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Fisher, Celia. Flowers of the Renaissance

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Fisher, Celia.

Flowers of the Renaissance.

Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011. Pp. 176. ISBN: 978-1-60606-062-9 (hardcover) \$39.95.

Were flowers of the Renaissance different from the ones we know today? There may be botanical differences, yet they are not as important as the symbolic importance given to Nature in the art of the past. Celia Fisher's book offers a new view of the variety of flowers that appear in paintings, manuscripts and decorative objects in Italy and Northern Europe. The book is a collection of colour illustrations with the equivalent of long captions on the species depicted, the iconographic significance, and horticultural history. Some paintings, such as Hugo van der Goes's *Portinari Altarpiece* (c. 1475) receive much attention with its iris, lilies and columbine perched at the lower edge of the panel, anticipating its placement above an altar. Joris Hoefnagel, Leonardo da Vinci, and Albrecht Dürer are all well represented. Less famous manuscripts and smaller panels, many from British collections, include flowers in unfamiliar ways as the main subject or a prominent part of the composition.

This picture book does not include footnotes or bibliography, and the main value for scholars (beyond the delight of the images) is the creation of this visual resource for anyone working on art and nature in the Renaissance. The many details, beautifully printed and in large format, show the botanical world in all its specificity and acuity.

A keen gardener will enjoy recognizing familiar flowers in art from the past. A Renaissance historian, however, might find an additional pleasure: seeing the range of ways artists integrated close observation of nature into sacred and secular imagery. Few of the pictures show flowers as the principal subject. Yet the delight of colour, form, and the implied sensual experience of smell and touch are an insistent presence. Recent scholarly work makes much of the senses in culture, the historical shaping of bodily experience in every aspect of life. Flowers, as this book shows, were not a distraction from religious experience but a route to the divine through the material qualities of divine Nature herself.

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