

# FLORAL FEATURES



## The Symbolic Language of Flowers in Medieval Art

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### THE SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS IN MEDIEVAL ART



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Wonders of nature, flowers are also an enduring symbol of human expression. We offer flowers as tokens of love, congratulations, or condolences, adorn table centerpieces with them, and admire their fleeting beauty as they bloom with the changing seasons. From a dozen roses symbolizing romance, to a delicate orchid as gift of felicitations, flowers have long been imbued with meaning. This connection between flora and symbolism, however, is far from solely a modern concept. Just as flowers hold significance today, plant life in medieval art held many symbolic meanings.

As Anne Margreet W. As-Vijvers points out in her article, "More than Marginal Meaning? The Interpretation of Ghent-Bruges Border Decoration," while it would be unwise to assign each floral motif a distinct and universal resonance, this does not mean that they were painted without intention or deeper meaning. Differences in artistic style amongst illuminators working from different references introduce another challenge in the attempt to interpret the significance of flowers. Although their depiction is neither always seasonally accurate nor contextually consistent, the painting of certain flowers in specific contexts may reveal patterns and associations. These patterns suggest that certain flowers carried potential spiritual or symbolic associations in the medieval period, aid in the identification of floral species, and invite modern viewers to question the design choices. In the same way one finds oneself ruminating on which bouquet of flowers to buy for an occasion, illuminators perhaps pondered the same question.

Additionally, it is crucial to consider the context in which these fictive flowers are arranged. While the repeated depiction of certain flowers may suggest that they carried an established symbolic meaning, this does not necessarily imply that it is their intended purpose. For example, in the Ghent-Bruges Book of Hours, the scattered composition of the flowers in the borders suggests that they were more decorative than symbolic. While this does not completely void the flowers of underlying meaning, it does influence our interpretation of them. In contrast, the rose in the famous medieval courtly love poem *Le Roman de la Rose* plays a central role in the narrative and in the intended symbolism of the work. These differences in the depiction and usage of the flowers highlight how context can dictate whether a flower's presence is symbolic or purely aesthetic.

Stop to smell the roses and learn about the multifarious depictions of flowers and plant life across multiple artistic mediums of the Middle Ages. *Floral Features: The Symbolic Language of Flowers in Medieval Art* will feature a variety of works, from the beautiful trompe-l'oeil manuscript borders of the late fifteenth century to the smallest engravings on gilded pendants, they invite viewers to explore the symbolic interplay of art and nature in fictive flowers, while providing insight into the layered meanings behind the petals that adorn them.







1.

Lombard Illuminator

*Annunciation*, in an initial 'D' from a Choir Book

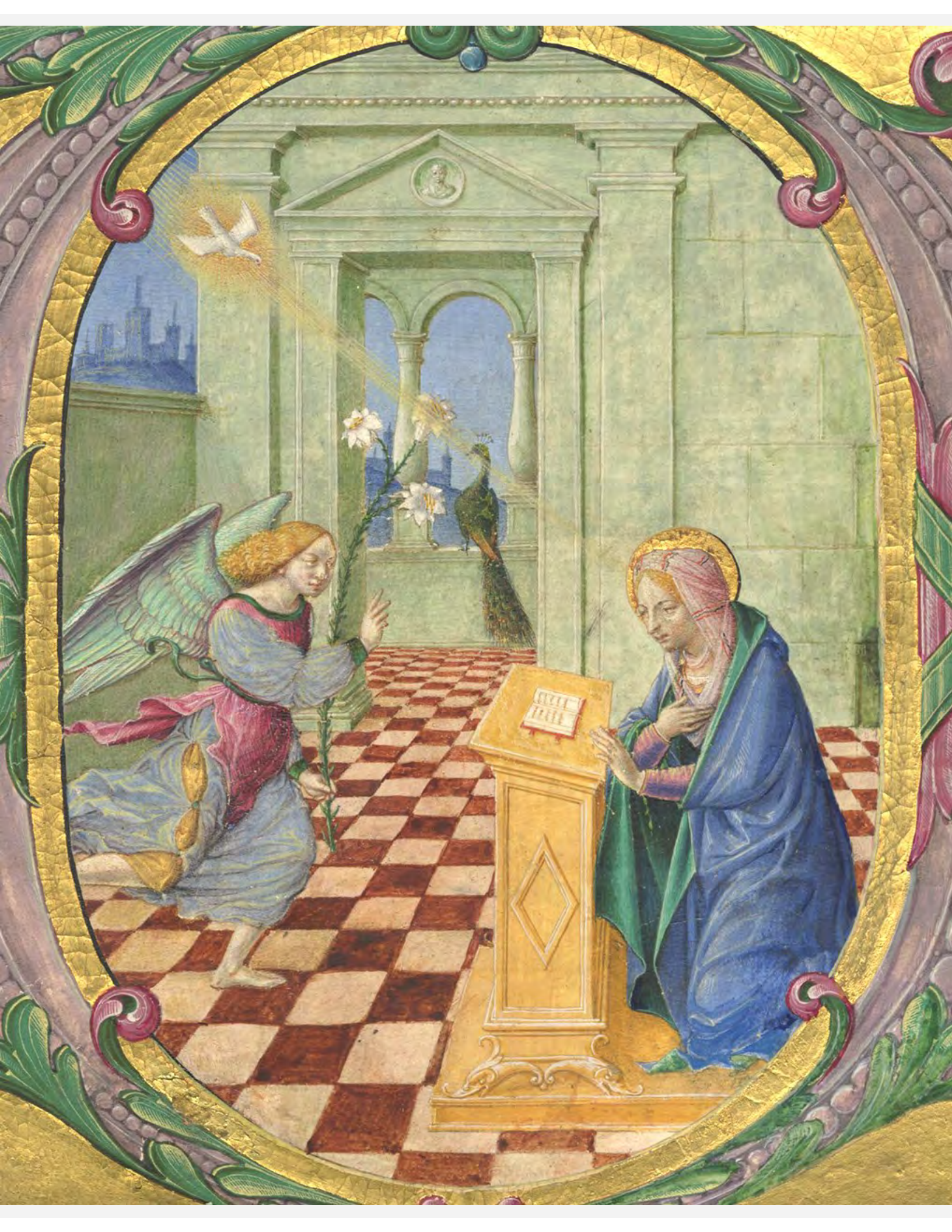
Italy, Lombardy, Brescia or Mantua, probably San Benedetto in Polirone (Gradual E?), c. 1510

c. 208 × 242 mm, initial c. 190 × 177 mm

Originally from a choir book, this large historiated initial 'D' most likely introduced the Feast of the Annunciation (March 25). The Lombard illuminator captures the moment the archangel Gabriel enters the virgin Mary's room, his garments flowing with his movements. One of the most iconic flowers featured in Medieval art takes center stage in this brilliantly illuminated initial. In his left hand Gabriel holds a long leafy stem that diverges at the top into three delicate lilies—no doubt a symbolic reference to the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Introduced in the late 13th century, lilies are a common feature of Annunciation scenes.

The *Lilium candidum*, or the Madonna Lily, became the breed of lily associated with Mary—its white color is a symbol of purity and chastity, and its golden anthers signify divine light. The light of the Holy Spirit shining down on the lily in the composition enhances the flower's symbolic reference to the Trinity. Furthermore, the purple pearl detailing in the body of the letter 'D' in conjunction with the green vegetation may have evoked for its medieval viewer grapes—another iconic symbol in Christian art more broadly as a reference to the Eucharist, the passion of Christ, and the last supper.









2.

### Hours of Johannes Meckis (Use of Utrecht)

In Latin, Illuminated manuscript on parchment,

South Netherlands, Brabant (Antwerp?), c. 1520

6 full-page miniatures and 7 half-page miniatures by a Brabantine artist

Made for a woman and attributed to at least two separate artists, the panel borders of this Book of Hours showcase the new Ghent-Bruges border style of the later 15 to early 16th century, featuring an eclectic arrangement of trompe l'oeil flowers, berries, and branches that create vibrant, life-like frames. The borders disregard seasonality, displaying carnations, a May flower, lilies, a July bloom, and thistles. Their scattered composition could be a reference to how flowers were tossed during ceremonial processions where images of sacred figures were carried through streets. While one could attempt to decipher the symbolic meaning of each flower in these borders, their primary role appears to be ornamental, contributing to the overall aesthetic richness of the manuscript rather than expressing a singular theological message. The composition of the borders also reflects contemporary book-owning practices. Manuscript owners frequently pressed real flowers or pilgrimage pendants between the books' pages: painted borders like those of this book of hours emulate this effect.

Particularly striking in this manuscript is the depiction of the flowers in the borders of the Flight into Egypt miniature. What looks like a blue and red orchid and another green, four-scalloped petal bloom are embellished with gems and pearls—a composition that is not present anywhere else in the manuscript. This fusion of botanical subjects and gems reflects a broader artistic trend in the Ghent-Bruges style, where personal items and luxuries were depicted in the solid panel borders. Overall, this manuscript illuminates the multivalence of floral motifs in medieval art. In as much as they were rich in spiritual and religious symbolism, flowers and plant-life could also be decorative, enhancing the visual splendor of the art while subtly nodding to contemporary material culture and book-ownership practices.





Les Enluminures, BOH 243, Hours of Johannes Meckis (Use of Utrecht)



Les Enluminures, BOH 243, Hours of Johannes Meckis (Use of Utrecht)





3.

### Reliquary Pendant of Saint Lawrence

Spain, 18th century

Gilded silver, silver, enamel, rock crystal, bone, paper, sealing wax

Weight 161.6 gr.; Dimensions 97.5 (including bail) x 78.7 mm., Height 26.5 mm

This reliquary pendant of Saint Lawrence contains a curated collection of devotional objects displayed between two convex shaped rock-crystals. Saint Lawrence was a highly venerated saint in Spain who was martyred by being burned on a gridiron. Viewed from the front, the pendant presents a bone relic of Saint Lawrence against a blue-enameled gridiron with pearl-like ornaments that emulate nails. On the reverse, a paper label with an ecclesiastic seal pressed into red sealing wax is secured to the gridiron by a red cord that is knotted at the base. Encircling these varied devotional objects is a garland of poppies. A flower that was considered as symbolic of the Eucharist and Christ's passion, the poppy often carried subtle proleptic meaning, and was used as a memory aid that would remind the viewer of the passion of Christ.

The symbolic nature of this poppy wreath shape can be read through two interpretations. One borrows the ancient Greek use of the wreath as a symbol of victory; the second reads the wreath as an evocation of the crown of thorns. Since the poppies have been gilded in silver rather than painted in their usual symbolic rouge shade, perhaps this depiction blends these two meanings, thus transforming the poppy into a flower that reminds the viewer of the passion of Christ in a triumphant and positive light. In conjunction with the relics of a saint who achieved such spiritual rewards, this reliquary pendant inspires its wearer to lead a pious life.





*Les Enluminures, Reliquary Pendant of Saint Lawrence*



4.

Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*  
In French, Illuminated manuscript on parchment.  
23 miniatures by Richard (1) and Jeanne de Montbaston (22)  
France, Paris, c. 1350

*Le Roman de la Rose* is a 13th-century French allegorical poem originally composed and left unfinished by Guillaume de Lorris and later expanded by Jean de Meun after Guillaume's death. The theme of courtly love is conveyed through a religious allegory, wherein the narrator, a male lover, seeks to obtain the rose—a symbol of idealized love—within a walled garden. The garden represents the realm of courtly love and the rose is simultaneously the beloved and an embodiment of desire. However, beneath this courtly framework lies a deeper religious allegory: the lover's quest mirrors a spiritual pilgrimage, and the rose ultimately reflects divine love. The challenges he faces parallel moral and theological trials, aligning his pursuit of love with the soul's journey toward salvation.

Blooming from Roman mythological associations of love and Venus, the rose was adopted into Christian iconography under a medley of meanings that continue to represent love but through an altered interpretation. The white rose, like the Madonna Lily, became a symbol of purity, charity, and love, while the red rose signifies blood. Red and white roses with their green leaves represented the three cardinal virtues: faith, hope, and love of God, or charity. Mary is also described as a rose without thorns, emphasizing her purity. These diverse meanings assigned to the rose reveal the allegorical Christian message of *Le Roman de la Rose* where the lover's quest is a religious pilgrimage and the rose represents God's divine love. Through this interpretation, this manuscript, both textually and pictorially, articulates another fascinating approach to incorporating flowers in medieval art and thought.





Les Enluminures, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*





5.

### Reliquary Pendant with Christ on the Cross

Gilded silver

Germany, c. 1480–1500

Weight 35 grams; dimensions 69 × 46 × 8 mm

Fashioned of gilded silver, this pendant retains its remarkably fine detailing throughout, the body of Christ being a notable exception. Its unnatural smoothness serves as a testament to its profound significance to its owner, who must have frequently caressed the figure in prayer or sought spiritual solace through touch. On the reverse, a hinged rectangular compartment delicately engraved with the image of the empty cross encloses a small cavity likely designed to hold a relic, which was thus kept intimately close to the patron's heart. The symbolic nature of this reliquary unfolds with the same elegance as its sinuous vegetal forms, revealing underlying meanings that complement the pendant both aesthetically and iconographically. With Christ as the central figure, the surrounding leafy motifs grow outwards, creating an elegant extension of the crucifix. Foliate decoration on the Cross imbues the pendant with the Christian idea of the Cross as the Tree of Life.

While Jesus may have been crucified and died on the cross, the wood was considered the source of salvation, everlasting life for believers, and the birth of Christianity. As the branch divides into three sections, with leaves unfurling in three distinct directions, it subtly alludes to the Holy Trinity while simultaneously enhancing the pendant's compositional harmony. These intricate details make this pendant a wonderful example of how plant forms were used not only for their decorative appeal but also as compositional and narrative elements, enriching the work's spiritual resonances.





*Les Enluminures*, Reliquary Pendant with Christ on the Cross

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