

Jean-Michel Othoniel decodes the secret language of flowers in the Louvre's collections

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The artist has published a new book about the flowers within the storied Paris museum's art collection, alongside an intervention of new paintings in its glass-roofed French sculpture hall



La rose du Louvre, 2019, by Jean-Michel Othoniel, installation view at the Louvre Museum, Paris. *Photography: Claire Dorm*

Jean-Michel Othoniel has a fascination with flowers. Long before the French artist became known for his joyful, gold-plated fountain in the gardens of Versailles and his cascading wave of Indian glass bricks, he was already exploring floral motifs, explaining, 'My first works played with anemones buried in sulphur, cut and dissected pomegranates, flower petals pinned to walls.' This fascination led him to amass extensive notes on the history of plants, and develop a habit of photographing his favourite species. Flowers, in his view, 'are a way of looking at the world – and an expression of my desire to see the marvels that surround us'.

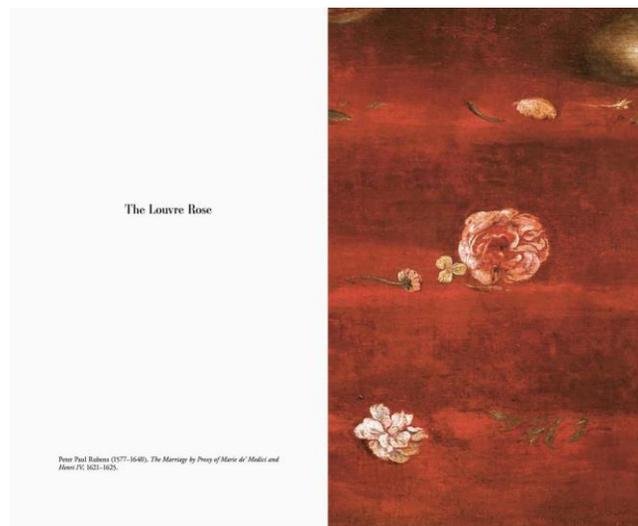
So it makes perfect sense that his new intervention at the Louvre would focus on flowers and their hidden meanings. Unveiled to coincide with the 30th anniversary of IM Pei's grand pyramid, Othoniel's project comprises two parts: a book about the flowers within the museum's collections, and a series of original paintings installed in the glass-roofed Cour Puget.



The Secret Language of Flowers is published by Musée du Louvre/Actes Sud

Titled *The Secret Language of Flowers: Notes on the Hidden Meanings of the Louvre's Flowers*, the petite volume is just that. A compendium of painstakingly researched notes on 99 floral species, each titled by its common and scientific names, with a small photograph above and text underneath referring to its geographical origins, its place in ancient mythology and religious tradition, its cultural associations, and the role it has come to play in the history of art. The genius lies on the page opposite the text, displaying a full-bleed detail shot of an artwork in the Louvre in which the species is shown. Othoniel spent 18 months researching and photographing these artworks, roaming the galleries every Tuesday (when the museum was closed to the public) and delving into all eight curatorial departments.

The featured artworks, then, range from an Assyrian frieze, showing a winged spirit with pine cone in hand; a 17th-century Delft ceramic plate, painted with Chinese chrysanthemums; Da Vinci's *The Virgin of the Rocks*, which has white irises in the foreground as the Virgin Mary cradles the infant Jesus; and Tiepolo's *Apollo and Daphne*, which sees Daphne being transformed into a laurel tree. With the simple, yet deft pairing of artwork and contextual information, Othoniel unlocks a visual vocabulary that has often been neglected, and presents the reader with a new lens through which to appreciate historic masterpieces.



The Marriage by Proxy of Marie de' Medici and Henri IV, 1621-1625, by Peter Paul Rubens, pictured in a spread from *The Secret Language of Flowers*

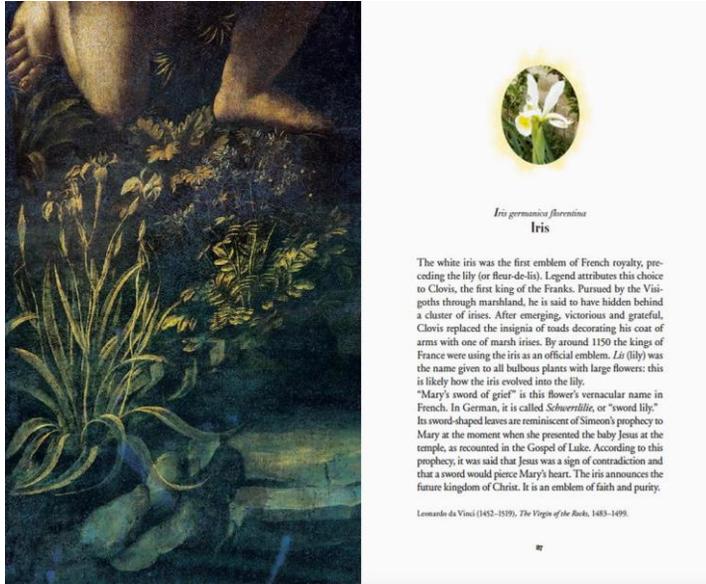
One work captured the artist's imagination above the rest – a painting from Peter Paul Rubens' fabled Marie de' Medici cycle (above), depicting the Florentine princess at her proxy wedding to King Henry IV (the ceremony took place in the Cathedral of Florence, with the bride's uncle standing in for the French king, who couldn't personally attend). On the steps of the altar, upholstered in a regal red, Rubens drew a single rose that had ostensibly fallen from the wedding wreath, its petals unfurling in vivid detail. 'A rose that is the art of painting itself, with lightning brushstrokes, shattering the colours of the canvas,' describes Othoniel. 'Blood red, illuminated by white, symbol of passion and power, of erudition and sensuality, this rose is the rose of mystery, the flower of the Louvre.'

And so Othoniel created his new paintings, six in total, in homage to Marie de' Medici's rose. Each shows a single rose, abstracted into a mighty swirl of beaded forms and drawn in ink on a gleaming golden canvas. Displayed in the niches of the Cour Puget, amid the finest examples of outdoor statuary, Othoniel's intervention is a fitting homage to the glory of France, to a queen who would become the nation's foremost patron of the arts, and to the Louvre, a cultural institution that holds a special place in many hearts.

Indeed, La Rose du Louvre has been a homecoming for Othoniel himself. 'As a student, I worked as an attendant at the Louvre. I guarded the paintings, monitored the visitors, and even cleaned the galleries,' he recalls. 'So it's very moving to have a show here, 30 years later.'



La rose du Louvre, 2019, by Jean-Michel Othoniel. Photography: Claire Dorn



A spread from Jean-Michel Othoniel's *The Secret Language of Flowers: Notes on the Hidden Meanings of the Louvre's Flowers*