Art, Vases and Flowers

By Lois Ann Helgeson
Chairman of Arrangements
North Central District
helge006@umn.edu

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which dates back to 1883, has a collection of over eighty thousand objects. Pieces in the collection range from paintings by the Dutch masters to ancient Asian artifacts. A half million people visit the museum each year. MIA is located in an area of Minneapolis noted for the mansions built between 1880–1920 by wealthy Minneapolis business owners.

In April 2008 the Minneapolis Institute of Arts celebrated the 25th year of Art in Bloom, the museum’s annual combining of floral art and their art collection. Floral artists are invited to select pieces of art to interpret with fresh floral arrangements. Somewhere around 200 flower arrangements were included in the show this year. Setup for the artists is always on a Wednesday at the end of April or early May and includes a major fund raiser the first evening. Thursday through Sunday the display is open to the public. This year over 26,500 people visited the museum in those four days.

The floral artists participating in Art in Bloom come from various backgrounds such as Ikebana, Japanese flower arranging, members of various garden clubs and a number of commercial florists. A friend of mine, who has participated since the first year of Art in Bloom, opened the door for me to join the group of floral artists. I have gone from making one floral arrangement a year to this year putting together four arrangements - and creating the vases that aided in the interpretation of those four floral arrangements. As a potter this seemed to be a natural progression of the overall challenge.

The rules for participating as a floral designer in Art in Bloom are written to allow for a wide variety of artistic styles – and to protect the art work of the museum. Fresh floral material is required (minor amounts of dried may also be used). Floral material and water must not touch the art work. Floral material must be replenished and watered when necessary during the exhibition. All vases must be attached securely to the pedestals that are provided to hold the arrangements.

An American Rose Society flower arranger would quite easily note that many AIB arrangements lack roses – or if they do have roses included that the roses are not always used as the primary focus. Generally this is because tropical flowers are known for their longer vase life. With this flower show setting up early on a Wednesday and open to the public through the weekend (take down is Monday morning) it is desirable to have flowers that can last several days. Sometimes flower arrangers do prefer using roses (and may change them part way through the show) finding that they seem essential to an interpretation of a particular art piece. I probably use more roses than many of the other arrangers – simply because I like roses. However, I do believe that rose arrangers probably would agree with other viewers that the arrangements in this show are often very unique - and that competition rules/classes are not needed in order to create floral beauty.

I enjoy working with a variety of art pieces and usually make my selections from several different galleries. This year I treated myself to a Renoir in the Impressionists Gallery, a floral print from the mid...
1800s, a pair of Chinese gold “flying dragon” sculptures dating from the eighth century T’ng dynasty and a large ancient water storage bottle that is estimated to have been created between 5000 – 4000 B.C. In other years I have done floral interpretations of wedding photography, English porcelain jars, jade incense burners, and other paintings and pieces of sculpture.

The objective of Art in Bloom designer is to “interpret” the art piece with a floral arrangement. Each year the museum publishes a guide to the floral arrangements for the public. It lists the arrangements by gallery, notes the name of the floral arranger, lists the major plant/floral material used and gives an explanation of the interpretation as provided by the designer.

A little explanation about my pottery background is probably also in order. Somewhere along the way as I developed my own likes, dislikes and style as a potter, I began to focus on a glaze process called crystalline. It is primarily used on porcelain. Not exaggerating I can say that it is a complicated, time consuming, precision method – one that results in unique one-of-a-kind pieces with incredible crystals floating on the surface of the glazes. A wide variety of colors are possible. One of the first years that I used a crystalline vase was to do an interpretation of a still life painting of a Chinese vase by Danish architect turned artist Soren Carlsen. In my written interpretation I referred to the painter’s mastery of color and light as my inspiration for the floral design. I used orchids to compliment the oriental influence. My vase – the color matching the vase in the painting - sat on an antique carved base similar to the one painted in the still life.

In 2005 I did an interpretation of a wedding portrait from 1938. The photographer, James Van Der Zee, is known for chronicling six decades of African American life. The wedding photo was beautifully hand colored. I chose to use a pale green and white crystalline vase with white roses and orchids that had a hint of green and pink to recreate in a floral arrangement the bride’s bouquet. The look of the crystalline complimented the elegance of the photo.

The first time that I worked with a painting by a Dutch artist it wasn’t one of the Dutch masters. I chose a painting by Georgius Jacobus van Oz painted in the early 1800s. The painting titled “An Arrangement with Flowers” was a colorful assortment of flowers that included roses. I created and glazed a porcelain vase to match the general shape and color of the vase in the painting. The painting seemed to insist that I play with recreating the arrangement done by Van Oz – including the striped tulips and the OGR roses.

This year I selected Renoir’s “Piazza San Marco” with its bold bright sunny colors painted with typical Impressionist technique. My crystalline vase with Italian styling was glazed in colors similar to those found in the painting’s frame and in the painting itself. The arrangement, including yellow roses, picks up the mood and the colors in the painting.
An arrangement that I really enjoyed working on this year was the interpretation of the Pricilla Susan Bury floral print. I created a large green crystalline bowl with cut notches. The idea was to make the shape mimic the large green leaves in the print. Red and white roses were used to provide the interpretation of the large spider lily. Variegated banana leaves and euonymus branches were also part of this arrangement. The bowl will remain a special piece in my collection.

Since variety is part of the attraction for me I also selected a pair of Chinese flying dragons this year. For the vase I created a handled piece and glazed it in a combination of gold/white crystalline and a black glaze. The result was an area of movement where the two glazes meet. The tiny yellow orchids, curled dracena stems and wispy wisteria foliage contributed to the interpretation of dragons in motion. Yellow roses and yellow protea gave visual weight to the lower part of the arrangement.

Perhaps my favorite arrangement is the interpretation of the ancient earthenware storage bottle. On the Monday before the show I pulled a vase out of the kiln that was to be the heart of the arrangement. The vase was almost 2-feet tall with a diagonal line of cutouts across the face strategically placed for a line design. Roses in earth tones created a strong line from above the container downward. Orange protea and a few philodendron leaves widened the line in the middle — and fantail willow and dried bittersweet extended lines and added interest. Perhaps it is enough to mention that when I was researching the Art Institute I found a photo of this arrangement of mine on the website of someone I have never met.

All images by Lois Ann Helgeson