Symbolism of plants: examples from European-Mediterranean culture presented with biology and history of art

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MAY: Columbine

It is a great pleasure to meet the first blue flowers of columbine when walking along woodland edges in May, but it is becoming a rarity in the wild in central Europe. Columbine petals have a quite complicated structure inviting close inspection. Their beauty has attracted poets and painters and they have accumulated symbolic and transcendental meanings, an uplifting plant for scientists and artists alike.

Biology

Aquilegia, called columbine in English, is a genus of Ranunculaceae and can be found over the whole northern (holarctic) hemisphere. In Europe, the most common species is A. vulgaris. A. atrata or A. alpina are more restricted in their distribution and are now quite rare. All of them are perennial herbs with characteristic tripartite leaves. They are toxic, due to a cyanogenic glycoside, and columbine became a medicinal plant (Gersdorff in 1535, cited by Behling, 1967) and is still in use in homoeopathy. The flower is ‘beyond comparison’ beautiful, as stated in ancient herbals (Gallwitz, 1996), due in part to their contrasting blue and yellow colouration and in part to their particular morphology with the five prominent spurs of the nectar leaves (Fig. 1).

Symbolism

In ancient Greek and Roman cultures, the spur provoked an allusion to phalli and columbine was a plant of Aphrodite (Venus). In Celtic culture, the flowers were supposed to open the door to the other world (Zerling, 2007). In the Christian tradition, the particular morphology contributed to associating the columbine with the praise of God. The spurs on the flowers are reminiscent of five doves sitting together and thus of the Holy Spirit. ‘Five birds together’ was a name for the plant in parts of Austria and the English name, columbine, little dove or dove-like, also alludes to this property.

Symbolism of columbine flowers is often combined with symbolic numbers (Behling, 1967). Thus, the tripartite leaves were seen as symbols of Trinity, seven columbine flowers can be interpreted as the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: sapientia (wisdom), intellectus (intellect or intelligence), consilium (advice), fortitudo (strength), scientia (knowledge), ietas (reverence), and timor (fear – of God) (Zerling, 2007). A motif of three columbine flowers, which is often found, symbolizes the three Christian virtues: fides, spes, and caritas (faith, hope, and love or charity).

In medieval art, according to Löber (1988), ‘columbine is the flower of Christ in the course of the salvation history’, a sign of his Redemption and frequently appearing close to bittersweet (Solanum dulcamara). Löber observed that ‘columbine, whenever presented together with bittersweet, cedes its preferred place (right lower corner of paintings) to...
bittersweet’. He based his conclusions on 50 images portraying Mary with the Child, the Incarnation of Christ, the Annunciation, the birth, the adoration, and the flight to Egypt, and 20 depictions of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. In the Portinari altar painted by Hugo van der Goes (Uffizi, Florence) columbine flowers have a very prominent position in the foreground in front of Mary and the Christ child (Fig. 2).

Despite the frequency of portrayals with Christ, the columbine has not been used exclusively for Christ. It appears on paintings with prophets and saints, even with the protestant reformers of the 16th century (e.g. in Lucas Cranach’s paintings). Additional properties must be inferred, such as fidelity, resurrection, and support by the Holy Spirit, even as an apotropaion (protector against evil forces).

The clear colours of columbine of blue or violet and yellow can be interpreted in several ways in the language of colour (Pawlik, 1987) standing for passion and penance (violet) and for light and vivacity (yellow). Poets have also included both the beauty and symbolism of columbine into the language of their verses. For example, Shakespeare uses columbine in his plays, Love’s Labour Lost and Hamlet, in which the tragically mad Ophelia collects columbine, although here it is taken as a symbol of ingratitude and infidelity.

References


Fig. 2. Worship by the shepherds with Mary and Christ child in the centre. Left side: expanded view of the flower vases. Portinari Altar (Hugo van der Goes) 1473–1475. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Polo Museale fiorentino Uffizi, Florence.)