 2016, on the wall. I was lucky enough to assist Zavros with this painting when Curator of Decorative Arts at the Art Gallery of South Australia. The silver ewer and silver-gilt centrepiece are from the gallery's collection and Zavros used them for this composition. It was fascinating to see them repurposed by Zavros and months later there was the finished painting resplendent with flowers!

How do the Australian works in the exhibition differ from the European ones, not only in terms of the actual flowers depicted but what flowers symbolise and represent?

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century Australian artists looked to Britain and Europe to emulate the current styles. Hans Heysen, Tom Roberts and others wanted to paint exotic flowers in Australia that reminded them of the motherland and the symbolism associated with the Old World. Australian flowers were largely illustrated as botanical specimens, something I didn't want to examine in this exhibition. It wasn't until Margaret Preston and the modernist movement of the 1930s and 1940s that Australian artists started to take native flowers seriously. For them, they gave legitimacy to the notion of creating a truly Australian art, a national art.

To many visitors, the word 'Nation' in the exhibition's name will be intriguing. Can you expand on the role that floral paintings played in the establishment of an Australian artistic identity?

The idea of nation was seen as particularly important during the Federation period, and, as such, there was a surge of Australian art that captured the grand narrative of

the Australian countryside. A masculine image, painted by men. During the modernist period in Australia, in very simple terms, modernist women artists like Margaret Preston and Grace Cossington Smith were able to elevate still life or flower painting, seen to be the lowest form on the hierarchy of painting, and make it potent. With support from key critics, galleries and magazines, modernist still life painters were at the forefront of artistic identity in Australia and their work linked to a range of ideas associated with nation.

Did David have a favourite Australian artist of flowers?

Yes, David bought eight still life paintings by Harley Cameron Griffiths. They used to decorate his dining room in Sydney before returning to Adelaide after his death.

Can you expand on how artists such as Del Kathryn Barton and Christian Thompson offer ideas about flowers that broke with tradition, and created a more diverse interpretation of flowers in art?

Del Kathryn Barton's (Australia b. 1972) own painting practice doesn't often include flowers, however, when she worked with Brendan Fletcher on the short film *The human dress with Remy Hii*, 2013–14, from which the photographic stills in this exhibition were taken, it focussed on the male figure of Hii engaged in an intense amorous relationship with native Australian flora, especially the waratah. Our love of flowers is not necessarily matched by humankind's relationship with nature and habitat destruction. Christian Thompson (Australia b. 1978) in contrast, uses exotic and native flowers regularly in conjunction with his own image. *On becoming*, 2015, is a continuation of Thompson's contemplation on his identity – his being of both aboriginal and European descent and how this informs his identity. Flowers are in a dialogue with his narrative, they take on new symbolism, and move the tradition of flower painting into the twenty-first century.

FLOWERS: PASSION. PAIN. NATION

Currently closed due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The exhibition will **resume** when the museum reopens on 9 June. The exhibition finishes on 8 August.

The David Roche Foundation House Museum
241 Melbourne Street, North Adelaide, SA 5006
www.rochefoundation.com.au

To read Barnaby Smith's article visit:

<https://artguide.com.au/flowers-passion-pain-nation>



Chelsea Porcelain Factory (Britain c. 1745–1770), Joseph Willems (Britain 1716–1766), modeller, *The music lesson*, c. 1760, London, soft-paste porcelain, polychrome enamel, gilt, 40.0 x 33.0 cm. TDRF 765



Theude Grönland (France/Germany 1817–1876), *Still life with flowers*, 1846, France, oil on panel, 45.0 x 34.0 cm. TDRF 3024



attributed to Nicolas-Jean Marchand (France 1697–after 1770), *Secrétaire abattant*, c. 1765-70, France, kingwood, lacquer, gilt bronze, breche d'alep marble, 143.0 x 81.2 x 42.0 cm. TDRF 2165



Ah Xian (China/Australia born 1960), Jingdong Cloisonné Factory, China, *Human human - cloisonné bust 3*, 2001, Dachang County, Hebei Province, cloisonné enamel on copper, 45.0 x 42.5 x 25.5 cm. Gift of ETSA Utilities and the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 2006, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, © courtesy the artist. 20063S1



Nora Heysen (Australia 1911–2003), *Spring Flowers*, c.1956, Sydney, oil on canvas on board, 44.0 x 36.5 cm (sight). South Australian Government Grant 1956, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. 0.1655



Michael Zavros (Australia born 1974), *The Phoenix*, 2016, Brisbane, oil on canvas, 220.0 x 200.0 cm. James & Diana Ramsay Fund supported by Philip Bacon AM through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 2016, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Courtesy the artist and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane, Jon Linkins. 20162P21



Balthasar Van Der Ast (The Netherlands 1593–1657), *Still life*, 1622-23, Utrecht, oil on copper, 21.6 x 30.5 cm, 38.0 x 47.0 x 6.0 cm (Frame). Bequest of Alexander Melrose 1945, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. 0.1299



Jacqueline Hick (Australia 1919–2004), *Strangers*, 1952, Adelaide, oil on cardboard, 67.2 x 47.0 cm. Purchase Elder Bequest Fund 1952, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. 0.1477



C Douglas Richardson (Australia 1853–1932), *Acrasia or the Enchanted Bower*, 1889, London, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 96.8 cm (sight). M.J.M. Carter AO Collection through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 2015. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. 20157P63



David Roche at Monet's Garden, Giverny (2008)