

The Soul of Flowers

PAVLÍNA KOURKOVÁ

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# THE SOUL OF FLOWERS

*The loveliest flowers in our meadows and gardens*



*Albatros*





*Albatros*

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A detailed botanical illustration of a flowering plant, likely a species of Campanula. The plant features several slender, green stems that branch out. The stems are adorned with numerous small, yellow, star-shaped flowers, some of which are in full bloom while others are still in bud. Interspersed among these are larger, vibrant purple flowers with five petals and prominent white stamens. The overall composition is delicate and elegant, set against a plain white background.

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*Albatros*

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Text © Klára Mandausová, Pavlína Kourková, 2022  
Translation © Andrew Oakland, 2022

*As well* as my parents and sisters, I wish to thank my grandfather, my constant inspiration. Huge thanks are owed to my boyfriend Vojta for his unwavering support and encouragement on my journey.

I dedicate this book to those who love flowers as much as I do and to those who are only just discovering their beauty and gentle charm.

As a little girl, I often imagined and wished that flowers were as big as trees, so that their loveliness was there for all to see. These days, I think it as well that this is not so. To admire flowers, you must bend down to them, in itself an expression of the respect they deserve and our humility in the face of it. To say that they are essential for our life is no exaggeration: it literally depends on them. Without the oxygen they give so selflessly, our existence would be impossible. Our gratitude and humility are their just deserts.

I very much hope that this book will give you the kind of pleasure that flowers have given me my whole life long.

*Pavlína Kourková*

# PAVLÍNA KOURKOVÁ'S WORLD



She is most at home on the meadow, in the woods, in the garden... in short, in the countryside. When we see her, she will be bending down to a flower, touching a blossoming branch, or caressing the grass, breathing in the scents and taking in the sights with respect and admiration. Sometimes she will take a flower back to her desk, where she will paint it for hours on end. Her home has the breath of flowers: live ones in vases, their true representations on paper.

She is most fond of irises, peonies, roses and simple wildflowers. She considers the amaryllis a jewel. She sees a uniqueness worthy of admiration even in flowers that are beginning to wither. She loves all flowers without reservation.

It takes Pavlína a full month to produce a watercolour. She applies one layer of paint over another with great patience. First, she takes a thin brush to draw in the natural shades with firm strokes. Then, having waited for the water-based paint to dry, she brings the beauty of the plant to the paper with tremendous precision and great tenderness. Pavlína's paintings make you want to touch them, immerse yourself in them, examine every petal, leaf and fold. One of her pictures on your wall is like part of a beautiful garden in your home.

Pavlína's talent as an artist caught the eye. Before long, she was accepted as a member of the UK's prestigious Society of Botanical Artists (SBA) and its US equivalent the American Society of Botanical Artists (ASBA), both of which have worldwide reach. Her global recognition does not end there. The SBA magazine has published several of her pictures. *Plantae*, the world's largest regular

exhibition of botanical art, held in London, chose as its poster her picture *Dandelion Rings on Black Background*. At an exhibition in Seoul, South Korea she was awarded an Honourable Mention. As a result of these successes, Pavlína finds herself in an elite group of botanical artists with worldwide recognition.

Yet she might have taken an altogether different, simpler (her own word) path. She has degrees from two Prague schools: in Biology and Healthy Lifestyle from the Faculty of Education of Charles University, and in Landscape Gardening and Landscaping from the Czech University of Life Sciences. Both would have opened doors to an interesting, well-paid profession; she could have become a teacher or a landscape architect. But the desire to paint overwhelmed such aspirations.

By taking the artist's path – like a seed forcing its way through firm earth, to develop into a strong, healthy plant with the loveliest flowers – she has combined her love for all that grows with her love for paper and brush.

While still on a study stay in the Netherlands, Pavlína joined a group of scientists on two expeditions in the Western Sahara, where in line drawings she produced a survey of local medicinal plants for the book *Plantas Medicinales Saharawi*. She also drew maps for a book titled *Exploring the Upper Dulong River*.

Her studies over, she started work as a landscape architect in the United Kingdom, where her work took her to the Chelsea Flower Show in London. And it was there that the first silken threads were spun that would trap Pavlína in an artistic web. As she marvelled at so many beautiful pictures of large flowers in one place, she felt the need to talk to their painters. It dawned on her that this might be her chosen path.

Back in the Czech Republic, her own work became her top priority. Although she continued to work as a garden architect, it soon became clear that because of the demands on her time – she was painting early in the morning

and all evening into the night, with a full day's work in between – she would have to choose between one or the other profession. Her doubts in her ability to make a living as a painter notwithstanding, she decided to take the risk: she gave up the day job and became self-employed.

As well as painting the pictures of her choice, she worked as an illustrator of children's books and with a number of companies involved in the production of herbal products. Interest in her pictures – originals and fine-art prints in limited editions – intensified to such a degree that she was able to give up on commercial commissions.

Despite her many successes (painting now provides her with a good living), Pavlína has remained out of the limelight, as is her nature. For the most part, she presents her work on social networks; she is shy of putting it up for exhibition or entering it in competitions. So imagine her surprise in 2018, when she was invited to exhibit at the event *Plants: Myths and Legends*, held in Moscow by the Russian Association of Botanical Artists! Not only did she present her work there, but she also led a masterclass on large-format botanical illustration. She continues to regard this invitation as a minor miracle that welcomed her into the worldwide community of botanical artists.

Pavlína now spends her days painting and enjoying nature and the creative process. Her greatest reward, she says, is the pleasure her paintings give those who take them away. She exchanges long, handwritten letters with the grandfather who introduced her to painting and from whom she has inherited her talent. He is over ninety now, and still an active painter.

There is always something to write about. There is always something to paint.

For the beauty of flowers is never-ending.

# TREATING FLOWERS WITH RESPECT

***‘To see a World in a Grain of Sand/  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your  
hand/ And Eternity in an hour.’***

— WILLIAM BLAKE, ENGLISH PAINTER, POET AND PRINTMAKER

There exists a parallel between flowers and human life. At first, they are small and barely seen. They become buds that only hint at what they will become. Their petals are revealed slowly before opening in all their beauty, in impressive plays of colour and scent. Later, they tire and wither – yet their beauty is not lost, just different. This second phase is charged with memories and loaded with experience. Though time takes away freshness, the essence remains, and from this essence new life grows.

For their beauty, mystery and gentle charm, flowers have interested artists (painters, novelists, poets and architects alike) throughout history. They beautify gardens and homes. They brighten up the landscape. They provide food and comfort for the soul and for the body. They have the ability to heal, and to bring joy and encouragement.

They may also serve to embolden – which explains their presence in the coats of arms of noble families and knights. They have a language of their own, expressing feelings at moments when their giver is lost for words.

For Pavlína Kourková, a flower is more than a plant with a stem, leaves and petals. She perceives it as a perfect organism whose beauty can be transferred to paper only by patient striving combined with a large dose of understanding. She looks at it from many angles, not all of which are physical. This examination is also an attempt to reveal that which is within – the very soul of the flower. The imprint of the artist's observation – infused with love, respect and humility – will then appear in the picture.





# Common chicory

(*Cichorium intybus*)

**Past and present:** Its blue flowers are like the eyes of blue-eyed girls waiting for their beloved to come home from war. Some don't stay the course, and they wither. 'The one who waits': such is the name of this flower in Slavonic languages. Perhaps for this reason, chicory is sometimes referred to as a sorrowful flower. It is also a symbol of eternal love. It thrives all over the world, except in colder regions.

Many legends and superstitions relate to chicory. Not everywhere was it an expression of sorrow. Indeed, in eastern lands of the ancient world it was considered a magical bearer of beauty. The Egyptians regarded it as a panacea. Our ancestors also believed that whoever should pluck it on Walpurgis Night would become invisible. On the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, a person desirous of love or friendship should touch the object of their desire with the flower.

Chicory of the aster (*Asteraceae*) family is prized for its medicinal properties as well as its beauty. Each part of it will benefit the human body. It is said to have antiparasitic effects. It supports the workings of the liver, gallbladder and metabolism, is a mild diuretic, and lowers blood sugar levels. It works against constipation and generally improves digestion. Powdered chicory root is used as a coffee substitute.

Chicory is favoured by beekeepers. Relatively rare chicory honey is pale yellow and has a similar taste to sunflower honey. Brewers add roasted chicory to beer, to improve its taste. It is said that chicory root contains more inulin than sugar beet. It is used as a sweetener.

*Through the painter's eyes: This flower's simple blue reflects the tenderness of the blue sky. I often see it on my country walks. I struggled with the composition of this picture. For a long time, I had the feeling it wasn't quite right, that something was missing. And then it occurred to me what to do: the chicory in my picture would be supplemented by a bee. The chicory has pollen in abundance, so bees love it. This chicory was a first for me – my first large-format picture with an insect in it as well as the plant.*



Common Chicory,  
2019, watercolour, 20 cm × 62 cm

# Purple-flowered Christmas rose

(*Helleborus pupurascens*)

**Past and present:** The hellebore known as the purple-flowered Christmas rose is associated with a Bible story about a poor shepherd girl who travelled to Bethlehem to see the new-born Christ Child. As she had no gift for him, she knelt down and wept. Before long, she saw hellebore flowers in the snow. According to one superstition, whosoever should wear these flowers will be granted eternal youth.

But flowers of the crowfoot family (*Ranunculaceae*) are also associated with witchcraft. They were used in the making of 'flying ointments', said to improve a witch's ability to fly. They were also said to help with invisibility.

As the plant was poisonous, it was used by the Celts in the making of poison darts for the hunting of game. The Celts also hung it in their barns, to keep evil spirits away from their livestock. In ancient Rome, the poison was known as *helleboro*, hence the Latin name of the plant. In the distant past, hellebore poison was used by folk healers in the treatment of heart disease and rashes, and for suppression of mental disorders. To this day, the expression '(S)he needs hellebore' is used to suggest that someone is mad or going that way. The plant has also been used to treat epilepsy or certain gynaecological conditions. Its use was dangerous, however: by giving the wrong dosage, the healer might kill the patient. Hellebore has fallen into disuse as a medicine. Because of the cardiac glycosides it contains, it acts in a similar way to the highly poisonous foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*).

In England, Germany and France, it is popular at Christmas, as a table decoration or as part of a wreath or other floral arrangement. It is one of the few plants that blooms in winter too.

Whoever receives this plant as a gift can hope to appear in the giver's dreams.

This plant genus comprises about thirty species. It is found mainly in Europe, but also in parts of Asia and northern Africa.

**Through the painter's eyes:** The purple-flowered Christmas rose is very popular with botanical artists. The graceful flowers often put us in mind of the wild rose. It is one of few flowers that bloom in winter too. It lasts well in a vase, so allowing the artist plenty of time to capture it faithfully. The beautiful leaves are a wonderful dark green, making them perfect for decoration. My picture of the purple-flowered Christmas rose is one of my first botanical paintings. Its playful composition differs in style from my other pictures.

Purple-flowered  
Christmas Rose,  
2018, watercolour,  
33 cm x 36 cm



# *Bigleaf hydrangea*

*(Hydrangea macrophylla)*

**Past and present:** Many European fairy tales contain a princess called Hortensia, after an alternative name for this plant. The reasons for this are obvious: as well as having a noble ring to it, the hortensia (or hydrangea) produces beautiful, sophisticated flowers that were surely predestined to become flower nobility.

Not only are they beloved of writers and artists, but they are a favourite with florists too. Dried hydrangea flowers are used in small works of art. They look good in wreaths and many other kinds of decoration. Cut hydrangeas last well in a vase.

When receiving a hydrangea as a gift, a woman should pay full attention. In the language of flowers, it expresses a question she may later forget.

This flowering plant of the family *Hydrangeaceae* comes in over seventy species in the form of subshrubs, shrubs, trees and vines, most abundantly in Asia (China and Japan are considered its homes), but also in America. No species of hydrangea is indigenous to Europe, although it is very popular here. The hydrangea came to the Old Continent in the 19th century, perhaps reaching its greatest popularity in the 1980s – even though it is not undemanding in terms of care, since it is sensitive to calcium. Where its conditions are good, it rewards its keeper with flowers of magnificent fullness. If its soil is high in acid, it acquires a blue colour; more alkaline soil colours it pink.

The Dutch and the English are considered master cultivators of hydrangeas. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that in their countries hydrangeas of various colours are found on every corner.

Hydrangea and Large White,  
2020, watercolour, gouache,  
58 cm × 37.5 cm →





Hydrangea, 2020,  
watercolour, 53 cm × 57 cm ←



Hydrangea, 2017,  
watercolour, 43.5 cm × 56 cm ↑

*Through the painter's eyes: So many tiny florets must come together to form one beautiful head! Sometimes this reminds me of a cluster of little butterflies. The changing colours of the flowers make gorgeous combinations. The hydrangea is one of few flowers to retain its charm and beauty even after it dries. Therein lies its secret.*



# Garden hyacinth

(*Hyacinthus orientalis*)

**Past and present:** Greek mythology gives us several stories about the origin of this striking, fragrant flowering plant. Hyacinthus was a son of King Amyclus of Sparta and his wife Diomedes, and a favourite of the gods Apollo and Zephyrus. Hyacinthus's preference for Apollo caused the jealous Zephyrus to kill Hyacinthus during a game of quoits. The hyacinth flower then grew from the young man's spilled blood. In his honour, the Spartans held a three-day Hyacinthia festival every summer. The first day was one of mourning over Hyacinthus's death; the second and third celebrated his rebirth in flower form. The myth is known to us through Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

The eleven-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wrote the opera *Apollo et Hyacinthus* on this very theme. As dictated by the time, Apollo's love interest is Hyacinthus's sister Melia, not the young man himself.

A nymph called Daphne adds another story to the legend. The sounds of Apollo and Hyacinthus playing quoits wakes the nymph, and the god falls in love with her. Daphne promises herself to whichever of them should throw the furthest. As the two compete, a quoit thrown by Apollo strikes Hyacinthus on the head, killing him by accident. In the young man's honour, Daphne plants white, blue and yellow candles in the ground, and these are turned into flowers by the Fates.

Three species of the asparagus family (*Asparagaceae*) are widespread in southwest Asia. In Europe, the garden hyacinth (*Hyacinthus orientalis*) is cultivated as a decorative flower. Along with the daffodil and the tulip, it is the most distinctive of the spring flowers. It will thrive just as well in a flowerpot as in the garden. It contains no health-giving substances that would make it a sought-after medicine, but it is loved by perfumiers, who use it in their luxury products.

The recipient of this flowering plant should rejoice: the gift of a hyacinth means that the giver's heart belongs to them.

*Through the painter's eyes: Not least for the intoxicating scent of the dozens of florets in each of its beautiful large heads, the hyacinth is an expression of the energy and joy of spring. Whenever I bring it into my home, I'm amazed by how quickly and easily the life-giving force of a bulb in a small pot produces a magnificent bunch of flowers. What's more, it perfumes the whole home!*





# Cornflower

*Centaurea* sp.

***Past and present:*** The cornflower originally grew in southwest Asia and southern Europe only, before spreading gradually to other parts of the world. Today, we can admire this attractive blue flower all over Europe, as well as in Australia, America, and western and central Asia.

In folk tradition, the cornflower serves to invoke the love of a man. A woman wearing a cornflower on her breast trusts in fidelity and sincerity. A wreath of cornflowers was displayed in a cottage as a good-luck charm.

In a legend from the Dnieper River, blue is the colour of the blood of a young man who falls in love with a water nymph (known as a *rusalka*) after his parents command him to marry a rich girl from the village. The young man consents to the marriage after they threaten to kill the *rusalka*. On the way to the home of his prospective bride, where the marriage contract is to be made, the young man turns his horse around and rides away. When he fails to return, his friends set out to look for him. They find no sign of the young man but a hollow in the grass under a willow tree, his silver-chased belt, and masses of flowers of the same blue as the young man's eyes. As they search for signs of his blood, an old woman tells them it turned blue in the *rusalka*'s embrace, then grew into cornflowers.

In France, the cornflower honours the memory of victims of war, widows and orphans. On the day when France remembers its war veterans, the French attach a cornflower to their lapels. The cornflower has become the national flower of Estonia. It was held in high esteem by German Emperor William I, as it reminded him of his mother Queen Louise, who wove a crown of cornflowers for him to wear during their flight from Berlin and Napoleon's invading army.

The giving of cornflowers is an expression of the giver's happiness.

A member of the aster (*Asteraceae*) family, the cornflower is both beautiful and precious. As it is sensitive to soil quality, it doesn't grow just anywhere. It has medicinal properties, too. It is included in herbal teas and tinctures and used in the cosmetics industry. It is effective against colds and flu, stomach ulcers and infections of the urinary tract, and it is also good for the skin, hair and eyes. People once believed that if the first person to see a cornflower rubbed their eyes with it, they would get no eye-ache for a whole year. It also relieves pain sustained by injury. According to legend, the centaur Chiron used cornflowers to treat

an injury sustained by an arrow belonging to Heracles that was treated with the blood of the Hydra.

Since the cornflower is edible, it is used in the food industry. It looks wonderful on cakes!

*Through the painter's eyes: The cornflower and the simple beauty of blue. I remember getting the cornflowers for my picture on a visit to the Bohemian Forest. Their remarkable blue struck me even from the car; I just had to pull over and pick a few. That year, their heads were really big. How glad I was to come across them like that, and so was able to paint them!*



Brown Knapweed, 2018,  
watercolour, 55 cm × 39 cm



Cornflowers, 2020,  
watercolour, 34 cm × 57 cm

Cornflowers in the Field, 2017,  
mixed media, 35.5 cm × 41 cm



# Apple

(*Malus domestica*)

**Past and present:** If there were no such thing as the apple tree, perhaps the world would comprise only the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve in it. But those two tasted the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, so becoming the grandparents of all humanity. We can't be sure that the tree in question was an apple: it is possible that the apple entered the Bible through the similarity of the word *malus* (apple) and the word *malum* (evil). Commentaries on the Talmud suggest that the tree was a fig. The tempting crop may even have been wheat: the words *chitah* (wheat) and *cheit* (sin) are similar.

There is no such confusion in Greek mythology. The garden of the gods was guarded by the Hesperides, but they were negligent in their task, allowing the goddess Eris to take the Apple of Discord. She inscribed this fruit with the words 'For the fairest one' and tossed it among the goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite, provoking them into a quarrel which led to the Trojan War.

Considered a protective tree, the apple was once a feature of every cottage – not least to protect the building from lightning strikes.

People first cultivated trees of the rose family (*Rosaceae*) long before the Christian era. In the early years of the 1st millennium AD, the apple tree was popular with the Romans, who knew how to graft it.

The apple is a health-giving fruit filled with vitamins, minerals, fruit acid and fibre. It is a very popular cooking ingredient. As well as being eaten raw, it features in many dishes in many countries, most notably in pies and strudel, and in apple butter. Apple is also delicious when sliced and dried. It can be distilled to make calvados (apple brandy).

The wood of the apple tree is heavy and hard. It is used in the making of decorative objects and jewellery, as well as in intarsia and for smaller pieces of furniture.

The apple is the most popular fruit tree in temperate regions, with over 10,000 cultivars and varieties. It commonly lives for about eighty years, although some trees live to be over a hundred.



Apple blossom, 2018,  
watercolour, 52 cm × 36 cm



In the language of flowers, this plant conveys that the giver does not understand a message in the eyes of the receiver.

*Through the painter's eyes: Fruit trees in blossom make spring the year's loveliest season. The whole country is suddenly awash with white and pink petals. The apple combines both colours, making it more charming still. I simply can't imagine trying to transfer the beauty of an apple tree in blossom to paper. Its delicacy, fragility and softness make the apple something truly exceptional.*

Apple, 2017,  
watercolour, 40 cm × 28 cm



# Rowan

(*Sorbus aucuparia*)

**Past and present:** The rowan is lovely to look at. What's more, its berries are beneficial to health. High in vitamin C and other nutrients, they strengthen the immune system and help with hoarseness of voice, problems of digestion, kidney stones and rheumatism. The rowan flower alleviates unpleasant symptoms of the menopause, brings female hormones into harmony, and promotes fertility. It is used in baths.

Rowanberries are popular with cooks. They are used to add spice to game and sauces, and also in preparation of syrups, compotes and even wine. Only cultivated varieties are suitable for use in the kitchen, however: wild rowanberries are so bitter as to be inedible. Rowanberries for eating must be dried or boiled; otherwise, they may cause mild poisoning.

A member of the rose (*Rosaceae*) family, the rowan grows as a tree or shrub in the temperate zone of the Northern Hemisphere, mainly in Europe and Asia.

In the language of flowers, this plant draws attention to excessive self-importance.

**Through the painter's eyes:** For me, the primrose is a symbol of spring. The rowan represents quite the opposite: the approach of autumn. In the past, I would always notice it first when its ripe, orange berries were shining in the treetops. In recent years, I have been watching it earlier – throughout the summer, in fact. I watch the green buds ripen before they take on their deep orange. I like the combination of green and orange – the two colours go well together. I enjoyed painting the picture Rowan – a symbol of autumn, maturity and the harvest.

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*The loveliest flowers  
in our meadows and gardens*

Pavčina Kourková  
Klára Mandausová

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# PAVLÍNA KOURKOVÁ AND HER ART

‘The earth laughs in flowers,’ stated the poet, essayist and spiritual thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson. World-renowned botanical artist Pavlína Kourková shows us exactly what he meant. Inspired by beautiful flowers she sees on her travels about the countryside, she brings these to paper in vibrant watercolour. Naturally, her work is admired by lovers of art. It is admired, too, by prestigious associations of botanical artists all over the world, who have accepted her as a member. Pavlína Kourková paints with passion and love.

