

ANNUAL APPEAL

Anatomy of Art

To celebrate the acquisition of Dutch artist Maria van Oosterwyck's 1668 painting *Still life with flowers and butterflies* through the NGV 2022 Annual Appeal, *NGV Magazine* invited botanist Dr Alastair Robinson of Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens to identify the plant and flower species captured by van Oosterwyck, known for her sumptuous, and densely floral paintings. As Robinson discovered, the work features more than twenty different plants, and two animals of symbolic importance.

BY DR ALASTAIR ROBINSON

As a botanist at Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, it was novel to be asked by NGV's Curator of International Art, Laurie Benson, to provide information about the plants featured in painting to be acquired with the support of the public via the NGV's Annual Appeal. More habituated to determining identities through examination of living plants or pressed specimens, or working with technical illustrations of same, I was delighted to be faced instead with a spectacular still-life painting by a seventeenth-century artist, Maria van Oosterwyck.

The plants featured in this painting fall into two groups: native wildflowers and garden cultivars. The latter are varieties produced through coordinated breeding by skilled horticulturists, such as those at Leiden's Hortus Botanicus, a botanical garden in Amsterdam, a place that was frequented by Maria van Oosterwyck.

The wildflowers are most easily identified since they remain more or less true today to their wild counterparts of that era. They include cow parsley, lily of the valley, forget-me-not, nasturtium,

sweet pea, silver ragwort, dwarf morning glory and cornflower. Also present is a buttercup that appears similar to the field buttercup (*Ranunculus acris*), however, with apparently six petals instead of the usual five, this may be a cultivar.

The cultivars, which cannot be easily identified, include iris, lily, tulips, apothecary roses, double flowered peonies, carnations, paperwhite narcissus, bunch-flowered daffodil and the unopened poppy, whose large leaves indicate that it is not the common field poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, seen across Europe. Also present is a variegated grass, which features in many of van Oosterwyck's paintings. Though there are several contenders for this, the additional perspectives of this plant in her other paintings suggest that it is reed canary grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*).

Of particular interest are the so-called 'broken tulips' found in the painting, which resemble the modern triumph tulips of today. Broken tulips were highly prized in the seventeenth century owing to their relative scarcity. The striping seen in the petals – known

as colour break, hence 'broken' – is viral in origin and weakened the plants themselves, meaning their numbers could not be rapidly increased. This limited their availability and fuelled their wild popularity and high cost, which exceeded even that of the exuberantly ruffled parrot tulips, which also feature in paintings from the era.

Set upon one of the carnations is a red admiral butterfly, a consistent motif of the highly religious van Oosterwyck, to whom the insect may have symbolised transformation, or Christ's resurrection. Perhaps more tellingly is the barely noticeable European garden spider hanging to the left of the peonies. The female of this species, aptly named *Araneus diadematus*, meaning 'crowned spider', bears a pattern of silvery white dots on its abdomen that form the pattern of a traditional Christian cross – accounting for the alternative common name of 'cross spider' and its concomitant association with Christianity. Coupled with the cornflower, itself an emblem of the Virgin Mary, this piece may be one of van Oosterwyck's most symbolically rich compositions.

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Maria van Oosterwyck *Still life with flowers and butterflies* 1668
Proposed acquisition

