THE ARTS SOCIETY

BECOME AN INSTANT EXPERT ON...

...MEDIEVAL NATURAL SYMBOLS

BY ARTS SOCIETY LECTURER JONATHAN FOYLE

Enter a church or cathedral or pore over an ancient manuscript and you'll discover representations of nature that are full of meaning. Our expert examines the evidence...

'...HEAVEN – THE RETURN TO EDEN – WAS IMAGINED AS AN ENCLOSED GARDEN IN LATE SPRING. THE ENCLOSURE IS A SYMBOL OF MARY'S SEALED WOMB; YOU MIGHT SEE A DOVE AS THE HOLY SPIRIT ENTERING FROM ABOVE, BUT THE GATES ALWAYS STAY SHUT'

Book of Hours, Ghent or possibly Bruges, c.1505 (tempera on vellum)

Ox-eye daisies and other native species known to medieval eyes

1. CULTIVATING NAMES

Our inherited vocabulary can be taken for granted – but it is laden with meanings and understanding its etymology can unpack the experience of our ancestors. Flower names are rich with medieval ideas on art and nature. Many of us have common daisies in our lawn and marigolds self-seeding in the borders. But did you know that the name ‘daisy’ comes from ‘day’s eye’? Like the marigold, it opens in sunshine and closes at dusk. So it seeks the light and rejects the darkness – a Christ-like flower. Look closely: its white petals tinged with pink speak of Christ’s bloodstains; as a motif the daisy is laced through the margins of Books of Hours.

The closely related marigold is ‘Mary’s Gold’, its long petals collecting dew and dripping as if with tears at dawn. It flowers through ‘Ladytide’ – the liturgical calendar with the main feasts of the Virgin, from early spring to the autumn frosts. The marigold was usually depicted in the margins around the lamentation of the Virgin. It’s a little-known fact that the King and Queen of heaven’s flowers were used to represent our monarchs at the end of the Middle Ages.

Double rose decoration in the southwest tower vault of Lichfield Cathedral, c.1520

2. KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

The appearances of plants were crucial to understanding the intention of their maker. It was thought that God's purpose in nature was to remind us of biblical truths, as the *Wisdom of Solomon* explains that God ordered all things in measure and number and weight. The number three was thought trinitarian – an open iris looks like a paternoster triangle showing God, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The number five – a common array of petals – suggested the five wounds of Christ. Combine that number with the colour red, and you have five bloody wounds. No wonder the red rose of five petals is seen in so many churches, and was chosen as an emblem by the warrior king Edward III, even before the Lancastrian dynasty adopted it.

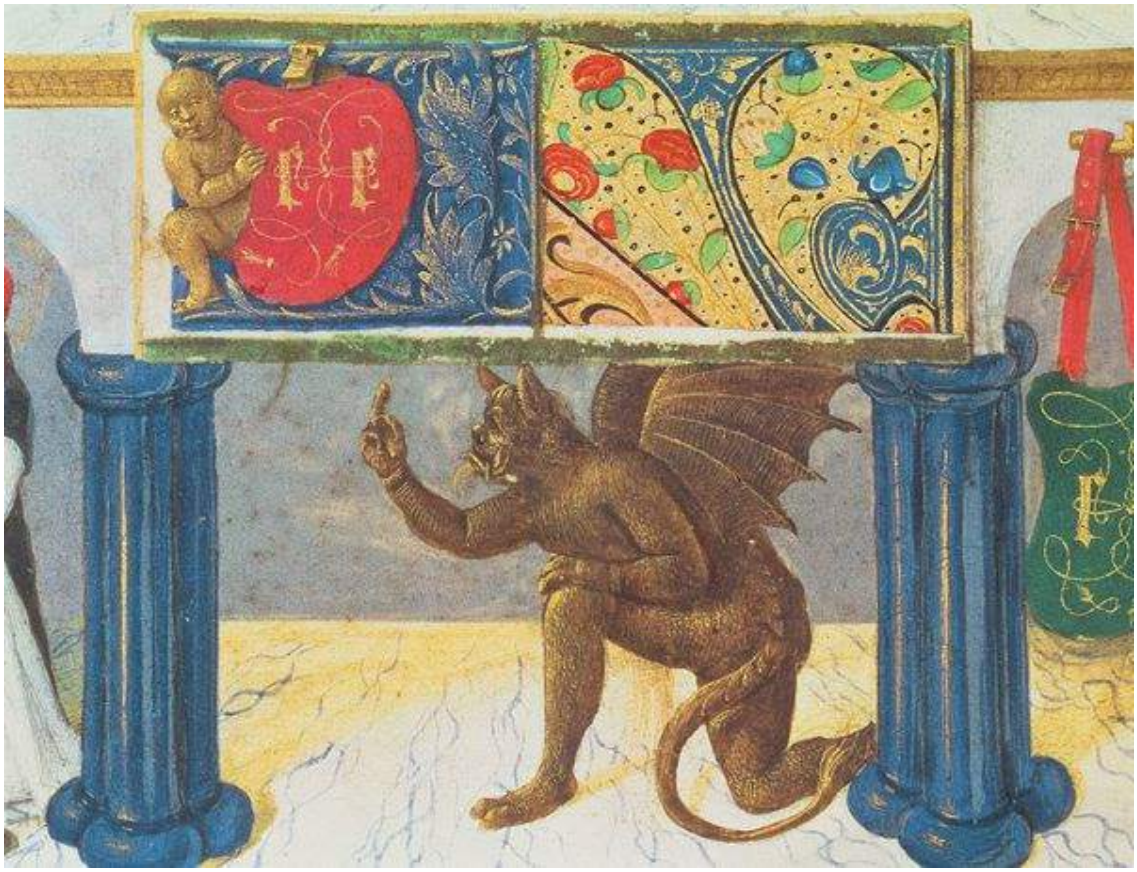
But not all plants relayed biblical symbolism through their shape and colour. In some illustrated copies of the *Tacuinum Sanitatis* (an 11th-century Arab book on health by Ibn Butlan of Baghdad, which became popular in Christian Europe) a man is shown lustily approaching a fashionable lady before a patch of aubergine plants. The pendulous purple pods reminded many of the male appendage, and similar visual associations were informative to medieval medicine. Walnuts were thought to be good for the brain, for example.

A Lincoln Cathedral carving of a dragon eating grapes

3. SEASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Today, we flock to Chelsea Flower Show in May, when gardens are at their youthful peak. That promise of new life was central to the medieval idea of rebirth and redemption. Just getting through the cold and barrenness of each winter before the advent of central heating and supermarkets would have made the return of spring's sunshine and greenery a tangible salvation. So heaven – the return to Eden – was imagined as an enclosed garden in late spring. The enclosure is a symbol of Mary's sealed womb; you might see a dove as the Holy Spirit entering from above, but the gates always stay shut.

Medieval paintings of paradise tend to show plants in May, when growth and colour are at their best. So iris and speedwell are the blue of the Virgin's mantle, and in the grass there are strawberries, the first sweetness of the year. Medieval artists in Europe often showed the first red roses of summer, *Paeonia officinalis* (known in the Alps), set near a figure of an infant Christ, to indicate his sacrifice. The array of flowers is encyclopaedic. However, there were exceptions to spring blooms. Autumnal grapes reminded you that the Communion wine taken in church with bread was the blood and body of transubstantiation. In Italy, oranges symbolised life through the depths of winter, a task given to holly and ivy in the north.



Details of a demon, from the Hours of Etienne Chevalier, *c.1445*

4. GARDENS ALWAYS HAVE BUGS – AND WORSE

Don’t gardeners know it; slugs, snails, rabbits and birds will all help themselves to your tender produce. In the Garden of Eden there was the serpent, who tempted poor Eve to lose paradise for mankind. The whole point of Western theology was to regain that original paradise through exemplary conduct – good deeds, worship, pilgrimage or even sainthood – but the devil lurked in his many reptilian guises, waiting to leap on the fallible.

Many medieval great churches were conceived as visions of paradise with leafy sculpture, and their numerous devils remind you of the constant challenge to your moral integrity. Lincoln Cathedral is a great example. It is dedicated to St Mary, and you’ll find a figure of her in the Angel Choir, built from 1256 to 1280 and one of the most expensive and glorious examples of English Gothic architecture. But to reach her you have to navigate a sculptural cycle that starts at the expulsion of Adam and Eve with a notably disgusted St Michael, then – almost hidden within the carved foliage – you’ll encounter the Lincoln Imp, crouching over the shrine of St Hugh of Lincoln’s head. Today he’s the dancing symbol of Lincolnshire County Council, which suggests his true meaning as the agent of damnation may have been lost in translation.

A flowering Old Rosa alba

5. MAKE YOUR OWN PARADISE

Glean inspiration from the medieval gardens that have been reconstructed at The Weald and Downland Living Museum in West Sussex, and many other sites around the world. The more ornamental are typically set out as grids, featuring raised beds with stake-clamped timber boards or borders of hazel or willow hurdles, linked by gravel paths, surrounded by chestnut gates and fences. The beds might grow the brassicas and pulses found in pottage; lavender to sweeten the home, perhaps bay and herbs for flavour, or flowers to be arranged in handled jars. The symbolism in those plants is yours to research and enjoy. You may want to try an ancient plant like the *Rosa alba* – the white rose of York. It will flower for years, but it would only take an hour's talk to explore its origins.

JONATHAN'S TOP TIPS

Seek out the saintly
Plants were associated with saints. Look for roses in churches and cathedrals dedicated in whole or part to St Mary the Virgin (Lincoln, Lichfield, Exeter, Salisbury) and grapes in those dedicated to St John the Evangelist (for example, at Beverley Minster).

Discover associations
Explore manuscript margins with new eyes, considering how the behaviour of insects and animals complements the flowers. A good example is that of butterflies, which are often associated with red carnations. They emerge from their tomb-like chrysalis with wings that take them heavenward, so they represent the reincarnation of Christ from which the carnation took its name.

Dip into a good book
Explore this subject further through:

- *The Oak King, the Holly King and the Unicorn: the myths and symbolism of the Unicorn Tapestries* by John Williamson, published by Harper Collins
- *Flowers of the Renaissanc*e by Celia Fisher, published by Frances Lincoln
- *Lincoln Cathedral: The Biography of a Great Building* and *Lichfield Cathedral: A Journey of Discovery* by Jonathan Foyle, both published by Scala Arts & Heritage Publishers Ltd

OUR EXPERT'S STORY

Dr Jonathan Foyle was chief executive of the British office of World Monuments Fund for eight years, and a curator of historic buildings at Hampton Court for as long, during which time he took his 2002 PhD on reconstructing Wolsey's palace. He is a frequent feature writer for the *Financial Times* on issues of architecture and craft and has written seven monographs on medieval great buildings. A presenter of numerous television series, including BBC Four's *Henry VIII: Patron or Plunderer?* and BBC Two's *Climbing Great Buildings*, he lectures on art-historical topics. Among his Arts Society talks are *A Paradise Garden: the art of medieval natural symbols*; *Lincoln Cathedral: Mary's Paradise Garden:* 300 years of changing expression on St Mary in an architecturally superlative cathedral; and *Henry VII's State Bed*, the story of an exceptional recent discovery of state furniture, rich with carved plant symbolism, revealing the self-image of one of our most interesting monarchs.