

Hidden Plant Stories: Close and distant readings of houseplants in Danish art 1820–1920

“How can nineteenth-century houseplant art shed new light on the relationship between humans and plants? A plant-centred approach opens up overlooked narratives within art museum collections.

Summary

In response to the climate and biodiversity crises, recent years have seen a renewed focus on plants within science, art and culture. But how may the historical collections of art museums contribute new perspectives? We highlight an overlooked source of new knowledge, topical interest and public engagement in the form of nineteenth-century Danish ‘houseplant art’, which testifies to the arrival of plants in Danish homes and to the intricate entanglement of human and plant life within the domestic sphere. We argue that an interdisciplinary, plant-centred approach to art, combining close and distant readings, can uncover neglected plant histories that imbue these works with fresh, topical relevance.

A new focus on plants¹



Fig. 1. Anna Ancher: *Two Little Girls Being Taught*. 1910. Oil on canvas. 54.4 × 64 cm. Art Museums of Skagen. Inv. no. 868. Photo: Art Museums of Skagen.

Across the realms of science, art and culture, new attention is being directed towards plants. Three scientists recently published an estimate of the total weight of all life on Earth, showing that plants, with their 450 gigatonnes (Gt), make up by far the largest share of the global biomass while animal species account for only 2 Gt.² The study highlights the unique position held by plants within the

Earth's biosphere. It reminds us that plants do not inhabit our world; rather, we inhabit theirs. As the philosopher Emanuele Coccia has observed, plants have until now existed on the 'margins of the cognitive field'.³ We tend to overlook them, or see them only through the functions they serve *for us*: as timber in the forest, crops in the fields, ornamentals in gardens and on windowsills, or as a picturesque rolling landscape glimpsed from a car window.⁴ These days, however, global environmental crises of biodiversity loss, pollution and climate change show us that we cannot take plants – and their role in sustaining life on Earth – for granted. These crises compel us to view plants as botanical beings *in their own right*, and to recognise the complexity of our shared existence with them. In response, anthropologist Natasha Myers has proposed the term as a new, plant-centred starting point for knowledge and design. *Planthroposcene* is a contraction of 'plant' and 'Anthropocene', the latter referring to the current geological epoch marked by extensive, human-driven environmental disruption.⁵ The term 'planthroposcene' does not designate an era; rather, it constitutes an epistemic proposition, an approach grounded in the fundamental entanglement of human and plant life. Whereas the notion of the Anthropocene emphasises human (*anthropos*) actions and their environmentally destructive consequences, the planthroposcene emphasises how plants are co-creative agents of a shared world, not a passive backdrop.⁶



Fig. 2. Laurits Tuxen: *Morning. From My House in Skagen*. 1916. Oil on canvas. 120 × 94 cm. Ribe Kunstmuseum. Inv. no. RKM844. Photo: Ribe Kunstmuseum ©

Today, many contemporary artists and designers are creating 'planthropocene' spaces for encounters between humans and plants.⁷ But how may art museums play their part in this green turn? How might they activate the collections they are legally bound to develop, preserve, present and study in order to attract renewed attention to our entangled coexistence with plants?⁸ This is the overarching question asked by the research and dissemination project *Hidden Plant Stories*,

supported by the Velux Foundation.⁹ Establishing cooperation between Aarhus University, Ordrupgaard and The Hirschsprung Collection, our interdisciplinary team delved into Danish art museum collections to uncover overlooked plant histories. We have focused in particular on the houseplants which appear as seemingly incidental background elements in many nineteenth-century interior paintings [Figs. 1–4]. To facilitate a systematic investigation, alternating between close and distant analysis, we created a database of 452 Danish oil paintings produced between 1820 and 1920.¹⁰

The following article is a position paper – a genre often used in the early stages of natural science research projects to sketch out the field in which forthcoming research and dissemination activities will unfold. Here, we identify nineteenth-century Danish ‘houseplant art’ as an overlooked source of new knowledge about how our lives are entangled with those of plants. We argue that an interdisciplinary, plant-focused approach, alternating between close and distant readings, can pave the way for fresh perspectives on museum collections. This, in turn, may enhance the topical relevance of those collections and underline the role of art museums as essential contributors to our current era’s collective efforts to cultivate new ways of seeing – and new understandings of – the plants with which we live.



Fig. 3. Anna Sophie Petersen: *An Evening with a Friend by Lamplight*. 1891. Oil on canvas. 145 × 173.4 cm. The Hirschsprung Collection. Inv. no. 3168. Photo: The Hirschsprung Collection.



Fig. 4. Sigurd Wandel: *Children Drawing*. 1910. Oil on canvas. 60 × 74 cm. Ribe Kunstmuseum. Inv. no. RKMm0251. Photo: Ribe Kunstmuseum ©

Identifying and studying Danish ‘houseplant art’

The only criterion for including a work in our specific collection is that the artwork must include a houseplant – defined here as a plant growing within a domestic setting. The collection was assembled through searches in the museum database SARA, supplemented with material from online resources such as Wikimedia Commons, where photographic documentation is often uploaded by auction houses in connection with sales.¹¹ Our focus is the nineteenth century, when the houseplant first emerged as a cultural phenomenon. Given that we did not identify any relevant works from 1800 to 1820, we specifically home in on the period from 1820 to 1920.¹² A total of 452 works have been coded using 27 datapoints relating to botanical, cultural, social and artistic factors, based on an initial round of analysis. The resulting database enables us to conduct multivariate statistical analyses of the motifs with a view to uncovering significant patterns. It also allows us to extract simpler information such as data on the increase in the number of paintings featuring houseplants over the course of the century [Fig. 5].

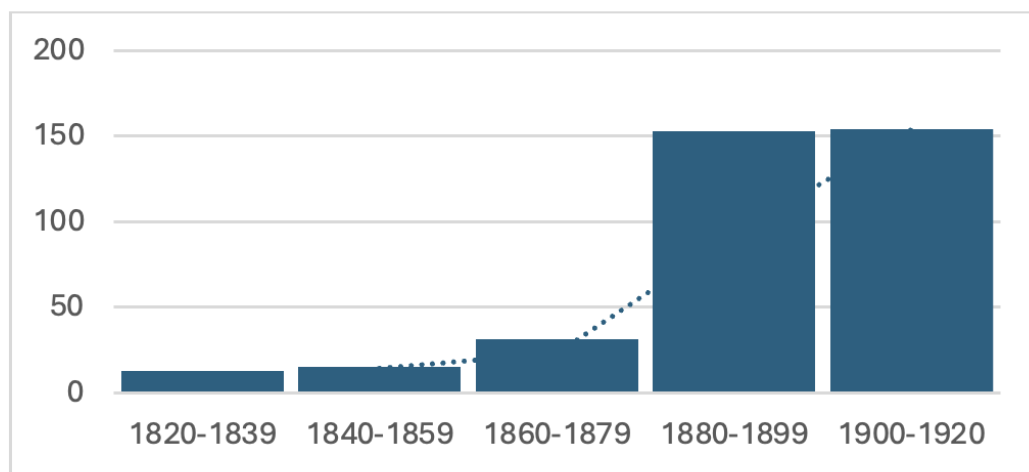


Fig. 5. Number of oil paintings featuring houseplants, 1820–1920, in 20-year intervals. Based on the 366 works for which we have been able to confirm the date. Graphics: Anette Vandsø.

The project alternates between close and distant readings. Quantitative analyses can inform close readings of individual works; for example, an indication of how widespread the houseplant motif was at a given time can offer useful context for a close analysis. Data can also draw attention to unexpected patterns not immediately visible in the material, and it can confirm or challenge hypotheses arising from close readings of artworks or other sources. For example, we might ask whether women artists depicted plants differently from their male counterparts, or examine, confirm or nuance relationships between class and plant choice, or between plants and gender, as discussed in this article.

State of the Art: Plant-centric readings of nineteenth-century art

Houseplants in nineteenth-century Danish art have not previously been the subject of a comprehensive, systematic study. Perhaps this is due to the unassuming nature of their role in the artworks: they generally appear as modest everyday elements that attract little attention. The figures in the paintings often have their backs turned on the plants or gaze past them, and the plants recede into the background as secondary, though often richly coded, elements [cf. figs. 1–4]. Generally speaking, the various details found in nineteenth-century interior paintings are laden with meaning, including the plants.¹³ Flowers, moreover, were richly associated with symbolic connotations, and in the nineteenth century an actual language of flowers, or floriography, with codified messages became fashionable.¹⁴ In addition to this, art is always ‘conditioned by the culture and worldview [of the historical period] in which the image was created,’ as Eva de la Fuente Pedersen and Hanne Kolind Poulsen note in their introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Flowers and World Views* (2013). Those aspects, culture and worldview, are also reflected in art’s depictions of plants.¹⁵ Indeed, several individual analyses of houseplants in Danish art examine their references to conventional symbolism beyond the work itself; their role in creating meaningful relationships between pictorial elements within a work; or the ways in which plant depictions reflect the period’s culture.¹⁶ A good example is the many analyses of Martinus Christian Wesseltoft Rørbye’s *View from the Artist’s Window*, painted between 1823 and 1827 [Fig. 6].¹⁷

Art historian Dyveke Helsted describes Rørbye’s painting of the view from his childhood room at Amaliegade 45 in central Copenhagen, with houseplants on the windowsill in the foreground and, in the distance, the view of the naval base at Nyholm with the fleet’s berth and a masting house crane.¹⁸ Art historian Kasper Monrad emphasises how the windowsill and the open window act as a symbolic threshold between inside and outside: the home, with its plants, represents the familiar and safe, while the harbour serves as a window opening up on faraway worlds.¹⁹ Building on art

historian Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark's earlier analysis, Monrad interprets the row of plants as an allegory of 'a young person's life from birth until they stand on the threshold of leaving home and beginning adult life.'²⁰ The cutting symbolises the child, thriving in the safe environment of the home; the plant with round, pink flowers is a globe amaranth, also known as bachelor's button in both Danish and English, a name pointing to burgeoning youth; and the flowering hydrangea at the far right symbolises the young person in full bloom, ready to step out into life through the open window.²¹ Monrad posits the work within the broader context of Denmark in the 1820s, a time marked by economic decline and the loss of Norway in 1814. He argues that the painting reflects a yearning to venture out, but also 'the limited outlook that most Danes of the time shared, confined to their immediate surroundings, yet perhaps casting a cautious, stolen glance towards the wider world.'²² In Monrad's reading, the houseplants serve simultaneously as an allegory of human development and as an image of Denmark's somewhat constrained horizons in this period.



Fig. 6. Martinus Christian Wesseltoft Rørbye: *View from the Artist's Window*. 1823–1827. Oil on canvas. 38 × 29.8 cm. SMK/National Gallery of Denmark. Inv. no. KMS7452.

The Danish ethnographer Lene Floris points to another abundance of meaning in Rørbye's work. She interprets the painting as a testimony to a burgeoning fashion in 1820s Denmark: the houseplant. For Floris, Rørbye's painting illustrates the arrival of houseplants in bourgeois homes at the end of the eighteenth century and their increasing spread throughout the nineteenth century.²³ The title of Floris' article reflects nineteenth-century usage, which described the keeping of plants indoors as 'the garden on the windowsill.'²⁴ Her article points to nineteenth-century paintings as an overlooked

source for insight into a neglected field: the cultural history of Danish potted plants and the many narratives attached to them:

*Potted plants can tell many stories. They tell of human relationships with nature when nature is moved indoors and placed behind glass. They tell of home décor and fashion, and of women's tasks and gender roles as they changed over time.*²⁵

Since Floris wrote her article in 1999, global environmental crises have become an unavoidable context for us all, one that not only foregrounds environmental decline as a pressing theme; it also challenges the nature-culture dichotomy that shapes our view of plants. Anthropologist Natasha Myers suggests that we take a closer look at how specific sites, especially gardens, invite particular relations between humans and plants:²⁶

*Gardens are for me poignant sites for anthropological inquiry into the various ways that people stage relations with plants – whether these relations are intimate, extractive, violent, or instrumentalising.*²⁷

We propose that nineteenth-century depictions of 'the garden on the windowsill' can be read as stagings of the intimate and entangled relations with plants highlighted by Myers' concept of the planthroposcene. In art, we can trace the plant-related cultural-historical perspectives Floris mentions as well as the global dimensions that have become so insistently urgent today. Our interest, however, is not confined to viewing the works as sources of knowledge about houseplants as part of Danish cultural heritage. We also consider how art performatively helps to establish the space of meaning that conditions our perception of plants through the layers of significance embedded in the works. In other words, individual works reveal how categories relating to nature – but also to gender, class, nationality and so forth – are performatively created and negotiated through the aesthetic staging of plants within the domestic sphere. The following analyses provide concrete examples.

This project thus situates itself within a wider wave of re-readings of historical art, where the thesis of the (pl)anthroposcene offers up new perspectives on older works. Paintings of city life by Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) and Claude Monet (1840–1926) are now read as evidence of fossil fuel combustion and as signs of the dawn of the Anthropocene epoch.²⁸ In similar ways, nineteenth-century landscape paintings are being reinterpreted in relation to broader knowledge formations concerning, for example, colonialism, animal husbandry or cultural conceptions of nature.²⁹ Moreover, the expanding field known as plant humanities introduces analyses that give topical relevance to natural, cultural and art-historical archives and collections, as exemplified by the extensive work of art historians Giovanni Aloï and Prudence Gibson.³⁰ Finally, our project continues the work done by a series of Danish exhibitions with substantial research-based catalogues that have explored our complex relationship with plants through new readings of historical art. In particular, we draw on our earlier experience with ARoS' *The Garden: End of Times; Beginning of Times* (2017) and the Faaborg Museum and the Hirschsprung Collection's *Jordforbindelser / Down to Earth* (2018).³¹ Other examples, including *Flora* at Stavanger and Randers Art Museums (2019) and *Flowers in Art* at ARKEN (2021), have also helped establish the theme in a Danish context. Drawing on critical positions such as new materialism, feminism, and postcolonial and decolonial theory, this particular field of study and curating sees visual art as part of a broader visual culture that has contributed to naturalising problematic ways of seeing. It has been pointed out, for instance, how art aestheticizes Anthropocene environmental disruptions in

ways that make people grow accustomed to them – and thus overlook them. As professor of visual culture Nicholas Mirzoeff concludes: ‘The Anthropocene is so built into our senses that it determines our perceptions, hence it is aesthetic.’³² Thus, historical art holds potential for nurturing alternative narratives if we choose to approach it differently.³³ Our central idea is precisely that nineteenth-century art can play a part in the broader effort to find better words, narratives and images for what we once called ‘nature’ – for the planet, the biosphere, or our life with other species – an endeavour currently much in demand across the Environmental Humanities.³⁴

In our project, these analytical approaches are supplemented by a quantitative method building on distant reading methods that have become increasingly widespread in recent decades. In Danish art history, for example, Gertrud Oelsner has employed a form of distant reading in her work on nineteenth-century Danish landscape painting, based on a systematically compiled group of works.³⁵ Multivariate statistics are not yet widespread in art-historical studies, but they will undoubtedly gain momentum with the rise of generative AI and the general development of digital art history as a field.³⁶

Seeing art through the lens of botany and horticulture

Despite the complex theoretical framework, our project is guided by a simple method: we focus on the plants. They govern our selection of works and our analyses. In close readings, we look beyond the narrow categorisation of plants as ‘houseplants’ and instead regard them as botanical specimens in their own right, with their own histories of cultivation and breeding. This raises questions about which plants we are looking at, where they originated, how they came to be on the windowsill, how they were cared for and by whom – as well as how they were perceived by the artist. We thus adopt an interdisciplinary approach to the works where botanical, ethnobotanical, and cultural-historical expertise informs our analyses. This perspective enables us to uncover broader narratives within the works; narratives about the entanglements of human and plant life.

Rørbye’s painting is particularly interesting because it is one of the earliest identified examples of Danish art featuring houseplants. It forms part of the starting point for the development we trace throughout the century, making the houseplant a recurring motif in art [cf. Fig. 5]. Houseplants were a relatively new phenomenon in the bourgeois home at the time, inviting readings that consider the historical context.

The history of Danish houseplants is part of a larger history of global plant migrations, which gathered momentum in the seventeenth century when human activity fundamentally altered the distribution of plants.³⁷ Over the course of two centuries, more than 5,000 plant species were moved across continents, given new scientific names, and made part of new cultural and scientific contexts.³⁸ Bulbs such as hyacinths and tulips constituted a growing market, and the activities of European explorers and the expanding colonisation of the tropics meant that an increasing number of tropical and subtropical plants made their way to Europe. These were initially cultivated in royal and aristocratic gardens, and later also in botanical gardens. From the late eighteenth century, and especially throughout the nineteenth century, houseplants found their way first into bourgeois homes and subsequently into those of the wider population.³⁹

The history of houseplants has been addressed quite extensively in literature outside of Denmark,⁴⁰ while the field is rather more sparingly described in a Danish context.⁴¹ Even so, primary sources still offer some insight into the spread of houseplants in the 1820s, when Rørbye painted his work. The gardener and horticultural writer Julius August Bentzien (1815–1882) noted in 1858 that twenty years earlier, in the 1830s, houseplants in windows were *not* a common sight: ‘Back then one could walk through several streets without seeing flowerpots in any window,’ he wrote.⁴² Indeed, not until 1833 did an actual flower market open in Copenhagen: it did so at Holmens Kanal, where commercial gardeners could sell their potted plants directly to the townspeople.⁴³ Prior to this, the citizens of Copenhagen had access to ornamental plants via sales from the Botanical Garden at Charlottenborg, from commercial gardeners, or by ordering from catalogues provided by suppliers

abroad. In the 1820s, however, such botanical abundance must have been an unusual sight and a status symbol evoking the floral splendour of distant lands.⁴⁴

If we regard the plants as botanical specimens in their own right and ask about their countries of origin, a surprising pattern emerges: on the left-hand side of the window ledge we see a *Hydrangea macrophylla*, native to Japan; in the centre is an Aloe vera, native to Oman on the Arabian Peninsula; and to the right, just before the cutting, a *Gomphrena globosa* (globe amaranth or bachelor's button), native to Mexico, Central America, and tropical South America.⁴⁵ The plants in the painting thus hail from different corners of the globe and have come together on a Danish windowsill in the northern hemisphere. Taken as a whole, the windowsill represents all four quarters of the world.



Fig. 7. The countries of origin of the plants featured in Rørbye's *View from the Artist's Window*. The painting is mirrored to illustrate the point. Graphics: Anette Vandsø.

We do not know whether Rørbye deliberately arranged the plants to represent the four corners of the world. It is not, however, unlikely. At the time, there was widespread interest in science and botany, especially in the plant geography founded by Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) in the early nineteenth century.⁴⁶ In 1822, the Danish botanist and later director of the Botanical Garden, Joachim Frederik Schouw (1789–1852), published a Danish plant geography strongly inspired by Humboldt.⁴⁷ It was also during this period that volumes of the extensive *Flora Danica* (1761–1883) were being published on the basis of expeditions across the Danish realm, meaning that the plants described were embedded within a specific geographical context.⁴⁸ When Bentzien published one of the first Danish handbooks on the care of houseplants in 1851, he likewise included information about the plants' geographical origins – and in some cases also about their journey to Europe. He describes, for example, how the botanist Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820) brought the hydrangea to Kew Gardens in London from Japan in 1790, and notes that before its introduction in real life the plant was already known to Europeans from Chinese wallpapers.⁴⁹ Regardless of Rørbye's intention, this work represents not only the 'garden on the windowsill', but also the wider world given that a global perspective is present in the painting through its plants.

At the same time, the work also demonstrates an interest in plants collected and placed behind glass in human-made and human-controlled growing environments. The small glass cloche with a cutting underneath it points to a knowledge of plant propagation, including an awareness that tropical and

subtropical plants required special conditions in order to thrive. The birdcage, moreover, reflects the wider fascination with exotic 'curiosities' or naturalia in which the interest in plants was often embroiled.⁵⁰ It is therefore natural to view the plants not only as houseplants representing the domestic and the Danish spheres in a narrow sense, but also as specimens exemplifying the wider natural world from which they were drawn.

The painting is structured by repeated grid patterns: note the gauze curtain whose tassels are doubled in the mirror, the small railing in front of the window echoed in its cast shadow, as well as the birdcage and the ship's masts in the background. The accumulated effect creates a kaleidoscopic feel that does not, as earlier analyses suggest, establish an opposition between indoors and outdoors, the interior and exterior world, but rather seems to mirror them in each other. Within these myriad reflections, the painting revolves around the technologies that enabled foreign life forms to thrive within the Danish home.⁵¹ These include the specific growth environments – clay pots, birdcage, glass cloche, and the windowsill protected by panes of glass and the small railing – and the ships themselves. After all, the ships were the technology that enabled the large-scale transfers of plants from distant lands to Europe, and seafaring later became central to the trade in plants.

Earlier descriptions of the harbour area depicted in the artwork have focused primarily on the view of the naval dockyard with its warships.⁵² Yet the middle ground is also of interest: it shows the Copenhagen harbour front, which at the time was heaving with merchant vessels that, among other things, brought ornamental plants, flower bulbs and seeds into the city.⁵³ In the painting, a smaller merchant ship – probably a two-topsail schooner – is moored at the quay behind an anchor and a row of barrels or bundles that may well be cargo.⁵⁴ The trading companies that transported plant matter such as coffee, sugar and tea to Denmark via long-distance shipping were also located in this area. The West India Warehouse on Toldbodgade, visible in Rørbye's view of a *Weighing Station at the West India Warehouse* from 1826, is just to the right of the vista framed by the window.⁵⁵ Viewing the harbour as a transitional zone pointing out towards faraway, foreign places, as Monrad describes in his analysis of the work, is an obvious interpretation. In our analysis, however, we wish to emphasise that the foreign was not only something one *sailed out* to encounter, but also something that *arrived in* Denmark due to the activities of trade and science.

Houseplants as an emerging cultural and aesthetic category

This analysis opens up new horizons of meaning in Rørbye's painting. The plants represent not only the domestic sphere, but also the wider world which entered Europe in the service of science and global trade as part of an imperial and colonial culture. The dynamic movement of the work thus flows not only outward through the open window, but also inward through it. The windowsill emerges as a zone of domestication for plants from other parts of the world, making it a liminal space or contact zone between inside and outside, home and abroad, north and south, where the distant becomes visible *within* the familiar and the everyday.

According to the French historian of science Bruno Latour, modernity is characterised by a constant production of hybrid nature-culture phenomena.⁵⁶ The period from the Enlightenment onwards is generally held to be marked by the differentiation of social and epistemological spheres, where nature begins to be understood as something fundamentally separate from society or culture. Latour argues that such a separation never actually took place, a fact proven by the hybrids themselves. The houseplants in Rørbye's painting appear precisely as such nature-culture hybrids. They are biological organisms that, by virtue of their specific biology, reflect the ecosystems and climates from which they originate. Yet at the same time they have been collected, transplanted, propagated and adapted to Danish homes through specific technological practices.⁵⁷

The Anthropocene, as Mirzoeff explains, is an aesthetic category, and visual art has taught us to appreciate (and thereby to overlook) Anthropocene transformations. Landscape paintings have aestheticized the monocultures of agriculture and forestry, teaching us to regard them as 'beautiful'

and as 'Danish' nature.⁵⁸ Similarly, one might argue that the many interior paintings of the nineteenth century featuring houseplants contributed to a gradual shift in the perception of plants from distant regions, making observers see them as Danish and as a natural part of a Danish home. Viewed in this light, Rørbye's painting not only *reflects* a cultural tendency, but also actively *produces* it through the aesthetic staging of plants as part of a bourgeois Danish interior.

Rørbye's work thus marks the beginning of a visual process of domestication in art that continues throughout the nineteenth century, one in which plants were gradually integrated into a Danish cultural repertoire as they were visually inscribed into bourgeois, and later also rural, homes [Fig. 5]. This development took place concurrently with the practical domestication, commercialisation and often hybridisation of plants by commercial gardeners and florists, as well as with their literary representation in both fiction and the increasingly popular handbooks on houseplant care from the latter half of the century.⁵⁹ By representing the plants within the framework of a home, the artworks also link them to the social categories associated with the domestic sphere. Class, gender, and national identity – and, with them, Europe's colonial past – emerge as key perspectives, which we will explore further in the following analyses.

Houseplants and class



Fig. 8. . Laurits Andersen Ring: *Country Interior*, Oil on canvas. 39.2 x 44.7 cm. 1880. The Hirschsprung Collection. inv.no. 397. Photo: The Hirschsprung Collection.

The plants in Rørbye's window ledge reflect his family's economic means.⁶⁰ Bentzien, in his 1858 text, specifically describes Rørbye's street, Amaliegade, and clearly regards houseplants as a fashion phenomenon linked to class: 'There are plants not fashionable enough to be welcome in the homes of the wealthy and distinguished,' he writes.⁶¹ At the same time, he celebrates the fact that the phenomenon of houseplants had spread across all social classes. Economic resources governed which types of plants were attainable to individuals, just as they did for other consumer goods.⁶² The pelargonium (often known as a geranium in English) is a particularly interesting example in this respect. It was the height of fashion in the Nordic countries in the first half of the nineteenth century, to such an extent that people spoke of an outright 'pelargonium mania.'⁶³ Over the course of the nineteenth century, the plant became popular among the common people due to being easily propagated from cuttings.⁶⁴ It also lent itself well to producing hybrids, giving rise to varieties with different scents, leaf sizes and flower forms. These hybrids became part of the expanding flower trade – and remain so today.⁶⁵ Subsequently, however, the pelargonium lost its prestige, almost becoming a symbol of the common folk, as we see in art – for example, in many of Laurits Andersen Ring's depictions of rural life [Fig. 8].

A good example is Ring's painting *A Farm Boy Doing his Homework* (1883), in which two pelargoniums (*Pelargonium sp.*) are placed in the window [Fig. 9]. In this work, the rustic wooden table, the coarsely woven clothing, the clay-daubed and cracked walls, the pelargoniums in turned clay pots on the window ledge, and the descriptive title all serve to draw us into a peasant household of the 1880s. Here too, the windowsill serves as a boundary zone separating inside and outside. The home is presented as an educational environment: the boy has Martin Luther's (1483-1546) *Small Catechism* on the table, turned so that the viewer can easily see its title page. Yet the boy, looking on the verge of jumping to his feet, seems more intent on gazing out – perhaps at the birds in the bush outside – than on his lessons.⁶⁶ The pelargoniums obscure the view and appear as a cultivated form of nature, a contrast to the free nature beyond the window. Given that Ring, like many other painters, would actively stage and rearrange his subject matter, his works cannot be read as one-to-one depictions of reality.⁶⁷ They do, however, offer us some impression of the way houseplants were regarded at the time.



Fig. 9. Laurits Andersen Ring: *A Farm Boy Doing his Homework*. Oil on canvas. 60 x 47.1 cm. 1883. Private collection. Photo: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

The colonial narratives of houseplants

Like the kaleidoscopic pattern of reflections in Rørbye's work, houseplants in nineteenth-century art seem to destabilise the scenes in which they appear because they open up a multitude of supplementary perspectives. One of the most frequently found plants in our material is the pelargonium, presenting the rich variety characteristic of the species. The pelargonium originates in

South Africa. In the mid-seventeenth century, Dutch traders established a colony in the region, one which expanded during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under both Dutch and British rule, a process involving the importation of enslaved people from other regions and the displacement or extermination of parts of the indigenous population. Dutch traders brought the first pelargonium species to Europe in the seventeenth century.⁶⁸ Like many other plants collected from other parts of the world, it was given scientific names in order to be integrated into the botanical taxonomic system,⁶⁹ because houseplants are not only nature–culture hybrids: they are also cultural hybrids belonging simultaneously to several cultures, each with its own perspective on, name for, and use of the plants. In South Africa, for example, the pelargonium was used both as food and as medicine.⁷⁰ In this way, plants challenge the idea of a stable, unequivocal national identity from within their domestic settings, pointing instead to the complex, often invisible connections between Danish interiors and the – frequently colonised – world that supplied its green inhabitants. The windowsill thus becomes a special site for the negotiation, inscription or articulation of hybrid identities.⁷¹

At first glance, the windowsill in Ring's work appears as an emblem of a Denmark we might look back on with nostalgia and perhaps revisit in museums such as Den Gamle By. The casement windows are typical of older Danish homes. The *Small Catechism* speaks of the efforts made to ensure that even peasants would learn to read and learn about Christianity in Danish. The pelargonium contributes to establishing the strong sense of Danishness in the paintings, since it was such a characteristic houseplant among the common folk in nineteenth-century culture.⁷² Conversely, paintings of this type helped establish the view of the plant itself as typically Danish.

Yet alongside stories of class, national identity, plant trade and plant exchanges, the pelargonium also carries Europe's colonial history with it onto the windowsill and onto the picture plane. Ring's work does not necessarily directly invite these supplementary perspectives, but one may choose to inject this knowledge of plants into one's reading of the paintings, thereby seeing them as testimonies to Europe's colonial past.

Houseplants and gender



Fig. 10. Title page from Jens August Carl Jenssen: *Hjemmets Flora. Vejledning til behandling af potteplanter i stuen alene* [The Flora of the Home: A Guide to the Care of Pot Plants in the Living Room], Gad, 1896 (1883).

A final significant perspective on plants is the question of gender and care work. In our project we consider houseplants as botanical beings in their own right, which makes the issue of their care central. Quite concretely, this raises the question of who tends them and sustains their life in pots – vessels that, by their very nature, make such care necessary. Over the course of the nineteenth century, plants became domesticated, thereby moving into the gendered sphere of the home where they became part of women's responsibilities and labour.⁷³ Indeed, the illustrations on the title pages of several plant manuals published in the latter half of the nineteenth century, offering instructions on the care of houseplants, clearly reflect the assumption that they would be looked after by women [Fig. 10].

Many other sources frame plants as part of women's care work in the home. For example, the publication *Raadgiver for Hus og Hjem* (Advice on House and Home, 1885) observes that a loving and good housewife will tend her flowers as she does her children and will 'reap rich rewards for doing so', emphasising that this need not cost anything since cuttings are easily obtained from friends and acquaintances.⁷⁴ Women were thus expected to acquire practical knowledge of plants, knowledge no longer reserved for gardeners, and their management of good taste within the home was not simply a matter of style, but also of acquiring botanical or horticultural expertise. Within the home, a mutual exchange was at play: the woman tended the plants, which in return adorned the household, conferring status and added comfort.⁷⁵ In this way, plants contributed to the construction of the housewife as an ideal; a process that unfolded during the nineteenth century as the bourgeois nuclear family became the norm.

In Viggo Pedersen's (1854–1926) depiction of an everyday scene set in a sun-drenched living room, we witness a tender encounter between the artist's wife, Elisabeth, and their child, Christen. The mother is seated on the floor, tilting her head attentively as she listens to the child, who reaches trustingly towards his mother's face [Fig. 11]. Illuminated by a light that carries an almost religious quality, mother and child form the central subject of the work. Six houseplants stand on the windowsill, relegated to a peripheral background role; they are even cropped so that only their pots and lower stems remain visible. Like the sewing by the window, or the clutter on the floor and on the *escritoire*, the plants belong to the sphere of the housewife's duties. Positioned directly in the fall of sunlight, they filter and refract the light, and their lush, healthy foliage – together with their sheer abundance – testify, like the child himself, to the life that the mother nurtures within the domestic sphere.



Fig. 11. Viggo Pedersen: *Sunshine in the Living Room. The Artist's Wife and Child*. 1888. Oil on canvas. 35.5 × 45.5 cm, 1888. SMK/National Gallery of Denmark. Inv. no. KMS1363.

Women and houseplants shared similar circumstances during this period: both were confined to the private sphere of the home. This was before women won the right to vote, and a time when married women were barred from holding business licences.⁷⁶ In the nineteenth century, women were also denied entry to the art academies. They had to make do with private tuition, where flowers and interiors were among the primary subjects.⁷⁷ Women artists such as Alhed Larsen (1872–1927), Anna Syberg (1870–1914), Anna Ancher (1859–1935), and Christine Swane (1876–1960) painted the very plants they themselves tended in their homes, adding new layers to the narrative of care visible in these works [Fig. 11].⁷⁸ Despite the labour involved in tending plants on windowsills, in greenhouses and gardens, art historian Søren Thorlak Madsen points out that the plants in these works seem to represent a sanctuary, a space for retreating from other forms of care work.⁷⁹ Perhaps this is why women artists often chose houseplants as their main subject matter? [Fig. 12]

A source of new insight and renewed relevance

The close readings presented in this article demonstrate the richness of meaning that can be found when you cut across disciplinary silos and analyse the art through multiple perspectives spanning the natural sciences and the humanities alike. For example, our analyses are supported by botanical, horticultural, ethnobotanical and cultural-historical studies and perspectives. Such analyses can reveal overlooked aspects in well-known works, especially those that concern the entanglements of human and plant life. This interdisciplinary approach can inscribe older works within a present-day perspective, allowing historical art to be considered in relation to both contemporary art and current issues – thereby honing the relevance of the collections found in Danish art museums.



Fig. 12. Alhed Larsen: *Cactus Flower*. 1910. Oil on canvas. 56 x 40 cm. Faaborg Museum. Inv. no. 457. Photo: Faaborg Museum / Anders Hoby.

A plant-centred approach to art, alternating between close and distant readings and between diachronic and synchronic perspectives, can thus provide new knowledge about – and new means of presenting and mediating – our relationship to plants. The works offer insights into the concrete entanglements of human and plant life within the domestic sphere as they unfolded throughout the nineteenth century. The genre of ‘houseplant art’ shows how plants came to play a role in social categories such as gender, class and nationality. It also illustrates how plants linked the intimate, domestic Danish sphere with global structures such as colonialism and transnational trade, thereby connecting social, cultural, botanical and economic aspects from widely different parts of the world. None of these topics have been examined extensively with Danish houseplants as a point of departure. Future studies might profitably look at broader bodies of work in this light, conducting similar analyses in order to nuance, confirm, or challenge such theses through the use of the database. Also, the database itself may generate new hypotheses requiring further close analysis.

Moreover, houseplant art can provide a framework for new forms of public engagement, offering a collective sensitivity towards plants through exhibitions and other interpretive formats. ‘Plant blindness’ is a widespread phenomenon, particularly in relation to houseplants sold purely for their aesthetic qualities – a narrow view that obscures broader understandings of them as botanical nature-culture hybrids.⁸⁰

Houseplant art has the advantage of being relatable, since it depicts intimate portrayals of plants within domestic settings that are very similar to the ways we cultivate plants in our homes today. Thus, the plant motif can give otherwise abstract ideas about the entanglement of human and plant life concrete form. Audiences can gain greater knowledge and a broader aesthetic appreciation of how human and plant lives intertwine on a large, macrosociological scale *and* on the microsociological scale of the home, whether a peasant household in Jutland or an artist’s childhood home in central Copenhagen. The motif also quite literally brings the Anthropocene’s global questions concerning the relationship between humans and nature down to earth, grounding it in everyday, relatable perspectives as plants forge a link between the intimate sensory world of the home and wider global contexts.

Through houseplant art, museums can make distant and complex issues accessible and relatable. They can serve as forums for inclusive conversations in which visitors encounter new planthropocene perspectives on the houseplants they see in art and on their own windowsills. The works may prompt curiosity and perhaps inspire audiences to seek knowledge about the plants they encounter, whether in paintings or at home, perhaps asking about their origins, how they ended up on the windowsill, and who tends to them. Such *enrichment* of the audience’s outlook on plants may counteract the apathy towards global environmental challenges that many warn against.⁸¹ This is one of the core ideas behind the exhibition *Plant Fever. The World on the Windowsill*, opening in September 2025 at The Hirschsprung Collection and Ordrupgaard, and in 2026 at Faaborg Museum as part of the project Hidden Plant Stories.⁸²

Museums can use their collections to tell new stories about the evolution of our relationship to plants in the home: plants being collected, propagated, cultivated and enjoyed within the domestic sphere. Plants with which the Danish people developed an intimate relationship by tending them, sharing them with friends and family, reading about them and painting them. These may be planthropocene stories about intimacy, but also about power relations: between humans and plants, between the Global North and South, between colonial powers and colonised regions. At a time when our future with plants is being fundamentally reconsidered, it is worth looking back at our past with plants – and at the period of transformation when the houseplant emerged as a new cultural category.

Notes

1. The article is authored with a joint first authorship by Anette Vandsø and Pernille Leth-Espensen. In an abbreviated reference it may be cited as *Vandsø and Leth-Espensen et al.*
2. Yinon M. Bar-On, Rob Phillips and Ron Milo: 'The biomass distribution on Earth', *PNAS* 115(25): 6506–11, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1711842115>, last accessed June 2024.
3. Emanuele Coccia: *Planternes liv: blandingens metafysik*, Hans Reitzels Forlag, 2022, p. 27.
4. See Michael Marder: *Plant-Thinking: a Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Columbia University Press, 2013; Richard Mabey: *The Cabaret of Plants: Forty Thousand Years of Plant Life and the Human Imagination*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2015; Yuriko Saito: 'Plants and everyday aesthetics', in Line Marie Thorsen (ed.): *Moving Plants* Exhibition catalogue, Næstved: Rønnebæksholm Kunstmuseum, 2017, pp. 33–47. The idea of nature being subordinated to the interests of a given subject is not a new observation, see for example T.W. Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum, 1997, p. 71. Also see Heather Swanson: 'The Banality of the Anthropocene', *Fieldsights*, 22 February, 2017. DOI: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/the-banality-of-the-anthropocene>, last accessed May 2017. This kind of plant blindness was first described in: James H. Wandersee and Elizabeth E. Schussler: 'Preventing plant blindness', *The American Biology Teacher*, 61:2, 1999.
5. The concept of the Anthropocene is introduced in: Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer: 'The Anthropocene', *IGBP Newsletter* 41, Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, Stockholm, 2000; Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer: 'Geology of Mankind', *Nature*, 415:23, 3 Jan. 2002, doi:10.1038/415023a, last accessed September 2016. Whereas the Anthropocene Working Group has ratified the thesis, the global geological community has rejected it. In the humanities, however, the concept is widely accepted.
6. Natasha Myers: 'From the Anthropocene to the Planthropocene: Designing Gardens for Plant/People Involution', *History and Anthropology*, 28:3, 2017, ' . 299, DOI: 10.1080/02757206.2017.1289934; as Myers puts it: 'Plants are the world-makers we need to heed, if we hope to grow liveable worlds', Natasha Myers: 'How to grow liveable worlds: Ten (not-so-easy) steps for life in the Planthropocene', *Opinion, ABC*, 7 January 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/natasha-myers-how-to-grow-liveable-worlds:-ten-not-so-easy-step/11906548>, last accessed December 2022.
7. Regarding plants in contemporary art, see Line Marie Thorsen (ed.): *Moving Plants* Exhibition catalogue, Næstved: Rønnebæksholm Kunstmuseum, 2017; Giovanni Aloï: *Botanical speculations. Plants in contemporary art*, Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2018; Anette Vandsø: 'Kunsten at tale miljø', in Erlend G. Høyersten, Jakob Vengberg Sevel, Anne Mette Thomsen, Anette Vandsø (eds.): *The Garden: End of Times, Beginning of Times*. Exhibition catalogue, Aarhus: ARoS, König Verlag, 2017, pp. 76–86. Regarding rewilding in garden designs in public and private spaces, see for example Siân Moxon, Justin Webb, Alexandros Semertzi and Mina Samangoeei: 'Wild Ways: A Scoping Review to Understand Urban-Rewilding Behaviour in Relation to Adaptations to Private Gardens', *Cities & Health*, 7:5 (2023), pp. 888–902. DOI:10.1080/23748834.2023.2218016; Zoë Myers: *Wildness and Wellbeing*, Springer Nature, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9923-8>.
8. According to Section 2 of the Danish Museum Act, see for example Act H472 2001.
9. *Hidden Plant Stories (Skjulte Planterhistorier)* is an interdisciplinary museum project led by PI Anette Vandsø. The authors of this article constitute the project's core research group. Also affiliated with the project are scholar and curator Gry Hedin, curator Rikke Zinck Jensen, writer Anne Green Munk, and art historian and gardener Astrid Steffensen, as well as student assistants Martin Bjerg Dahl, Amalie Søvnal Nielsen, and Sira Cecilie Hentze Kjeldal. The project is supported

by the Velux Foundation's Museum Programme.

10. The works in the database were organised and collected by Pernille Leth-Espensen with assistance from student assistant Martin Bjerg Dahl. The data values the database is coded with is developed by the authors of this article, and the coding was done by Leth-Espensen, Dahl, Nielsen and Kjeldal. More works have been collected than the 452 currently coded in the database.

11. Not all museum works are registered in SARA, and not all works in SARA are documented in photographs. Nevertheless, the database contains a sufficient number of works to enable statistical analysis of the material gathered. For other kinds of studies, it may be relevant to consult the individual museum collections and their storage facilities directly.

12. The earliest work we have identified is Jens Juel: *Countess Anna Joachima Danneskiold-Laurvigen, née Ahlefeldt*, 1790–1791. Oil on canvas, 149.5 × 120 cm. SMK inv. no. KMS941. Since our timeframe is limited to 1820–1920, this work is not included in the coded database.

13. See for example Mikkel Bogh: *Tæt på. Intimiteter i kunsten 1730-1930*. Exhibition catalogue, Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst/National Gallery of Denmark, 2016; Gertrud Oelsner and Anna Schram Vejlbj, *Fra den bedste side. Portræt og følsomhed i guldalderen*. Exhibition catalogue, Copenhagen: The Hirschsprung Collection, 2017; Kasper Lægning: 'The (Re)birth of Genre Painting During the Danish Golden Age: The Case of the Studio "Portrait"', *MDCCC 1800*, 11, 2022, pp. 53–80.

14. Bengt Arvidsson: 'Blomsterspråket – en forskningsintroduktion', *Bulletinen* 19–20, 2006–2007, pp. 14–19; Henrik Holm: 'Sig det med blomster', in Eva de la Fuente Pedersen et. al (eds.): *Blomster og Verdenssyn*, Exhibition catalogue, Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst/National Gallery of Denmark, 2013, pp. 220–227; Karin Martinsson: *Pelargoner: Kulturarv i kruka*. Prisma, 2000, pp. 119–125. For primary sources from Denmark, see for example August Bentzien: *Flora: nyeste Blomstersprog eller orientalsk Blomstervexling, indeholdende nordiske Blomsters, Blades og Frugters symbolske Betydning*, Mørch, 1858. For a British context, see for example Brent Elliot: 'The Victorian Language of Flowers', *Occasional Papers from the RHS (Royal Horticultural Society) Lindley Library* 10, 2013. pp. 3–94.

15. Eva de la Fuente Pedersen and Hanne Kolind Poulsen: 'Introduktion', in Copenhagen 2013, p. 1. Given the nature of our subject matter, we have chosen to use Danish and plant-related sources. This distinction between the iconographic meanings of individual elements and the broader ideological layers of meaning in art is familiar from Erwin Panofsky, 'Ikonografi og ikonologi' in *Billedkunst og billedtolkning*, Nyt Nordisk Forlag, 1983. Norman Bryson further points out that the everyday elements in still lifes – 'the culture of the table' – must necessarily represent a deeper ideological layer that reflects a contemporary historical culture, Norman Bryson: *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 12.

16. Jakob Rosendal provides a fine discussion of the semiotic connotations of houseplants and flowers in the paintings of the period: Jakob Rosendal: 'Michael Ancher blomster – Semiotiske tydninger' in Anna Schram Vejlbj (ed.): *Michael Ancher og kvinderne fra Skagen*. Exhibition catalogue, Copenhagen, Charlottenlund and Skagen: The Hirschsprung Collection, Ordrupgaard and Skagens Museum, 2018, pp. 91–133; other examples of analyses of houseplants in Danish works of art include: Kasper Monrad: *Dansk Guldalder: Hovedværker på Statens Museum for Kunst*. Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst/National Gallery of Denmark, 1994, p. 88; Kasper Monrad: 'Det nære og det fjerne', in Birgitte von Folsach et al. (eds.): *Martinus Rørbye Det nære og det fjerne*. Exhibition catalogue, Hellerup, Viborg, Nivå and Ribe: Øregaard Museum, Skovgaard Museet, The Nivaagaard Collection and Ribe Kunstmuseum, 2014, pp. 1–21; Rune Gade: 'Udkast til liv – Om Anna Sybergs akvareller', in Sofie Olesdatter Bastiansen (ed.): *Anna Syberg – Øjeblikkets skønhed*. Exhibition catalogue: Faaborg: Faaborg Museum, 2020, pp. 22–53; Annette Rosenvold

Hvidt: 'Jeg kan ikke blive fra den blomst', in Stine Høholt et al. (eds.): *Fynboerne. Kunsten frem for alt!* Exhibition catalogue, Odense: Kunstmuseum Brandts, 2023, pp. 90-105; Sofie Olesdatter Bastiansen, 'Øjeblikkets skønhed', *Perspective Journal*, April 2022: <https://www.perspectivejournal.dk/oejeblikkets-skoenhed/>. Lene Floris's article features examples of houseplants in art: Lene Floris: 'Haven i vindueskarmen', in *Folk og Kultur, Årbog for Dansk Etnologi og Folkemindevidenskab*, 28:1, 1999, pp. 38-63.

17. The work can be viewed at the Statens Museums for Kunst/National Gallery of Denmark website in a version that allows users to zoom in on selected details. The site also provides an overview of the available literature on the work. See: <https://open.smk.dk/artwork/image/KMS7452>

18. Dyveke Helsted: 'Martinus Rørbye 1803-48' in Dyveke Helsted et. al (eds.): *Martinus Rørbye 1803-1848*, Thorvaldsens Museum, 1981, p. 29. The plant we identify as an aloe vera is described by Helsted as an agave.

19. Monrad 2014, p. 18.

20. Monrad 2014, p. 18. The analysis referenced and expanded upon by Monrad is Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark: 'Udsigter og indsigter. Martinus Rørbye: "Udsigt fra kunstnerens vindue", ca. 1825"', in Ernst Jonas Bencard et al. (eds.): *Kunstværkets krav. 27 fortolkninger af danske kunstværker*, Fogtdal, 1990, pp. 67-77.

21. Monrad 2014, pp. 18-21.

22. Monrad 2014, p. 21.

23. Floris 1999, p. 49.

24. See for example Karl Alexis Waller: *Der Stubengärtner*, Voigt, 1821; Henry T. Williams: *Window Gardening*, Henry T. Williams, 1872

25. Floris 1999, p. 38.

26. See Myers 2017, p. 299.

27. Myers 2017, p. 297.

28. Regarding Turner, see: Susan Ballard: *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene, Planetary Aesthetics*, Routledge advances in art and visual studies, 2021, p. 25. Regarding Monet, see: Nicholas Mirzoeff: 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', *Public Culture*, 26:2, 2014, pp. 213-232, DOI 10.1215/08992363-2392039.

29. Relevant examples include Jacob Wamberg: 'Mellem paradis og den antropocæne have: Naturforestillinger i og uden for kunsten 1600-2017', in Aarhus 2017, p. 18-39; W.J.T. Mitchell: 'Slangen i haven. Rum, sted og landskab i 1700-tallet', in Aarhus 2017, pp. 40-49; Gry Hedin and Gertrud Oelsner (eds.): *Jordforbindelser: Dansk Maleri 1780-1920 og det antropocæne landskab*, Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2018; Gry Hedin: 'Blød modstand og gyldne marker - det danske landskabsmaleri genbesøgt', *Baggrund*, 9 September 2023.

30. See for example Giovanni Aloï: *Botanical Revolutions - How Plants Changed the Course of Art*, Getty Publications, 2025; Prudence Gibson: *Plant Contract: Art's Return to Vegetal Life*, Brill, 2018.

31. Anette Vandsø was the researcher behind *The Garden* and chief editor on the peer reviewed part of the catalogue, while Gertrud Oelsner was editor of *Jordforbindelser* alongside Gry Hedin, see

Aarhus 2017; Hedin and Oelsner 2018; Vibece Salthe (ed.): *Flora: Mellem mennesker og planter*. Exhibition catalogue, Stavanger and Randers: Stavanger Art Museum and Randers Kunstmuseum, 2019; Christian Gether, Gry Hedin and Naja Rasmussen (eds.): *Blomsten i kunsten*. Exhibition catalogue, Ishøj: Arken, 2021.

32. Mirzoeff 2014, pp. 221–223.

33. An excellent example of an analysis that is not merely critical but also productive in its reading is: Gry Hedin: 'Koens forsvinden: Landbrug og liv i SMK's landskabsmalerier', *Perspective Journal*, May 2024: <https://www.perspectivejournal.dk/koens-forsvinden-landbrug-og-liv-i-smks-landskabsmalerier/>, and Hedin and Oelsner 2018.

34. See for example Tsing's declaration: 'Words make worlds' in Anna Tsing: 'Catharsis for the Anthropocene: Three papers on productive misplacement', in Anna Tsing (ed.): *Aura Working papers* 1, Aarhus University, 2015, p. 3; Donna J. Haraway: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women – The Reinvention of Nature*, Free Association books, 1991; Ursula Le Guin: *Bæreposeteorien om fiktion*, Forlaget Virkelig, 2022; Bruno Latour often puts forth similar points, see for example Line Thorsen and Anette Vandsø: 'How to rediscover our ground after nature? A conversation with Bruno Latour' in Aarhus 2017, pp. 60–67.

35. On the concept of distant reading, see: Franco Moretti. 'Conjectures on World Literature' in *New Left Review*, Jan/Feb. 2000; Gertrud Oelsner: *En fælles forestillet nation: Dansk landskabsmaleri 1807–1875*, Strandberg Publishing, 2022.

36. Our database was coded without the aid of AI and on the basis of our initial close analyses. For an introduction to digital art history, see Lisbet Tarp and Ross Deans Kristensen-McLachlan: 'Det reducerede værk: Datavisualisering af tusindvis af værkfotografier' in *Perspective Journal*, November 2021: <https://www.perspectivejournal.dk/det-reducerede-vaerk-datavisualisering-af-tusindvis-af-vaerkfotografier/>

37. Annie Christensen: 'Planteflytninger gennem 3000 år – Overraskelser i 1600-tallets danske haver', *Fra Kvangård til Humlekule. Meddelelser fra Havebrugshistorisk selskab*, no. 34, 2004, pp. 41–52.

38. Christensen 2004, pp. 41–52; for a focus on pelargoniums/geraniums, see: Martinsson 2000; for a focus on colonial issues, see: Vibe Nielsen: 'Botanikkens koloniale rødder. Kulturhistorisk formidling af plantesamlinger i Storbritanniens botaniske haver', *Kulturstudier*, no. 2, 2022, pp. 161–184.

39. See Jesper Bærentsen: 'Fra havekarl til handelsgartner', *Fra Kvangård til Humlekule. Meddelelser fra Havebrugshistorisk selskab*, no. 40/41, 2010/2011, p. 9; Dorte Rhode Nissen: houseplant, entry in the Danish national encyclopaedia *Den Store Danske* at [lex.dk](https://lex.dk/stueplanter): <https://lex.dk/stueplanter>, last accessed 5 August 2024; Floris 1999.

40. Tovah Martin: *Once Upon a Windowsill*, Timber Press, 1988; Martinsson 2000; Catherine Horwood: *Potted History. How Houseplants Took over our Homes*, Frances Lincoln Limited, 2007; Andreas Stynen: '“Une mode charmante”: Nineteenth-Century Indoor Gardening between Nature and Artifice', *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 29, no. 3, 2009, pp. 217–234. DOI: 10.1080/14601170802201488; Sophie Ruppel: 'Houseplants and the Invention of Indoor Gardening', in Joachim Eibach and Margareth Lanzinger (eds.): *The Routledge History of the Domestic Sphere in Europe: 16th to 19th Century*, Routledge, 2020, pp. 509–529; Penny Sparke: *Nature Inside. Plants and Flowers in the Modern Interior*, Yale University Press, 2020.

41. Sources on the history of Danish houseplants include: Budde Christensen, Johan Lange, Jette Dahl Møller and Michael Sterll: *Oldemors potteplanter. Dyrkningsvejledninger og råd fra oldemors tid*, Botanisk Haves Forlag, 1988; Gitte Kidmose Røn: *Potteplanter fra oldemors tid*, Den Gamle By, 1998; Floris 1999; Bærentsen 2010/2011; Nissen, 2000.
42. Julius August Bentzien: 'Den Wardske blomsterkasse', *Folkekalender for Danmark*, vol. 7, Lose og Delbanco's Forlag, 1858, p. 44.
43. Regarding the opening of the flower market, see Luise Skak-Nielsen: *Blomsterelskerne & havesagen. Historien om det kongelige danske haveselskab*, Haveselskabet, 2005. Skak-Nielsen and other secondary sources list 1834 as the year of the plant market's opening, but its establishment was in fact announced the year before, in 1833. *Kjøbenhavns Kongelig alene privilegerede Adressecomptoirs Efterretninger*, vol. 75, no. 24, 29 January 1833: 'Udsalg af blomstrende potteplanter. Fredagen d. 1rste Februar aabnes et Udsalg af blomstrende Potte-Planter i Boutiken ved Holmens Canal Nr. 257, hvortil de Herrer Gartnere i og om kjøbenhavn frit kunne indlevere blomstrende Potte-Planter i Forhandling' (Sale of Flowering Potted Plants. On Friday the 1st of February there shall be opened a Sale of Flowering Potted Plants in the Shop at Holmens Canal No. 257, to which Gentlemen Gardeners in and about Copenhagen may freely deliver Flowering Potted Plants for Sale.)
44. See the Botanical Garden, Copenhagen: 'Botanisk Haves historie. Haven ved Charlottenborg', website: <https://snm.dk/da/artikel/botanisk-haves-historie>, last accessed March 2025. Regarding the purchase of plants via international mail order, see: Astrid Steffensen: 'Værk og virke', in Pernille Leth-Espensen, Gertrud Oelsner and Anette Vandsø (eds.): *Plantefeber: Verden i vindueskarmen*, Exhibition catalogue, Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2025. Regarding Danish commercial gardeners, see: Bærentsen 2010/2011.
45. Identified by botanist Anders S. Barfod. In a previous analysis, the aloe vera was identified as an agave (Helsted 1981).
46. See Andrea Wulff: *The Invention of Nature*, John Murray Publishers Ltd, 2016.
47. See: Joachim Frederik Schouw: *Grundtræk til en almindelig Plantegeographie*, Den Gyldendalske Boghandlings Forlag, 1822.
48. Henning Knudsen: *Flora Danica*, Lindhardt og Ringhof Forlag A/S, 2019. During the period 1806 to 1840, issues 22 to 39 are published under the leadership of J.W. Hornemann as editor.
49. Julius August Bentzien: *Hvilke Planter egne sig bedst til Dyrkning i vores Stuer, og hvorledes bør vi behandle dem der?* Copenhagen, 1851, pp. 59-60. In the second edition, 1852, the main title *Stuegartneren* is added.
50. Shirley Hibberd: *Rustic Adornments for Homes of Taste, and Recreations for Town Folk, in the Study and Imitation of Nature*, Groombridge and Sons, 5, Paternoster Row, 1856. Regarding the interest in natural curiosities in Denmark, see Signe Møllemegaard: 'Fra natur til naturalie - og tilbage igen: Om naturens orden og (u)ordentlige samlingspraksisser i københavnske naturaliesamlinger i 1700-tallets sidste del', *Kulturstudier* no. 2, 2014, pp. 65-83.
51. Helsted 1981 emphasises light and reflections. We are grateful to art historian Lars Kiel Bertelsen for bringing the reflection motifs to our attention.
52. Helsted 1981, Bogh 2016, p. 50.
53. In 1801, for example, an auction held at the Copenhagen Stock Exchange (which at that time

was an auction house) featured hyacinths, buttercups and tulips 'recently arrived from Harlem' on Captain John Chapman's ship. The auction was announced in *Kjøbenhavns Kongelig alene privilegerede Adresse-Contoirs Efterretninger*, vol. 43, no. 320, Wednesday 23 September 1801, p. 6.

54. We are grateful to Benjamin Asmussen for his assistance on reading the harbour scene.

55. An inscription reads: 'Weierboden ved Westindiske Handels Pakhuus, 1826', according to Helsted 1981, p. 36. From the collection of M/S Maritime Museum of Denmark.

56. Bruno Latour: *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, 1993.

57. That house plants are culture-nature hybrids is for instance evident from Christensen, Lange, Møller and Sterll's small book on Danish houseplants from 1988. Here each plant is accompanied by both botanical information and information on the plant's cultural history.

58. Mirzoeff 2014; Wamberg 2017; Hedin and Oelsner 2018; Hedin 2023; Oelsner 2022.

59. Literary references include Amalie Skram: *Constance Ring*, Gyldendal, 1878 (1885), in which houseplants indicate class, and Johannes V. Larsens *Jørgine*, in which the myth plays a key part, Johannes V. Larsen: *Jørgine*, Gyldendal, 1971 (1926). Nineteenth-century books on the care of houseplants include: Julius August Bentzien: *Stuegartneren*, E.L. Thaarup, 1852 (1851); Stephan Nyeland: *Blomstervennen, en kortfattet praktisk Vejledning til at dyrke Stueplanter*, Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag, 1890 (1878). Jens August Carl Jenssen: *Hjemmets Flora. Vejledning til behandling af potteplanter i stuen alene*, Gad, 1896 (1883). See also Floris 1999.

60. The parents were Senior War Commissioner Ferdinand Henrich Rørbye and Frederikke Eleonore Cathrine, née Stockfleth, see Helsted, 1981, pp. 17-18.

61. Bentzien 1858, p. 44.

62. Floris 1999, p. 52. For more source material see Anette Vandsø, Gertrud Oelsner and Pernille Leth-Espensen: 'Hjemmets Flora og det grønne Ordrupgaard' in *Dansk Magasin for bygningskunst og -kultur* nr. 9:8, 2025.

63. Christensen et al. 1988; Martinsson 2000, pp. 86-92.

64. Jenssen 1896, p. 92.

65. Christensen, Lange, Møller and Sterll 1988; Martinsson 2000, pp. 86-92.

66. Gertrud Oelsner: 'L.A. Ring - 150 år', Rønnebæksholm Kunst- og Kulturcenter, 2004, p. 6.

67. Sara Hatla Krogsgaard: 'L.A. Ring - Mellem lys og mørke', in Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark et al. (eds.): *L.A. Ring - Mellem Lys og mørke*. Exhibition catalogue, Charlottenlund: Ordrupgaard, 2016, p. 57.

68. Martinsson 2000, pp. 43-53.

69. Vibe Nielsen: 'Botanikkens koloniale rødder. Kulturhistorisk formidling af plantesamlinger i Storbritanniens botaniske haver', *Kulturstudier* 2, 2022, pp. 161-184; Lucile H. Brockway: *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Garden*, Yale University Press, 2002; James Delburgo: *Collecting the World: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum*, Belknap Press, 2019.

70. Martinsson 2000, p. 41.

71. Cf. Homi Bhabha's concept of a 'third space of enunciation' for hybridity and cultural negotiation. Homi Bhabha: *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994, see for example pp. 37-40.

72. Regarding the pelargonium as part of a wider nostalgia for a past Denmark, see: Christensen et al. 1988. Elsewhere, we have proposed using the concept of 'cultural Danishness', but space does not permit us to elaborate on this notion here; see Anette Vandsø and Nick Shepherd. 'Expanded Aesthetics: Care, Attention, and the Everyday Plant', *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 33: 69, 2025 (in print).

73. Ruppel 2020, p. 520; Sparke 2020, p. 29; Floris 1999. Regarding the connections between houseplants, gender and women's lives in a British context, see for example Margaret Flanders Darby: *The Hothouse Flower. Nurturing Women in the Victorian Conservatory*, Brighton, Edvard Everett Publishers, 2020.

74. *Raadgiver for Hus og Hjem paa Land og I By. Gratis Følgeblad til 'Illustreret Familiejournal'*, Allers Forlag, vol. 1, 1885, p. 51. See also Floris 1999, p. 57.

75. The theme lends itself well to being seen in light of current studies on care work. However, space does not permit us to pursue this further here. See for example María Puig de la Bellacasa: *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*, Minnesota University Press, 2017.

76. Næringsfrihedsloven (The Free Enterprise Act) 1857, section 7. See: Næringsfrihedsloven, 29 December 1857 in Danmarkshistorien at lex.dk. Accessed 8 June 2025 from: https://danmarkshistorien.lex.dk/N%C3%A6ringsfrihedsloven,_29._december_1857

77. Karina Lykke Grand: 'Dansk guldalder. Perioden og begrebets historie', in Cecilie Høgsbro Østergaard et al. (eds): *Dansk Guldalder. Verdenskunst mellem to katastrofer*. Exhibition catalogue, Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, pp. 47-48.

78. See for example Annette Rosenvold Hvidt: 'Jeg kan ikke blive fra den blomst', in Odense 2023, pp. 90-105.

79. Søren Thorlak Madsen: 'Sin egen tid', in Odense 2023, s. 10-69.

80. Regarding the aesthetic appreciation of plants as a type of plant blindness, see Giovanni Aloï: 'Brief Encounters' in Giovanni Aloï (ed.): *Why look at plants? The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art*, Critical Plant Studies series vol. 5, Brill, 2019, p. 134.

81. Regarding this enrichment aesthetic, see: Vandsø and Shepherd, 2025 (in print) and Anette Vandsø: 'Apokalyptisk kunst: kunstens nye roller i en antropocæn epoke', in K.B. Willert (ed.): *Planetære Frakturer*, Multivers, 2022. Regarding climate fatigue, see: Per Esben Stoknes: *What We Think About when We Try not to Think About Global Warming*, Green Publishing Co, 2015.

82. The exhibition was developed as an ongoing collaboration between the research project and the three museums, each of which applied their own curatorial take on the subject. Hence, the three exhibitions are very different.

About the author



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