

The World on the Windowsill

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Ludvig Find
Reading Girl
1915
Oil on canvas
82 x 71 cm
Ribe Kunstmuseum
Ribe



The houseplants found in nineteenth-century Danish paintings strike present-day observers as surprisingly familiar. While the clothes and furnishings obviously date from a bygone era, the depictions of houseplants greatly resemble scenarios you find in many Danish homes today. In the artworks, we see evidence of how the plants were cared for, enjoyed, and formed an integral part of the home. Often, however, viewers pay them little attention because they fade into the background, giving way to the central subject of the painting in question: a child reading, a woman crocheting, or similar everyday scenes in which houseplants are incorporated as seemingly unremarkable elements (16 and 22).

While the presence of houseplants in these domestic scenes feels familiar, the research and dissemination project *Hidden Plant Stories* reveals that there are surprising stories to be found in nineteenth-century interior paintings, if we focus specifically on the plants.¹ This is because they were painted at a pivotal historical moment when subtropical and tropical plants from other parts of the world first entered Danish homes, and over the course of the nineteenth century became a staple of Danish culture.² As plants begin to appear in richly rendered detail, we can see how houseplants gradually grew increasingly widespread in Danish homes, how they became objects of women's care work, and how they intersected with wider social categories such as gender, class, and national identity. At the same time, narratives of transnational trade and Europe's colonial past can be found trailing in the plants' wake as they enter the drawing rooms – and the picture plane.³ Thus, a plant-centric view of art can reveal new layers of meaning that can help make older paintings take on fresh relevance today. This publication offers an impression of just how rich in perspectives this approach is, and we hope that readers will be spurred on to go plant hunting in the works on display in the exhibition *Plant Fever: The World on the Windowsill* and in this book.

Onto the windowsill

Our overall approach is fuelled by the renewed interest in plants prompted by global environmental crises today. In recent years, a wild garden aesthetic has grown increasingly popular in suburban gardens and cities alike.⁴ Focusing on biodiversity and native plants, this rewilding trend has fostered an awareness of plants as botanical organisms in their own right, making us more aware of their names, growth conditions and roles in the ecosystem.⁵ An interest in plants is also evident in contemporary art, where artists cultivate gardens or work with all things botanical in other ways.⁶ In recent years, the fields of anthropology and philosophy have also expanded the study of human life to include the entanglements of human and plant lives, using concepts such as the “planthroposcene”⁷ and “plant thinking”.⁸ We align ourselves with this renewed interest in plants by proposing a plant-centric approach to Danish art history.

Specifically, we strive to rewild museum collections by viewing the houseplants in nineteenth-century interior paintings as botanical, earthbound organisms in their own right. We examine which kinds of plants are depicted and how they are integrated into the paintings. This raises questions about where the plants come from, how they arrived in Denmark, how their lives are sustained here, and what roles they play in human life. In this way, we explore the cultural, aesthetic, social and economic spheres in which houseplants were embedded.

Martinus Rørbye's (1803–1848) painting *View from the Artist's Window* (1823–1827, (19)) is one of the earliest Danish works to feature houseplants on a windowsill.⁹ The artist depicts a view from his childhood home in Amaliegade, with the Nyholm Harbour visible through the open windows. The work has been the subject of many art historical analyses. Several have pointed out how the window constitutes a threshold separating the familiar, intimate world of the home from the harbour in the background, which represents faraway places and a yearning to travel. The bird in the cage illustrates this duality: it is outside, yet caged.¹⁰ The houseplants in the picture have also been the subject of analysis before. Art historian Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark reads the windowsill and the

plants on it as representing 'an entire lifecycle, from the well-protected early beginnings of the cutting placed in a glass incubator to the abundant flowering of the hydrangea onwards to the drooping globe amaranth'.¹¹ The point is reiterated and expanded upon by art historian Kasper Monrad, who perceives the arrangement of plants as an allegory of a human lifetime.¹² Both, then, read the plants as symbols rather than as botanical entities in their own right.

If we home in on the actual plants in the artwork and ask where they come from, we pave the way for new perspectives. On the right-hand side of the painting, next to the cutting, is a plant with small, round, pink flowers. Commonly known as globe amaranth (*Gomphrena globosa*), this plant originates from Mexico, Central America and tropical South America. In the centre stands an aloe vera (*Aloe vera*), which comes from Oman. And furthest to the left is a hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*), which is native to Japan.¹³ A pattern reveals itself in the work, as the plants represent different corners of the world: the globe amaranth from the west, the aloe vera from the south, and the hydrangea from the east. These plants now live side by side on a windowsill in the north, specifically in Denmark, in Rørbye's home in central Copenhagen.

Seen in this light, the windowsill is not only a symbol of the domestic sphere; it is also a microclimatic zone for the domestication of plants from other continents. This introduces a new dynamic to the motif: here, the movement is not just directed *from* the windowsill *out* into the world, but also from the wider world *onto* the windowsill, which now takes on a global perspective.

This inward movement, *onto* the windowsill, is underscored by the view of the harbour area with a smaller merchant vessel in the far right of the painting as well as various warships. Rørbye's contemporaries would have been familiar with this harbour from the period's many paintings of the Danish navy. In the visual culture of the day, those ships spoke eloquently of Denmark's role as a seafaring and warring nation in a global world, as seen in, for example, C.W. Eckersberg's (1783–1853) *A Danish Corvette Laying-to in Order to Confer with a Danish Brig: The Scene Being Set in West Indian Waters* (1827, (21)).

The plants we see in Rørbye's windowsill were introduced to Europe in the eighteenth century. The hydrangea, for example, was brought to Europe by the botanist Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820) in 1789 under dramatic circumstances, as Japan did not engage in free trade with the West before 1850.¹⁴ Banks displayed it in his home at 32 Soho Square in London, entirely in line with the general trend for plant collectors to use their own homes to exhibit the botanical rarities they imported from overseas colonies and trading stations.¹⁵ Later, he donated it to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London. From there, the hydrangea was, in the late eighteenth century, distributed across Europe and made available for sale for those wealthy enough to afford it.

The plants we see on the windowsill here need not have come directly from the harbour. Rørbye's family may have acquired the hydrangea from the Botanical Garden in Copenhagen, which, like many other botanic gardens of the time, sold plants and seeds as a source of income.¹⁶ Or it might have been purchased from the commercial gardener Svend Hansen, who advertised hydrangeas for sale in Danish newspapers in 1826.¹⁷ Perhaps it was sent from Germany.¹⁸ We do not know. However, we do know, based on sources of the time, that such a display of glorious plants would have been a spectacular and unusual sight on a Danish windowsill in the 1820s.¹⁹ In 1838, roughly ten years after Rørbye painted his work, the hydrangea was still considered so precious that the police placed an ad in the newspaper looking for the owner of a stolen specimen:

A flowerpot containing a hydrangea, as well as a bush of white-variegated carnations, which were stolen last Wednesday night at around 11 o'clock from a garden facing Blegdamsvejen, are on public display in the Police Court, 1st Protocol B.²⁰

We also know that the origins of the hydrangea were widely recognised in Denmark at the time. A Danish guide to the care of houseplants from 1851 states:



Martinus Rørbye
View from the Artist's Window
1823–27
Oil on canvas
38 x 29.8 cm
SMK – National Gallery of Denmark
Copenhagen

This beloved plant had been familiar from Chinese wallpapers long before living specimens arrived in Europe, which occurred when the first plant arrived at the famous English garden at Kew in 1790.²¹

The book also describes the hydrangea as having been cultivated as a garden plant in Japan and China before arriving in Denmark. The care guide thus ensured that Danish houseplant enthusiasts would view the hydrangea through a lens of knowledge that connected the plant to the period's prevailing Orientalist conceptions of the Far East.²²

There is much, then, to suggest that the windowsill in Rørbye's painting represented not only the domestic sphere but also served as a place to display exclusive plants that pointed to distant parts of the world and foreign cultures. Similar dives could be made into the cultural history of the other plants, either before or after they made their way onto Danish windowsills. The plants carry many stories with them into the pictorial plane, opening the works to many – and many different – new meanings.

At the same time, we can also make specific observations about the works we analyse. For example, we see that Rørbye has carefully rendered the plants' distinctive features, making them easy to identify. At the same time, details such as the small bend in one of the globe amaranth's stems emphasises that this is not a botanical illustration of plant typologies but rather a depiction of a specific, living houseplant. The cutting in the glass on the right-hand side of the painting demonstrates knowledge of how to propagate plants. All in all, this painting appears to reflect the botanical interest – botanophilia or plant fever – that spread across Europe in the late eighteenth century.²³ Rørbye's botanical interest is also evident in other works from his youth, particularly in a portrait of his sister Ida Athalie from around 1824 in which the plants and their 'pots, vases, and glasses occupied Rørbye just as much as the portrayal of Ida Athalie herself'.²⁴

Our focus on the plants in the painting reveals a global perspective in the work, one in which the windowsill showcases the natural world that scientists and colonial powers were in the process of mapping and collecting – a world reflected in the bourgeois windowsill decorated with plants. Here, faraway places are not just something one might imagine, gaze upon or travel to. They have entered the home in the form of living plants.



On Rørbye's windowsill in the North, plants from various parts of the world converge: the globe amaranth from the West, the aloe vera from the South, and the hydrangea from the East.

Plant care

The research project is titled *Hidden Plant Stories*, but the fact that Danish homes contained goods from other parts of the world is no "hidden story". We see this, for instance, in Julius Exner's (1825–



C.W. Eckersberg
*A Danish Corvette Laying-to in
order to Confer with a Danish Brig: The
Scene Being Set in West Indian Waters*
1827
Oil on canvas
58 x 86 cm
SMK – National Gallery of Denmark
Copenhagen

1910) *A Girl from Fanø with Her Crochet Work near an Open Window* (1900 (22)), an example of the period's popular genre paintings depicting Danes in everyday scenes.²⁵ In the painting, we see a room with an open window looking out onto the sea. The central figure is a girl engaged in crocheting while gazing out the window with a distant look. Evidence of global trade can be found in the girl's traditional costume, in this case the costume native to the island of Fanø, which features a headpiece made of Chinese silk. It can also be found in the wall panels, which are clad with blue Delftware tiles from the Netherlands, a feature typical of the island's vernacular architecture.²⁶ On the windowsill sit two pelargoniums (*Pelargonium sp.*), well protected behind the glass of the closed part of the window. Through the window, two white-sailed ships can be seen, symbolising how the island of Fanø was a seafaring community.

Like the tiles and the Chinese silk, the pelargoniums in the window originate from distant lands, specifically South Africa – and, as in the work of Rørbye, they speak to us of the era's global plant migrations. At the same time, they tell another story too, one that concerns their care within the home. Because the moment these plants were placed in pots and brought into Danish living rooms, they became wholly dependent on human care and attention.

Up through the nineteenth century, the task of tending to houseplants became the domain of women, and plants came to symbolise feminine care and a cosy home.²⁷ In 1885, the publication *Raadgiver for Hus og Hjem* (Advice on House and Home) offered this admonition to housewives: 'A loving and



Julius Exner
A Girl from Fanø with Her Crochet Work near an Open Window
1900
Oil on canvas
51 x 64 cm
VILLUM Window Collection

good housewife will tend her flowers as she would her children and shall reap rich rewards for doing so.²⁸ Just as the nearly finished crochet piece and the wool-spinning wheel in Exner's painting speak of the young girl's diligence, so too do the two healthy plants in the window reflect the care given to them.²⁹ The red of the flowers mirrors the girl's headpiece and scarf, suggesting a kinship between plant and girl.

'Pelargoniums are easily propagated from cuttings and make undemanding houseplants', states one of the era's popular handbooks on houseplants,³⁰ and obtaining plants by snapping off a cutting was a widespread practice.³¹ In this way, those less well-off – and those living far from nurseries and flower markets – could also have plants in their homes. If one knew how to propagate and care for plants, they could become lifelong companions, even passed down to the next generation.