

Signs of Spring

A new show at Hawthorne Fine Art explores the delicate nature of spring

Hawthorne Fine Art

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After moving to Walden Pond in the 1850s, Henry David Thoreau wrote that he made the migration so he could have “leisure and opportunity to see the spring come in.” On the lookout for the first

signs of this splendid season, Thoreau paid close attention to the “chance note of some arriving bird, or the striped squirrel’s chirp,” and was eager to “see the woodchuck venture out of his winter quarters.”

As a season, spring is representative of renewal, rebirth and resurrection of earth’s botanical beauty after winter hibernation comes to an end. This spring, Hawthorne Fine Art explores the beauty of the season and its different interpretations by American artists in *Blossoms: A Botanical Exploration of Spring in American Art*.

Echoing the diversity of flora found in nature, the exhibition will feature works created in oil, watercolor, pastel and a variety of genres—including figural, uninhabited, cultivated and wild landscapes. A majority of the works in the exhibition come from historic, academically trained female artists—fitting for spring, a season ruled by Mother Nature.

Among these artists is Minnie Rankin Wyman (1871-1963) who employed the trompe l’oeil painting technique, a French phrase that translates to “fool the eye.” The



Minnie Rankin Wyman (1871-1963), *Tabletop Bouquet*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 15½ x 23¼ in., signed and dated lower left: '1888'.



Minerva Josephine Chapman (1858-1947), *Lilacs*. Oil on canvas, 16 x 12½ in., signed lower right, inscribed: 'Étude Fleurs'.



Junius R. Sloan (1827-1900), *Afternoon Picnic*. Watercolor on paper, 16 x 11½ in., signed lower left.

technique first became popular during the Renaissance, bringing to life botany popular throughout the 19th century. Wyman's painting, *Tabletop Bouquet* (1888), depicts a lush group of colorful pansies and roses delicately arranged against a black background.

Another work included in the exhibition, *Roses*, by Claude Raguet Hirst (1855-1942)—a highly regarded female painter of hyperrealistic still lifes during the turn of the 20th century—portrays yellow, white and pink roses, nearly glowing against a dark green bushel of leaves and thorns.

The heterogeneity of flora depicted in the different botanical works featured throughout the exhibition is influenced by both the artists' personal interests and the region of the world in which the plants were observed.

For example, in *Magnolias* by Clara



Winslow Homer (1836-1910), *Fishing*, 1878. Charcoal and watercolor on paper, 8³/₁₆ x 10⁷/₁₆ in., signed lower right.



Clara Lotte Von Marcard-Cucuel (ca. 1915-1955), *Magnolias*. Oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in., signed lower right.



Claude Raguet Hirst (1855-1942), *Roses*. Oil on canvas, 8½ x 10½ in., signed and dated: '1881'.

Lotte Von Marcard-Cucuel (ca. 1915-1955), the red tubular flowers—likely standing cypress or trumpet vine creepers from the American South—symbolize how the German artist emigrated to the United States to live and work.

While viewed at surface level, it's easy to read the exhibition's paintings merely as floral still lifes and nothing deeper. However, academic studies of the paintings provide windows into the experiences of the artists, their interests and the world around them.

Completed by Minerva Josephine Chapman (1858-1947) during her training at the Académie Julian in Paris, *Lilacs* demonstrates both the artist's use of classical academic composition and her decision to remain in Paris for a large duration of her career.

Although the backgrounds of the artists featured in *Blossoms* vary, their work at large is informed by detailed studies of nature drawn from two distinct yet related traditions in art history: still life drawing at European art academies and the rising popularity of natural history. These academies taught still life painting as a way to instill in artists important skills including concentration, composition and precision. Natural history, on the other hand, investigated the botanical specimens that often appeared in popular still life subject matter. Thus, the practice of observing, recording and studying nature became a symbolic practice of still life artists during the 18th and 19th century.

However, during this time not all springtime scenes were still lifes. Works by artists like J.M.W. Turner, John Constable and Junius R. Sloan often represented larger societal themes, such as the rise of tourism and nostalgia for the homestead.

Blossoms: A Botanical Exploration of Spring in American Art will be on view at Hawthorne Fine Art from April 6 through May 15. A selection of the works will also be on display at the gallery's booth at the Lyndhurst Mansion this April during *Antiques on the Hudson*. ■