PLANT CULTURE

Symbolism of plants: examples from European-Mediterranean culture presented with biology and history of art

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JUNE: Lilies

Lilies are a group of the most conspicuous flowers of early summer. Thousands of cultivated varieties are available from modern lists. However, wild lilies are distinctive enough to have acquired religious and cultural significance in many ancient cultures. It is fascinating to follow these cultural aspects from antiquity to the modern age, although there are far too many associations for them all to be covered here.

Biology

Among the various species Lilium candidum, the white or Madonna lily, has always been the most important one. Starting from its natural habitat in Palestine and Lebanon, it was soon spread over the whole eastern Mediterranean by the Phoenicians. As a wild plant it is only rarely found these days growing in mountainous, dry rocky habitats, but at lower altitudes it thrives as an escaped garden plant. Characteristic of L. candidum are its tall, branchless stem, the upright position of the flower buds, the large white flowers with their pleasant fragrance, and the short leaves along the whole stem almost to the ground (Fig. 1). It flowers from May to June. A feature of L. candidum is that the flowers are held erect with the petals reflexed to some extent. By contrast, the flower buds and flowers of L. chalcedonicum, the other species encountered in ancient wall paintings, are pendent, bright red, and with strongly reflexed petals. Restricted to the more humid, tree-covered mountain areas it flowers from June to July. Long foliage leaves grow out of the stem up to its tip. Another red lily used in many medieval paintings is the central European species L. bulbiferum which has fiery orange flowers held erect rather like those of L. candidum.

Symbolism

Lilies in ancient and Minoan cultures: Lilies have a majestic and awe-inspiring aura. Since the times of the Assyrian and Egyptian empires they have been an emblem of the sovereignty of kings and a symbol of virginal innocence and the bridal state (Solomon’s Song of Songs, 2, 1–2). This citation has also been taken as an association of this lily with the Hebrew Flower of Solomon, Judaism’s Star of David.

In a high-class villa in Amnisos, Crete, frescos from the period between 1600 and 1500 BC have been uncovered showing plants of L. candidum adjacent to step-like bands of the top of a wall (Fig. 1). It is possible that the purpose of this presentation was to support the claim of the landlord for a noble life-style. An easier association of lilies with power is seen in the throne hall of the Knossos Palace, originating from about the same period. Both walls around the throne of the priest-king were covered with painted stylized lilies and griffins.

A different meaning of the lily is expressed in the frescos excavated by Spyridon Marinatos (1986) in Akrotiri (Thera/Santorin). Three walls of a relatively small room called the ‘lily chamber’ are covered down to the floor with a painted rocky landscape in which red-blooming lilies thrive and above them swallows fly (Fig. 2). The upright position of the flower buds and flowers and the short leaves at the bottom of the stem are usually properties of the white-flowered L. candidum, but here the colour of the flowers is red. Perhaps the features of the white and red lilies were combined on purpose. This room was used in connection with wedding ceremonies, even as the ritual bridal chamber. The lilies are both beautiful decorations and represent purity passing into adulthood. Altogether, lilies in their white and red forms can be regarded as an aspect of the early summer and the worship of Ariadne, who is assumed to be the local vegetation goddess of Thera. Ariadne guarded the re-beginning of growth, prosperity, fertility, and the blessing of the harvest.

In later Greek and Roman times, the lily was regarded as the symbol of sublime love, procreation, and glory and was used for making the ritual bridal wreath. In the Jewish tradition (cf. Solomon’ Song of Songs, Ch. 2) lilies symbolized youth and virginal state.

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Lilies in the Byzantine Period: In the church of San Apollinare in Classe (near Ravenna, 6th century AD) the apse mosaic shows the Tabor mountain with the transfiguration of Christ. St Apollinaris, the first bishop of Ravenna, stands in the centre below the large golden cross. He is surrounded by a paradisical landscape characterized by green meadows, trees, lilies and roses to signify that the glorification of Christ radiates into nature itself.

Lilies in the Middle Ages: In the Middle Ages red lilies seem to have been a symbol of the virgin Mary although the white *L. candidum* was to become her particular flower, symbolizing purity of soul and chastity. Hence its common name, the Madonna Lily.

When Charles the Great proclaimed an order for the imperial palaces in 812 (Capitulare de villis) it contained a list of plants to be cultivated. This list of 73 herbaceous plants almost exclusively contained useful and medicinal plants, but mentioning ‘lilium’ in first place. In his ‘Hortulus’ poem, Strabo, the abbot of the monastery of Reichenau (an island in Lake Constance) (809–849 AD) praised lily bulbs as a remedy against snakebites, adding that the lily points to purity of faith. Thus, the language of symbols was well known, with lilies often appearing...
In the Middle Ages, in the cathedral of Monreale in Sicily (c. 1180 AD), among many mosaics there is also a presentation of the third day of creation. After the separation of land and sea, plants and trees are created. Two of the three trees bear lily flowers, the other roses.

There are many examples of paintings where white lilies were combined with Mary and other saints in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance (Heydenreich, 1972). In the transition period between Gothic and Renaissance in about 1440, Giovanni di Paolo painted the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise by the Archangel Michael. Here, paradise is characterized by lilies, roses, carnations, and pomegranates. At the height of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci painted The Annunciation (1472–1475) of the Virgin Mary by Archangel Gabriel who holds a Madonna lily.

*Lilies in the Modern Age:* Figure 3 shows just one example in which white lilies continued to play a role for a painter, Augusto Giacometti, who otherwise was a pioneer tending towards abstract painting (Hartmann, 1981). In his pastel drawing of the Annunciation, ‘Annunciation to St Mary’ (1928), the white lily is standing in a jug close to Mary who is seen only as a blue shade. The angel glides down a narrow stairwell. The painting is designed as an enigmatic image. Here something of the aura and magic of the lily has been recaptured, which was particular of lilies from Minoan times up to the Middle Ages as symbols of purity and bridal state.

**References**


![Figure 3. Augusto Giacometti, Annunciation to Mary. Pastel on paper. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Bündner Kunstmuseum, Chur, Switzerland.)](image-url)