

GIVING

THE LANGUAGE  
OF FLOWERS

Flowers often express the things we find hard to put into words. **Shane Connolly** introduces us to the intriguing art of floriography





Designer Shane Connolly is our guide to a deeper look at flowers.

When I choose flowers, I want them to look and feel like the fruits of the earth, not like products off an assembly line. And when I arrange them, I want people to be enchanted by the flowers themselves. Understanding how former generations relied upon flowers, and were even able to express emotion and communicate through them, helps us rediscover their dignity, individuality and character.

It all started about twelve years ago, when I wrote a book called *The Language Of Flowers*. The experience transformed the way I see them. When I took on the task my knowledge of the language of flowers was basic at best but, as the project progressed, I noticed something surprising. Exploring this archaic floral language was opening my eyes to the beauty of flowers and, at the same time, it was opening my mind to the stories behind those flowers. Flowers had pasts. No meaning had been randomly allocated: the unique, individual histories of each flower led to a chain of specific meanings or symbolism. It was like getting to know someone, learning their life-story and meeting their family.

I'd always had a 'botanical approach' to flower arranging, where flowers are chosen with a gardener's eye and then arranged to flatter each bloom's individual qualities. The alternative approach generally sees flowers as generic elements of colour, structure or form; massed together to fill the void of an empty vase. And the result relies more on quantity than individuality for impact. It's rather like cooking with off-the-shelf ingredients instead of making the most of carefully chosen seasonal food.

*"Flowers were used to express feelings at a time when strict etiquette suppressed open communication"*

In the highly civilised and cosmopolitan world of today we have undoubtedly lost our ancestors' deep-rooted familiarity with nature. But the language of flowers was built on that connection. So, understandably, our 21st-century minds struggle to comprehend how floral symbolism could have wound its way through life, literature and the arts to even become an object of academic study – floriography.

### **Coded communication**

Meaning had been attributed to flowers for thousands of years in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, but the language of flowers was 'discovered' in Turkey, at the Ottoman Court in Constantinople. There, in 1717, the wife of the British Ambassador, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, came across a system of coded messages used by the concubines in the Sultan's harem. It was known as 'Selam' and was simply a decorative box filled with single flowers and other natural objects. Each flower and object had its own designated symbolism, and was used to pass information confidentially between the concubines, under the noses of guards and eunuchs. We don't know why Lady Mary was in the harem in the first place, but we do know she was enchanted and immediately sent similar boxes to friends back home, presumably including instructions to help them know what she was trying to say. A seed had been sown, and slowly it grew. In 1819 Louise Cotambert, writing under the nom de plume 'Madame Charlotte de la Tour', published the first proper dictionary of floriography, *Le Langage des Fleurs*. Some of her meanings came from the original Turkish Salem, others were the fruits of De La Tour's painstaking research into ancient mythology and plant folklore. This was a whole new ball game.

Flowers could now be used as a form of coded communication. Floriography caught on and blossomed alongside the growing passion for botany. Between 1830 and 1880, De la Tour's book inspired a host of others. Each one copied, added to, adapted and discarded previous interpretations to suit the individual author's knowledge or beliefs to accommodate some newly discovered species

of flower. The result was a confusing plethora of potential floral interpretations. But, despite this confusion, flowers were increasingly being used to express and even awaken emotions and feelings at a time when strict etiquette suppressed open communication. By the end of the 19th century, an understanding of the language of flowers was as important as being correctly dressed, if one wanted to make one's mark in society.

It could be said that the language of flowers, as Charlotte de la Tour knew it, died in the trenches of the Somme. The First World War removed the sentimentality and restrictions of the old order and left us with red poppies as the final floral symbol to remember the loss.

Since then, we've seen communication develop from post and telephone, and fax and mobile phone, to the phenomenon of social media. This has allowed us to communicate with an exchange of images that has become so unsuppressed, so completely out-there and so embarrassingly permanent, that we may well be reaching the point where a different visual code becomes newly relevant as we rediscover the need for discretion.

We're still obviously searching for ways to communicate more clearly, individually and meaningfully, even today. There is still a lot left to learn from exploring the meaning of flowers. At its simplest, floral symbolism stitches our relationship with



flowers back into the seasons, nature and the garden. And that makes us think of the origin of the flowers we buy, just as we now regularly do with the food we eat.

We have always used coded communication, but I'd even say the language of flowers is more expressive than the emojis, text abbreviations and acronyms that pervade communication today – maybe it's a visual code just waiting for someone to adapt it for Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat.

But the message I take from this is simple – flowers are a part of life, part of the living landscape, and we need to examine again our relationship with them, use them thoughtfully and respectfully, and be aware of their fragility and the potential damage we might be causing in their production.



Find out more about floriography in Shane Connolly's book *Discovering the Meaning of Flowers: Love Found, Love Lost, Love Restored*, published by Clearview, £20. [www.clearviewbooks.com](http://www.clearviewbooks.com)

## GIVING

### CLANDESTINE COMMUNICATION

*The language of flowers is a centuries-old visual system of coded messages that, today, just demands to be shared on social media. Here, Shane Connolly puts together his own secret communication...*

#### CHOOSE YOUR FLOWERS AND ITEMS

*The language of flowers originated in Turkish harems. Flowers and other items, all with secret meanings, were put in boxes and passed between concubines. Dead roses symbolise rejected love.*

#### PERSONALISE YOUR MESSAGE

*New elements can alter the tone of the message already in place. Here, autumn leaves represent melancholia, a handkerchief tree fruit symbolise tears, while dried beans convey exhaustion.*

#### EXTEND THE SEASONS

*Enthusiasts developed ways to extend the natural seasons of flowers, so that communication could continue all year round. Here, dried thistle represents retaliation, while primula pleads for restraint.*

#### ADD SOMETHING FRESH

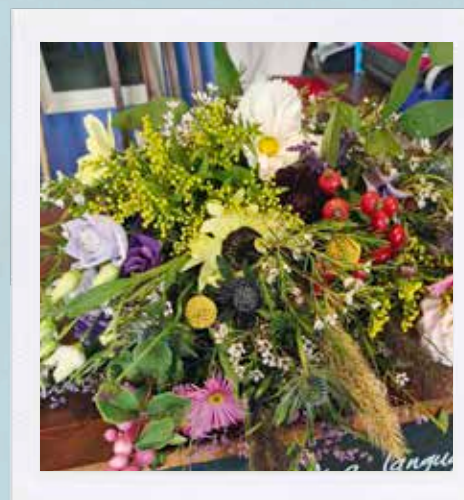
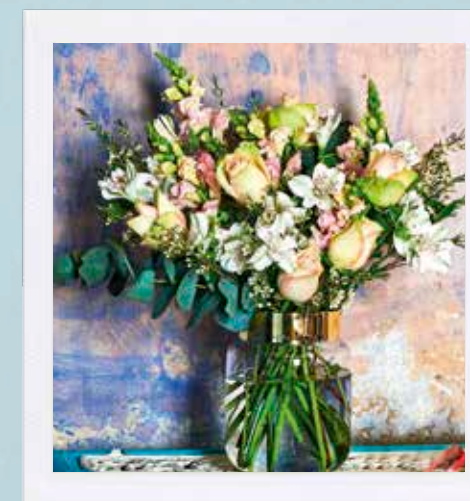
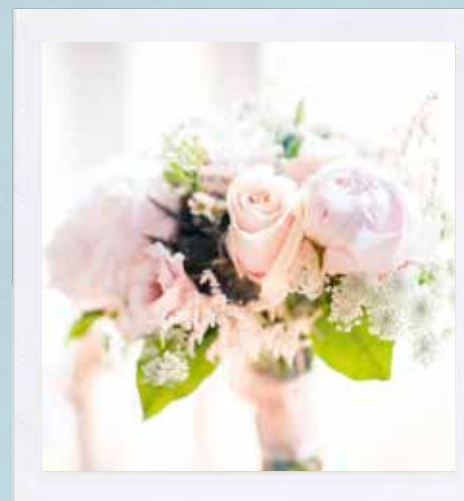
*Finally, a fresh sprig of artemesia suggests absence (it's the main ingredient of the highly alcoholic drink absinthe), while raspberries convey remorse.*



## GIVING

### MODERN FLORIOGRAPHERS

While the language of flowers may have blossomed in Victorian times, it's still being spoken by the most inspired and creative of today's florists. **Julia Wills** talked to four modern floriographers to find out why ▶





**Orchard Lane Flowers**

MARY KELAVA

Mary Kelava is the owner of Orchard Lane Flowers in Vancouver, Canada, and for her, floriography's connection with history adds hugely to its modern appeal. She believes its heritage inspires the same curiosity with the past as our modern fascination in tracing ancestors, collecting antiques and the love of all things vintage. It's also the perfect antidote to social media.

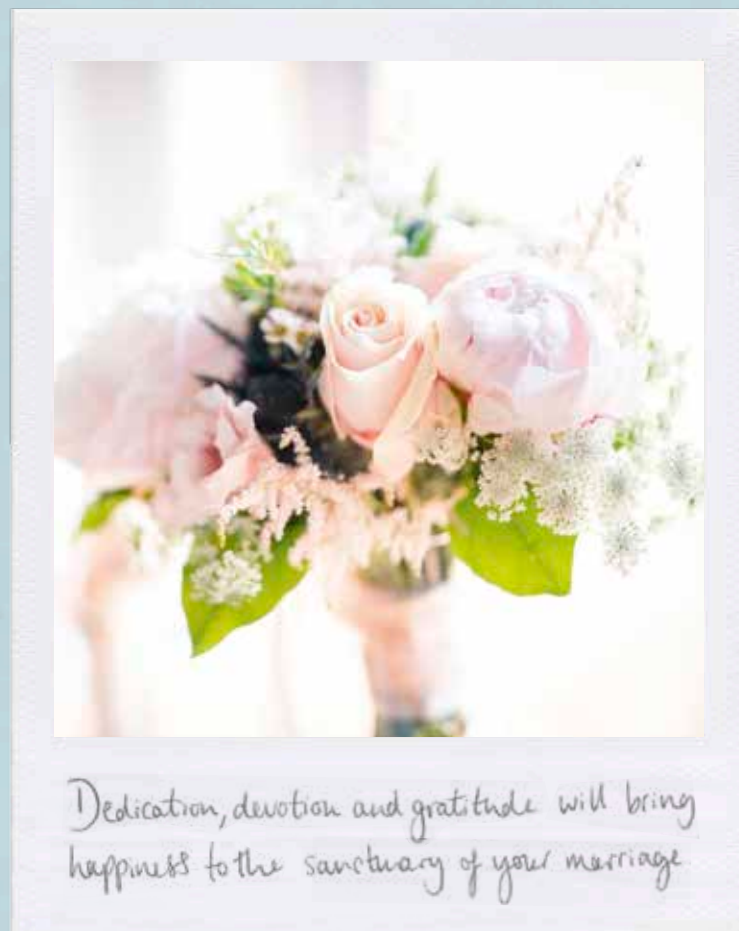
"This historical connection is important because while it may be a time of ancestry and vintage, we also live in a world of social media where a photo can go viral and that becomes the look everyone wants," she says. "Taking an inspirational image of a bouquet, then adding some flowers of your own gives it a personal message."

However, modern floristry allows for new twists in flower talk, too. Romance, for example, is traditionally spoken in red roses, but as Mary points out, when other flowers, "such as peonies, ranunculi and dahlias are included, chosen to underpin the particular sender's feelings – friendship, love, happy life, lasting success, protection, admiration, good fortune – then they come together in a beautifully personal and memorable bouquet."

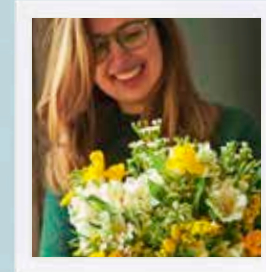
- \* Pink rose: admiration \* Peony: good fortune
- \* Astilbe: dedication \* Thistle: devotion
- \* Lisianthus: gratitude \* Queen Anne's lace: sanctuary
- \* Waxflower: happiness in marriage

Bouquet by Mary Kelava at Orchard Lane Floral Design, [www.orchardlanefloraldesign.ca](http://www.orchardlanefloraldesign.ca)

*"We live in a world where a photo can go viral and becomes the look everyone wants. Taking an image of a bouquet and adding some flowers of your own makes it more personal"*



Photograph by Cliff Ma



**Bloom & Wild**

AMELIA CHRISTOFFERS

Amelia Christoffers, the floral stylist at innovative online florists Bloom & Wild, says giving flowers has always been an emotional act, but by incorporating the symbolism of flowers into your bouquet, you make it personal too.

"We send flowers for people's most important occasions and knowing the deeper meaning helps them to tell a more emotive story," she says. Every bouquet is sent with its own booklet, illustrating each flower in turn, and highlighting one whose meaning perfectly expresses the bouquet's message.

But floriography is firmly about the everyday too, as perfectly illustrated by Bloom & Wild's popular 'Erin' bouquet, a gorgeous display full of yellow scented freesia and solidago. "Freesia symbolise friendship and yellow is scientifically proven to improve your mood," explains Amelia, "making it perfect to brighten a friend's week."

Another popular option is Bloom & Wild's 'Piper' bouquet. With Belle Rose for gratitude and snapdragon for strength, the bouquet communicates its message of true friendship through its signature flower, Alstroemeria. Perfect to add sparkle to a loved one's day.

- \* La Belle Rose: gratitude \* Alstroemeria: friendship
- \* Eucalyptus: protection
- \* Snapdragon: strength

Bouquet by Amelia Christoffers and Caroline Chate at Bloom & Wild, [www.bloomandwild.com](http://www.bloomandwild.com) ▶

*"We send flowers for people's most important occasions. Knowing the deeper meaning helps them to tell a much more emotive story"*



**The Real Flower Company**

ROSEBIE MORTON

Rosebie Morton, founder of the The Real Flower Company (which has won several awards at the Chelsea Flower Show), believes that floriography also has roots in our colour psychology. “For instance, the human eye processes the colour yellow first. It’s the perceived colour of the sun and carries connotations of confidence, optimism and creativity. It therefore makes sense that yellow roses are regarded as a symbol of friendship and joy – the perfect choice to cheer someone up.”

But flowers don’t just carry meaning in their poetic associations, shapes and stories. It’s in their scent too. After all, who can think of lavender without its aroma, which epitomises calm and serenity? For Rosebie, scent is all important. “An important part of the message conveyed by our bouquets comes from their wonderful aroma. I started out by growing scented roses in a corner of my mother-in-law’s garden, as I couldn’t understand why most of the flowers being sold by florists didn’t have the scent I remembered from my childhood. People often report a sense of nostalgia when they smell our flowers, especially our garden roses, which is what we are best known for. Drinking in the exquisite scent of an English garden rose is uplifting and positive.”

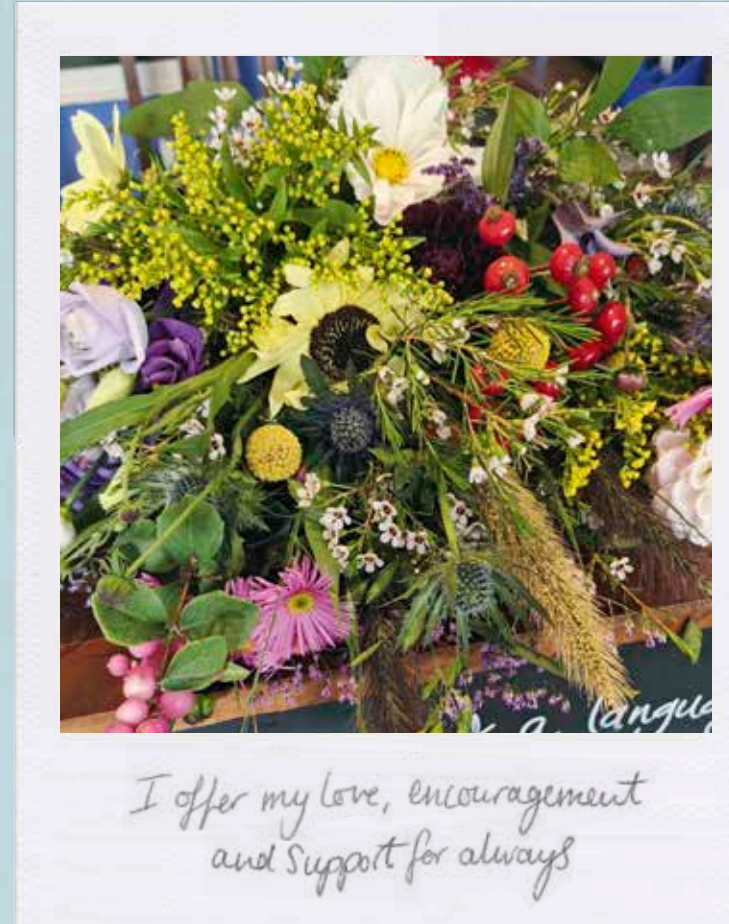
\* Pink roses: perfect happiness \* Ammi Visnaga: sanctuary \* Tanacetum daisy: innocence and purity

Bouquet by Rosebie Moreton and Daisy Brooks at The Real Flower Company, [www.realflowers.co.uk](http://www.realflowers.co.uk)

*“The human eye processes the colour yellow first. It’s the perceived colour of the sun and carries connotations of confidence, optimism and creativity”*



*True love, real love,  
love's sanctuary, love's embrace*



*I offer my love, encouragement  
and support for always*

*“People try to show emotion impossible to put into words. Flowers reflect what their hearts and minds are singing, and it’s all wrapped up in the ritual of bouquet building”*



**Floriography by Vera Fallacy**

VERA FALLACY

“Flower symbolism is a language that speaks without words,” says Vera, the owner of Floriography by Vera Fallacy, a rainbow-bright shop based in Bristol, brimming with seasonal blooms and botanicals.

Floriography originally whispered the sender’s secrets in societies that didn’t want them said out loud. For Vera, modern floriography remains faithful to those roots. For her, freedom to express oneself is still at the heart of this craft. The message most commonly expressed in her floriographed bouquets is hope. She thinks long and hard when she creates a floral arrangement. “People are most often trying to show depth of emotion that’s impossible to put in words. The flowers reflect some of what their hearts and minds are singing, and it’s all wrapped up in that little ritual of bouquet building that I’m obsessed with.”

Modern floriography, then, is clearly blooming. Far from being pressed into history books, in the creative hands of these florists, it continues to delight, weaving its nostalgia and messages into beautiful bouquets that truly say it with flowers.

\* Lisianthus – appreciation that will never fade or be forgotten \* Wax flower – life’s riches \* Solidago – encouragement to be one’s best self and light in dark times. \* Sunflower – loyalty, positivity and strength \* Cosmos – peace and wholeness \* Craspedia – to tell someone you light up my world \* Dahlia – for an unbreakable bond

Bouquet by Vera Fallacy – Floriography by Vera Fallacy, [www.floriographybyvera.co.uk](http://www.floriographybyvera.co.uk)