



What a 21st Century Floral Artist Can Learn From A Painting Created In 1619

Introduction:

What does a floral design teacher do in his free time? Well lots of things.

One thing that I love to do is to visit Museums, in particular Art Museums. Here in Boston we have an outstanding Museum of Fine Arts.

The process of viewing various works of art sharpens one's visual literacy. I find it not only enjoyable but also a wonderful form of renewal. I rarely come home from an art experience without some amazing new discovery or insight, that is fun and may even enhance my work.

So you can imagine my enthusiasm when I learned that the MFA acquired several amazing collections of Dutch/ Flemish paintings. The Dutch have a proud tradition of flower still life paintings. Of course we had to check these out. And we were not disappointed.

I noticed a number of things, but in particular, a work by Ambrosius Bosschaert spoke to me. In the next few pages I think you will see why. I hope you enjoy this brief visual and design exercise.

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Ambrosius Bosschaert has long been one of my favorites. Whenever I teach the history of floral art, he is there to inspire.

He lived from 1573 to 1621, and this painting of roses in a glass vase was painted around 1619.

Typically reproductions of paintings that were created by this artist, feature oval shaped arrangements, in water, usually formally (symmetrically) balanced, but with enough internal variation so as not to be monotonous.

Most of the floral designs in his paintings feature a variety of flowers, possibly derived from earlier studies of individual flowers. This piece, however, featured only roses.



I was surprised to find how small the actual painting was. This was the first time I had actually seen a Bosschaert original, and I expected a larger canvas. The clarity, sharpness and attention to detail was/is impressive in spite of the small footprint. As the saying goes, "good things come in small packages." Clearly this is a small but amazing "jewel."



But why this painting? There are other still life florals at the MFA by other artists. Although I like Bosschaert, this one didn't feature a huge diversity of botanicals..So why did I like this particular painting so much?

First of all it featured roses only, one of the most beloved flowers of all time.

All floral designers know that the rose is a flower you never can go wrong with. Most people love them.

Secondly the very fact that the arrangement featured in this painting didn't have a large number of flowers/stems was interesting.

At a time when floral artists creating commercial pieces are trying to use less to create the feeling of more, this tiny painting, approximately 400 years old, was (perhaps deliberately, perhaps accidentally) offering some possible solutions to a remarkably contemporary commercial floral art problem.



Third of all it was a very convenient mixture.

To try to simulate many of the dutch floral still life paintings would require having a stem or two of many different flowers. This is possible with today's amazing floral distribution system, but logistically it is a nuisance, and financially oppressive.

The design in the painting didn't contain an entire greenhouse of varieties. It featured only a few. Entirely by coincidence, I just happened to have both pink and white roses and a few spray roses left over from a design class.

The timing couldn't have been better.

I couldn't resist creating an interpretation of the piece.



Ok. The original is on the left, my interpretation on the right.

An interpretation is just that. It is intended to capture the feeling but allow some differences and self expression. When dealing with botanicals, differences in the size and shape of blooms, stems and leaves also come into play.

I obviously used a contemporary container. I also like the use of branchy stuff (curly willow in this case.) My numbers of flowers (and colors) are deliberately close but not exact. (One could create a stylistic interpretation that allows even more variation in numbers of blooms, container, etc. For the sake of this exercise, my interpretation was a very conservative one.)



This was a really fun exercise and I think the floral created is very pretty.

But are there some specific thoughts, insights or reactions that I could share with you, as a result of doing this exercise?

Yes.. Indeed there are. And I think you may find them interesting...



1. You don't need huge numbers of flowers to make a visual impact.

In the painting there are five large pink and two white flowers (plus a few buds). In my interpretation I used six dark pink (and two white). As my flowers had no buds, I added some spray roses.

Eight main flowers and a stem or two of spray roses is not much. It confirms the old saying, "it's not what you use, it's how you use it."

2. Concentrating flowers and facing them towards one side of the container--as a one sided arrangement--(instead of making a design that can be viewed all the way around) helps give more visual impact with less content.

Eight flowers (plus spray roses) is bare minimal, but the **size of the design measured 23" tall (plus branchy stuff that extended the arrangement a little further)**. That is a fairly large sized arrangement considering the fact that there is relatively little content. This is achieved with greater ease if there is a front side featuring the flowers... and a back side of the design (facing away from the viewer).

3. The natural foliage of the rose has visual impact.**

No other foliage was used in this piece. The rose foliage contributes to positive space. It creates visual weight. A designer can manipulate this depending upon the psychological impact desired.

** (Don't believe that? Try making an arrangement of roses with all of the foliage stripped from the stems. You will actually see/feel the difference).



4. Incorporating flowers at different stages of their life span creates more visual interest and impact.

Some of the flowers used are fully open. Some are not. That variety contributes to visual interest.

The negative aspect of doing this, is that an arrangement incorporating very well developed botanicals has a much shorter life span than it otherwise might have had. This is not always commercially desirable.

5. Floral designing exists in three dimensional space. Don't be afraid to place flowers behind other flowers. It creates a feeling of depth and dimension.

Contemporary floral artists sometimes call the practice of putting a botanical behind another to create depth, "shadowing." Perhaps this "new" concept was recognized as a viable approach nearly 400 years ago!





6. Allow the flowers to angle in different directions. It feels more natural, when flowers angle upwards, downwards, or towards the sides, and are not arranged like soldiers on parade.

This works well with both live flowers as well as with permanent botanicals. They feel less stiff and more life like. It's a good trick. Try it.



7. Don't be afraid to use foliage/flowers with flaws. Once again it looks more natural.

Bosschaert didn't hesitate to feature foliage that appeared torn or "eaten." I found the effect intriguing. Some greens do come slightly flawed. I had to actually cut one piece of foliage to create that effect.

Note: This is at your own risk....Not all consumers would find this idea acceptable.





8. Sometimes visual complexity is a good thing. Messiness can be useful! A joyful profusion of natural mess adds to the visual complexity of the piece and means that each time we look at it, we can enjoy more detail.

(In other words, not all designs have to be minimalist or perfect geometrics. There are other looks that can also be enjoyed).



9. Consider adding artificial critters to the arrangement.

Bosschaert added insects to his painting. There is all kinds of speculation as to why insects sometimes end up in these kinds of floral paintings. Some have suggested that they represent the transience of life, and remind us not to be vain. Today the addition of such things to florals is usually an aesthetic statement not a religious or philosophical one. One floral designer I knew, always added a cute artificial bumble bee to his work, as a signature of his shop.

When I was a kid I had a pet turtle. So in a nod to Bosschaert, I had a little artificial/toy turtle visiting my interpretation.

Note: Not all consumers would find this idea acceptable.





**10. Experiment and feel free to interpret.
Respect the past while adding your own
vision to it.**

I am sure Bosschaert wouldn't mind if you used a differing container, added branchy stuff for interest etc.

11. An Unexpected Surprise--Fragrance!

The pink roses turned out to have an amazing fragrance. This was an unexpected pleasure.

Perhaps we should consider developing more flowers that smell good. It is a very basic appeal that has been neglected by breeders.

12. Remember that floral art doesn't exist in a vacuum. It is viewed in the context of a particular place or spot.

Bosschaert placed his rose arrangement inside a niche frame, with an open sky beyond. Some of his other paintings featured arrangements against dark backgrounds.

I do tend to like plain dark backgrounds for photography, but it was also fun to frame this arrangement against a window. After all, in real life flowers are placed in a wide variety of settings.





Thank You for Joining Me On This Little Adventure...

I really enjoyed the visit to the MFA, and urge that you visit there (often) as well. I also had a great time playing with the roses, reflecting upon the designing process, and sharing my musings with you today.

I hope that you got a sense of that---and that you get out there, get a few roses and also experiment with some of these design possibilities.

About Rittners Floral School

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Located in the prestigious Back Bay neighborhood of Boston, Rittners Floral School attracts students from all over North America and abroad by the excellence of its courses. Rittners makes use of the latest educational theory and technologies, to bring its students outstanding diploma/certificate programs in floral designing....

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