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Further Reading

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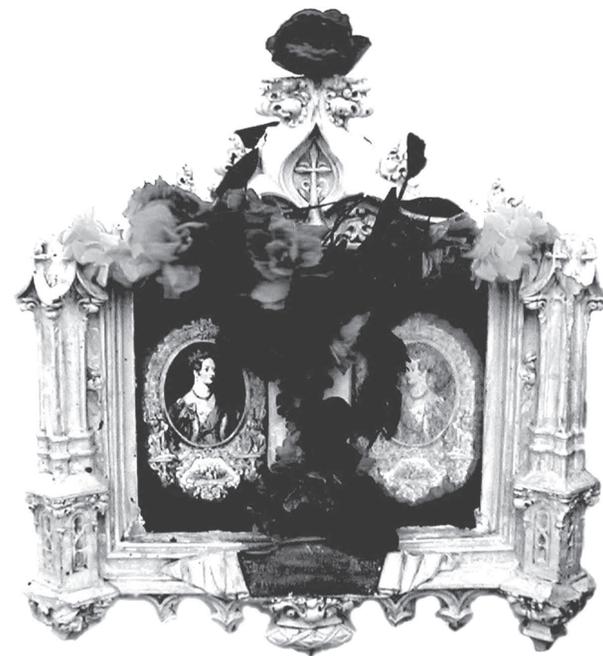
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Cover: Queen Victoria Shrine with waxed flowers.

Back: Domed waxed and beaded flower arrangement. Suzanne Karr, 1999.



Artificial Flowers



Curated by Suzanne Karr
October 27-December 2, 2000
Rockefeller Library A-Level Lounge
Brown University

Artificial flowers proliferated in their Victorian heyday, yet the concept originated in the Golden Crescent, 25 centuries B.C. The term *artificial* comes from the Latin *ars*, art, and *facere*, to make. This etymology touches upon both the skill, or artistry, of a human-made object, and the trickery involved. Ideally, the viewer should never doubt that the simulated object is real.



Fleuriste Artificiel, Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, 1751-65

Practically speaking, artificial flowers only differed in a single feature. While genuine flowers wilt, 18th and 19th century cloth, paper, or wax blooms were relatively imperishable. Other more eccentric materials included human hair, feathers, beads, seashells, eggshell linings, fish scales, porcelain, leather, and semiprecious gems.

These flowers contributed to innumerable interior decorations, hair or clothing ornaments, and enduring funerary wreaths. The artificial flower was a woman's garland for all seasons, including her death. Women of nobility, the bourgeoisie, the proletariat and—according to one

account, even the Virgin Mary—enhanced their popularity. This fascination ensured both the flower's largest market and, later, its workforce.

Artificial flowers were ubiquitous in the Victorian Age, abounding in both living rooms and World's Fairs. However, the Industrial Revolution soon pitted rote manufacture against artistry. Women who made flowers in bulk in factories or at home in cities from London to New York rendered Queen Victoria's royal flower maker obsolete.

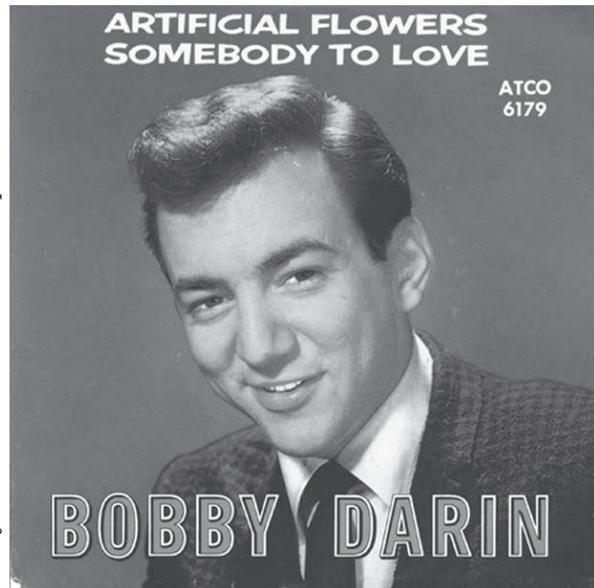
Although fashioning flowers was still considered an art or craft fit for genteel women, the seemingly innocuous flower trade actually threatened to subvert the domesticity of the lower-class Victorian wife and mother, by taking her out of her home, or worse, to disrupt it and bring labor into that sacred sphere.



Finishing a Rose, Lewis Hine, New York, 1913

An ironic depiction of this labor issue, Bobby Darin's 1960 hit, *Artificial Flowers*, features a flower-making orphan who dies of cold in a garret, *up-tempo*. Death and labor were immediate period associations, but modern plastic flowers have become bereft of their Victorian legacy. No longer truly artificial or even convincing, they are constructed by machine, not by women's hands.

Bobby Darin's Artificial Flowers 45 rpm record, 1960



This exhibition examines the history of the 19th and early 20th century European and American flower trade, and the integral roles of women from all walks of life. Artificial flowers pervaded society, embodied intense symbolism, and sparked essential labor criticism. May they obtain the recognition they deserve.