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Les Fleurs du Bien: The Language of Flowers in Contemporary France



Abstract: The language of flowers is frequently characterized as a bygone tradition of the Victorians, yet traces of this symbolic system permeate daily life in 21st century France. An application of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital and Pierre Nora's conceptualization of sites of memory to three ethnographic case studies of French floral traditions offers an explanation for the continued relevance and benefits of the language of flowers.

Introduction

“Every age and every clime has promulgated its own peculiar system of floral signs and it has been said that the language of flowers is as old as the days of Adam.”

John Henry Ingram “Flora Symbolica”

Perpetually dismissed as a frivolity of nature, the flower’s potent symbolic power has been subjected to much “shallow and inaccurate handling”.¹ Far from frivolous and purely decorative, the flower functions as the reproductive organ of the plant, and thus bears the promise of fruit and marks the changing of the seasons. These two crucial functions have guaranteed an enduring link between humans and flowers. The ancient human attraction to flowers may have been of a more utilitarian nature, but it would not be long before flowers came to be used as ceremonial objects, endowed with special powers and symbolic meaning, as was the case of the lotus in ancient Egypt.² This desire to ritualize the natural beauty of the flower would eventually blossom into today’s enormous floral global industry, a testament our deeply held desire for these potent living objects.

Over the course of time, many highly specific and contextual meanings have become associated with particular flowers. The majority of the most common domesticated plants and wildflowers, from the humble buttercup to the regal iris, have been endowed with unambiguous meaning through oral, traditional, scientific or artistic systems, and some of these connotations have even been codified into floral “languages.” These languages are highly culture-specific, and they are often intentionally constructed, rather than organic in nature. From the Japanese floral language of Hanakotoba to the

¹ Seaton, Beverley, *The Language of flowers: A History*. 1995: 157.

² Goody, Jack. *The Culture Of Flowers*. 1993: 29-39.

marigold offerings to the Hindu gods and goddesses, there are countless ways flowers continue to be used as communication mediums, each system offering insight into the rich and complex history of the culture it is a product of. One of the most well known (and most widely misrepresented) systems of floral meaning is the Western language of flowers, or the *langage des fleurs*, as it is known in France, its nation of origin.

This “Victorian language of the flowers,” as it often referred to in popular literature, was first formalized in France in the early 19th century was widely imitated and altered over the course of the next two centuries. In this symbolic system, each flower represents a specific sentiment or phrase. Thus, by composing a bouquet, one may convey complex thoughts and messages to the intended recipient. Though the French language of the flowers is not nearly as recognized or widely “spoken” as it once was, the respect for floral traditions undoubtedly remains a crucial element of contemporary French culture. By examining the language of the flowers in France through the perspective of Bourdieu’s Theory of Cultural Capital and Pierre Nora’s Realms of Memory, it may be legitimated as a system of communication that is vital to the performance of France identity as it relates to cultural *patrimoine*. This paper will offer an overview of history of the language before presenting a theoretical analysis of three flowers that still carry strong and specific messages in France: the rose, the lily of the valley, and the chrysanthemum.

History of the Language of the Flowers in France

How did this *langage des fleurs* come into being and what factors have allowed it to remain a fixture of French culture? The most common misconception about Western European floral language is that it began with socially repressed Victorian gentlewomen

and men who would send each other coded messages through flowers, necessitating the publication of guidebooks to decipher the bouquets. This is in fact a fictional history, but one that would play a role in the enduring popularity of using flowers to communicate. In reality the origins of this language are much more complex. The language of flowers owes its existence to botany, anthropology, and literature, and unlike most languages, this one has the distinction of being mostly invented rather than evolving organically.

A formalized language of the flowers first gained traction in Europe thanks to the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu written from Turkey in 1718. Within these letters Lady Montagu described a system of communication in which a verse is matched with an object that rhymes with it. Groupings of objects could be presented together to form a sort of poetry, or *sélam*. Lady Montagu described the *sélam* as a practice used by women in the Turkish harem to communicate with lovers on the outside, and she famously claimed “there is no colour, no flower, no wee, no fruit, herb, pebble or feather that has not a verse belonging to it; and you may quarrel, reproach, or send letters of passion friendship, or civility, or even of news without ever inking your fingers.”³ In 1727, Aubry de La Mottraye, a French travel writer also elaborated on this particular harem practice describing ways in which poetry played an important role in establishing the meanings of each object, which undoubtedly cemented the romantic connotations and possibilities for an object based language in the minds of his contemporaries.⁴ This conception of the *sélam* was flawed however, as German Orientalist Joseph Hammer-Purgstall would later prove in his critical essay on the *sélam*.⁵ As it would turn out, the *sélam* was an amusing

³ Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley. *The complete letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*. 1965: 388-9.

⁴ Goody, 233.

⁵ Seaton, 62.

pastime for invented by and for the women of the harem, and not in fact a symbolic system of communication between the sexes. However, it was the flawed conception of the *sélam* as a romantic symbolic system that captivated the imagination of 18th century France, a nation in the throes of an extreme fascination with the Orient. This desire for Oriental escapism combined with the renewed “commitment to rustic nature and sentimental botany” would produce a multitude of works inspired by both the coded poetry of the harem and by flowers themselves in the later half of the 18th century, most notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie ou la nouvel Héloïse* in 1760. By the end of the century, plenty of literary and traditional significations for the most common flowers had become accepted, although there was by no means a definitive, structured emblematic system in place for conveying one’s sentiments through a bouquet of blossoms.

The catalyzing moment in the creation of the language of the flowers occurred towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars. First in 1811 Monsieur Delachénay published *Abécédaire de flore, ou Langage des fleurs, méthode nouvelle de figurer avec des fleurs les lettres, les syllabes, et les mots, suivie de quelques observations sur les emblèmes et les devises, et de la signification emblématique d'un grand nombre de fleur* which represented the first known attempt to create taxonomy for flowers and their popular meanings. Next in 1816, an anonymous pamphlet entitled *Les Emblèmes des fleurs: pièce de vers, suivie d'un tableau emblématique des fleurs, et traité succinct de botanique, auquel sont joints deux tableaux contenant l'exposition du système Linné et la méthode naturelle de Jussieu*. was the first to offer a precise explanation of how histories of the flowers were linked to their signification.⁶ Finally in 1819 the most important guide of all arrived: Charlotte de Latour’s *Langage des fleurs*. Floral language scholar Beverley

⁶ Goody, 235.

Seaton speculates that Charlotte de Latour may have in fact been the pen name of Louise Cortambert, the mother of geographer Eugène Cortambert, but unfortunately there are minimal records available to confirm this.⁷ Organized by season and offering selected anecdotes relating to each flower, this particular guide also featured two dictionaries at the end, one to be used to create a *sélam* of one's own or *pour écrire un billet doux*, the other to translate the resulting bouquet or letter.⁸ The impact of this book was so profound that it was quickly translated into both English and German, with nine London editions published by 1843.⁹ The 19th century also saw an increase in the sales of flowers to all classes, which was accompanied by an explosion in the popularity of floral language guidebooks, and thus the number of participants actively sending and receiving these messages. As the popularity of this “language of flowers” began to take off, flower retailers helped the trend spread by giving out complementary booklets, with titles like “Whispers from Flowerdom” or “The Boudoir Language of Flowers” thus making “explicit the commercial interest in appropriating this popular medium of expression and that spelled out for uninitiated consumers the specific meanings of various flowers.”¹⁰ This commercialization of the language of flowers would ultimately go on to produce the oft-quoted national advertising slogan of the Society of American Florists, “Say it with Flowers.”

As the widespread commercialization and popularization of the language of the flowers progressed, references to this language in literature and art rapidly followed. It is unsurprising that flowers should become the symbol of choice for artists during this time,

⁷ Seaton, 71.

⁸ Seaton, 167

⁹ Goody, 239

¹⁰ Henderson, Alfred. "American Horticulture," in *One Hundred Years of American Commerce*, ed. Depew, I, 252, 1895: 39-40.

for as during the 18th century, a renewed interest in botany in Europe and an increase in the number of public botanical gardens also gave rise to an increase floral imagery in art.¹¹ Philip Knight argues in his study of floral imagery in the poetry of 19th century France, that the flower has remained one of the enduring motifs of French culture due to the fact that poets and writers eagerly incorporated floral language and symbology into their writing.¹² Aside from the obvious allure of the flower as a distilled symbol of sensuality and the continuation of life, it is an extremely binary symbol that lends itself to both positive and negative connotations. A single bloom may metaphorically embody life and death, male and female, innocence and corruption depending on who is interpreting it. In her psychoanalytic analysis of floral symbolism in the works of Freud, Derrida, and Hegel, Claudette Sartillot claims, “like the fetish, the flower allows an oscillation between contraries, between feminine and masculine, between phallus and vagina, between ‘penis/vagina, castration/virginity, erection/relapse [*retombée*], natural organism/disarticulated artifact.’”¹³ This ambiguity is precisely what made the flower such a potent signifier for Balzac, Derrida, and Baudelaire, as all drew upon the flower in their works and thereby expanding upon the ways flowers may be used to unify sensuality and language.¹⁴

Though the act of sending coded messages through flowers fell out of favor at the beginning of 20th century, floral imagery and rhetoric would still remain popular in the French public sphere, from the organic forms of Art Nouveau architecture to the

¹¹ Thacker, Christopher. *The History of Gardens*. 1979: 223-235

¹² Knight, Phillip. *Flower Poetics in Nineteenth Century France*. 1986: 33.

¹³ Sartillot, Claudette. “Herbarium, Verbarium: The Discourse of Flowers.” 1988: 77

¹⁴ Knight, Phillip, 2.

modernist gardens of Le Corbusier.¹⁵ The language of the flowers also maintained a strong foothold in 20th century France, thanks to the greeting card and postcard industry. Cards depicting flowers alongside their traditional sentiment or a poem expressing their sentiment were classic correspondence (Appendix 1). As class patterns began to shift following the post-war baby boom generation, France saw the emergence of a large middle class that was less pre-occupied with distinguishing itself from the other classes. Instead, this culture shift resulted in a middle class that sought to hegemonically exert influence over the lifestyles and behaviors of the other classes.¹⁶ In the latter half of the century, a re-discovery of the language of flowers took place primarily through the publication of etiquette books, as the increasingly fluid middle class began a *cherche des temps perdu*, seeking to nostalgically recapture the leisurely lifestyle of the 19th century bourgeois.¹⁷ These guidebooks on the *l'art de savoir vivre* frequently copied word for word the floral vocabulary sections of the early floral language guidebooks.¹⁸ A continued interest in the language was also propelled by the heavily romanticized myths that had come to surround the origin of the language of the flowers, the myth that the language had begun as a way for men and women to secretly communicate with each other. This fictionalized history continues to be popularized by florists in the 21st century, though it should be noted that Victorian culture scholars such as Beverly Seaton have played an important role in correcting these misconceptions.

As this history has shown, an increased attention to flowers in literature and life frequently accompanies advancements in botany and floral cultivation, however it

¹⁵ Imbert, Dorothée. *The modernist garden in France*, 1993: 162-163.

¹⁶ Mendras, Henri. *Social Change in Modern France*. 1991: 41

¹⁷ Mendras, 207.

¹⁸ Goody, 250.

remains to be seen whether this century's developments in floral science will have a similar effect.¹⁹ As the 21st century presses on, the language of the flowers may in fact continue to be driven by the creative commercialization of flowers in France. Floral culture in contemporary France is more than adequately sustained, firstly because a more rigorous training process is demanded of French florists, as the profession is perceived as requiring high levels of creativity and social tact, and secondly due to the fact that the demand for cut flowers in France shows little to no signs of slowing in the coming years.²⁰ The language of flowers itself may have originally been constructed from writing and written language, however it is the ritualistic acts and traditions associated with the flowers that will carry the language into the future.

Theories of Floral Language

“Qui plane sur la vie et comprend sans effort

Le langage des fleurs et des choses muettes.”

–Charles Baudelaire *“Elévation”*
Fleurs du mal, 1857

The contemporary French language of the flowers differs significantly from the floral language of the 19th century, as it no longer claims to be a universal method of communication but rather a culturally specific code.²¹ While this contemporary floral vocabulary may not technically fit the definition of a language, it is still a semiotic system of meanings with connotations unique to France and several characteristics that mimic language. In an interesting parallel, the language of the flowers has more or less followed a similar trajectory to the French language. Just as the *Académie Française*

¹⁹ Stewart, Amy. *Flower Confidential*. 2007.

²⁰ Données Et Bilans de FranceAgriMer, Horticulture. 2014: 11

²¹ Goody, 253.

codifies and regulates the language, floral language was explicitly codified in writing before it was incorporated into the lives of the citizens.²² In the case of both languages, published dictionaries claim to be definitive sources of meaning yet the living language has a strong tendency to evolve and drastically change over time.

The language of flowers imitates language in that it embodies the concept of double articulation.²³ In 1948 French linguist André Marinet presented the novel theory of double articulation, which claims that *phonemes*, or meaningless units may be combined into meaningful *morphemes*, which in turn may be used to create an infinite number of sentences.²⁴ The language of the flowers is constructed using a similar grammar. A solitary bloom represents a simple idea, virtue or word, which can certainly be appreciated on its own, but that the act of assembling different flowers or even crafting a large bouquet of the same type of flower allows a more complex sentiment to be communicated, akin to a sentence. In theory, anyone with a basic understanding of the traditional signification of the individual flowers in a composition can interpret it. On this point, many would argue the language of the flowers fails to produce universal meaning. Seaton for instance, claims that the language of the flowers is not and cannot be a legitimate form of communication, as each flower's meaning is contingent upon the interpretation of the one who receives it. However, a 1994 study published in the journal of the American Society for Horticultural Science demonstrated that groupings of flowers might in fact serve as a reliable form of communication. By asking participants to assign meanings to specific floral bouquets, researchers found that "25 adjectives (and nouns

²² Mendras, 224

²³ "L'Histoire | Académie Française". *Academie-francaise.fr*. 2016.

²⁴ Ladd, D. Robert. "What Is Duality Of Patterning, Anyway?." *Language & Cognition (De Gruyter)* 4.4 (2012): 261-273.

can be associated reliably with six clusters of meaning".²⁵ The results suggest that the grammar of floral communication operates in the same way as De Latour described, with the caveat that the message's sender and recipient must have a basic awareness of Western color symbolism.²⁶ Essentially, this study demonstrates that culture specific cues re-enforce the language of the flowers in such a way that even those who may be unaware of its history or even the specific meanings of individual flowers may still grasp the meaning of a bouquet.

Though the meanings of certain plants may be less well defined than they were during the 19th and 20th century, the fact remains the French continue to purchase and give flowers to each other at an astonishingly high rate, as the average French person spends approximately €79 annually on flowers from the florist,²⁷ compared to the average American household which spends only \$25 on flowers per year.²⁸ This demand can also be measured by the sheer quantity of florists accessible to the population. In 1982 for example, there was 1 florist to ever 3,200 French residents compared to 1 for ever 19,707 people in the United States.²⁹ Even the smallest village is guaranteed to have a flower shop of some sort, or perhaps two in the case of the villiage of Onzain, which has a population of only 3,478 people. The ritual of buying and giving flowers therefore is just as critical to the economy and identity of the classic French *centre ville* as the *boulangerie*. Affordable seasonal bouquets of cut flowers area also readily available to the population at the weekly or semiweekly outdoor markets. These bouquets are often

²⁵ Doyle, K.O., J. McGrew, and A.M. Hanchek. "Communication In The Language Of Flowers." *Horttechnology* 4.3 (1994): 215.

²⁶ Seaton, 119

²⁷ FranceAgriMer. *Végétaux d'ornement : achats des ménages en 2012*: 14.

²⁸ Stewart, 237.

²⁹ Goody, 214

the gift of choice for the traditional French dinner parties and *aperitif* get-togethers, while the florist's professionally arranged bouquets are reserved for special occasions, such as *Noël*, *la fête des meres*, or birthdays. In studies of ritualistic gift giving, the gifts within a given culture carry different meanings to outsiders vs. insiders, thereby establishing community in a similar manner to the way language establishes community.³⁰ The language of the flowers has therefore become a legitimized a form of ritual expression through the daily and seasonal patterns of giving and receiving. With every passing holiday, the shared floral vocabulary becomes even more entrenched within the national consciousness and begins to take on more specificity as an articulated sign of cultural practice.

This positions floral language firmly within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. This theory states that within a given culture there are certain social assets available to the middle class that are then passed down from generation to generation. Bourdieu identifies these resources as *cultural capital*, and posits that they are what allow an individual to succeed and participate in society.³¹ Included in the definition of cultural capital are two capital sub-types: embodied cultural capital and objectified cultural capital. Embodied cultural capital represents knowledge that is acquired over time, which includes social manners and behavior. Objectified cultural capital, on the other hand, is enacted through the purchase of material goods, such as fine art and books. The customs and rituals of the language of the flowers thus fit the definition of both types of capital, for in order to demonstrate embodied knowledge of the language, typically flowers must be purchased. Understanding and participating in the language of flowers is

³⁰ Cheal, David. *The Gift Economy*. 2015: 96.

³¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital". In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. 1986: 241-258.

a potent form of cultural capital, not only because it demonstrates possession of economic capital, it also highlights the participants' connectedness to French history and heritage.

The notion of heritage plays a significant role in how the language of the flowers is represented in contemporary French society. Participating in floral culture is frequently described as evoking the past or a memory for the participant, which links floral culture to the theoretical framework established by memory scholar and historian Pierre Nora. Nora notes that there can be no "spontaneous memory" and that traditions represent deliberate attempts to maintain a connection to history.³² Some of these traditions or cultural symbols are in fact more influential than others and constitute what Nora identifies as a "*lieu de mémoire*" or a site of memory. In fact, these *lieux de mémoire* may in fact help minimize what many perceive to be the threat of multiculturalism. Nora writes in his catalogue of the people, places, events, and things that capture the essence of French civilization, claims that these things enact a '*contre-pouvoir aux inerties des différences, un contrepoids aux mosaïques des façons de vivre et de mourir; l'obligation absolue d'enrôler des mémoires locales dans le fonds commun d'une culture nationale et de faire de tous Tes fils de 89*'.³³ Scholar Ari Blatt claims, "from the tricolor flag and the 'Marseillaise,' to the Pantheon, the 14th of July, and the Tour de France, Nora's sophisticated yet accessible inventory of these "commonplaces" is designed to prevent the gradual destruction of national memory and solidify the historical origins of French heritage."³⁴ Thus, in the midst of the increasing presence of American cultural hegemony and the influx of immigrants, the language of the flowers offers another mode of enacting

³² Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire", 1989: 12.

³³ Nora, Pierre. "De la République à la Nation," *Lieux de mémoire*, 1984. 1:559-66.

³⁴ Blatt, Ari J.. "The Play's the Thing: Marivaux and the "banlieue" in Abdellatif Kechiche's "l'esquive""", 2008: 523.

“Frenchness” during a point in history when this term has become increasingly difficult to define.

Three Floral Case Studies

To better clarify how flowers function as cultural capital and *lieux de mémoire* I would like to offer three case studies from my six-month long study of French floral culture. Although there are countless flowers with fascinating everyday uses and meanings, there are three flowers in particular that have particular relevance in the lives of the modern French: the rose, the lily-of-the-valley, and the chrysanthemum. While conducting this ethnographic study, I found that most French individuals have reached a consensus on the specific idea each flower represents, due to countless clues from religion, art, and commercial media, which supports Jack Goody’s findings that Western Europeans consider the language of flowers part of their cultural heritage even if they have a minimal understanding of its intricacies or grammar.³⁵ Furthermore, these three flowers each serve as cultural touchstones thanks to the traditions that surround them, therefore they are a means by which French identity may be enacted.

The rose represents one of the most universally recognized symbols of romantic love, and its classical meaning continues to be expanded upon due to its versatility as a commercially exploitable plant. The lily-of-the-valley, or *muguet* carries a message of the return of happiness, thanks to a uniquely French public ritual that takes place each year. The chrysanthemum’s meaning has been drastically altered within the last century, and its strong association with death serves to illustrate how the French may be qualified to

³⁵ Goody, 232.

decipher coded floral messages.³⁶ These three flowers express certain uniquely French aspect of this floral language, as each of the ritualistic traditions associated with these particular plants embody the romantic, commercial, and patriotic elements of French floral culture. Three traits are becoming increasingly important in constituting French identity in a moment when the very notion of French identity is in the midst of a crisis. Ultimately these three floral case studies demonstrate how each flower bears the universal quality of language within France.

The Rose: Love

Perhaps the most famous floral poem to emerge from France, the romantic connotations and sensuality of the rose are immortalized in Pierre Ronsard's 1545 *Ode à Cassandre*:

Mignonne, allons voir si la rose
 Qui ce matin avoit desclose
 Sa robe de pourpre au Soleil,
 A point perdu ceste vesprée
 Les plis de sa robe pourprée,
 Et son teint au vostre pareil.

Las ! voyez comme en peu d'espace,
 Mignonne, elle a dessus la place
 Las ! las ses beautez laissé choir !
 Ô vrayment marastre Nature,
 Puis qu'une telle fleur ne dure
 Que du matin jusques au soir !

Donc, si vous me croyez, mignonne,
 Tandis que vostre âge fleuronne
 En sa plus verte nouveauté,
 Cueillez, cueillez vostre jeunesse :
 Comme à ceste fleur la vieillesse
 Fera ternir vostre beauté.

This meditation on the inevitability of aging centers on the image of the rose, whose beauty inevitably wilts, like the beauty of the *objet aimé* of Ronsard. Today, the rose is most frequently referred to as a symbol of romance, but it has many connotations from the romantic to religious, which vary depending on the color and who you ask. It also holds the done of the most common commercial flowers in the world, and amongst the French.

As any French florist or flower vendor of the *marchés* what their most popular flower is, and they will invariably reply that their clientele purchase roses at a higher rate than any other flower. The sheer versatility and multiplicity of meanings roses offer makes them an appropriate offering for nearly any occasion, from Valentine's Day to Mother's Day. According to *L'Établissement national des produits de l'agriculture et de la mer* (or FranceAgriMer for short), these two holidays are the apex of French floral spending.³⁷ I spent the saint day of St. Valentin observing customers on the streets of the city of Dijon, and the holiday passed relatively uneventfully, at least compared to the bacchanalia of red roses and chocolates one typically encounters in the America. In France, the celebration of the *Fête de St. Valentin* as a romantic commercial holiday is a relatively recent phenomenon imported from the United States, and as a result, it is primarily reserved for couples and lovers. The most common gift given by men to women tends to be either a single or 13 long-stem white or red roses, both signifying passion and true love.

The roses purchased for Mothers Day also convey a message of love to the recipient, but the degree of that passion is frequently tempered with the addition of another flower, such as the peony, or through the color. Mother's Day at the *Marché aux*

³⁷ FranceAgriMer, *Végétaux d'ornement : achats des ménages en 2012*: 14.

Fleurs in Nice was characterized by enormous floral sales, as nearly all of the composed bouquets³⁸ were sold out by noon. I interviewed a woman working on behalf of M. Claude Mascalchi at the *Roses de Nice* stand, after the crowds had begun to subside. This particular vendor specialized in many different types and colors of roses that she personally helps grow and she told me that in general her customers buy roses for others and not for themselves, and that most of her Mother's Day sales were red and pink roses because red symbolizes passionate love, while pink represents *un amour tendre* (Appendix 1, Picture 1). She said that the white is the color preferred for marriages (and she also claimed it symbolizes friendship) and people tend to buy exotic colored roses to offer to boys on their communion. It was fascinating how the responses I received from this women in Nice differed from the florists in Paris, who claimed that the white rose stands for innocence. Many of the florists I interviewed also denied the yellow rose's negative connotations, (traditionally a symbol of diminishing love or infidelity).³⁹

The contemporary variation in the meanings of the rose is primarily due to the availability of the rose above all other flowers, as well as modern scientific developments that allows for the creation of roses in unnatural colors and patterns (for which no historical connotation exists). Thanks to a well-established hothouse culture in the Netherlands and the ability to transport roses around the globe in two days to meet demand, the rose is one of the few flowers that can be found any time of the year, everywhere from the grocery store to the florist. Since it is possible to have fresh roses nearly year round, florists have a vested interest in promoting the roses as a more neutral

³⁸ A composed bouquet, is a bouquet comprised of more than one type of flower.

³⁹ Seaton, 119.

flower, one associated with the generic sentiment of “love”, in order to boost sales.⁴⁰ The rose has been associated with many different groups and individuals throughout history, but its ubiquitous presence has diluted somewhat its power as a *lieu de mémoire*. Buying and sending roses, however, is still a potent form of cultural capital, as it demonstrates a profound romantic spirit that is still admired and respected by the middle class in France.

The Lily-of-the-Valley: The Return of Happiness

If the rose is the symbol of *eros* (passionate love), the lily-of-the-valley is a fitting symbol of *ludus* or playful love, as illustrated by Robert Desnos’ poem published in 1955 in his 1955 collection of poetry entitled *Chantefables et Chantefleurs*:

Le muguet
 Un bouquet de muguet,
 Deux bouquets de muguet,
 Au guet ! Au guet !
 Mes amis, il m'en souviendrait,
 Chaque printemps au premier Mai.
 Trois bouquets de muguet,
 Gai ! Gai !
 Au premier Mai,
 Franc bouquet de muguet.

The lily-of-the-valley, or *muguet* as it is known as in France has been found in France since the Middle Ages and traditionally represents the return of happiness, as it only blooms for a short time in the spring when the weather becomes temperate enough.⁴¹ Giving the flower away to lovers and friends originated from a tradition started under the reign of King Charles IX that consisted of giving small bunches of these flowers to the ladies of the court. Vendors in Nantes originated the tradition of selling the *muguet* on May 1st in the 1930s, but the flower did not become associated with the labor party until

⁴⁰ Stewart, 186.

⁴¹ Seaton, 182.

1976 when protesters started wearing them as boutonnieres instead of the traditional symbol of the labor movement, the wild rose.⁴²

This *jour férié* presents an incredible opportunity for true French floral culture ethnography, as anyone is allowed to pick and sell the flower on the streets without a license. Unfortunately, the weather was very discouraging on the May 1st I had the chance to observe. Despite the inclement weather, over 25 different *muguet* vendors (excluding florists) could be observed along the 5 block long main street of Dijon, a city of approximately 151,000 residents.

That rainy afternoon I interviewed 10 different vendors and 1 florist⁴³, and several customers. The first thing that I noticed is that prices were fairly consistent amongst vendors, averaging two euros for a bunch (20 branches) .50 for a sprig, and five euros for a large bouquet. One gentleman used to harvest them for florists in Paris when he was younger and noted that in Paris there is usually a very high markup on the flowers, with people paying 15 euros for a potted *muguet* root, which he was selling for five euros. When asked what percentage of the population they believed participates in this tradition, the vendors and florists responses ranged from 45%-60%. The florist said she believed the older generation was far more invested in the tradition, as 14 of their morning deliveries were *muguets* for clients between the ages of 40-90, but from my observational data, there seemed to be only a slight advantage of the older generation over the younger who were purchasing the *muguets* on the street.

⁴² See Appendix 1, Images 2A, 2B, 2C, and 2D for a comparison of a card from 1914, which employs the lily-of-the-valley's more generic message of happiness for a New Year's greeting and a card from 1941 which presents the same flower with its traditional May 1st message "Porte Bonheur."

⁴³ Fleurs de Clémentine, 10 Rue du Chateau, Dijon.

All of the street vendors had picked their muguets themselves in the woods outside of Dijon. Several of them showed me the cuts on their hands they had obtained while harvesting the flowers amidst brambles. One vendor told me that this had been a very good year for the muguets, but that they only would bloom for a period of 14 days. The Dijonaise florist that I spoke with confirmed that Nantes is the center of commercial production of *muguets*, but the civilian vendors must pick the *muguets* themselves in order to sell them, and they are not permitted to sell the roots of the plant. All of the vendors confirmed that this was a nation-wide tradition, and that they imagined the flowers were sold in nearly all French towns. One man I spoke with said that there were more vendors this year because unemployment is so high, and that traditionally it is students, children or scouts (who raise money for charity) who sell the muguets. From a selling standpoint, the tradition of picking and selling *muguets* is highly inclusive.

When questioned about the intended recipients of the flowers, most vendors responded that *muguets* are typically purchased for family, friends, or other people one appreciates; two vendors said it was more traditional for men to offer the flowers to their girlfriend/wife. The florist found that it is also fairly common for mothers to send them to their daughters who do not live at home anymore. One vendor confirmed that it is the best luck to receive a branch with 13 flowers on it. When customers were questioned about who would be the recipient of the flowers, most replied that they were buying to give to their family, but two customers were buying in bulk to give muguets to their friends at a dinner party they were throwing that night, and two gentlemen were buying them for their wives. As these intended recipients show, the muguet serves as a cultural capital, as purchasing it offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of

French culture to others in public. I also asked the customers how long this tradition had been a part of their lives, most responded that they remembered their parents participating in this tradition as children, or remembered family members picking the flowers in their childhood. One woman in her 80s recalled how after WWII, her uncle and cousin would go and pick muguets in the forest of Citeaux and then sell them to vendors in the markets of Paris. Most vendors and customers did not have a real sense of how long the tradition had been around, and simply said that people participated in this tradition because the muguet *porte bonheur* or brings happiness. These shared cultural memories mark the flower as a compelling symbol for whimsical nostalgia across generations, and by Nora's definition the tradition is a *lieu de mémoire*.

The Chrysanthemum: Death

Le Testament

S'il faut aller au cimetière
 J'prendrai le chemin le plus long
 J'ferai la tombe buissonnière
 J'quitterai la vie à reculons
 Tant pis si les croqu'-morts me grondent
 Tant pis s'ils me croient fou à lier
 Je veux partir pour l'autre monde
 Par le chemin des écoliers

Avant d'aller conter fleurette
 Aux belles âmes des damnées
 Je rêv' d'encore une amourette
 Je rêv' d'encor m'enjuponner
 Encore un' fois dire: "Je t'aime"
 Encore un' fois perdre le nord
 En effeuillant le chrysanthème
 Qui est la marguerite des morts

- Georges Brassens, 1955.

Last of all is the chrysanthemum, a flower with such a strong meaning that many guidebooks for American tourists in France carry with them a warning against giving this

plant as a gift. The chrysanthemum was commercially introduced to Europe from China in the late 18th century.⁴⁴ Throughout the 19th century, the chrysanthemum still possessed its prior connotations from Asia as a symbol of joy and positivity, as seen in much of the art and ephemera of the time.⁴⁵ However, on November 11, 1919 on the first anniversary of the Armistice of World War I, President Raymond Poincaré ordered that these autumnal flowers be placed on the graves of the fallen. From that point forward, the chrysanthemum became associated with passing into the final phase of life, and by virtue of its proximity, the official flower of *Toussaint*, the November 1st Catholic celebration of departed ancestors.⁴⁶ This holiday continues to be celebrated; primary through the act of placing potted chrysanthemums upon the graves of departed loved ones each year. This holiday is responsible for the largest spike in cemetery floral spending for the whole year, with October and November holding 62% of the totality of flowers purchased for funeral or cemetery purposes and 21% of the overall yearly sum spent by the French on flowers for any purpose.⁴⁷ In the Catholic convention, “attention after a person’s death can influence the fate of his soul” which illuminates how the chrysanthemum is viewed as an object that actively communicates a message of remembrance to the dead.⁴⁸ Although I did not get the chance to observe the annual *fleurissement des cimetières* in person, the florists I spoke with noted that the tradition seems to be upheld more in the north of France than in the south, which is consistent with French religiosity patterns.

⁴⁴ Goody, 291-293.

⁴⁵ See Appendix 1, Image 1B for a pre-1919 postcard that symbolically links the sentiment “M’aimez vous?” with the chrysanthemum.

⁴⁶ Goody, 292.

⁴⁷ FranceAgriMer, *Végétaux d’ornement : achats des ménages en 2012*: 10.

⁴⁸ Goody, 287.

Chrysanthemums may send a message of remembrance to the dead, but they also convey to the living a family's commitment to the memory of a departed loved one.

In this past year the chrysanthemum has become increasingly displayed outside the cemetery, as makeshift memorials sprung up across France for the victims of the Charlie Hebdo attacks on January 7, 2015 and the three terrorist attacks of November 13, 2015. These spontaneous memorials usually materialize at famous public sites, such as the *Place de la République* and *Nôtre Dame* cathedral, as well as at the sites of violence themselves. In the many press photographs to emerge after these incidents, there are many unmistakable splashes of orange, pink and yellow chrysanthemums amongst the bouquets of roses, and many people purchased official mourning arrangements of chrysanthemums with tri-color ribbons to place at these sites of grief. The sheer volume of flowers at these memorials is spectacular, which conveys the depth of national grieving and evokes the memory of the nation-wide mourning and *fleurissement* in 1919. The act of bringing a bright cheerful flower to a place marred by violence and death demonstrates quite poignantly how flowers are often the best way to speak as a united people when words are too difficult to find. In these moments, new *lieux de mémoire* are formed, as the image of the chrysanthemum and heaps of flowers in civic spaces becomes re-connected with deeply felt national sorrow in the public consciousness.

Conclusion

As these three case studies demonstrate, the people-plant interactions in France are by no means set in stone. The language of the flowers, like any other language, is subject to changes and shifts in grammar and meaning over time, and it may also be threatened by the ever-increasing influence of American culture. The uniquely French

associations with specific flowers may also fade as the younger generation loses interest in maintaining the traditions of their parent's generation. Yet as long as the act of giving flowers to others is socially incentivized, reciprocal floral communication practices will continue.

This study has several important implications within the larger context of French society. The first concerns France's strict naturalization process. The policy dictates that those wishing to claim French citizenship must demonstrate complete assimilation into French culture; that is, rather than integrating which implies retaining certain aspects of old national identity.⁴⁹ Gaining cultural capital in all its forms is incredibly important for any individual going through this process. Knowledge of the language of the flowers is one form of cultural capital that can easily be made accessible as a low-risk, low-cost method for new citizens to signal belonging to the in-group. The second implication is the language of the flower's potential as a unifying symbol, one that has not been co-opted by the xenophobic political party the *Front National*. This controversial and reactionary political party has already linked themselves to many of the classic *lieux de mémoire*, including the tricolor flag and Marianne, which weakens their power as communal touchstones. As these classic symbols of France become increasingly unappealing to those who do not identify with the politics of the *Front National*, floral symbolism and the language of the flowers are given space to take their place, as they represent classic hallmarks of French culture that have yet to be exploited as a source of national pride. Lastly, encouraging participation in floral culture benefits both the

⁴⁹ Mendras, 37.

domestic floral industry in France, as well as its citizens who receive the psychological benefits of fresh flowers, in addition to the cultural capital.⁵⁰

As I have shown, the language of the flowers offers a unique lens for examining contemporary French culture. Born from the scientific achievements of the 18th century, the popular literature of the 19th century, and the cultural nostalgia of the 20th and 21st centuries, this romanticized semiotic system absolutely continues to hold contemporary relevance for the French. It continues to act as a form of cultural capital in which a participant may benefit socially from their understanding of the symbols within the language and their participation in the exchange of flowers. Thus act of “speaking” this language is akin to speaking French; it creates a particular sense of belonging, a *lieu de mémoire* that reaffirms French identity. On its own, the flower “evokes the harmonies of nature and love by appealing to both smell and sight”,⁵¹ but it is the addition of a symbolic framework that ultimately elevates the object beyond the sensual realm to the spiritual. This transfiguration of the flower’s symbolic status is the most fundamental function of the language of the flowers, as it has been since its inception. Thus, this language’s power does not lie in its capacity to convey messages effectively, but to provoke an awareness of the unity between nature and the human experience, for in these moments of unity a true *harmonie des êtres* emerges.

fin



⁵⁰ Park, Seong-Hyun, and Richard Mattson. "Effects Of Flowering And Foliage Plants In Hospital Rooms On Patients Recovering From Abdominal Surgery", 2008: 563-568.

⁵¹ Knight, 49.

Appendix 1

Image 1 (Undated floral language postcard)



Image 1B – (Postcard from c. 1900)



Image 2A (Postcard from 1914- Front)



Image 2 B (Postcard from 1914-Back)

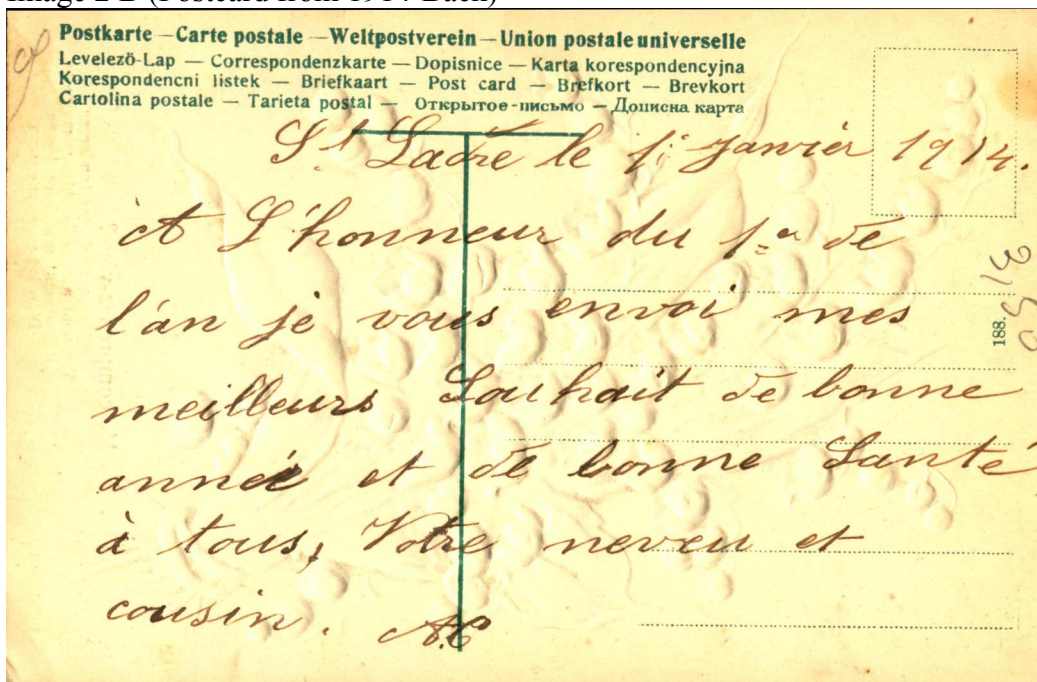


Image 2C (Postcard from 1941- front)



Image 2D (Post card from 1941-Back)

le 14 Mai 1941

Chers Bons Parents

Cette simple carte pour vous envoyer à l'occasion du 14 Mai tous nos vœux de santé et de Bonheur. Nous vous embrassons tous quatre Germaine Henri

IMPRIMÉ EN FRANCE

Un petit mot pour vous dire que nous avons reçu le colis de bobines hier au soir et ce matin votre lettre nous vous écrirons plus longuement demain. Pour le contraire il ne faut pas y compter car nous avons oublié de vous le dire car nous y sommes allés Samedi et il n'y avait pas. Merci à l'avenir pour le colis de ravissement.

Vos enfants qui pensent et qui vous aiment beaucoup nous avons les photos elles sont magnifiques Germaine Henri

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