



Cultivated: The Elements of Floral Style

Photos by **Christin Geall**

In her first book, Christin Geall explores floral design through the lens of art history, ecology and personal narrative.

Christin Geall is a designer, writer, gardener and photographer whose work focuses on the intersection of nature, culture and horticulture. When profiled in the August 2018 issue of *Florists' Review*, Geall described her floral style as “asymmetrical, with a Rococo sense of flow; floriferous, with little use of foliage.” That aesthetic is captured in *Cultivated: The Elements of Floral Style* (Princeton Architectural Press, March 2020), Geall’s elegant collection of essays illustrated with 90 images of arrangements she grew, designed and photographed.

Geall’s richly informative work brings her curious intellect to topics such as color theory, creativity and style. She encourages fellow designers, gardeners and floral entrepreneurs to think differently and deeply about their own relationships with flowers. Drawing from the fine arts and historic sources – including Baroque music, the paintings of the Impressionists, or the work of floral innovators like Gertrude Jekyll and Constance Spry, *Cultivated* celebrates the cherished act of growing flowers and the ritual of designing them.

In a recent conversation with Geall, we discussed this beautiful project, her path to flowers, her influences and her design practice. Trained at the Royal Botanic Gardens,

Kew, Geall completed a B.A. in Environmental Studies and Anthropology and an M.F.A. in Creative Nonfiction before becoming a columnist for *Gardenista*, a professor, and a designer. Through her studio, **Cultivated**, she teaches floral design internationally. She lives in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

SFJ: What originally drew you to flower growing and design?

CG: Initially, I was a garden columnist here in Victoria, growing on about one-third of an acre. I went to a Floret workshop in 2015 and became obsessed with shifting from salad production to floral production. Then came bouquets. Then came working with some florists, initially supplying them with product. And then, not really liking what they were doing with the flowers, I began to design myself. I started photographing the arrangements, studied more, gathered clients and began to teach, and over the last two years, *Cultivated* ramped up with the production of this book.

SFJ: How did your writing life influence your work?

CG: When I began flower farming, I had been teaching

in the creative writing department at the university here for six years. One of the tenets of creative nonfiction is to write to discover. I like that orientation because it takes the reader along for the journey.

SFJ: Often in your writing, you refer to other art forms and how they trigger some insight or lesson. What do you draw from those influences?

CG: You can go in so many directions from flowers, intellectually and aesthetically. They appear in painting, in fashion, in gardens, in nature ... and a discussion of repetition, for example, can lead you to music or rhetoric or meadows. The book was so fun to research because I could sashay off in all different directions and learn, and as long as I stayed the course and circled back to the subject of arranging flowers, the essays held.

SFJ: What makes *Cultivated* unique as a floral design title?

CG: Many floral design books are recipe driven. I've never been the type of person who cooks from a recipe, as I was taught to learn fundamental techniques and then adapt them to the materials I had at hand. That was my experience of working with flowers too – one day, you have what you need, and the next, you need to innovate. So I saw that there was an opportunity to write a more literary book about the principles of style, as opposed to a how-to book, thus offering people more flexibility and confidence, no matter what flowers they have or where they live. I tried to tease apart various design principles, such as form, line, mass and color, and make them more accessible and universal.

SFJ: We love the “Ten Things to Learn” lists, which appear throughout the book, with lessons drawn from your study of the Impressionist period, the Baroque period, the Dutch Masters, Rococo and Ikebana, among others. Your Impressionist list is great, containing such truisms as “shadow contains color” and “dots of color disappear at a distance, but when massed, the brain will create form.”

CG: Delighted to hear! I love lists, and I had great fun doing them. They're distillations, and it really taxed my brain to find an efficient way to sum up years of history and knowledge. I wanted to translate complex ideas – about seeing, photography, painting, culture – and how they have led to the design sensibilities that we carry today.

SFJ: How do you want this book to change attitudes about floral design?

CG: I'm all for floral designers gaining more respect. I suppose that is a part of my mission, to say, “We're not just putting pretty things in vases or brides' hands. We understand seasons, plants, ecology, design and art ... and we have found a way to speak to emotion, aesthetics and history. Our work bridges the indoors and out.” ■

DETAILS

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