



*Rosa Eglanteria var. fumea.*

*Rosee Eglantier var. couleur fumeau.*

*P. J. Redouté pinx.*

*Delphinus sculp.*

*Cochon sculp.*

# Natural Wonder

Portraying flowers with consummate artistry and precision, 19th-century engraver Pierre-Joseph Redouté spread the gospel of botanical beauty by creating masterpieces that continue to inspire

BY KIRK REED FORRESTER PHOTOGRAPHY BY LIZ YOUNG



Like a great portrait artist trying to capture the face of his subject, Redouté depicts every tilt of the petal, every thorn on the stem, and each detail as an integral part of the rose's expression.

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EFORE YOU CAN APPRECIATE the works of Redouté and his contemporaries, it is extremely important to understand the milieu in which they worked,” says J. Gilbert Johnston, a noted scholar, lecturer, and dealer of antique prints. “These artists lived during the Golden Age of natural history and exploration, a time between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when educated, cultured, wealthy Europeans became consumed by the desire

to understand the world around them. They were driven by a missionary’s zeal to understand God’s creation as completely as they possibly could and spread that knowledge to others.” For artists of this era, the interest in the natural world became not only the muse for their work, but also the model. They saw nature as the ultimate artistic achievement, the pinnacle where order, design, aesthetic, and function merged in perfect unity. Therefore, rather than romanticizing nature in their work, artists aimed to portray it realistically and scientifically.

Pierre-Joseph Redouté is widely viewed as the greatest botanical artist from this period. Born in 1759 in the village of Saint-Hubert (now part of Belgium), he came from a long line of painters. As a young man he set out to paint religious works, but a trip to Paris ignited his interest in botanical subjects, and he was soon a fixture in the royal gardens of Paris. In Paris, Redouté attracted the attention of the famous botanist Charles L’Héritier, and after a period of study under L’Héritier in London, Redouté returned to Paris and was invited to become the art teacher to Marie Antoinette and the master draftsman to her court.

Marie Antoinette was by all accounts a devoted pupil, but her tutelage with Redouté was short-lived. As the Revolution swept through France, Madame Guillotine claimed the life of Redouté’s star pupil and many of his contemporaries in the court. Amazingly, Redouté managed to thrive in the new social strata, becoming the art teacher to Napoleon’s wife, Empress Josephine.

While Redouté enjoyed steady patronage throughout his career, his relationship with Josephine proved to be the most transformative. Like Redouté, the empress was passionate about horticulture. She created a magnificent garden at Malmaison, her estate outside Paris, where she cultivated hundreds of flowers, most famously roses, and ushered into fashion the idea of flower gardening as an art form. (Before then, most aristocratic gardens were formal, green gardens, and cutting gardens were hidden from view.)

During this period, European explorers were venturing farther east into China and returning with ships full of exotic botanical species. The introduction of new plants to European gardens sparked a horticultural revolution and the cultivation of thousands of new flowers. The rose, in particular, enjoyed a surge in popularity, and Redouté was on hand to chronicle the moment.

Drawing primarily from the varieties in the gardens at Malmaison, Redouté produced 170



THIS PAGE: *Great Royal Rose*, 1821  
 OPPOSITE PAGE: *Blush Noisette*, 1821  
 PREVIOUS LEFT PAGE: Considered the most important botanical artist of his period, Pierre-Joseph Redouté, born in 1759, painted the roses of Malmaison, Empress Josephine’s grand estate outside Paris.  
 PREVIOUS RIGHT PAGE: ‘Austrian Copper’ Rose, 1817

## A Closer Look at Antique Prints

All 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century natural history prints were intended to be bound for ease of study, viewing, and protection. Individual prints from Redouté's "Les Roses" (1817-1824) are unnumbered and measure about 10¼ inches by 14 inches, depending upon the amount of trimming by the bookbinder. They are printed on wove paper without watermarks.

Individual prints will often exhibit stitch holes on the bound side of the print. A 10-power magnifier is an essential tool to view the color printing and hand-color finishing. A dot matrix or scanned pattern does not appear, as it does in modern photocopy reproductions.

Antique prints should always be framed using acid-free materials and UV-blocking glass or Plexiglas. Prints should never be hung where they are exposed to direct sunlight, which can result in fading. Damaged antique prints can be repaired by an experienced conservationist, who can mend paper tears, reduce staining and spotting, and make brittle paper more flexible. Conservation will increase the print's value by restoring it more closely to its original state.

—J. Gilbert Johnston  
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watercolors of different roses. The collection, printed and bound in a three-volume set called "Les Roses," was instantly hailed as a crowning achievement and remains the gold standard in botanical illustration. Redouté intended the drawings in "Les Roses" to be both a celebration of the rose's beauty and a scientific record. As such, the flowers are rendered with painstaking care and extraordinary candor—thorns, bruised leaves, crawling beetles, and all—yet the effect is elegant, regal, and joyous.

"Les Roses" took seven years to complete, from 1817 to 1824, due to the labor-intensive task of printmaking. First, Redouté painted on vellum. Next, the image was engraved or etched onto a metal plate or stone, then inked in black, and finally, filled in with color by an apprentice. Redouté was famous for pioneering a technique called stipple engraving (which uses dots rather than lines to translate an image onto the metal plate), lending

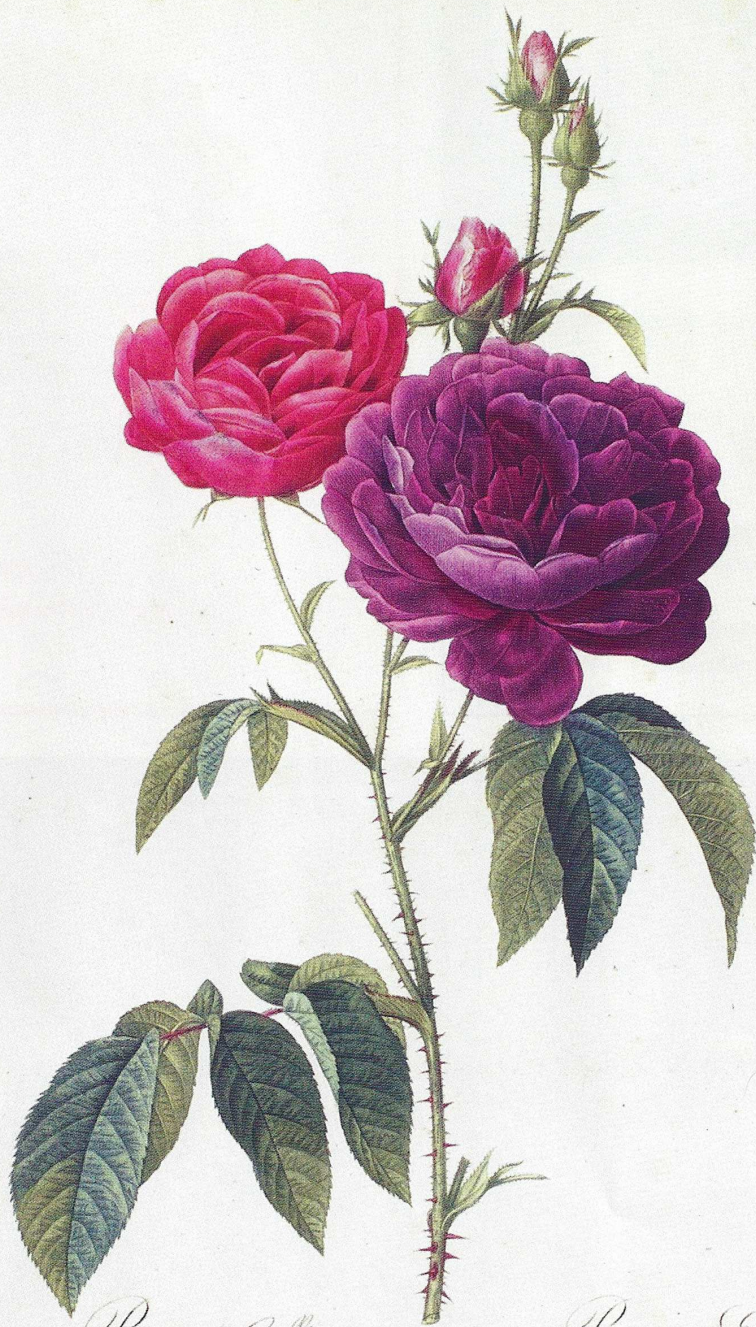
unmatched subtlety and tonality to his prints. The collection is a masterpiece to behold. Bushy cabbage roses stand in stark contrast to the delicate white roses on another page. There are orange roses, purple roses, and red roses; each painting is unique and scientifically accurate. According to renowned Redouté scholar Lugene Bruno of the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation in Pittsburgh, the botanical fidelity captured in these prints is as significant for its historical value as it is for its

aesthetic value. "Redouté's work provides an important record of the plants that were available during his lifetime, as well as the plants that were being introduced at that time," he says. "It's remarkable how many of the heirloom plants that Redouté painted are lost to us today. His work gives us a crucial record of that botanical history."

Redouté went on to paint many more botanical portraits during his career, but the illustrations in "Les Roses" remain the work for which he is most remembered and admired. In 1840 the artist died in Paris. His work continues to be in high demand, selling at auction for lofty sums. To see one of his botanical prints is to be transported to a time when the world was in the throes of discovery and an artist's highest calling was to portray nature in all her glory—which is to say, exactly as she was. \*



THIS PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Seven Sisters Rose, 1821 •  
Vilmorin Rose, 1817  
OPPOSITE PAGE: 'The Bishop'  
Rose, 1821



*Rosa Gallica.*  
(*Raspura-villosa magna*)

*R. A. Redoute pinx.*

*Suppression de Roussel*

*Rosier Evigee.*

*Langlois sculp.*