

The Gorgeous Nothings: Flowers at Chatsworth

Flowers in all their forms and incarnations take centre stage in this exhibition. The Devonshire Collection is at the source of this survey that stems from the rare botanical books and herbaria in the Chatsworth library and extends to the garden, park and wood that form Chatsworth's otherworldly environment. Gardeners and botanists have foraged, planted, conserved and protected an array of specimens at Chatsworth over the past 500 years. Together, they have created what amounts to a living compendium of the natural world that continues to be nurtured today.

Botany has been referred to as the science of beauty, but it is also the study of humanity. The great horticulturalist and engineer Joseph Paxton was Head Gardener to the 6th Duke of Devonshire from 1826. He spoke expressively of the 'structure, affinities, and habits of plants and vegetables'.

This exhibition encompasses a series of themes that reflect the features and temperaments of flowers, and by association of human nature in all its contracts and complexities: mythology and magic, still lifes, gatherers, in

place and out of place, sexuality and the senses, beauty and horror, permanence and transience, and flowers as symbols.

The exhibition takes its cue from the American poet Emily Dickinson's habit of composing poems on scraps of paper and used envelopes. The 'gorgeous nothings' she refers to in one such poem are vital matters to her. Gathering – to bring together and take in from different places and sources – is an act of preservation and often of survival. Different forms of collage and assemblage are featured throughout The Gorgeous Nothings, like the modulated surfaces and found items that converge on the canvases of 'scavenger' painter Frank Bowling, or Chiara Camoni's regal female figure composed of myriads of clay components featured in this room.

The installations presented here evoke the tenacity and focus of 'gatherers' – be it gardeners, scientists, archivists, artists, poets or collectors. They reflect the resilience and persistence of nature amidst the scourge of the environmental crisis. Each flower is associated with deep-rooted and geographically diverse histories and myths.

Individually, they may be considered gorgeous nothings, but together, they manifest life and endurance against all odds.

Sister (Hut)

Chiara Camoni, 2022

Black terracotta, iron, fresh and dry flowers

Courtesy of the Nicoletta Fiorucci Collection

People have combined clay and water since the early Stone Age. Chiara Camoni extends this ancestral tradition of gathering organic materials to make forms of clay, flowers and leaves. The results are both benign and startling.

This sculpture is part of a series of enchanted female figures entitled 'Sisters'. Garlands of hand-moulded flowers weave through the thousands of small pieces of terracotta used to make the voluminous skirt. The skirt provides a place of safety and contemplation, space for us to think, while the imposing size and posture of the figure evoke unfaltering stature.

Mythology and Magic

Flowers and the natural world have long been the foundations for mythological figures and tales of the supernatural. Here, in the room known as the Grotto, works from both past and present embody the otherworld. Diana, goddess of wildlife and the moon, is captured bathing with her nymphs and framed by sealife in an ornate 17th-century fountain. As a patroness of nature and protector of birth, she has a talismanic presence in the context of Chatsworth and this exhibition. David Wiseman conjures the lure and mystery of the grotto in his bewitching mirror. Stalagmites proliferate in a collusion of earthly life and the imaginary. Grottoes have long been described as dwelling places of divinity and portals to the underworld.

They are places of seclusion and protection yet they never feel fully safe. In a parallel environment conceived by the Roman master micro-mosaicist Maurizio Fioravanti, a leaping frog in a halo of daisies is one of a cast of fantastical creatures.

Come, Mother of Flowers, that we may honour thee with
merry games.

Ovid, *Fasti* (V.183)

Tulip Petals N.1

Maurizio Fioravanti, VAMGARD, 2025

Zirconia, micro-mosaic, signed by the artist

Courtesy of M. Fiorvanti, VAMGARD

Rana

Maurizio Fioravanti, VAMGARD, 2022

Gold brooch with old, titanium, yellow and white diamonds, emeralds, micro-mosaics, signed by the artist

Courtesy of Contessa Daniela Memmo d'Amelio

Tulip Petals N.2

Maurizio Fioravanti, VAMGARD, 2025

Zirconia, micro-mosaics, signed by the artist

Courtesy of M. Fiorvanti, VAMGARD

Le Crapaud

Maurizio Fioravanti, VAMGARD, 2021

Gold box/clutch, diamonds, carbon fibre, micro-mosaic, signed by the artist

Courtesy of Virginie Torroni and G. Torroni Sa.

Tulip

Maurizio Fioravanti, VAMGARD, 2025

Brooch in titanium, gold, silver, micro-mosaic, tsavorite, diamonds and spessartite (garnet), signed by the artist

Courtesy of Virginie Torroni and G. Torroni Sa.

La Reine Brooch

Maurizio Fioravanti, VAMGARD, 2025

Brooch with bees in micro-mosaic, gold, silver, and diamonds, signed by the artist

Courtesy of M. Fiorvanti, VAMGARD

Maurizio Fioravanti is an alchemist. He dissolves the boundaries between magic and reality in a fantastical world of flowers and creatures. Details like tulip petals and butterfly wings are rendered pictorially with tiny tiles of glass. Fioravanti uses a technique known as micro-mosaic to create unique pieces of jewellery. His is a contemporary interpretation of an artistic practice that dates back to the 1700s.

Grotto Mirror

David Wiseman, 2025

Bronze, glass, porcelain, enamel, resin

Courtesy of Wiseman Studio, Los Angeles, USA

A Schneeballen Vase and Cover

Meissen, late 1800s

Porcelain

Still Lives

Floral compositions in paintings can be categorised as still lifes, but they are often visual manifestations of life in action, from birth to death. A young bud may suggest the vibrancy of conception while a wilting leaf might symbolise the transience of life. Nature and humanity are conjoined in these botanical 'portraits'.

Many of the still life paintings at Chatsworth were acquired by the 1st Duke of Devonshire in the late 1600s, at a time when this genre was particularly in vogue. Among them are works by the Duke's contemporaries Jakob Bogdany and Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer. Individually, they impart the technical skill of the artists, while as a group, as seen for the first time in this exhibition, they express the energy and regenerative charge of a garden in bloom.

Gatherers

Nearly five centuries of foraging, researching, assembling and preserving at Chatsworth have formed an extraordinary range of 'gatherings' both indoors and outdoors. Areas of focus differ in type and scale from 18th-century porcelain teacups by the celebrated German manufacturer Meissen to the collection of conifer trees in the Pinetum conceived by the 6th Duke and his head gardener Joseph Paxton in the 1830s.

The artists featured in this exhibition are all gatherers of sorts – they explore the fields of nature and science, and collate their 'specimens' into formats of their imagination. Anna Atkins identified over 400 species of British algae and reproduced them photographically in one of the rarest and most seductive publications of the 1800s. The painter Eileen Agar emphasised the surreal qualities of the marine world in whimsical objects made out of found shells and flotsam.

Often, the grouping of an item with similar counterparts is more poignant and enduring than the individual item itself.

Fish Basket

Eileen Agar, 1965

Wicker, shell and wood on cardboard base

Tate: Purchased 1993

Sculpture Consisting of a Piece of Coral Glued to a Plastic

Tripod

Eileen Agar, 1899-1991

Coral and plastic

Tate Archive

Painted Shell

Eileen Agar, 1899-1991

Acrylic paint on shell

Tate Archive

Sculpture Consisting of a Nautilus Shell Glued to a Clam

Shell

Eileen Agar, 1899-1991

Shell

Tate Archive

**Sculpture Consisting of a Shell Stuck on Top of Sea Urchin
Mounted on a Base Made Out of Woven Bark**

Eileen Agar, 1899-1991

Shell and wood

Tate Archive

**Sculpture Consisting of a Lotus Flower Made Out of Brass
and Glass Mounted in a Metal Dish and Surrounded by Fish
and Flower Shapes**

Eileen Agar, 1899-1991

Glass, brass, plastic, mother-of-pearl, unidentified metal

Tate Archive

“I surround myself with fantastic bric-a-brac in order to trigger my imagination. For it is a certain kind of sensitive chaos that is creative, and not sterile order.”

Eileen Agar

Eileen Agar combed beaches and woods for flowers, shells, fossils and bones and re-assembled them into objects of her imagination. She found beauty and boundlessness in nature and the marine world and created fantastical forms through a combination of conscious manipulation and chance.

Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions, vol. 1

Anna Atkins, 1843-53

Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions, vol. 2

Anna Atkins, 1843-53

Anna Atkins' revolutionary images are simultaneously evocative "impressions" and faithful representations of botanical specimens. Privately printed, they are a rare example of early photography by a female botanist in a male-oriented world. In 1851, Atkins visited Derbyshire with her family. The signatures of her husband, father and uncle have recently been discovered in the visitors' book at Chatsworth. Two fern specimens from the great conservatory at Chatsworth appear in Atkin's Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Ferns, 1853.

Herbarium

Unknown creator, France, mid-1700s

Plant specimens and collage

The anonymous creator of this Herbarium used hand-coloured, cut out prints to create a world where science and the imagination collide. Pressed parsnip plants flower out of a red conch shell; a family dines at the foot of a lentil plant and Cupid reaches for an arrow as he flits past a lupin in these elaborate collages.

A recent rediscovery in the Devonshire Collection and exhibited here for the first time, this rare book is a remarkable feat of artistry and knowledge yet its origins remain mysterious. By the 20th century, it belonged to Lady Anne Tree, a campaigner for prison reform and daughter of the 10th Duke of Devonshire.

Today there are 400 million dried plant specimens preserved worldwide. They provide a window into historic biodiversity that can inform our approach to conservation and address climate change.

Requiem

Jonas Mekas, 2019, 84 minute DV video

©estate of Jonas Mekas, courtesy of Re:Voir

Jonas Mekas experienced first-hand the violence of World War Two and witnessed conflicts throughout the 20th century. Born in a Lithuanian farming village, he was imprisoned in a forced labour camp by the Nazis.

He became a refugee when the Soviets retook Lithuania, immigrating to New York in 1949. There he became a 'godfather' of American Avant-Garde Cinema.

This cinematic poem is a disquieting sequence of flowers intercut with images of disasters. Created as a visual counterpoint to composer, Giuseppe Verdi's Mass for the Dead, it is an acceptance of the passing of time. It provides a space for us to contemplate suffering and loss alongside the regenerative force of nature.

Requiem also acts as a herbarium, capturing on film flowers typical of Mekas' homes, both new and lost.

Jonas Mekas completed this film, his last, at the age of 95.

In Place and Out of Place

Weeds are plants that are out of place, but like gorgeous nothings they can also be considered beautiful and beneficial. Dorothy Cross expresses both the lure and the threat of the foxglove in her magisterial bronze sculpture of this weed. It is a sensuous and elegant plant that can be used for the treatment of heart conditions. The cutting edges of its leaves warn us of its more dangerous properties – extracts of Digitalis, as it is otherwise known, can be toxic if taken in large doses. Casts of the artist's own fingertips in lieu of the tubular flowers that flop from its tall, bent stem expose the affinity between human and botanical nature.

Foxglove XL

Dorothy Cross, 2024

Bronze

Courtesy of Dorothy Cross Studio

The Marias

Kapwani Kiwanga, 2020, paper, wire, paint, customized wood plinths

Courtesy of the artist

The text and artwork in this room includes reference to people in the conditions of slavery, sexual violence and abortion.

Obscured history is brought to light in Kapwani Kiwanga's immersive installation *The Marias*. Intricate paper recreations of the peacock flower plant (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*) are represented here in two different phases of growth. The peacock flower, which can act as a natural way to terminate a pregnancy was one of the methods used by women living in the conditions of slavery (subjects not only of forced labour but also of sexual violence) to maintain control of their own bodies and break the chain of reproduction and exploitation. Kiwanga's botanical specimens are perched on plinths and surrounded by vibrant yellow walls that evoke the harsh light of the sun, while vividly foregrounding an obscured history.

The construction of paper flowers was a Victorian hobby for affluent women. These in particular reference the 17th-century naturalist and botanical artist Maria Sibilla Merian who visited Suriname when it was a Dutch colony.

In her published work *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* she described what she had learnt about the seeds of the peacock flower from women living in the condition of slavery:

“...[they] are not treated well by their Dutch masters, [and] use the seeds to abort their children, so that their children will not become slaves like they are. The black slaves from Guinea and Angola have demanded to be well treated, threatening to refuse to have children. They told me this themselves.”

Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium can be seen later on the visitor route.

Another Place

Konstantin Kakanias, 2024

Wallpaper printed and painted by hand at Comunità San
Patrignano, Italy, with a ceramic dish, Big Greek Bowl

Courtesy of the Stefanidou Tsoukala Gallery

Two Flora Danike Tureens and Covers

Royal Copenhagen

Porcelain

Two Cushion Shaped Dishes

Sevres, 1800s

Porcelain

Konstantin Kakanias is a Greek artist based in Los Angeles. The wallpaper in this site-specific installation was produced with the help of members of the Community of San Patrignano, a rehabilitation centre near Rimini in Italy. With this gathering of hands, Kakanias proposes an internal woodland that acts as an isolated sensory enclave. It is a space to pause and rise from the complexities of life, even for a brief moment.

Sexuality and the Senses

Like humans, plants are born, grow, reproduce and die. Plants can also sense the world. They communicate with other plants and organisms, and respond to light and temperature. Nature flourishes through plant reproduction, which may involve a bee pollinating a flower, a bird dropping a seed, or a gardener pruning a tree. The majority of flowering plants have both male and female reproductive structures.

It is possible that that gender-nonconforming artist Gluck responded to the bisexual character of flowers in still life paintings like the one on display. Born Hannah Gluckstein, Gluck confronted gender norms in art and in life. *Convolvulus* combines cool tones and sharp outlines with the curvaceous and sensual forms of the plant in bloom.

Convolvulus

Gluck, 1940

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of a private collection

Beauty and Horror

The world of plants is a field of opposites. Where there is growth there is decay, where there is science there is spirit and serendipity, where there is beauty there is horror.

Similar contrasts and complexities are found in human nature. The camouflaged silhouettes in British surrealist artist Eileen Agar's *Figures in a Garden* are confluences of humanity and nature. Her figures are at once haunting and seductive, bold yet fleeting, and interchangeably male and female. Agar ceased making art during World War II. A trip to the island of Tenerife in 1953, which she described as a 'watershed in my life', revived her artistic practice, together with her love of nature and the sea. Vibrant colours and distorted proportions also define Hussein Chalayan's topiary dress – it too a binding of botanical and human form.

“Surrealism for me draws its inspiration from Nature... you see the shape of a tree, the way a pebble falls or is framed, and you are astounded to discover that dumb nature makes an effort to speak to you, to give you a sign, to warn you, to symbolise your innermost thoughts.”

Eileen Agar

Figures in a Garden

Eileen Agar, 1979-81

Acrylic paint on canvas

Tate: Accepted by HM Government in lieu of tax and allocated to the Tate Gallery 1993

Eileen Agar found many of her subjects and forms in nature. Here, two enigmatic figures stand hand in hand before what appears to be the dark entrance to a wood. At age 80, when she made this painting, Agar evoked the beauty and horror of nature and humanity with uninhibited boldness and brightness. Her affinity for collage and the gathering of disparate elements in her work is reflected in the camouflaged style of the figures' gowns.

Collection of Flower Pyramids and Campana Shaped Vases

Adriaan Kocks, about 1690

Tin-glazed earthenware

Queen Mary II popularised Dutch flower vases in England after the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. The 1st Duke of Devonshire emulated the sovereign with his own important collection of Delft pottery, a type of ceramic named after the eponymous town in Holland where they were produced and also known as Delft blue. The range of flowers painted on these vases and urns mirror the real flowers they would have displayed. The spouts enabled each highly prized bloom to be appreciated individually, like a specimen. They identified the owner as part of an elite of wealthy patrons of imported flowers.

Permanence and Transience

In nature, there are roots and grounding properties that assure life and longevity, but death and decay are never too far away. Dorothea Tanning, like many Surrealist artists whom she associated with, perceived beauty and seduction in the evanescent qualities of nature.

Her painting *Some Roses and Their Phantoms* of 1952 is permeated with a sense of mystery and transience.

“Here some roses from a very different garden sit?, lie? stand?, gasp?, dream?, die?—on white linen. They may serve you tea or coffee. As I saw them take shape on the canvas I was amazed by their solemn colours and their quiet mystery that called for—seemed to demand— some sort of phantoms. So I tried to give them their phantoms and their still-lifeness. Did I succeed? Clearly they are not going to tell me, but the white linen gave me a good feeling as if I had folded it myself, then opened it on the table.”

Dorothea Tanning

Valley

Liza Lou, 2024

Glass beads on wood

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Seoul,
and London

Liza Lou challenges the supremacy of painting by introducing beads as her medium. Unlike paint, beads cannot be blended yet, like atoms, the beads cluster together to create form:

“My studio in Los Angeles is located in the San Fernando Valley, which turns out to be very close to where there was a nuclear spill. The work is comprised of many layers, including a gun metal grey layer, which I tried to cover up in subsequent layers, but it remains, even though “flowers” have grown over it.”

Liza Lou

Central Point

Elias Sime, 2004

Buttons and thread on canvas

Courtesy of a private collection

Elias Sime is a gatherer of discarded items, and for a period of time in the early part of his artistic career he made works exclusively out of found buttons. The open-air market in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, is among his hunting grounds.

Flickers of light formed by the reflective buttons in this work create a sense of cosmic splendour.

Some Roses and Their Phantoms

Dorothea Tanning, 1952

Oil on canvas

Tate: Presented by the Tate Collectors Forum 2003

Dorothea Tanning does not give us the faithful reproduction of a flower that might be expected of a still life. In a dreamlike scene, a rose becomes a creature peering at us from behind the table. The flower's traditional associations with purity and beauty are subverted. Delicate petals morph into metallic folds exposing an eerie, otherworldly dimension to an everyday domestic setting.

Small Clive Album

Unknown maker in the Mughal Empire, first half of the 1700s

Opaque watercolour on paper

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, gift of Mr John

Goelet, IS.48/A-1956

The following text discusses the colonisation of India.

An exceptional gathering of botanical paintings in the traditional Mughal miniature painting style is bound in this rare album. The orange-yellow marigold lies at the heart of a complex colonial web. An iconic flower in India, it was named the African marigold by Europeans but is in fact native to Mexico and Central America.

During the Mughal Dynasty, the appreciation of flowers was intrinsic to being part of the elite. In this album that belonged to the Grand Vizier Shuja ad-Daula, miniature paintings of flowers are interspersed with portraits of Mughal leaders.

When Shuja ad-Daula was defeated by the East India company under Robert Clive in 1765, he was ordered to pay

the Company 5 million rupees. By 1767, this amount was in Clive's possession.

Clive was a controversial figure in his own lifetime as well as today. First British Governor of Bengal, he amassed a vast fortune whilst his leadership impoverished the region. His victories against the Mughals paved the way to British rule in India.

The Agony in the Garden

This room is kept darker because of the light sensitive works on paper that it is designed to display. The drawings on the upper tier of the walls are part of a series of works in watercolour and pen from the 1450s to the 1600s that depict a range of subjects from the fields of flora, fauna and vegetation. Together they form a visual sanctuary of the biological world.

Along the lower tier, 11 intaglio prints by contemporary artist Chris Ofili from the portfolio entitled *The Agony in the Garden* take inspiration from a biblical subject. Each scene is set in the Garden of Gethsemane and depicts the same moment when Judas betrayed Christ with a kiss. Ofili represents the scene as perceived by the 11 other disciples, from close-ups to more distant viewpoints. 11 shaded Afro heads vary in position from print to print, echoing these shifting perspectives. The tension between love and threat is poignantly felt within the framings of the figures and their bucolic surroundings. In some, the facial features are in focus, in others it is their bodies that speak. All are captured

with minimal yet swaying linear form. The soldiers that accompanied Judas to capture Christ and those who ultimately sentence him to crucifixion are absent from these images, but their presence is sensed. The practice of composing on paper allows the artist to work with the blank nature of the page and thus to isolate the delineations of plants and flowers within the parameters of the sheet. The drawings by Ruth Asawa and Sebastian Vrancx are bold and seductive examples of this use of pen on paper.

Ieri Ikebana 080220192

Alessandro Piangiamore, 2019

Concrete, flora, metal

Ieri Ikebana 180920191

Alessandro Piangiamore, 2019

Concrete, flora, metal

Courtesy of Alessandro Piangiamore and Magazzino Gallery,
Rome

Alessandro Piangiamore references the Japanese art form of Ikebana in his series of petrified flowers. The term ikebana comes from the combination of the Japanese ikeru (to arrange, have life, be living) and hana (flower), and it relates to the practice of nurturing, arranging and viewing plants throughout the four seasons, as established in Japan over 550 years ago. Piangiamore blends life and death in his own interpretation of the practice. Found flowers from the streets and markets of Rome are impressed in poured concrete. Where there is fleetingness and ephemerality in his art, there is also gravitas and solidity.

Like Leaves

Simryn Gill, 2025

Sea hibiscus, *Hibiscus tiliaceus*

Courtesy of the Richard Saltoun Gallery, London

A grid of cut leaves from the sea hibiscus tree wraps around the walls in Simryn Gill's contemporary herbarium. There is order and serenity in her composition, but this may be deceptive. The leaves were cut into seamless, same sized squares but in time they have shrunk and taken on a more disorderly aspect — as if their nature defies containment and regularisation.

The sea hibiscus, as it has been named in English, also known as coast cottonwood and sea mallow, is a tree native of the shores of old world tropics and Oceania. Its origins are thought to be Austronesian, with its homelands as far south as Torres Straits, and north to Taiwan and Japan, with archipelago and littoral South East Asia in between.

It is a familiar in all these localities: berbaru in Malay, waru in Javanese, purau in Tahitian, vau in Vietnamese, pariti or tali-pariti in Malayalam. This last name appears in Van Rheedé's Hortus Malabaricus, the Dutch compendium of the plants of the Malabar Coast, published in 1684, with records of all the specimens drawn by local artists.

The leaves pinned on the walls here were collected by the artist from lone trees in suburban streets and manicured stands in municipal parks in the vicinity of her home in Sydney.

Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium

Maria Sibylla Merian, 1705

Hand-coloured plates

DEV/000397

Artist and naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian made significant discoveries in the study of insects a century before it was recognised as a science. She broke with social norms, and set up her own artist studio before travelling to what was then the Dutch colony of Suriname to record its native insects. Her work was highly respected by other scientists such as Carl Linnaeus but also by important patrons of the arts like Peter the Great of Russia.

During her research, Merian was dependent on the knowledge of people of indigenous origin and living under the conditions of slavery. She mentioned their contribution in her book, even though their names were not recorded.

A Flower is a Symbol

Flowers have long been associated with figures in the visual arts. They may appear as attributes of the subjects they accompany, as evocations of status or origin, or as premonitions of the future. A rose for instance can have different meanings according to the context in which it is depicted. In Christian iconography, the rose is the flower of martyrs and miracles. It symbolises beauty and purity, but it may also allude to Jesus's crown of thorns and impending death. The rose, as held by the standing noble woman in the portrait from the circle of Alonso Sánchez Coello, reflects sumptuousness and fidelity. Pinkish-red roses and buds held by Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, in her portrait by Gainsborough, echo the sitter's soft yet piercing persona. The rose is most commonly associated with love, although in the marble sculpture Cupid Removing a Thorn from the Foot of Venus, its thorns can also warn against the dangers of love.