

A *Bloomin'* Tour



It's bloomin' springtime and time to start thinking beds, bulbs, and buds. Better than any seed catalogue, this self-guided tour leads you from one gorgeous blossom to another, while providing notes and tips by Tom Wolfe, the Art Institute's preeminent gardener. See Tom's handiwork in the gardens just to the north and south of the Michigan Avenue entrance.



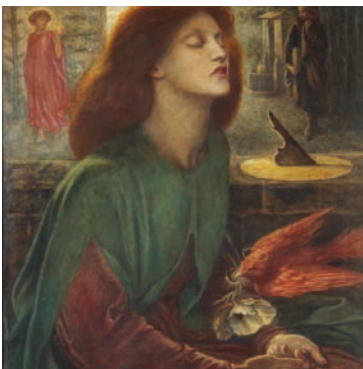
GALLERY 134

***Pear-Shaped Vase* (c. 14th century). China, Ming dynasty**

We begin our tour with the peony, a symbol of late spring and early summer, that graces this vessel. The peony is China's national flower and is traditionally an emblem of love, happiness, and good fortune. Found in the home, these flowers are talismans of good feng shui and emanate a positive influence over men and women to live harmoniously together.

Tom's Tidbit: "There are two kinds of peony: herbaceous and tree. The tree peonies are gorgeous but very expensive. Peony blooms don't last long, so I don't usually plant them in the Art Institute's gardens."

Fun Fact: The peony is Indiana's state flower, which was elected to replace the zinnia in 1957.



GALLERY 226

***Beata Beatrix* (1872) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti**

A strange red bird, a harbinger of both love and death, drops a poppy into the hands of a woman whose closed eyes and parted lips show her to be poised between this world and the next. This evocative painting links the artist's life and work with that of his namesake, the great Italian medieval poet Dante Alighieri. Rossetti's late wife, artist and model Elizabeth Siddall, is represented in the guise of Dante's unattainable beloved, Beatrice. Siddall's death from an overdose of laudanum, a highly addictive opiate mixture that was widely available in Victorian England, is referenced by the poppy, the source of laudanum.

Tom's Tidbit: "I plant big, colorful Oriental poppies in the north garden. Make sure yours get full sun and good drainage."

Fun Fact: During the Napoleonic Wars, the poppy drew attention as the mysterious flower that bloomed over the graves of fallen soldiers.



GALLERY 201

Chrysanthemums (1881/82) by Pierre Auguste Renoir

Flowers are forgiving subjects, as Renoir discovered. “I just let my brain rest when I paint flowers . . . I establish the tones, I study the values carefully without worrying about losing the picture. I don’t dare do that with a figure piece for fear of ruining it.” In *Chrysanthemums*, Renoir laid down a layer of lead white paint over a primed canvas to create a smoother surface. Then, while the surface was wet, he created the blossoms, working quickly with thin layers of paint, which lends the painting a delightful sense of transparency and fluidity.

Tom’s Tidbit: “It’s a great fall plant, and I fill the small urns lining the north garden’s balustrade with them.”

Fun Fact: The word *chrysanthemum* is derived from two Greek words *chrysos* (gold) and *anthos* (flower).



GALLERY 171

Magnolias on Light Blue Velvet Cloth (1885/95)

by Martin Johnson Heade

Heade produced landscapes and still lifes throughout North and South America, but he spent the last 20 years of his career in St. Augustine, Florida. There he began painting indigenous flowers such as the Cherokee rose, orange blossoms, and magnolias. Here, four magnolias are shown at close range in different stages of blossom, presenting a lavish display of tactile surfaces in the shiny leaves, smooth creamy petals, and lush velvet.

Tom’s Tidbit: “Though magnolias are native to the southern U.S., I tried them once. They like acidic soil, and my pH was too high. I gave up that idea.”

Fun Fact: Magnolias were among the first plants on earth to reproduce through flowers pollinated by insects.



GALLERY 265

Red Hills with Flowers (1937) by Georgia O’Keeffe

O’Keeffe is well known for her landscapes and still lifes of objects native to the American Southwest. In 1929, she spent a summer in New Mexico, where she was mesmerized by the natural beauty of the landscape. This painting features one of her favorite subjects: the juxtaposition of the sun-washed hills with flowers, magnified and simplified to underscore their essential beauty. Despite the predominance of flowers in her work, the artist professed no special affinity for them, stating “I don’t even like flowers, but they’re colorful and they sit still.”

Tom’s Tidbit: “This looks like gaillardia, a member of the aster family. It’s also called Mexican blanket flower.”

Fun fact: In the western United States gaillardia grow wild in large quantities (hence the name *blanket flower*).



GALLERY 154

Scene from the Book of the Dead (1069–945 B.C.). Egypt

In nature, the lotus flower opens each day with the sun and closes with the dusk. For the ancient Egyptians, it was a symbol for the daily rebirth of the deceased. In this scene from the Book of the Dead, a collection of spells, a large lotus flower is positioned between the Egyptian woman Tayuhentmut and the god of the dead, Osiris. Although his body is wrapped like a mummy, his green face represents fertile lands and nature’s constant course of death and renewal. On some of the tomb paintings in this gallery you can see other women holding the lotus flower to their noses in hopes of rebirth in the afterlife.

Tom’s Tidbit: “You won’t find these on our grounds, but the Chicago Botanic Garden has some great lotuses. Their root system and flowers are horribly invasive, and they need a cement basin to be contained.”

Fun fact: The seed, the leaf, and the stem of the lotus are edible and also have medicinal purposes.