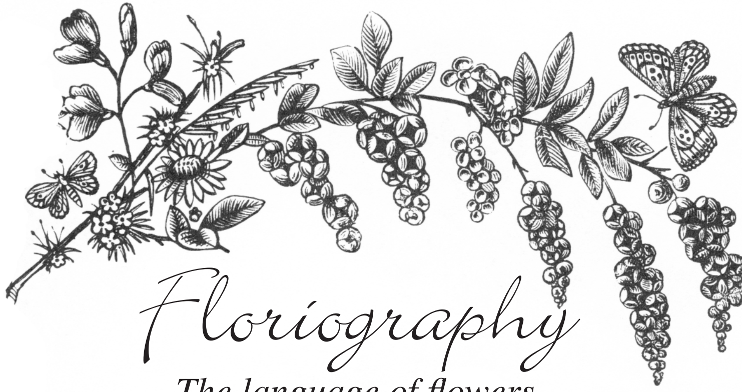
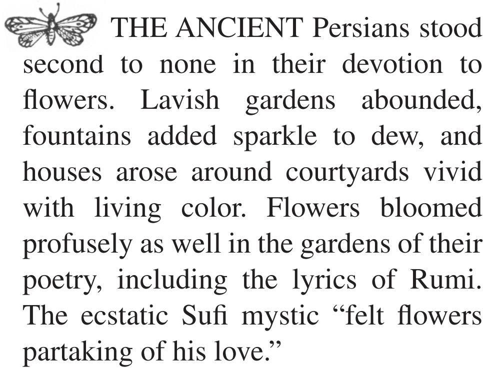


Floriography

The language of flowers



THE ANCIENT Persians stood second to none in their devotion to flowers. Lavish gardens abounded, fountains added sparkle to dew, and houses arose around courtyards vivid with living color. Flowers bloomed profusely as well in the gardens of their poetry, including the lyrics of Rumi. The ecstatic Sufi mystic "felt flowers partaking of his love."

By the sixteenth century "floriography" had developed. Specific varieties and bouquet combinations wafted

coded messages with their scents. A century later Charles II, the Merry Monarch, introduced Persian poetry and its floral symbols to Europe. But as the categories developed over time, controversies arose about the significance of certain blooms. Pink roses, for instance, could indicate either friendship or dying love, a potentially explosive mixed message.

In 1716 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, an eccentric English traveler, rolled up her leg-of-mutton sleeves and addressed the issue. She codified the jumble of symbols much as Homer had codified the jumble of Greek gods. Her writing spread to France and served as the basis for a classic handbook, *Les Fleurs Animées*, offering eight hundred floral messages. A further story allows that a French painter fell in love with a harem girl familiar with flower ciphers as contact with the outside world. He rescued her, wed her, and brought her back to France, where she taught others the fragrant system.

Victorian flowers speak up

The repressed English under Queen Victoria, never much of a merry

monarch, took the language of flowers to their hearts. The era was notorious for its prudery, especially in sexual matters, although the queen, mother of nine, must have been familiar with the basic process. Victorian guardianship of daughters was heavily paternal, and sweethearts had to make do with glances across the family tea table. But the lovers could say it with flowers, as florists still remind us, and the garden vernacular allowed expression of feelings.

Sometimes single flowers might be offered; sometimes bouquets served as more complex messages. The "tussie-mussie," yes, the actual term, was favored – a small bouquet swaddled in a lacy doily tied with a satin ribbon. Colors had their own significance. The most frequent presentation was the full red rose, then as now bespeaking passionate love and beauty. White rosebuds warn that one is too young for love. Yellow roses denote jealousy. Carnations declare fascination, honeysuckle assures of devoted affection, and chrysanthemums moan of slighted love.

So subtle is the flower code that even the manner of offering has its meaning, as conjugated as any language. A flower presented horizontally with the right hand conveys, "I love"; with the right hand but slightly to the left, "thou lovest"; with the left hand, "he loves." Two flowers indicate the plural. An inverted flower tells of denial – an asphodel held upside down signifies "I do not regret you." When a flower is presented at heart level it denotes the present; with the hand downward, the past; with the hand raised to eye level, the future.

Bouquet dispatches

For more specific messages, lovers learned the vocabulary of mixing flowers. A person too shy to declare love might simply send purple violets (shrinking violets). But a bouquet of streaky tulips and peonies indicate both an admiration for beauty and a person too bashful to speak up. Cabbage roses and lupines preceding a rendezvous express avid anticipation. Hollyhocks and sweetpeas say someone is interested in "delicate pleasures." But beware of an oleander branch with lavender surrounding a tuberose, for a person might be warning you of "dangerous pleasures." Abandoned love has its own message – lettuce leaves and hydrangeas circled around a white rosebud signify a cold heart and ignorance of true love.