

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Gallery Social: Flower Still Life With Bird's Nest by Jan Van Huysum

Video one: Artist Tessa Asquith-Lamb explores Jan Van Huysum's still life.

[05:09]

Tessa Asquith-Lamb:

Hello my name is Tessa Asquith-Lamb. I'm one of the artists that work on the Gallery Social programme at the National Galleries of Scotland.

In the first of two videos today I'm going to show you one of my favourite paintings in the gallery. In the second video an art activity you can do at home with things you might have lying around, inspired by that picture.

First, we'll have a cup of tea and look at the painting. So the painting I've chosen today is Jan Van Huysum's Still Life with a Bird's Nest from 1718. I've chosen this picture for its brilliant detail, vibrant colour and the way it is lit like a movie star with a spotlight right on the front of the flowers and the soft shadows in the dark. Now the flowers in this impossible bouquet are placed in a niche – a stone niche- which is quite difficult to see when you first look at it. One of the details of the niche that I really like is right at the bottom of the painting the artist has put his signature as if its carved into the stone of the niche. I like to think about the day he finished the painting and how glad he must have been to have finished and how pleased he was to sign his name.

Now I've called it an impossible bouquet because any gardener would know that tulips and roses do not flower at the same time of year, I mean unless you force them! And also, if you look at the urn at the bottom (which has got little cupids on it – the cupids are an emblem of love) there's an urn at the bottom. Even if you've got a really really long tulip in your urn it would never quite reach as far as the flowers in the Van Huysum.

And just to pick out a few of those flowers and tell you what they might have signified at the time: The big roses in the middle, of course they are emblems of love. The tulips top centre, a variety of stripy tulip, they symbolise again love and also vanity. Now there had been a big tulip craze in the early 1600s and that had kind of fallen away by the time this picture was painted but they were still emblems of vanity to some people.

Now on the left of the painting is a frond of lilac, a soft gentle-coloured flower, and they symbolise first love, or the first emotions of falling in love. Next to them are the narcissus, the yellow daffodil-like flowers. Because they are one of the first things that appear in the spring they are again symbols of hope and resurrection.

Right at the top is a poppy that symbolises sleep and towards the bottom of the painting is a vibrant blue morning glory, symbol of coquetry or flirtation! And down at the bottom there's an auricula, a healing flower.

There are in all fifteen different plants in this painting, all recognisable to botanists. There are also, when you get close to this picture, lots and lots of insects crawling about all over the flowers. Wasps, bees, flies, loads of ants on the roses, a butterfly, and of course there's a nest at the bottom. Of

course a nest is an emblem of rebirth and eggs of course are symbols of regeneration. The one in the painting is probably a mistle thrush's nest. But here's a blackbird's nest that my dad found, obviously after the bird had finished with it. I've put some little paper eggs inside. You can see what a lovely shape a nest is and just how difficult something like that is to paint, but he's managed it, with great detail. He's also, inside the nest, painted the wing of a dragonfly and a dead woodlouse the bird has left behind!

The last detail I wanted to talk about in the painting is the way the artist has shown, right in the centre, a rose leaf. You would think the natural bit of a rose leaf to paint would be something like this, the glossy green outer leaf. What he's done is painted the underside of the leaf, the softer green with its veins. Then what he's done is put on it a little dewdrop, like this. Such a brilliant little detail, there and just that moment of Spring-like life added to the picture, and it is one of the things that brings it to life for me.

So I hope you've enjoyed this look round the painting today with me and in the second picture I'll show you how to create something very similar at home! Thank you very much for listening.