

## *To Plant a Painting*

by  
*Olivia Meehan*



The wild angelica had grown to an enormous height. Clusters of dainty white flowers decorated a network of fine stems forming fragrant posies that lingered above the dense undergrowth, and made a fractured reflection on the surface of the running brook. A beguiling variety of flowers assembled at the water's edge; they met in the untamed areas and revelled in the company of the allotment's golden honeybees. I inherited the small plot from a housemate who had moved abroad to take up a prestigious fellowship. At first, I assumed the role of caretaker, but it soon became apparent that the small garden bed and wooden shed were to be mine alone. From the outset the other gardeners behaved kindly towards me, but I sensed that the time spent observing, tending, and harvesting was precious to them and most pleasurably reserved for solitary pursuit.

As a lover of gardens, I considered myself well-read on the subject though possessing very little practical experience. In truth I felt like an impostor. From time to time a fellow allotmenter would offer some thoughtful advice, or a bundle from their harvest, but I was largely left to my own devices. Perhaps they were pleased to see the neglected patch occupied again, and the annual dues paid on time. This suited me well, as it allowed me space to consider what to do, free from intervention.

It was during my first long winter as an allotment gardener that I saw the potential for the plot. A typical morning was spent in the Special Collections at the University Library, leafing through archives, rare books, and print collections. After lunch I would head home to fill my thermos with a brew of Irish Breakfast tea and occasionally pick up a Chelsea bun from Fitzbillies on my way to the garden. The resident robin often greeted me with his familiar song, hopping and dancing on the almost bare blackberry bush, always hopeful I'd turn some soil or leave him some chopped apple. The constant gentle coo-coo-coo-coo of the wood pigeons surrounded me; they were not within my view but perched high in the branches of the nearby oak. I especially enjoyed their company in the winter garden.

Early on I had conceived to plant a Henri Fantin-Latour painting in the garden bed. I could visualise his flower studies in the garden, arranged as he had painted them spilling out and over their containers. At first, I kept my plans guarded. Perhaps I was fearful my allotment neighbours would consider the plantings to be frivolous or extravagant, especially as their productive, prosperous beds were all sown to sustain and nourish. To voice my idea at the allotment, I felt, might expose it to ridicule and criticism. I suppose I wanted to protect the compositions from attracting a bad review or negative reception.

I prepared a raised container at the foot of my plot for the first of the arrangements, creating the effect of a frontispiece to the long garden bed. The first painting I planted was Fantin-Latour's *A Basket of Roses* (1890), held by the National Gallery London. Harmoniously rich colours overlap in crimson red, pale lemon, creamy white, and apricot buff. The rose cultivars that best resembled those depicted by Fantin-Latour included both shallow and deep cups and double petalled rosettes. To achieve the same cascading effect I decided upon climbing and rambling roses. That way I could easily encourage them to drift outwards from the central grouping to replicate the arrangement of cut roses featured in the painting. The first summer was glorious, all the roses flowered at once, repeatedly, and so the painting was miraculously and majestically on display.

Fantin-Latour's balanced colour scheme elevated the garden beds where I had shaped his two-dimensional creations into an animated and fragrant living images. I witnessed the other gardeners pause in admiration of this floral profusion. They marvelled at the way the roses convened together to form a perfect cut flower arrangement. For my own sake, I labelled the arrangement, as you would an object or painting in a gallery by listing the artist, title, date, dimensions, and collection details, and discreetly placed them at the base of the plants where they were unlikely to be noticed.

I changed little in terms of vegetables in the beds, in fact they suited my intentions well. The asparagus planted before me made a fitting homage to Édouard Manet's *A Bundle of Asparagus or A Bunch of Asparagus* (1880). Other paintings would reveal themselves in time. As the seasons turned all that I had inherited in the garden began to flower and grow. After picking an abundance of strawberries and piling them high into a pyramid I could vividly see Jean-Siméon Chardin's *The Basket of Wild Strawberries* (c.1760). These accidental displays fitted with the 'garden salon' that was surfacing. The wooden shed was the perfect backdrop to Fantin-Latour's *Nasturtiums* (1880) as I managed to guide the vines and flowers upwards by attaching them to an obelisk trellis similar to the vertical arrangement in the painting.

Over time I started to plant beyond the limitations of my plot. In quieter moments, when I was alone at the allotments, I managed to establish a border the length of the running brook where the wild angelica grew. My desire was for a gesture to the moon garden. I planted mock orange, white lilacs, dusty miller, patriot Hosta and silver sage lambs ear, all of which appear to illuminate in light of the moon. The strict light pollution policies in East Anglia afforded me this special effect, but I didn't let on to the others that I had requisitioned considerable common land for such folly.

I never disclosed that I composed eighteenth and nineteenth century French flower paintings in the garden. And no one ever enquired. I had quiet pleasure knowing they were hidden in plain sight, ascribed to me yet presented to all. Much like the ink landscape painting with hidden silhouettes of Marie Antoinette and the Dauphin (c.1790), the closer you peer into to the picture, deep inside it, you will find the double portrait; looking away and back again you need to search once more for the elusive pair. Spies posing as artists during the first world war overtly sketched landscapes; for some time nobody seemed to notice that the pictures were full of intelligence, such as landmarks and base camp maps, all concealed within a topographical impression of the countryside. The compositions in my humble garden allotment demanded the same attention. To the casual observer, were these simply accidental joys of nature, or was there evidence of cultivated intent?

Having had the fortune of this gift of a garden, my gratitude expressed itself in a gesture I hope was both modest and grand at the same time. I longed for the displays to be as inspiring as the originals they depicted, yet was happy for them to be seen entirely for their own sake, their design and intent undetected. Unlike the flowers in gardens such as those at Charleston House or indeed Monet's Giverny, my arrangements were not intended to pose or sit for the artist, although I am sure they would happily have obliged. Just as the great paintings might seem new with every fresh encounter and observance, so too their living counterparts: this ephemeral troupe, resident in the allotment, with each summer blossom anew.