

“Half-forgotten flowers”:  
Constance Spry and the Modern Interior

Owen Ostrowski

A Thesis in the Department of Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts (Art  
History)

Concordia University  
Montréal, Québec, Canada  
April 2022

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY  
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Owen Ostrowski

Entitled: “Half-forgotten flowers”: Constance Spry and the Modern Interior

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Art History)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Chair  
Dr. John Potvin

\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner  
Dr. Cynthia Hammond

\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner

\_\_\_\_\_ Supervisor  
Dr. John Potvin

\_\_\_\_\_ Thesis Supervisor(s)

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Nicola Pezolet      Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Annie Gérin      Dean

## Abstract

“Half-forgotten flowers”: Constance Spry and the Modern Interior

Owen Ostrowski

This thesis explores the practice of London-based florist Constance Spry (1886–1960), focusing on her interaction with the emerging field of interior decoration. I outline the historical context of flower arrangement in Britain to establish the cultural role of flowers in domestic spaces.

Focusing on the 1930s, I put Spry’s popularization of all-white flower arrangements in conversation with white as a modernist cornerstone, in order to interrogate its associations in this period with newness, cleanliness and health. I follow scholars of Sapphic Modernity, queer history, and queer theory in my analysis, which foregrounds themes of nostalgia and temporal dissonance to suggest that Spry’s work has a multi-temporal quality which pertains to a queer experience of modernity. I contest the gendered divisions between art, design, decoration, and floristry in situating Spry as a unique individual in these histories.

## Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. John Potvin, who introduced me to this field and encouraged me to pursue this degree. I am extremely lucky to have had his guidance, insight, and kindness along this journey. I would like to say thank you to the Department of Art History who made space for me and my research to grow into this project.

This thesis would not have been written without the constant love and support of Emily Mernin, who has an unbelievable belief in me.

Thank you to my family, who stay together for better or worse, thanks to whom my childhood was filled with art and music: Mama, Tatuś, Abunia, and Lux, who have supported me through the past few years with patience and respect. Dziękuję mojej Babci za to, że zawsze mi mówiła, jak ważne było się uczyć. Thank you to my friends, especially Nora, Connor, Matt, Sophie, Patricia, Polina, Ben, Sophia, and Kate, who I have depended on more than I know.

For Dania  
Danny, thank you for teaching me to imagine, dance, and create  
everything that seems as though it cannot yet exist

## Contents

<b>List of Figures</b>	vii
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>Chapter 1: Constance</b>	8
<b>Chapter 2: Women in Modernity and Flowers in the Home</b>	15
<b>Chapter 3: All-White</b>	22
<b>Chapter 4: Queer Flowers</b>	33
<b>Conclusion: Funeral Lilies, or A Celebration of Ephemerality</b>	41
<b>Figures</b>	46
<b>Bibliography</b>	64

## List of Figures

- Fig. 1. (pg 46) Atkinsons perfumery interior, designed by Norman Wilkinson and flowers by Constance Spry, 1929. Photographer unknown. RHS Lindley Collections.
- Fig. 2. (pg 47) Constance Spry, “Mixed group of exotic flowers in old jardinière table.” For Atkinson’s, Old Bond street, London. *Flowers in House and Garden* (New York: J.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1937).
- Fig. 3. (pg 48) Constance Spry, Arrangement with white lilac, arum lilies, and cellophane. From Enid Corral, “New Ways with Flowers,” *Britannia and Eve*, March 1, 1934, 63.
- Fig. 4. (pg 49) Syrie Maugham’s all-white drawing room, for her home in King’s Road, London, c. 1929-1930.
- Fig. 5. (pg 50) Constance Spry, “Griffin with dried mixture.” *A Constance Spry Anthology* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1953), 183.
- Fig. 6. (pg 51) An all-white arrangement. Constance Spry, “Designs in Blossom,” *Vogue New York* 84, issue 9 (Nov 1, 1934): 45.
- Fig 7. (pg 52) Cecil Beaton. *Baba Beaton*, 1930. Bromide Print. 22.6 x 17.5 cm.
- Fig. 8. (pg 53) Wall vases, one with mixed bouquet including tulips, peonies, anthuriums, rhododendrons, and trails of clematis montana. *Flowers in House and Garden* (1937).
- Fig. 9. (pg 54) Gluck, *Chromatic*, 1932. Oil on canvas. 122 x 119 cm.
- Fig. 10. (pg 55) Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Flowers in Glass and Fruit*, 1651.
- Fig. 11. (pg 56) Drawing by Rex Whistler. Constance Spry, “The Pleasure of Flowers,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (June 1935): 71.
- Fig. 12. (pg. 57) Constance Spry, A table arrangement with flowers and fruit. *Garden Notebook* (1940).
- Fig. 13. (pg 58) Gluck Room at the Fine Art Society, 1937. *Gluck: Her Biography*, by Diane Souhami. London: Phoenix, 1988.
- Fig. 14. (pg 59) Gluck in the studio at Bolton House, c. 1937. *Gluck: Who Did She Think He Was?* Directed by Clare Beaven. 2017.
- Fig. 15. (pg 60) Constance Spry, “Dead Group in Black Marble Vase.” *Flower Decoration* (1934), 143.
- Fig. 16. (pg 61) Gluck, *Nature Morte*, 1937. Oil on Canvas. 177 x 177 cm.

Fig. 17. (pg 62) Constance Spry, "Corky Stem in Glass Cornucopia." *Flower Decoration* (1934), 142.

Fig. 18. (pg 63) Norman Wilkinson, *Richard II Holding the Red Rose of Lancaster*, 1907. Print.



*My aim is to make suggestions which will help those who love flowers, but have no great knowledge of the variety of subjects at their disposal; to prompt others, whose knowledge is greater, to recall to their minds half-forgotten flowers, and to suggest the use of subjects hitherto unconsidered by them as suitable material.*<sup>1</sup>  
—Constance Spry

## Introduction

When James Dyson resigned as the chairman of London’s Design Museum in 2004, he made it clear that it was over his frustrations with the latest exhibition, complaining that its topic was not “a serious subject for an exhibit,” and calling out the museum’s director, Alice Rawsthorn, for interfering with the public’s understanding of “serious design.”<sup>2</sup> The show revolved around the life and work of the London-based florist Constance Spry (1886–1960), whose unusual arrangements attracted high-profile residential and commercial commissions from the late 1920s onwards. Dyson’s statements, echoed by the museum’s founder designer Terrence Conran and other supporters, exemplify the persistence of hierarchical and gendered divisions within design history. Attempts to recognize Spry’s innovative work seem to inevitably fall into this trap. The exhibition was criticized as not doing Spry justice, for minimizing her professionalism, being out of touch with her stylistic concerns and undemonstrative of her actual floral practice in its display of only two arbitrary floral arrangements.<sup>3</sup> While the museum failed to accomplish a robust appreciation of the florist, Dyson’s comments further denigrate Spry’s life and work, which was devoted to elevating all varieties of floral materials as integral to the design of the modern home, as frivolous—not even meriting to be categorized as “design” at all.

- 
1. Constance Spry, *Flower Decoration* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1934), 2.
  2. Robert Murphy, “Tempest in a Flowerpot,” *WWD: Women's Wear Daily*, vol. 188, issue 129 (December 20, 2004): 17.
  3. Andrew Lambirth, “Flower Power,” *The Spectator*, October 2, 2004, 62; Ryan, Deborah Sugg, “Constance Spry: A Millionaire for a Few Pence,” *Home Cultures* 2, no. 1 (2005): 126.

The controversy sparked media coverage and debates, and was likely a motivator to the publishing of an extensive biography of Spry a few years later. Biographer Sue Shephard opens *The Surprising Life of Constance Spry* (2010) by citing Dyson's and Conran's comments, speculating that "Spry would have been bemused by their narrow vision, not because it smacked of sexism but because in her day design and art were pretty much regarded as the same thing."<sup>4</sup> Shephard goes on to recall Spry—or as she refers to her, Connie—as a household name, who upon further investigation is revealed to have been a remarkable entrepreneur and artist: a well-loved, passionate, and intelligent woman who was invested in inspiring young women, and who, despite moving in elite circles and supplying flowers for royal weddings, Shephard insists was "blind to class differences."<sup>5</sup> Shephard's book paints a beautiful portrait of Spry, but as a biography, does not delve further into the issues at play in its opening paragraph. Shephard's claim that art and design were "the same thing" in Spry's lifetime, and her description of Spry as a "artist flower designer"<sup>6</sup> seems to avoid, rather than contest or complicate, the persistent and gendered division between these categories. In a system still influenced by Modernist ideals, any association with femininity, the previous generation, and the domestic sphere work against a consideration of Spry's practice as either art or design.

Spry did envision herself as an artist and a decorator, titles which, coupled with being a woman at the head of her own business, differentiated her from other florists. She "us[ed] flowers as an artist would use colours, using them to stress the architectural qualities of the colour values in a room."<sup>7</sup> Spearheading a new style of floristry that would influence decades to

---

4. Sue Shephard, *The Surprising Life of Constance Spry* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2010), ix.

5. Ibid., xxi.

6. Ibid., xi.

7. Constance Spry, *Flower Decoration* (1934): 5.

come, she was famous for breaking from the tame and traditional bouquets or single flowers that typically dotted late-Victorian homes. Instead, she advocated for dramatic, creative displays, using all varieties of flowers available, as well as plant material, fruit and vegetable elements, all as carefully designed, elaborate and gravity-defying as the old master still-lives she took inspiration from. Like other women who became active in the burgeoning field of interior decoration, Spry took on flower arrangement, a highly gendered tradition, as an opportunity for independence and creative expression. Flowers were a necessary expense in the homes and social events of the upper class, and in interwar London, Spry's arrangements were a signifier of wealth and style in the deluxe interiors of the new bourgeoisie. And yet, despite being a pervasive element of the modern interior, flowers are often only given a passing mention in the histories of modern art and design.

This omission sits within the issue that the modern interior itself has been overlooked in these histories. Over the course of the twentieth century, as urban areas grew, their unique types of labour and lifestyles caused the domestic sphere to become increasingly split from the public, male-dominated sphere of art and design. Christopher Reed points out that although domesticity, with its ties to family, comfort, and privacy, was a key feature of modernity, it was the absence and rejection of domesticity and decoration that came to define modern art.<sup>8</sup> These highly gendered categories were in constant tension: as home and work became spatially and temporally disjointed, an essentialist connection between womanhood, intuition, and domesticity was emphasized, with masculinity, rationality, and the public sphere as its natural counterpart. Penny Sparke writes, “the very concept of design, defined within modernism as a process determining

---

8. Christopher Reed, *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

the nature and forms of buildings and goods, grew out of this stereotypically masculine culture.”<sup>9</sup> Inferior to high art, architecture, and design, the home and its decoration were rendered “unintelligible, feminine and inconsequential.”<sup>10</sup> Spry, a woman who worked in the domestic sphere, complementing the interiors she decorated with ephemeral, provocative flower arrangements, has consequently been obscured.

A recent turn in scholarship has been attuned to the long-avoided issues of gender and sexuality in the history of modern art, design, and interior decoration. In his study of the evolution of modern interior design, design historian Peter McNeil outlines how the profession on interior decoration, a burgeoning field populated by women at the turn of the century, relied on the gendering of the separate spheres and their hierarchical binary system, while also forging new opportunities and notions of womanhood.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, McNeil calls for a consideration of sexuality in the study of this homosocial field, where relationships, romantic or otherwise, were fostered between the many women drawn to the possibility of financial independence, creative expression, and unmarried life.<sup>12</sup> The study of Sapphic Modernity has focused on the figure of the lesbian in modern cultural production, and historians looking into the role of queer women in the development of interior design, as well as intersecting art practices, have shown

---

9. Penny Sparke, “‘Everything in its place’: Women and Modernity,” in *As Long as It’s Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London and San Francisco: Pandora, 1994), 74.

10. John Potvin, *Bachelors of a Different Sort: Queer Aesthetics, Material Culture, and the Modern Interior in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 26.

11. Peter McNeil, “Designing Women: Gender, Sexuality and the Interior Decorator, c. 1890–1940,” *Art History* 17, no. 4 (Dec 1994): 4.

12. *Ibid.*, 5.

that domestic space is a deeply creative and subversive site, essential to building a more nuanced history of modern design.<sup>13</sup>

Spry's flowers are emblematic of these overlaps, and it is surprising that she is rarely present in this scholarship. In 2021, the Garden Museum in London, which showcases British gardening and its history, organized the exhibition *Constance Spry and the Fashion for Flowers*. In contrast to the Design Museum's 2004 exhibition, *Millionaire for a Few Pence*, the Garden Museum presented Spry's work as "floral design" which catered to an upper-class clientele, influenced artists, and fostered women's creative expression. Built around archival documents, the show pays attention to Spry's personal life while centering her innovative floristry as an unprecedented, modern practice. This new development is a step towards an acknowledgment of Spry's flowers as integral to the history of interior decoration. Still, I wish to tease out the implications of the terms that have been used to describe Spry's work, reaching backwards to develop a "period eye"<sup>14</sup> that will enable a richer understanding of her practice. My research leans on the existing scholarship on Spry. I will add to it by considering her unique practice in the context of flower arranging history and sapphic modernity in Britain. I am interested in how Spry and her contemporaries were in conversation with modern art and design influences and discourse.

---

13. I take this framework from scholars such as Bridget Elliott, who has drawn together the modern practices of non-heterosexual women and their domestic spaces in two essays referenced further, and Jasmine Rault, who similarly studies sapphic cultures in the modern era. The framework also stems from two collections of essays: Tirza True Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), and Laura Doan and Jane Garrity, *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women, and National Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

14. Latimer uses this term in her approach to studying early lesbian and feminist history. As notions of gender and sexuality were perpetually in flux and reliant on their local, cultural, and historical circumstances, it is crucial to build an understanding based on these rather than approach the past through our present-day lens. See Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart*, 7.

Spry's work is undeniably modern, and while she is recognized for her innovative artistry and lasting influence, her arrangements—and indeed flowers in general—are excluded from the history of modern art and design, and their significance to interior decoration similarly overlooked. Yet, a study of Spry has the unique potential to complicate and nuance both of these narratives. In her practice, we see an enmeshment of tradition and novelty that characterized much of British design of the early twentieth century; this simultaneous engagement with nostalgia and futurity is especially pertinent to a queer and feminine experience of modernity. It is through this framework that I will situate Spry as a unique individual in the history of early twentieth century interior decoration, art and design.

I first introduce Spry with biographical details, as well as the historical context of flower arranging in Britain, which establish the basis for her break from both floristry customs and societal expectations. To follow up, I examine the landscape of gender and sexuality in early twentieth century Europe through the field of interior decoration, an emerging profession which Spry and other non-heterosexual women were drawn towards. Scholarship is growing around how the feminine gendering of domestic space was utilized and subverted by female decorators, designers, and artists, and I carry this framework over to Spry's similar treatment of the highly gendered practice of flower arrangement in the home. As a case study, I analyze Spry's collaboration with the successful British decorator Syrie Maugham (1879–1955). Maugham is known for her instigation of the 1930s trend for all-white rooms, but little has been written about the shocking all-white flower arrangements popularized by Spry which played a necessary part in their design. Both women's use of white offers an alternative to the white wall, a symbol of male-dominated modernist design, thereby challenging its associations with cleanliness, progress, and health.

Spry was a prolific writer who regularly contributed to magazines and published several books with her personal anecdotes, thoughts and advice on flower arranging as a form of creative expression and decoration for homes and events. I focus on Spry's early career as she made a name for herself in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and pull from literature by her and about her from this period. The end of her only known queer relationship, in 1936, curtails my study. Here, Spry's flowers become significant as symbolic of all that is unsaid in queer romance, and become an important trace of a queer history haunted by loss, pain, and heartbreak.

## Chapter 1: Constance

Constance Fletcher grew up in Derby, England, and then Dublin, Ireland, with an inexpressible love for flowers. Their entrancing and magical qualities come forth in stories from her childhood, during which she picked whatever flowers she could find in her family's residential neighbourhood, and at home, pored over magazine reproductions of Flemish and Danish still-lives, where brilliant bouquets were painstakingly rendered. Horticulture, however, was not an acceptable path for a young middle-class woman, and her mother strictly enforced these values. Cultural attitudes about women undoubtedly impacted Constance even as she tried to escape them. Likely wishing to leave the house at a young age, Constance trained and worked as a health lecturer, during which she met her first husband, a widowed mine manager named James Heppell Marr. The marriage was an unfulfilling one. Shephard writes that the couple were completely unsuited for one another, with their hasty union fizzling out. She speculates, "[i]t is possible that Marr was a cold, inept lover," and concludes that he became angry and violent because of Constance's "sexual rejection."<sup>15</sup> Her role as the mine manager's wife in the remote town of Castlecomer was an unpleasant and isolating one. However, it was here that Constance finally had access to her own home and garden. For the first time, she had the opportunity to put her passion for plants and flowers into practice, growing and learning about different varieties, especially those she could cut and arrange in her home.

During the war, with her husband in the army, Constance moved back to Dublin to work for the newly established Red Cross. This experience, as was the case for many women, gave her practical insight into possible independence. In 1916, Constance moved to London, effectively leaving Marr (although they would not be formally divorced for several more years). It was at

---

15. Shephard, *The Surprising Life of Constance Spry*, 44.



her new job at the Ministry of Munitions that Constance met her second partner: Henry Ernest Spry (known to all as Shav) was her boss at the time. Shav too was still married to his first wife, but both pursued a relationship which they believed would lead to their eventual marriage. Going into a career in education, Constance became the principal of a new type of day-continuation school for children over the age of fourteen. The building, a repurposed mansion, was quickly decorated in bright colours and, of course, flowers from Constance's new garden. Brightening the classroom interior, flowers were an element of beauty intended to alleviate the traumatic realities of this post-war period.<sup>16</sup> Living in a new cottage in Essex, she would take on her journey to school every day a great bundle of flowers from her garden. These would dwindle as she gave them out to people along her route:

The journey ceased to be dreary and was enlivened with garden chat, homely personal memories of an earlier, more sunlit world, which were added to day by day, grew into sagas, nostalgic human stories. That is one of the things flowers do for you.<sup>17</sup>

In this period of Constance's life, flowers materialized as therapeutic and beautiful tools for intimate human connection: each bloom contained endless possibilities, rooted in nostalgia and memory.

While Shav was in India for many years, working for the Civil Service, Constance spent her evenings and weekends socializing. She joined other single and widowed women—in other words, “women without men”<sup>18</sup>—and survivors of the war at parties in and around London. It was here that Constance began decorating with flowers, asked by her friends and acquaintances to supply arrangements for their social events. Soon, favours turned into private commissions.

---

16. Shephard, 72.

17. *Ibid.*, 74.

18. Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart*, 8.

When Shav returned in 1925, the couple moved into an Essex farmhouse, where a walled garden became the site for Constance's self-taught, expert gardening. Finally divorced from Marr, Constance took Shav's last name, Spry, and the fact that they were never legally married was largely unknown. Entertaining often, Spry filled the house with flower arrangements, and began charging for her commissions. Her social circle and burgeoning private flower business grew. In 1927, Spry met cinema magnate Sidney Bernstein and the artist and theatre designer Norman Wilkinson, who each offered her large projects: to supply flowers and plants for Bernstein's London cinemas, and to decorate the shop windows of the new Atkinson's perfumery, whose interior Wilkinson was designing (Figure 1, 2). Spry jumped on this opportunity to resign from her post at the school, to turn flower arranging, her "'artistic' ladylike hobby,"<sup>19</sup> into a career. Shephard writes that this decision was received with shock and dismay: in the eyes of her parents and colleagues, "she was now recklessly giving up a fine career in education for a ridiculous little job doing flowers for shops and showmen."<sup>20</sup>

For Spry, the unconventional and life-altering decision meant she would devote herself to creative expression and experimentation with plants and flowers. Finally emerging from "the dark frustration of being unable to crystallize her visions," Spry began to see herself as an artist,<sup>21</sup> as well as a leader in an unexplored form of flower arranging: flowers as part and parcel of modern interior decoration. In her first published book, *Flower Decoration* (1934), she writes about starting out in the field and searching for relevant information on floristry. Reading "old books [...] enchanting in their sentimentality," she describes her disappointment upon finding

---

19. Shephard, 83.

20. Ibid., 84.

21. Ibid., xviii.

nothing on “that aspect of flower decoration which interests me, that is to say, the use of flowers as part of the decorative scheme of modern houses.”<sup>22</sup> While prior florists likely paid attention to their surroundings, Spry’s primary focus was to use flowers to complement, emphasize, and work with the colour schemes and architectural qualities of the rooms she decorated.<sup>23</sup> From the start, Spry articulates her practice as an art form which consciously engages with the design of the home.

Referring to herself as a flower decorator<sup>24</sup> who stated that she was “decorating rooms” rather than simply “displaying flowers,”<sup>25</sup> Spry aligned herself with the many women who were populating the then-emerging field of interior decoration. Spry reflects in her book, “[i]ntelligent women of to-day take the most invested interest in the decoration and furnishing of their houses,”<sup>26</sup> but laments that unlike her, these practitioners are not paying attention to flowers as an integral element of decoration. Constantly renewed fresh flowers were found throughout any bourgeois home, especially as they were a key signifier of financial means and social status. Spry situated herself alongside the leading decorators of the day, for whom each detail contributed to an overall interior scheme, to advocate for flowers as an essential element of this design rather than simply an adjunct. Indeed, Spry’s ethos made her arrangements distinct: her commitment to creating flowers that complimented the spaces they inhabited, even if ephemerally, meant her flowers became essential to many fashionable modern interiors.

---

22. Spry, *Flower Decoration*, 2.

23. *Ibid.*, 5.

24. Shephard, 119.

25. *Ibid.*, 272.

26. Spry, *Flower Decoration*, 5.

Spry was searching for and responding to a lack of precedent for her artistic vision: decorating with flowers. While flowers have always decorated homes in some capacity, there was significant growing availability, interest, and developing culture around flowers in the home from the mid-1800s onwards, creating the conditions for Spry to establish her practice. In *Flora Domestica* (2000), Mary Rose Blacker outlines an exponential interest in plants and flowers in Britain over the course of the nineteenth century, evidenced by the opening of the first botanical gardens, the publishing of numerous advice books and gardening journals, and the establishment of ever more horticultural societies. “Plant hunters” were sent abroad to find, categorize, and bring back foreign plants to England. Undoubtedly influenced by the conservatory-inspired massive glass structure that housed the 1851 Great Exhibition, personal hothouses and conservatories were added on to the drawing rooms of middle- and upper-class homes, housing exotic plants and supplying another space for socializing.<sup>27</sup> Flowers were cut from gardens surrounding the home, and their arrangement was the purview of the women of the house, assisted by gardeners and servants.<sup>28</sup> Cultured people, especially women, were expected to be fluent in the language of flowers, as this informed the flowers exchanged at social calls, events, and “key moments of emotion.”<sup>29</sup> Over the course of the century, industrial processes and technological advancements affected the flower market, producing standardized blooms in

---

27. Mary Rose Blacker, *Flora Domestica: A History of British Flower Arranging 1500-1930* (London: The National Trust, 2000), 157.

28. *Ibid.*, 154–5.

29. Felicity Hall, *Doing the flowers: an examination of morality, emotion and identity within contemporary British floristry*, MA Dissertation for the RCA/V&A History of Design program, May 10, 2016, 11.

increasing numbers. It was only in the late nineteenth century that the first flower shops opened, and the term “florist” began to denote these shopkeepers.<sup>30</sup>

In 1929, Spry opened her shop, Flower Decorations, in Pimlico. This name was only one of the qualities that set her apart from other florists working at the time. From the 1850s into the early twentieth century, it was customary to decorate rooms with large bunches of the same variety of flower, or single, perfect blooms in small vases. The era was marked by extravagance, and in the rooms of the upper classes, “[q]uantities of the most beautiful, perfectly formed flowers were required... at all times of the year.”<sup>31</sup> The growing bourgeoisie, in turn, imitated the floral customs of this wealthy coterie. Overturning these traditions, Spry brought back mixed bouquets, combining more luxurious flowers with branches, moss, berries, cabbage, and artificial leaves and petals, made of paper and cellophane (Figure 3). Spry rarely used conventional vases: her arrangements burst out of shallow dishes, jugs and glasses, marble pots, shells, statuettes, wall sconces, urns, boats, cornucopias. These were acquired by combing through the “antique-shops, the sale-rooms, and the junk-shops” which were her “constant sources of temptation.”<sup>32</sup> Spry undoubtedly bemused and intrigued the public; her unprecedented style was often described as “unique,” “unusual,” “interesting and original.”<sup>33</sup>

Spry’s use of unconventional, found and thrifted materials were a reflection of her belief that flower arranging was a creative and emotional art form, not an expense accessible only to the wealthy. In this move back to pursuing her childhood passion, Spry also defied societal

---

30. Blacker, *Flora Domestica*, 123.

31. *Ibid.*, 197.

32. Spry, *Flower Decoration*, 96.

33. “Constance Spry’s Flower Shop in London,” *Harpers Bazaar New York* 71, no. 2706 (March 1 1938): 163; Enid Corral, “New Ways with Flowers,” *Britannia and Eve* (March 1, 1934): 62.

expectations that she had been brought up with by becoming an entrepreneur in the public sphere, rather than fulfilling roles of traditional womanhood. Her work in the field was extremely influential: she played a key role in associating the profession of floristry with artistry, and led by example so that it could be a new career opportunity for women. Through the culturally loaded medium of flowers, Spry pursued her own creative fulfilment and interdependence, constantly navigating the expectations on her gender, class, and sexuality in the shifting landscape of early twentieth century and interwar Britain.

## Chapter 2: Women in Modernity and Flowers in the Home

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution continued to change the landscape in the West. Rural life and traditions were overtaken as urban areas grew, and their unique types of labour and lifestyles caused the private and public spheres to separate. Scholars have shown that the categories of public and private were gendered, and in constant tension.<sup>34</sup> Especially following the First World War, the opportunities for deviation from traditional gender roles were widening, threatening Western civilization's foundational gender hierarchy.<sup>35</sup> Anxieties about this changing world manifested in the classification and, in the case of the emerging fields of psychoanalysis and sexology, the pathologization of these deviations.<sup>36</sup> As the categories of home and work became spatially and temporally disjointed, an essentialist connection between

---

34. Potvin writes, “[t]he boundaries between the ‘separate spheres’ were fundamentally unstable and it was that instability, rather than the separation per se, that I will suggest, defined modernity, and by extension the modern interior.” See Potvin, *Bachelors*, 23; He follows Reed who wrote, “[t]he domestic, perpetually evoked in order to be denied, remains throughout the course of modernism a crucial site of anxiety and subversion.” This is illustrated by, for example, the notion of the male *flâneur* who thrived in public settings being subdued by the feminized home and undermined by any connection to it. See Reed, *Not at Home*, 8, 16.

35. In early twentieth century France, for example, where Latimer points out that the word *femme* signifies both “woman” and “wife,” entirely new categories beyond these constraints were being created by single women migrating to urban centres. See Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart*. Mary Louise Roberts also highlights that gender issues were a reference point for what many French writers perceived as the downfall of Western civilization. See Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender In Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

36. In the late nineteenth century, sexual scientists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and others, began to identify “sexual inversion” and by the early twentieth century these theories had reached literary and bohemian circles. See Latimer, 15-18, and Alison Oram, “A Queer Study,” in *Queering the Interior*, ed. Andrew Gorman-Murray and Matt Cook (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 212. Rault identifies the 1928 obscenity trials of the writer Radclyffe Hall surrounding the publication of *The Well of Loneliness* as a turning point, where photographs of the writer which circulated in the media connected Hall's dress and appearance with sex and gender deviance: “After the trials, various forms of female gender and sexual dissidence, from female masculinity to same-sex intimacy, which had been read as signs of modernity were reduced to one static and pathologized lesbian identity.” See Jasmine Rault, “Designing Sapphic Modernity,” *Interiors* 1, no. 1-2 (2010): 31.

womanhood and domesticity was emphasized, with masculinity and the public sphere as its natural counterpart.<sup>37</sup>

New stereotypes emerged that conformed to this separation, such as the housewife, but others, like the female interior decorator and the bachelor, deviated from its traditional heterosexual obligations and timeframes.<sup>38</sup> Women who pursued careers in the new field of interior decoration capitalized on this association between womanhood and the home, while at the same time flouting these conventions by becoming financially and personally independent.<sup>39</sup> As enclaves from the noise and pollution of the modern city, interiors took on a new meaning as places of repose, and modern design theories espoused the potential of the interior to be physically and psychologically therapeutic. Thus, the interior emerged as a site for the creation and control of virtuous, pure, and heteroreproductive modern subjects. Loaded with these oppressive gendered ideals, and during a “call to order”<sup>40</sup> encouraging women to adhere to traditional mores of motherhood and domesticity, the interior was apt ground for queer and early feminist interventions.

---

37. Elisabeth Freeman sees the modern period as uniquely marked by the fragmentation of time, when industrial capitalism forever changed ways of working, and split into highly gendered spheres the rhythms of domestic life and the workplace. Women were encouraged to return to their supposed “natural” role in the home, where cyclical rhythms of domestic labour took place, while the industrial modes of production occurring in the male-dominated public sphere were mechanized and linear. See Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Situating his study of the bachelor and queer, masculine domesticity in the context of the industrial revolution, Potvin too writes that the interior “emerged” as a private refuge and a place for self-expression, whereas the male-dominated public sphere was its opposite, nullifying any relationship between masculinity and domesticity, especially for unmarried men. See Potvin, *Bachelors*, 12.

38. Potvin, *Bachelors of a Different Sort*.

39. McNeil, *Designing Women*.

40. Sparke, “Everything in its place,” in *As Long as It’s Pink*, 77–78.



At the turn of the century, the profession of interior decoration, a new field populated by women, relied on the gendering of the separate spheres and their hierarchical binary system, while also forging new opportunities and notions of womanhood.<sup>41</sup> Whereas previously the home had been outfitted by several craftsmen and tradespeople, the decorator emerged as an individual figure, with a personal relationship to their client and creative control over the scheme of the home: an advisor and confidante.<sup>42</sup> Interior decoration and social etiquette in the home had previously been preoccupations of the upper-class, but the rising bourgeois class who sought to emulate them now brought these rules into their homes, and hired personal decorators to display their wealth, influence, and style. Increasing numbers of women were entering the workplace, and used the feminine association of certain fields— decoration, fashion, hairdressing, and flower arranging, among others—to acceptably do so, and hopefully secure financial independence. Success achieved here would be celebrated as such and invalidated as innate and intuitive rather than intellectual, professional, or truly creative.<sup>43</sup> Decorating became associated with male effeminacy and female inadequacy, hence the expression, “Is she happily married or an interior decorator?”<sup>44</sup> The idea that “taste” was an inherently feminine quality split interior decoration from male-dominated sectors of design: as opposed to masculine rationality and unique creative production, intuition and consumerism were tied to femininity, and these double-edged associations created the conditions for female interior decorators to carve out a place for themselves.

---

41. McNeil, 631.

42. Anne Massey, *Interior Design since 1900* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 123.

43. McNeil.

44. *Ibid.*, 637–8, 634.

Through interior decoration and other “feminine” fields, women who wished to elude marriage and other gendered expectations could access respect and independence. Pushing against restrictive views of femininity that they grew up with, upper- and middle-class women who sought out a career in decorating created spaces that, although varied in style, were united by a shared “rejection of the Victorian past,”<sup>45</sup> and by extension, its heteronormative frameworks. They joined other creative women for whom transgressing expectations of traditional womanhood was becoming a marker of being modern. At a time of increasing opportunities for women, views about gender were so ingrained that deviations from traditional femininity were deeply unsettling. Spry and other queer women in the professional sphere navigated this landscape, pushing to expand common conceptions of femininity. In the early twentieth century, it was possible for these women to exist in a “slippery space”<sup>46</sup> of unclassified sexual and gender dissidence, as queer identity was not yet visible, fixed, or condemned. The new field of sexology was developing, investigating deviations from assigned gender and homosexuality, but it is important to note that the concept of “sexual inversion” did not yet denote a sexual orientation, but rather “a broad range of deviant *gender* behaviour.”<sup>47</sup>

Scholars have pointed to the relevance of gender and sexual dissidence to the history of women in design in the twentieth century. There is a need for scholarship to address sexuality in relation to design, as well as properly take into account the diversity of aesthetics and mediums used by queer individuals. McNeil writes in his overview of women in interior design, “[i]f the matter of sexuality is ignored, then the social networks in which women moved, the possible

---

45. Ibid., 637.

46. Rault, “Designing Sapphic Modernity,” 32.

47. George Chauncey, Jr., “From Sexual Inversion To Homosexuality: Medicine And The Changing Conceptualization Of Female Deviance,” *Salmagundi*, No. 58/59 (Fall 1982–Winter 1983): 116. Italics mine.

source of commissions and alliances, are also obscured.”<sup>48</sup> Jasmine Rault argues there was a “phenomenon”<sup>49</sup> of queer women in the field of design, whose work expressed and housed non-heterosexual subjectivities. By working in and reworking the gendered interior, these women were challenging and subverting notions of femininity.

Flower arrangement in the home was a gendered activity, and in aligning herself with interior decoration as she took on flowers as her professional and creative practice, Constance Spry used, expanded and subverted these connotations. Cultural notions of femininity entwine the history of flower arrangement with the development of interior decoration. Over the course of the late 1800s, as interest piqued in botany, homes changed accordingly. Rooms in the house were newly designated for flower arrangement. Eating with the courses laid out on the dining table shifted to having staff serve food individually, leaving the table free for floral decorations.<sup>50</sup> Greenhouses were made domestic as conservatories or sunrooms were built off of drawing rooms or morning rooms. These were feminine spaces used for socializing, and the rise of the conservatory enforced the belief that women were “naturally indoor people,”<sup>51</sup> forever in pursuit of the domestic beauty that displaying flowers could enhance. Ladies’ advice books and articles advised women on their domestic duties, suggesting for instance to spend at least one hour a day on flower arranging.<sup>52</sup> The florally decorated interior was a feminine space, and Spry’s practice is situated in this history, as she worked out of these traditions to advance female floristry into the artistic, public, and professional realm.

---

48. McNeil, 635.

49. Rault, “Designing Sapphic Modernity,” 30.

50. Blacker, 176.

51. Sparke, *Nature Inside: Plants and Flowers in the Modern Interior* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 29.

52. *Ibid.*, 204.

As modernist design ideals permeated homes into the twentieth century, the crowded, dark, and enclosed Victorian interior was replaced by minimal and light furnishings, with a focus on the benefits of letting in sunlight and air. Many modern buildings were designed around a relationship between the inside and outside, in light of these discourses. As a result, as the Victorian era was rejected, an element that carried over from its interiors was the use of potted plants and flowers. Greatly diminished and stylized, potted cacti, ivy, and trees were included as elements that often interacted with the modern design of the space. For modernists who embraced industrial processes, as well as for more “organic”<sup>53</sup> modernists, plants were viewed as a healthy, detoxifying, and therapeutic link to nature. Flower arrangements in modernist interiors, heavily influenced by the Japanese style, *ikebana*, used minimal elements, chosen and arranged to blend in with their surroundings.

An enthusiastic stripping away of ornament and decoration in the name of physical, moral, and societal cleanliness marks the work of modernist design theorists. Yet as Sparke notes, flowers and plants occupy an in-between space here, where these natural elements become “quasi-objects”<sup>54</sup> which were “one of the few forms of ornament admitted into the modernist interior.”<sup>55</sup> Putting this history in the context of the nineteenth century, Sparke is able to nuance the conventional view of modernism as a dramatic split from the past. She writes,

While the functions and meanings of indoor nature have inevitably changed over time, its roles as an *aide-memoire* of the pre-industrial past, as a form of therapy for human beings, and as an active agent in the creation of a non-toxic environment have arguably remained intact through the whole period. Providing a counterpoint to rapid urbanisation, to the hard forms and materials of modern architecture, and to the cultural dominance of

---

53. Ibid., 71.

54. Ibid., 13.

55. Ibid., 71.

advanced technologies, in a variety of ways nature inside has consistently offered a much-needed anchor to otherwise unchained ‘progress’.<sup>56</sup>

Sparke brings up the gendered tensions at play in this history. Women were thought to have an innate capacity for arranging flowers as a domestic pastime.<sup>57</sup> Arrangement was associated with aesthetic pleasure and emotion, while gardening and plant reproduction took place in the male-dominated public sphere and became commercialized.<sup>58</sup> Modernists’ shedding of past decorative tendencies was also a shedding of traditionally feminine arts. Yet, as Sparke demonstrates, plants and flowers pervaded modernist interiors as decorative and organic elements: a detail ignored by critics and historians.<sup>59</sup> It is the neglect to acknowledge plants and flowers in descriptions of these interiors that betrays an ongoing denigration of the feminine, decorative, and emotional forms of design which have a place in this history. The marginalization of flower arrangement and other traditionally feminine arts in the history of modern art and design speaks to an avoidance of complicating or questioning its overarching narrative. As Potvin writes, “[w]ithin a modernist ethos that has dominated Western academic, political and cultural life, the cult of the domestic, sexual difference and the decorative beauty of flowers seem to stand in as the enemy.”<sup>60</sup>

It is precisely these in-between qualities, and their ability to complicate modernist agendas, that are explored in the following section, which deals with Spry’s use of white and her floral contributions to the all-white rooms of Syrie Maugham.

---

56. Ibid., 10.

57. Ibid., 48.

58. Ibid., 31, 49.

59. Ibid., 71.

60. Potvin, *Bachelors of a Different Sort*, 192.

### Chapter 3: All-White

The decorator Syrie Maugham's all-white room at her Chelsea home (Figure 4) was a unique exploration of the whiteness and lightness that was becoming characteristic of modern design. In what would become her signature style, the drawing room was dominated by tones of white, off-white, and beige. The walls were stripped, revealing bare white panels. Chairs and sofas were upholstered in beige satin, on a cream-coloured rug by the textile designer Marion Dorn (1896–1964). This palette of pale textures was amplified by its reflection in a screen entirely composed of tall mirrored panels, framed in chromium. Another, lower screen, made of white lacquer, concealed the piano. The room was emblematic of the influence of modern design in Britain, with the 1930s as the moment when the value of a decoration scheme completely shifted away from historical traditions, the price of its materials, or the intricacy of its ornamentation.<sup>61</sup>

Although she was equally known for sparing no expense on her all-white interiors, it was Maugham's decorative scheme, which communicated "an abstracted notion of chic"<sup>62</sup> that was their highest value. Maugham bleached and glazed "good" antique furniture to create a smooth, white finish, and this seamlessly complemented the other characteristics of her spaces: whitewashed walls, pale leather, sheep-skin carpets, and even clothing, as in the case of white uniforms worn by servants at her all-white ball.<sup>63</sup>

Indispensable to Maugham's all-white rooms and events were flowers arranged by her close friend, Constance Spry. In these arrangements, lilies, china camellias, lilac branches, white tulips, snowberries, arums, rhododendron, magnolias, and white roses (among many others),

---

61. Steven Calloway, "1930-1945: Pleasing Decay and the All-White Room," in *Twentieth Century Decoration* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1988), 213.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Potvin, 225.

seemed to flow, fly, and grow out Spry's unique containers (Figure 5), which were most often whitewashed in the same style as Maugham's furniture (Figure 6). In a photograph taken by Cecil Beaton of his sister Baba (Figure 7), Spry's rare use of crystal and glass vases highlight the modern quality of Maugham's white drawing room. In the portrait, the mirrored screen takes up the entire backdrop against which Baba poses, creating an otherworldly play of lights, shadows, and reflections. The screen's tall, thin panels call up the soaring height and rows of windows of early skyscrapers, and glittering city lights. Baba herself mirrors the décor of the room: her short, white-blond hair frames her pale face, and she wears a floor-length white gown with sparkling clasp, brooch, and bangles. The rug has been removed to reveal a darker, polished floor, throwing the white elements of the room into higher contrast. A crystal vase of white *Datura* sits atop a pillar at Baba's elbow: crafted out of several long tubes of glass, it creates its own set of glossy spots of reflected white light. Behind her, on a low white side table, a mottled glass vase of gigantic white lilies seem to follow the curve of Baba's pose: her hand on her hip, a light lean. Coupled with the modernized column to her right, Baba's diaphanous white gown suggests she might be a modern-day Greek sculpture, a symbol of a transformed ancient aesthetics.

Spry's partnership with Maugham lent a new visibility to the core drive of her practice: the integrity of flowers to interior decoration.<sup>64</sup> In her own writing, or in articles that covered her work, her arrangements are often pictured in their surroundings: they stand out against a wall, line a dining table, or frame a mantelpiece. More than interacting with furnishings, Spry's flowers would often become architectural elements themselves. Her wall vases (Figure 8), painted the same colour as the wall,<sup>65</sup> would cause floral elements to cascade down walls with an

---

64. Shephard, 122.

65. Constance Spry, "Vases That Are Different," *Harper's Bazaar* (Dec 1935): 84.

“eighteenth-century [effect], an evocation of the floral swags characteristic of fine rococo plasterwork, but using real flowers.”<sup>66</sup> In Maugham’s home, “[o]ne guest remembered pillars of white blooms in the dining-room lit from within.”<sup>67</sup> In her writing, Spry is always a decorator. The chapters of her first book, *Flower Decoration*, are organized based on colour, and flowers and arranging techniques are grouped together based on how they interact with their environments, surrounding materials and lighting. Indeed, flowers become a type of decorative item, chosen for the same qualities that one would look for in a piece of furniture or better yet, a built-in element of the home, as when Spry wrote that white and green flowers were best in a white room: “their infinite gradations of green or cream standing out against white walls, with the right lighting, [appear] almost sculpted.”<sup>68</sup> White—the marble-white of classical sculptures, platinum blonde hair, and ocean liners—overtook the home, became Maugham’s famous style, and drew Spry into “a different, dramatic and creative world.”<sup>69</sup>

White is the leitmotif of modernism. In the name of cleanliness, uniformity, and in opposition to the changeability of fashion, white was adopted by modern architects in their removal of ornament: a blank slate which would make way for a better, modern society. Mass production, with its emphasis on standardization and efficiency, influenced the design of buildings and interiors, as a new “machine for living in”<sup>70</sup> was required to suit new rhythms of life and their enhanced modern body. In *The Decorative Art of Today* (1925), the architect

---

66. Jane Stevenson, *Baroque Between the Wars: alternative styles in the arts, 1918-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 274.

67. Shephard, 122.

68. Shephard, 123.

69. Shephard, 121.

70. Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, trans. John Goodman (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 151.



Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, known as Le Corbusier (1887–1965), envisions a law, enforced by the Paris police, that each citizen whitewash their home. Rendered “clean,” with no more “dirty, dark corners,”<sup>71</sup> homes both wealthy and poor would be evened out by a coat of Ripolin. In its ability to throw anything in front of it into high contrast, white for Le Corbusier was physically and morally hygienic, revealing deceit like “an X-Ray of beauty.”<sup>72</sup>

Along with the Viennese architect Adolf Loos (1870–1933), who also saw nineteenth-century decoration as immoral, uncivilized, and criminal, the ideas advanced by Corbusier were and remain hugely influential. Throughout his work, he calls for white walls as a remedy to the redundant and perverse colours and patterns of over-crowded rooms, positioning modern architecture in opposition to the fleeting fashions of cheaply-made, feminine objects, whose accumulation by “[t]he pretty little Shephardess shop-girl in her flowery cretonne dress” renders her “a sickening apparition from the show-cases of the costume department in the ethnographic museum.”<sup>73</sup> Constantly calling up domesticity and decoration in order to reject it,<sup>74</sup> Corbusier’s pathological preoccupation with clean and healthy white relies on placing deviants—women, homosexuals, the nonwhite and colonized—in an inferior position, both temporally and spatially behind. As Mark Wigley writes, “modern architecture—and likewise, its historiography—cannot detach itself from what it emphatically defines as its degenerate other.”<sup>75</sup>

The white walls, surfaces made of glass and steel, and numerous windows that became characteristic of modern buildings were designed to fight dust and dirt and let sunlight and air

---

71. Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, trans. James I. Dunnett (London: Architectural Press, 1987) 188.

72. *Ibid.*, 190.

73. Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, 90.

74. Reed, 16.

75. Mark Wigley, “White-out: Fashioning the Modern (Part 2),” *Assemblage*, No. 22 (Dec. 1994): 10.

into the home. Bacteriology, knowledge around germs, the invention of the x-ray, and Freudian psychoanalysis raised awareness of new inner and invisible threats to health, changing forever how homes were designed, built, and maintained. New concerns abounded about the polluted city and unclean environments believed to be causing modern fatigue and widespread diseases, but also psychological ailments, “the nerves shattered in the aftermath of war.”<sup>76</sup> The white wall was “a sensitive surface, a sensor”<sup>77</sup> on which each stain or speck of dust would become visible, and thus easy to clear away. Ventilation, open windows, balconies, and rooftop terraces, stemming from tuberculosis treatment centres, were incorporated into new homes which would cleanse the body and mind. The influence of medical discourses on modern architecture cannot be underestimated; Beatriz Colomina writes, “Modernity was driven by illness.”<sup>78</sup> Disease, trauma, stress, immorality, anti-nationalism, degeneracy: all were symptoms of a sick society that could be treated by the correctly designed environment, dominated by clean and calming white.

White walls have remained synonymous with modernism and were widely embraced as the norm. Maugham’s sparsely decorated all-white room appeared shocking, even “miserable”<sup>79</sup> in 1930 as modern styles, often regarded with suspicion as foreign, were slow to impact British interiors. However, white walls are not inherently modernist, as Sally-Anne Huxtable has demonstrated in her study of white interiors in Britain, tracing the fashion back to the Pre-

---

76. Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Zürich, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019), 31.

77. Wigley, “White-out,” 8.

78. Colomina, 11.

79. Calloway quotes the architect and collector Charles Wade who commented on white and minimal rooms such as Maugham’s, “Just a world of washy porridge beige colour and utter blankness; nothing whatever to stimulate the imagination... I am miserable in such surroundings.” See Calloway, 214.

Raphaelites, Aestheticism, and the Arts and Crafts movement. From the 1850s to the turn of the century, the white and blue of Chinese porcelain and the contrasts against white in Japanese art began to influence British artists and designers. Moving away from the bright colours, patterns and ornamentation of Victorian interiors, paler shades and off-white began to be employed in avant-garde circles.<sup>80</sup> The earliest example was found at the Kelmscott home of the prominent artist and activist for the Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris (1834–1896), whose drawing room (c. 1871) was painted all white, with white curtains. Here, whitewash also had a connotation of morality and purity, and for members of the Aesthetic Movement, white spaces symbolized the *tabula rasa* of the mental interior, as in childhood.<sup>81</sup>

White walls would not become feasible for the majority of people until at least the 1930s, when electricity became commonplace (prior to this, white in urban environments would be quickly stained by soot and smoke from gas, coal, and fire). As “modern” became “a new and sophisticated taste among the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia,”<sup>82</sup> white walls strayed from their original moral connotations. Writing about the 1933 Bloomsbury home designed by Wells Coates for actors Elsa Lanchester and Charles Laughton, Potvin notes that the whiteness used throughout the space relayed the “sense of freedom, the lack of responsibility”<sup>83</sup> of their bohemian lifestyle and open marriage. The moral focus of Loos and Corbusier’s ethos was taken out of the equation. White walls instead became a chic backdrop where modern gender and

---

80. Sally-Anne Huxtable, “White Walls, White Nights, White Girls: Whiteness and the British Artistic Interior, 1850-1900,” *Journal of Design History* 27, no. 3 (2014): 244–5.

81. Huxtable, 249.

82. Colomina, 80.

83. Potvin, 238.

sexual identities were “project[ed] and picture[d],”<sup>84</sup> intentionally revealing “the very modern perversions they were meant to expose, shame and vilify.”<sup>85</sup>

Maugham’s signature white, and Spry’s all-white bouquets are compelling to consider in these contexts. At the same time that white surfaces were being advocated as healthy and moral, Maugham and Spry are cited as participating in a white “craze.”<sup>86</sup> Maugham famously turned antique pieces of furniture white by “pickling” them in lye or acid. She also painted, stripped, bleached, and waxed furniture to render it white, or created an “antique white” look by glazing white with an amber gilt.<sup>87</sup> Frequenting antique sales and flea markets together, Spry used the same techniques on anything that could hold flowers, stripping, painting, and waterproofing them.<sup>88</sup> Shephard writes about a friend of Maugham’s who, after painting her outdoor flower pots white, “allowed her *mania* for no colour to spread indoors, and the house, too, became all-white.”<sup>89</sup> The couturier Victor Stiebel, who would join Maugham and Spry on their shopping expeditions, referred to Spry’s influence on home decoration and flower arrangement as “start[ing] something which was spreading over the country like a wild euphoric disease.”<sup>90</sup> It is telling that when rooms are designed by women, their penchant for white becomes associated with the very illnesses that male modernists campaigned against: nerves, fleeting fashions, and contagious disease.

---

84. Ibid.

85. Potvin, 240.

86. Shephard, 122.

87. Shephard, 126.

88. Ibid., 128.

89. Ibid., 122, italics mine.

90. Ibid., 128.

Maugham and Spry's use of white being likened to a physical or mental illness perhaps stems from the fact that, as Potvin has argued, Maugham's rooms did not conform to either modern universality or historical styles but engaged with multi-temporality, creating "a queer time and place."<sup>91</sup> Her whitened furniture, and Spry's vases, were "a hybrid product"<sup>92</sup> in that they were recognizable as antiques, yet followed the modernist call for whitewashing, cleanliness, and the removal of ornament. In effect, this was a reversal or play on these dictums: Maugham and Spry cover up the historicity of found objects in modern white, complicating its supposed honesty while in a way, engaging in their own vandalization of the past.

This use of antiques by interior decorators such as Maugham and Elsie de Wolfe (1865–1950) has been analysed as a feminine response to modernity, which referred to the aesthetics and traditions of the past while incorporating modern elements and participating in the changing world.<sup>93</sup> Jasmine Rault sees, among non-heterosexual women specifically, a shared use of "outdated styles and cultural references" which "creat[ed] a sense of modernity out of attachments to, rather than rejections of, past aesthetic and cultural moments;"<sup>94</sup> Jane Stevenson likewise outlines a "counter-tendency" in the arts of interwar Britain, whose progenitors, as opposed to the upheld Modernist heroes, included women, queers, and people of colour who were interested in the decorative and eclectic, and who by virtue of being excluded from institutions of higher education, used their talents on low or marginal mediums and practices:

---

91. Potvin, 226.

92. Ibid.

93. Sparke, "Elsie de Wolfe and her female clients, 1905–15: Gender, class and the professional interior decorator," in *Women's Places: Architecture and Design 1860-1960*, ed. Brenda Martin and Penny Sparke (London: Routledge, 2003).

94. Rault, 37.

performance, textiles, interiors, and flower arranging.<sup>95</sup> Maugham and Spry were among these othered individuals, with their use of antique objects, along with their engagement with fashion and frivolity, critiqued as “lagging behind”<sup>96</sup> in the modernist discourses of industry, health, and productivity.

A few years before she unveiled her all-white drawing room, Maugham published “Back to Real Womanhood”, an article for the London newspaper *Weekly Dispatch*. A compelling parallel to the thoughts of Le Corbusier on the subject, Maugham identifies whitewashed walls as an emblem of the “woman of the future.”<sup>97</sup> For Maugham, the woman who paints her walls white, a choice still regarded as “eccentric and ridiculous,” is signifying her desire for mental and financial independence from men. During this time, women were visibly gaining rights and footing in the public sphere, and Maugham discusses the backlash and denigration this was receiving. Likely referring in part to Spry, who had just started running her own business, Maugham writes: “Clear your mind [...] of the idea that this widespread movement for opening shops in the West End of London is merely the temporary craze of a few bored and hectic women. There is nothing temporary about it.”<sup>98</sup> As in the thoughts of male modernists, the freshly painted white wall heralds a new world order, and a better society, yet Maugham does not align herself with the dictums of morality, health, or anti-sentimentality. Rather, the woman pursuing autonomy should be “tired” and “worried to death,” because that is the price of feeling “passionately alive.”<sup>99</sup>

---

95. Stevenson, *Baroque Between the Wars*, 6.

96. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: loss and the politics of queer history* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 6.

97. Syrie Maugham, “Back to Real Womanhood,” *Weekly Dispatch*, December 13, 1925, 12.

98. *Ibid.*

99. *Ibid.*

Maugham's writing reveals the modern subject's complicated relationship with time. The issues of time, history, and progress that concerned male modernists influenced women in a different way, especially as they were seen as inherently less developed than their male counterparts. As she insists on moving towards the future, she correlates it with going "back"; she writes that the woman with white walls was "drawn from life," her choices stemming from her past experiences, oppression, and objectification. The modern woman's attention to fashion and her interest in decoration are valued and used as tools of empowerment: "She was the first to shingle her hair," Maugham writes, and later, "She was tired of being a decoration. She wanted to decorate."<sup>100</sup> White walls reveal a relationship between the past, present, and future for women. However, they also become a site for non-linear and even spiritual consideration, as Maugham calls out to the reader:

Whitewash your walls and you will discover, when you rise in the morning, that there is something clean and fresh in you which, perhaps, you had been inclined to forget. [...] Whitewash your walls! When you look at them you will see nothing, and, seeing nothing, you will see yourself.<sup>101</sup>

In this declaration, closer to the Aesthetic movement's idea of the *tabula rasa* than Le Corbusier's criminalization of colour, white walls are an invitation for women's self-reflection. The wall throws the woman's individuality into focus, as she moves backwards, uncovering something anew in her rumination on the past. From within the domestic realm, Maugham thus resists the notion that women's true nature is domestic and passive. While she embraces the new opportunities and women's increasing presence in the public sphere, she does so through a multi-temporal understanding of the co-existence of memory, history, moments, and possibilities.

---

100. Ibid.

101. Ibid.

Maugham and Spry's convergence in all-white rooms uniquely complicates the clear-cut history of modernism. In the interwar period, modernist architects and designers were striving for structures that were free of the past: a "chronophobic" and "chronocidal" tendency<sup>102</sup> which must be examined as one part of a larger relationship between modernism and time. Looking into the actual use, materiality, and lived experience of modern buildings, Rajesh Heynickx, Pieter Verstraeten and Kris Pint posit that the modern interior is a site of complex temporalities, not only referring to multiple moments and larger histories, but actively "manifest[ing] different 'temporal regimes'."<sup>103</sup> Maugham's all-white rooms were a multitemporal realm, where modernist white walls met antiques, made new and old with a falsely aged coat of white. Spry's all-white floral arrangements, in similarly treated white containers, spilling from wall sconces, or becoming architectural elements themselves, were sculptural pieces that were nonetheless ephemeral. Their blooms, branches, berries, and leaves too were cut at differing moments and locations, brought together for a single artistic occasion, much like the elements of an old master's *nature morte*. Within the chronocidal clearing away that white walls represented, here was an insistence, not solely on the continuing influence of the past on the present, but of a complex and uniquely modern relationship to temporality.

---

102. Rajesh Heynickx, Pieter Verstraeten & Kris Pint, "Interiors and their temporalities: Etching time into Modernist Materiality," *Interiors* 6, no. 2 (2015): 111.

103. Heynickx et al., 113.



### Chapter 4: Queer Flowers

In the 1930s, at the new heights of her career, Spry's flowers arose as a significant visual and experiential element of queer modernity. To Shav's disdain, Constance was now running with a "homosexual clique"<sup>104</sup> of artists and tastemakers. This would cumulate in her romantic relationship with the painter Gluck (1895–1978), an open affair based on art and flowers that lasted from 1932 to 1936. It was a creative and romantic exchange, with Gluck immortalizing Spry's arrangements on her canvasses, and Spry introducing Gluck's paintings into the interiors of her clientele.<sup>105</sup> The first bouquet Gluck saw from Spry's shop was a gifted all-white arrangement of anthurium, amaryllis, arums, and tulips which surged out of a white marble vase. Gluck was inspired. She began painting, renewing each bloom as it withered, to produce one of her most well-known pieces, *Chromatic* (Figure 9). A painterly exploration of the white-on-white that Spry and Maugham were fascinated by, the painting depicts Spry's arrangement against a white wall, in a white ceramic vase, set on a grey-white table. *Chromatic*, as it means "pertaining to colour,"<sup>106</sup> (distinct from monochromatic, "having or producing one colour"<sup>107</sup>) is thus perhaps an invitation to reconsider white as colourless, bland or blank. The painting is a study of the scope of white flowers, each type with its own unique tone: slightly yellow lilies, greenly tinted tulips, bright white arums, blushing roses, and branches of white lilac, in greenish new buds or warmer, more unfurled bunches. The light flowers are set against their dark green

---

104. Shephard, 139.

105. Diane Souhami, *Gluck: Her Biography* (London: Phoenix, 1988), 90–94.

106. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), "Chromatic," <https://www-oed-com.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/view/Entry/32504?redirectedFrom=chromatic#eid>.

107. *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Monochromatic," <https://www-oed-com.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/view/Entry/121322?redirectedFrom=monochromatic#eid>.

stems and leaves, giving them the illusion of moving outwards. Flashes of other colours are precise—a long, bright red spadix emerges from the anthurium, tiny, vibrant orange pollen peeks out of the Madonna lilies, or thin lines of hot pink bleed into huge amaryllis petals. While the flowers are incredibly detailed, their surroundings appear purposefully vague. Highlights and shadows form a two-handled vase with light moulding, and the square, slightly reflective tabletop is a plane of greyish-blue, highlighting that the arrangement, which takes up the majority of the canvas, is the only focus. Spry included an image of the painting in her first book, *Flower Decoration*, and wrote:

Gluck's painting of this group exemplifies the delicacy and the strength, the subtleties and grandeur of white flowers. It has another point of interest to those who admire the paintings of the old Flemish masters, since here we have a modern artist painting flowers in a spacious and decorative manner, but with the same delicate precision and feeling that characterized the work of these men.<sup>108</sup>

Since childhood, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century still-lives were a constant source of inspiration for Spry. An image of Jan Davidsz de Heem's *Flowers in Glass and Fruit* (Figure 10) opens her first book: a little known, multi-coloured flower painting which includes bright red tulips and peonies, purple irises, plums, cherries, and orange gooseberries. She emulated the paintings by working with fruits and vegetables and inventing methods, such as the use of wire netting, in order to arrange materials that towered and spilled over in impossible proportions. In line with her passion for unconventional materials, Spry often used grapes, berries, and gourds in her work. For a party at a London home, Spry mixed white flowers with black grapes on the edges of a mantelpiece, to compliment the black coat worn in a portrait hanging over the fireplace (Figure 11); similar arrangements that combine fruits with flowers are found throughout her books (Figure 12). Arranging flowers in unprecedented ways to decorate modern rooms,

---

108. Spry, *Flower Decoration* (1934), 31.

Spry was drawing from the still-lives of old masters and the memories of her childhood. Spry's dialogue with nostalgia, floristry and art was met in Gluck's practice, as it merged with hers.

Gluck would paint over a dozen more images of Spry's unique arrangements, blending still-life influences with modern all-white. Gluck's 1932 solo exhibition at the Fine Arts Society was a completely designed, all-white "Gluck Room"<sup>109</sup> which included specially built frames that merged Gluck's paintings with the walls, and two of Spry's floral arrangements in the gallery space (Figure 13). Just as Spry's flowers were designed to match their surroundings, Gluck's paintings emerged from their walls, integral to the structure of the room. At her home in Hampstead, Bolton House, Gluck had a separate building built to use as a studio, designed by Edward Maufe (1882–1974). The white interior always featured fresh flowers, such as a "great vase filled with arums on a gilt console,"<sup>110</sup> a display of Spry's presence in Gluck's life. Alternative all-white interiors, modern floristry, painting, and non-normative sexuality inform and fuse with one another in this cultural moment, during which Spry's flowers explicitly took on significance as a marker of queer romance.

Notably in the case of the unnaturally green carnation which became, wittingly or not, a symbol of Oscar Wilde and other queer men in the 1890s,<sup>111</sup> flowers have a "hidden and privileged position"<sup>112</sup> in queer culture. Flowers stand in to signal and name the romantic and emotional unspoken. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), the titular hostess remembers vividly her feelings

---

109. Shephard, 155.

110. Bridget Elliott, "Housing the work: Women artists, modernism, and the maison d'artiste: Eileen Gray, Romaine Brooks, and Gluck," in *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts, 1880-1935: The Gender of Ornament*, ed. Bridget Elliott and Janice Holland (Aldershot, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 186.

111. Karl Beckson, "Oscar Wilde and the Green Carnation," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 43, no. 4 (2000).

112. Potvin, 190.

for her friend Sally Seton—“Had that not, after all, been love?”<sup>113</sup>—which culminated in “the most exquisite moment of her whole life,” when, walking past a stone flower pot, “Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips.”<sup>114</sup> Alison Syme identifies similar modern literary examples of “homoerotic pollination” which served to “naturaliz[e]... queer encounters.”<sup>115</sup> Syme demonstrates that throughout history, the act of creating art was conceptualized as a “floral birth,” “an alternative form of imaginary reproduction,”<sup>116</sup> a symbolism which, coupled with examples of hermaphroditism in nature, lent itself to queer artists. The flower was an index for female sexuality, revealing a woman’s proclivities, chastity or promiscuity. The long tradition of likening women and their physical features to flowers intensified at the turn of the century,<sup>117</sup> and from the 1880s onwards, floral names like “pansy” or “narcissus” were used to identify or degrade queer men.<sup>118</sup> Thus, femininity, effeminacy, and perversity was aligned with a connection to flowers, making these themes especially pertinent when considering Spry, a queer woman who worked with flowers as her artistic medium—as well as Gluck’s artistic production during their relationship.

Gluck was the painter’s chosen name; she was born Hannah Gluckstein, and her familial wealth and privilege were a large factor in her ability to wear masculine clothing, live alone, and pursue art as a career. Spry’s placement of Gluck’s work as a modern extension of Flemish still

---

113. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: CRW Publishing Ltd., 2003), 37.

114. *Ibid.*, 41.

115. Alison Syme, Introduction to *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010), 13.

116. *Ibid.*, 8.

117. *Ibid.*, 35.

118. Syme, *A Touch of Blossom*, 46.

lives aligns the artist with this masculine artistic legacy. It reinforces the way Gluck envisioned herself, when, back in her twenties, Gluck wrote to her brother:

I am flourishing in a new garb. Intensely exciting. Everybody likes it. It is all black though I can wear a coloured tie if I like and consists of a long black coat like a blue-coat boy's with a narrow dark leather belt. It was designed by yours truly and carried out by a mad dressmaker. Utterly loony. She thought I was mad and I was damn certain that she was mad... It is old masterish in effect and very dignified and distinguished looking. Rather like a Catholic priest. I hope you will like it because I intend to wear that sort of thing always.<sup>119</sup>

Although women who deviated from heterosexuality and other gender norms have always existed, Gluck's documented self-presentation and open relationships with women are an example of how the modern period brought forward "a different sort of lesbian visibility"<sup>120</sup> as more women entered the public sphere and expressed themselves through art, literature, and fashion. Yet Gluck was among those who were not aligned with the fashionable *garçonne* or the avant-garde; rather, they donned "eccentrically extreme variations of male dress"<sup>121</sup> which referenced bygone eras, in a style influenced by the decadent and aesthetic movements of the late 1800s.<sup>122</sup> Gluck's "mad" wardrobe of old master and country gentleman's garb was reflected in the artist's oeuvre, a claiming and lingering on the still life, and other classic painting types: portraits, self-portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes. Gluck claimed a tradition to which an eccentric queer could never truly belong. It is a backward glance which marks the modernity of

---

119. Souhami, 35–6.

120. Laura Doan and Jane Garrity, *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women, and National Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4.

121. Elliott, "Performing the Picture or Painting the Other: Romaine Brooks, Gluck, and the Question of Decadence in 1923," in *Women Artists and Modernism*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 74.

122. *Ibid.*, 76.

queer individuals:<sup>123</sup> their implementation of the outdated is a disruption to the hetero-reproductive timeline, and to the discourses of physiological as well as psychological health, newness, and progress.

In a short interview accompanying the 2021 exhibition on Spry, Garden Museum curator Amy de la Haye insists that Spry’s practice was “without precedent,” whereas “Gluck was a modern decorative painter, an accomplished painter, and a modern painter, but I wouldn’t situate Gluck in the context of modern art, as a leader, in a way that I would situate Constance in the context of flower decoration.”<sup>124</sup> Even in this most recent appreciation of Spry, lasting hierarchical divisions between art and design, and between such categorizations as “modern” and “decorative” are employed. Following Le Corbusier’s and Loos’s stance against the decorative, the severance of modern art and design from decoration was cemented further in the writing of art critic Clement Greenberg (1909–1994), who viewed the decorative as superficial, an enemy to the high abstract art he supported as being true to the Western tradition.<sup>125</sup> Writing in the mid-twentieth century, the decorative excess that early modernist architects sought to “weed out”<sup>126</sup> still threateningly lingered for Greenberg: decoration was “the specter that haunts modernist painting,”<sup>127</sup> and its association with the out-dated, domestic, unmasculine and weak was

---

123. Heather Love identifies “feeling backward” and turning to the past as key components of queer culture in her readings of literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, during which the emergence of modern homosexuality was not a straightforward betterment of queer life, but was met with mixed feelings including shame, self-hatred, loneliness, nostalgia and escapism. Love, 4.

124. Amy de la Haye, “Constance Spry and Gluck,” July 26, 2021, Garden Museum, London, 2:47, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=862169224708906>.

125. Elissa Auther, “The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg,” *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004).

126. Potvin, 190-191.

127. *Ibid.*, 343.

reinforced: “When the abstract artist grows tired, he becomes an interior decorator,” Greenberg wrote.<sup>128</sup> This rhetoric persists, and perhaps de la Haye attempts to elevate Spry’s practice through inserting it into this framework. As though in competition rather than collaboration, Spry is appreciated based on her innovative transformation of floristry into flower decoration, whereas Gluck is set backwards in the realm of high art through being classified as “decorative.”

However, a more nuanced appreciation stands to be gained by considering Spry and Gluck’s play with these categorizations, and how they complicate our notions of modernity and progress. Spry envisioned flowers as a material and arranging as an artistic process: she wrote of flowers being “the modern woman’s paint-box” with which she painted “living pictures.”<sup>129</sup> Illustrating this perspective, Spry crafted floral elements out of paper or gauze,<sup>130</sup> and as well as whitewashing and altering her vessels, often painted the organic or artificial leaves and blooms they contained, enhancing the sculptural and aesthetic effects of her pieces. In this way, Spry blurred the boundaries between gardener, florist, painter, sculptor, and decorator, inhabiting and flouting them all at once.

Spry’s influence in Gluck’s life was reflected in the painter’s oeuvre, as well as in her wardrobe, which began to incorporate high fashion garments made by Spry’s couturier friends, and her development of the eponymous frame, which fully joined her pieces to the homes of Spry’s clientele. For four years, the couple spent most of their time together, with Spry staying at Bolton on weeknights, and Gluck visiting Spry’s Kent home on weekends.<sup>131</sup> They attended dinner parties, visited country gardens, and vacationed in Tunisia. If a photograph of the couple

---

128. Ibid.

129. Spry, “Flower Arrangement and Display” (1952): 817.

130. Spry, “The Pleasure of Flowers,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (June 1935): 80.

131. Souhami, 96–7.

exists, it is unknown: any trace must have been destroyed by Gluck, who burned all evidence of her past relationships, including many paintings, when she fell in love with another woman in 1936.<sup>132</sup> Where love between women was still “unuttered and unutterable,”<sup>133</sup> so queer history is like this, mostly fragmented, lost, erased, mutilated, censored, illegible.

One photograph speaks to Spry’s ongoing presence in Gluck’s life and work. In the Bolton House studio, Gluck leans on a piano, in front of a massive dried flower arrangement (Figure 14). It resembles many of the dried arrangements by Constance (Figure 15), and it appears to be the model for Gluck’s 1937 painting *Nature Morte* (Figure 16). At the painter’s elbow sits an empty white vase, which calls to mind a claw-foot bathtub or a piece of furniture with its small legs and a bow detail. Like the one behind her, this is likely one of the vases being manufactured at the Fulham Pottery, designed by Spry’s assistant at Flower Decorations, Florence Steadfast.<sup>134</sup> Next to the vase, a classic, idiosyncratic Spry arrangement: a small cornucopia, opening directly upwards, filled with translucent white reeds and grasses. A similar piece is pictured in her first book (Figure 17). The flowers are dead, but colossal: they dwarf the painter, who, surrounded by traces of an absent Constance, looks away sternly at something beyond the frame.

---

132. Souhami, 16.

133. Judith Schalansky, *An Inventory of Losses*, trans. Jackie Smith (New York: New Directions, 2018), 232.

134. Tony Peart, “The Fulham Pottery 1932-1965: A return to ‘artistic’ production,” *The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 1850 - the Present*, no. 32 (2008): 105–108.



### **Conclusion: Funeral Lilies, or A Celebration of Ephemerality**

Her separation from Gluck in 1936 was one of many losses that Spry suffered on her rise to acclaim. Early on, she lost both of her brothers in the war, a blow which left her mother unable to speak for years.<sup>135</sup> She faced both of her parents' disappointment at her resignation from education, and over her divorce from her first husband, which caused a rift between her and her mother that would never mend. In 1934, Constance's father passed away, leaving her mother widowed. Shephard suggests that since they were estranged, it is possible that Spry never saw her mother again.<sup>136</sup> That same year, one of her first queer friends and encouragers of her practice, Norman Wilkinson, suddenly passed away. Estranged from her mother and living in a society which would not acknowledge her relationship with Gluck, or recognize its loss, she turned to express herself in her work.

Before Spry popularized them, the white flowers that she was known for were only used for funerals.<sup>137</sup> They were sparingly used and precious; when florist shops were established, the highest position assistant, White, was dedicated to their handling.<sup>138</sup> It must have been shocking then to see the decor of stylish interiors include excessive mounds of mourning flowers: white arums and calla lilies, tulips, roses, and lilac blossoms. This calling up of death, grief, emotion, and spirituality invade the supposed neutral *tabula rasa* that modern whiteness suggested. In another multi-temporal play on modernist dictums, the flowers bring to mind the essential transience of fashions, movements, and human life. Spry wrote that white had been wrongly

---

135. Shephard, 65.

136. Ibid., 168.

137. Ibid., 123.

138. Blacker, 123.

considered “cold, unbecoming, hard, funereal, unpractical,”<sup>139</sup> an association she was removing by emphasizing the aesthetically pleasing and sculptural qualities of white flowers on white walls, gradations of lightness. Yet this preoccupation and elaboration of all-white arrangements betrays a constant return to the funereal. Undoubtedly their link to mourning expresses Spry’s embroilment at this time in multiple serious losses, their amassment equal to the overwhelming amount of grief.

In this period, Spry became increasingly preoccupied with roses in a way that was also tied to heartbreak, nostalgia and grief. In a painting by her late friend Norman Wilkinson, Richard II plucks a dark red rose from a rich garden, the only one (Figure 18). The medieval-style scene seems anachronistic for the early twentieth century, yet it is echoed by Spry’s search, in her practice, of fictional and fabled roses, “‘old’ roses of her memories and dreams.”<sup>140</sup> Spry began collecting “lost” varieties of roses, visiting private gardens and acquiring cuttings for her own. For instance, she was sent cuttings from a cemetery in Virginia, where enslaved people had planted roses on the graves of their relatives.<sup>141</sup> Roses were outdated and sentimental; yet as with her white arrangements, Spry took on the cultural charge of this flower and exploded it, bringing back to life highly fragrant and forgotten blooms. Her collection, which renewed interest in these varieties, inspired the English rose breeder David Austin to name a flower after her: *Rosa* ‘*Constance Spry*’ was the first hybrid that Austin engineered to have the look and fragrance of an old rose, but the longer flowering period of a floribunda. It is this mix of temporalities—at once

---

139. Spry, *Flower Decoration* (1934), 30.

140. Shephard, 177.

141. Ibid., 178.

a new creation, but existing in a renewing cyclical rhythm, prompted by the desire to draw out a nostalgic leaning—that is representative of Spry’s work.

As society moved ever in favour of the machine, newness, and virility, Spry worked with women and queer individuals to assert organic materials and references to the past in modern interiors, advancing “the decorative domestic that modern architecture was meant to weed out.”<sup>142</sup> In psychoanalysis, sex and gender perversity was theorized as the physical and psychological symptom of a past event that was lodged in the subconscious, unprocessed and blocking the sick individual from progressing to more productive behaviours.<sup>143</sup> Queer individuals were “lagging behind,”<sup>144</sup> perceived as delayed, childish, and undeveloped. Indeed, queerness emerged in the context of modern temporality, existing in relation to its fractured and destabilizing nature, and in opposition to the dominant hetero-reproductive timeline—what scholar Elizabeth Freeman calls chrononormativity.<sup>145</sup> As such, a key feature of queer culture at any given time involves identification with other times and histories: temporal and sexual dissonance are intertwined in the feelings of nostalgia, longing, shame, regret, grief, haunting, and refusals to let go.<sup>146</sup> Spry’s work is a queer divergence from and tampering with the dominant temporal regime. In her prolific gardening, collecting, flower arranging, and writing, she consistently moves backward, imagining and re-creating centuries-old pictures, calling up dreams, memories, and emotions.

---

142. Potvin, 190.

143. Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 8.

144. Love, *Feeling Backward*, 5–6.

145. Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3–7.

146. Love, 4.

While Gluck purposefully set fire to her documents, Spry's work was intrinsically ephemeral. Indeed, the knowledge that her creations would soon disappear was a driving force. She wrote, "[s]ome of the most exquisite flowers are the most fleeting, but I find that no reason for disregarding them."<sup>147</sup> Spry wove a zone of multiple temporalities where the temporary had lasting power, whitewashing both obscured and revealed historicity, and old master artworks, valued for their nostalgic and emotional ties, were recreated. Like the interiors they decorated, her arrangements not only disappeared but have also been marginalized in the history of design. Spry approached arranging as an art form, and flowers as integral elements of décor, but, as Felicity Hall writes, "[f]loristry... has never claimed a place for itself within discourses surrounding art and design [...] due in part to the way that any creative engagement with flowers is dismissed as frivolous."<sup>148</sup> Even in celebrations of Spry, the modernist ethos is a looming presence which continues to stifle, flatten, and separate her oeuvre, especially the parts that are informed by grief, loss, or shame. As Heather Love argues, queer figures are pulled from the past to suit contemporary needs for empowerment and pride, and ignoring the harder-to-face injuries they suffered facilitates an ignorance of continuing oppression.<sup>149</sup> Turning to Spry's attunement to grief, loss, and the essential transience of her life and work is difficult; yet it offers a deeper appreciation for her practice, and an opening to inquiry and examination into what has been left out of the dominant history of the modern era, and why.

Constance Spry was a unique individual in the history of floristry and modern interior decoration, whose work offers insight into alternatives to male-dominated modernism. A more

---

147. Spry, *Flower Decoration*, 5.

148. Felicity Hall, *Doing the flowers: an examination of morality, emotion and identity within contemporary British floristry*, MA Dissertation for the RCA/V&A History of Design program (May 10, 2016), 27.

149. Love, *Feeling Backward*.

in-depth history of the relationship between flower arrangement and interior design is needed to further examine the culture of flower arrangement during the modern era and the presence of plants and flowers in modern interior spaces. In my focus on the culture of non-heterosexual women, I have suggested that flowers had a special, nostalgic significance to queer individuals in lived-in space and the creative dimension. Spry and Gluck's artistic exchange and romantic relationship warrants an inquiry into a queer or Sapphic language of flowers, which intersected with interior spaces in early twentieth-century Europe. We must interrogate and resist the ongoing denigrative dismissal of flower arrangement or garden practices as superfluous to more seriously considered art forms, since Spry's practice, in dialogue with painting, sculpture, and interior decoration, had an exceptional capacity to call up emotions, memory, and referenced an overwhelming amount of ever-changing cultural and deeply personal meanings. An analysis of supposedly ephemeral practices such as flower arrangement and interior decoration, especially as they were chosen by individuals who have been marginalized in the histories of art, has the potential to complicate these hierarchical divisions, and craft new historiographies planted in loss, longing, and dreams.

**Figures**

Figure 1. Atkinsons perfumery interior, designed by Norman Wilkinson and flowers by Constance Spry, 1929. Photographer unknown. RHS Lindley Collections.



Figure 2. Constance Spry, "Mixed group of exotic flowers in old jardinière table." For Atkinson's, Old Bond street, London. *Flowers in House and Garden* (New York: J.P. Putnam's Sons, 1937).



Figure 3. Constance Spry, Arrangement with white lilac, arum lilies, and cellophane. From Enid Corral, "New Ways with Flowers," *Britannia and Eve*, March 1, 1934, 63.





Figure 4. Syrie Maugham's all-white drawing room, for her home in King's Road, London, c. 1929-1930.



Figure 5. Constance Spry, "Griffin with dried mixture." *A Constance Spry Anthology* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1953), 183.



Figure 6. "An all-white arrangement of flowers is frequently more restful and effective than any combination of colours... Mrs. Spry has used a modern white vase and filled it with white dahlias, gladioli, hydrangea, Hyacinthus candicans, and white corn." Constance Spry, "Designs in Blossom," *Vogue New York* 84, issue 9 (Nov 1, 1934): 45.



Figure 7. Cecil Beaton. *Baba Beaton*, 1930. Bromide Print. 22.6 x 17.5 cm. Image reproduced from mutualart.com.



Figure 8. Wall vases, one with mixed bouquet including tulips, peonies, anthuriums, rhododendrons, and trails of clematis montana. *Flowers in House and Garden* (1937).



Figure 9. Gluck, *Chromatic*, 1932. Oil on canvas. 122 x 119 cm.



Figure 10. Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Flowers in Glass and Fruit*, 1651.



Figure 11. “Over the fireplace hangs a portrait of a man in a black coat. We wanted to make an arrangement of flowers which would stress the black note... we mixed white flowers with trails of black grapes.” Drawing by Rex Whistler. Constance Spry, “The Pleasure of Flowers,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (June 1935): 71.





Figure 12. Constance Spry. A table arrangement with flowers and fruit. *Garden Notebook* (1940).



Figure 13. Gluck Room at the Fine Art Society, 1937. Diane Souhami, *Gluck: Her Biography*. London: Phoenix, 1988.



Figure 14. Gluck in the studio at Bolton House, c. 1937. *Gluck: Who Did She Think He Was?*, directed by Clare Beaven (UK: BBC Arts Production, 2017).



Figure 15. Constance Spry, "Dead Group in Black Marble Vase." *Flower Decoration* (1934), 143.



Figure 16. Gluck, *Nature Morte*, 1937. Oil on Canvas. 177 x 177 cm.

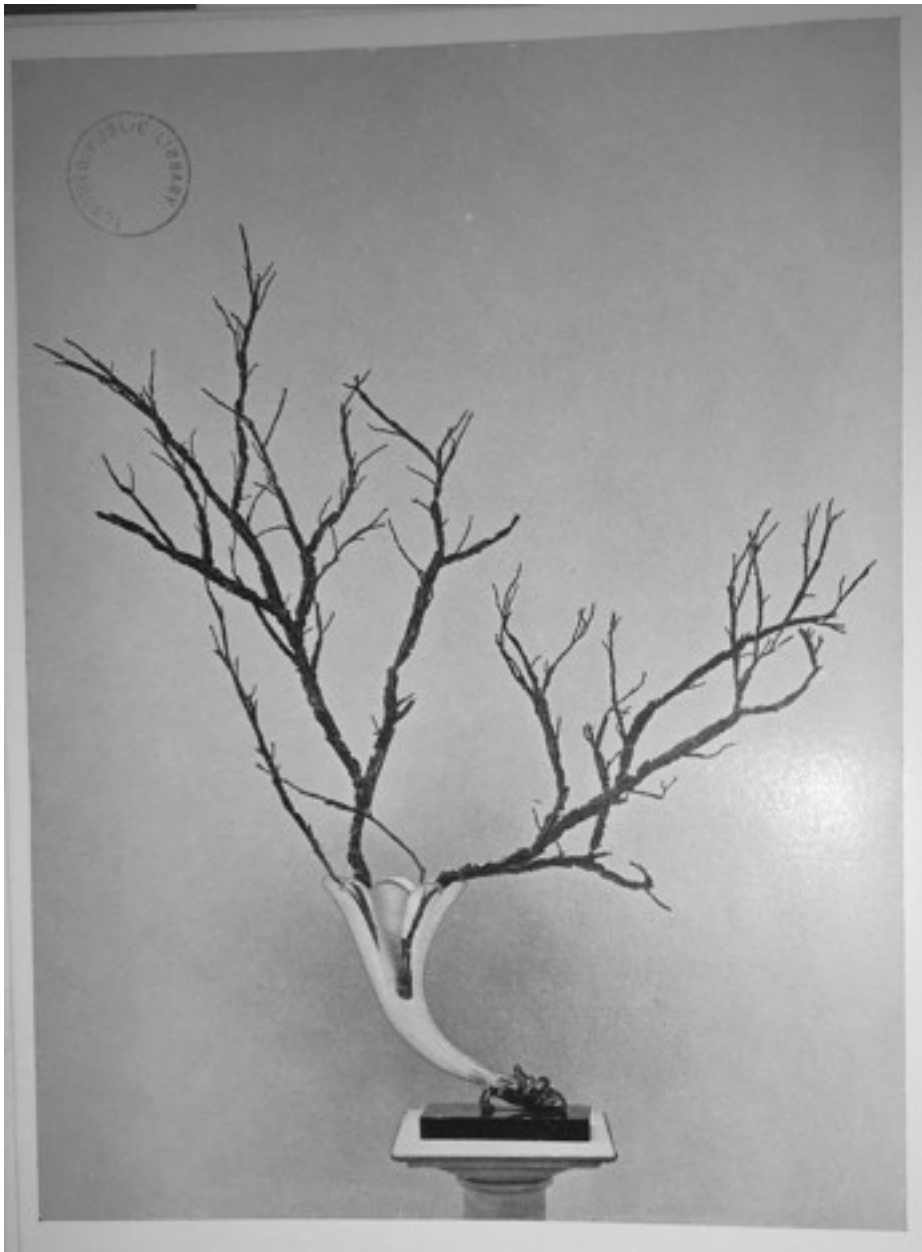


Figure 17. Constance Spry, "Corky Stem in Glass Cornucopia." *Flower Decoration* (1934), 142.



Figure 18. Norman Wilkinson, *Richard II Holding the Red Rose of Lancaster*, 1907. Print.

## Bibliography

- Auther, Elissa. "The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg." *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 339-364.
- Beaven, Clare. *Gluck: Who Did She Think He Was?* UK: BBC Arts Production, 2017.
- Beckson, Karl. "Oscar Wilde and the Green Carnation." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 43, no. 4 (2000): 387-88.
- Blacker, Mary Rose. *Flora Domestica: A History of British Flower Arranging 1500-1930*. London: The National Trust, 2000.
- Calloway, Stephen. "1930-1945: Pleasing Decay and the All-White Room." In *Twentieth Century Decoration*, 213-284. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1988.
- Chauncey, Jr., George. "From Sexual Inversion To Homosexuality: Medicine And The Changing Conceptualization Of Female Deviance." *Salmagundi*, No. 58/59 (Fall 1982–Winter 1983): 114-146.
- Colomina, Beatriz. *X-Ray Architecture*. Zürich, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019.
- Le Corbusier. *Toward an Architecture*. Translated by John Goodman. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007.
- "Constance Spry's Flower Shop in London." *Harpers Bazaar New York* 71, no. 2706 (March 1 1938): 163.
- Corrall, Enid. "New Ways with Flowers." *Britannia and Eve*, March 1, 1934, 62-63.
- Le Corbusier. *The Decorative Art of Today*. Translated by James I. Dunnett. London: Architectural Press, 1987.
- Doan, Laura and Jane Garrity. *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women, and National Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Elliott, Bridget. "Housing the work: Women artists, modernism, and the maison d'artiste: Eileen Gray, Romaine Brooks, and Gluck." In *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts, 1880-1935: The Gender of Ornament*, edited by Bridget Elliott and Janice Holland, 176-196. Aldershot, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002.
- . "Performing the Picture or Painting the Other: Romaine Brooks, Gluck, and the Question of Decadence in 1923." In *Women Artists and Modernism*, edited by Katy Deepwell, 70-81. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham, NC: Duke



- University Press, 2010.
- Hall, Felicity. *Doing the flowers: an examination of morality, emotion and identity within contemporary British floristry*. MA Dissertation for the RCA/V&A History of Design program, May 10, 2016.
- de la Haye, Amy. "Constance Spry and Gluck." July 26, 2021. Garden Museum, London. 2:47. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=862169224708906>.
- Heynickx, Rajesh, Pieter Verstraeten & Kris Pint. "Interiors and their temporalities: Etching time into Modernist Materiality." *Interiors* 6, no. 2 (2015): 111-121.
- Huxtable, Sally-Anne. "White Walls, White Nights, White Girls: Whiteness and the British Artistic Interior, 1850-1900." *Journal of Design History* 27, No. 3 (2014): 237-255.
- Lambirth, Andrew. "Flower Power." *The Spectator*, October 2, 2004, 60–62.
- Latimer, Tirza True. *Women Together/Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005.
- Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: loss and the politics of queer history*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Massey, Anne. "The Emergence of Interior Design as a profession." In *Interior Design since 1900*, 123-144. London: Thames & Hudson, 2008.
- Maugham, Syrie. "Back to Real Womanhood." *Weekly Dispatch*, December 13, 1925.
- McNeil, Peter. "Designing Women: Gender, Sexuality and the Interior Decorator, c. 1890–1940." *Art History* 17, no. 4 (Dec 1994): 631–57.
- Murphy, Robert. "Tempest in a Flowerpot." *WWD: Women's Wear Daily* 188, issue 129 (December 20, 2004): 17.
- Oram, Alison. "A Queer Study." In *Queering the Interior*, edited by Andrew Gorman-Murray and Matt Cook, 208-225. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.
- Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. <https://www-oed-com.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/>.
- Peart, Tony. "The Fulham Pottery 1932-1965: A return to 'artistic' production." *The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society*, No. 32 (2008): 100-125.
- Potvin, John. *Bachelors of a Different Sort: Queer Aesthetics, Material Culture, and the Modern Interior in Britain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018.

- Rault, Jasmine. "Designing Sapphic Modernity." *Interiors* 1, no. 1-2 (2010): 29–44.
- Reed, Christopher. *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.
- Roberts, Mary Louise. *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender In Postwar France, 1917-1927*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Ryan, Deborah Sugg. "Constance Spry: A Millionaire for a Few Pence." *Home Cultures* 2, no. 1 (2005): 123–128.
- Schalansky, Judith. *An Inventory of Losses*. Translated by Jackie Smith. New York: New Directions, 2018.
- Shephard, Sue. *The Surprising Life of Constance Spry*. London: Pan Macmillan, 2010.
- Souhami, Diane. *Gluck: Her Biography*. London: Phoenix, 1988.
- Sparke, Penny. *Nature Inside: Plants and Flowers in the Modern Interior*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.
- Sparke, Penny. "Elsie de Wolfe and her female clients, 1905–15: Gender, class and the professional interior decorator." In *Women's Places: Architecture and Design 1860-1960*, edited by Brenda Martin and Penny Sparke, 44-64. London: Routledge, 2003.
- . "Everything in its Place: Women and Modernity." In *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*, 73–96. London and San Francisco: Pandora, 1994.
- Spry, Constance. *A Constance Spry Anothology*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1953.
- . "Designs in Blossom." *Vogue New York* 84, issue 9 (Nov 1, 1934): 44, 45, 110, 114.
- . "Flower Arrangement and Display." *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 100, no. 4885 (October 31st, 1952): 814-824.
- . *Flower Decoration*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Limited, 1934.
- . *Flowers in House and Garden*. New York: J.P. Putnam's Sons, 1937.
- . "Frightened by Flowers." *Harper's Bazaar New York* 72, Issue 2725 (Jul 1939): 58-59, 93.
- . *Garden Notebook*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940.
- . "The Pleasure of Flowers." *Harper's Bazaar* (June 1935): 71, 80.
- . "Vases That Are Different." *Harper's Bazaar* (Dec 1935): 58, 59, 82, 84.

Stevenson, Jane. *Baroque Between the Wars: alternative styles in the arts, 1918-1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Syme, Alison. *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010.

Wigley, Mark. "Colour Blindness in Modern Architecture." Lecture given on March 20, 1996. AA School of Architecture, May 8, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAJ8U3s2j2o>.

———. "White-out: Fashioning the Modern (Part 2)." *Assemblage*, No. 22 (Dec. 1994): 6-49.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: CRW Publishing Ltd., 2003.