

## Interdisciplinary Web Quest: Flower Symbolism



*Pansy symbolizes Thoughts*

**Objective:** 1) students will be able to identify flowers and their symbolism in art, literature, and design as they appeared in Victorian times from 1850 to 1900 exemplified in furniture, quilt, paperweight, embroidery, and other designs. 2) students will choose a flower or plant, find the symbolism or associated idea, and from it create a simplified or stylized design motif they would apply to a particular art or literary form (draw, paint, carve, or write a poem, for example).

**Grade Levels:** grade 4 and above

**Time Required:** one 60-90 minute class period

### Illinois State Museum's Online collections:

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/barker/gallery/index.php?TopicID=lampwork>

The Morton D. Barker Paperweight Collection of the Illinois State Museum.

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/art/htmls/ms.html>

A Matter of Style: Victorian Furniture in MuseumLink Illinois, Illinois State Museum

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/art/htmls/ks.html>

Keeping Us in Stitches: Illinois Quilts, MuseumLink Illinois, Illinois State Museum.

Appliqué, whole cloth, and Pieced (crazy) quilts have floral motifs on them.

[http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/prairie/htmls/eco\\_fg\\_all.html](http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/prairie/htmls/eco_fg_all.html)

MuseumLink Illinois Prairie Module's Prairie Plant Guide with photographs.

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/ismdepts/botany/collections/?TopicID=prairieherbs>

Illinois State Museum's Herbarium Collection Gallery of Herbarium sheets

### Motivation:

Everyday we see flower motifs in artwork, furniture and architectural ornamentation, fabric design, and in literature and bookbinding. In the past in many cultures, flower motifs carried symbolism relating to religion, celebration, or superstition, to name but a few areas of symbolism. Perhaps the original symbolism of some of the motifs has been lost. We appreciate the beauty of the lampworked flowers in the French paperweights — do we ask ourselves why the makers may have chosen the flowers they chose?



*Apple: Temptation,  
Sunflower: Haughtiness,  
Raspberry: Remorse*

The Victorians liberally incorporated symbolism in the design of everyday objects and decoration. A popular book of the time was *The Language of Flowers*, which was a list of hundreds of flower names and a short definition of the symbolism of each. (Several versions of this can be found on the WWW). Victorian novels and poetry also contain symbolic motifs. This symbolism can be traced back through the Renaissance and the Middle Ages to Ancient Rome. The floral and plant symbols occur again and again.



By examining a Victorian object carefully and searching sources for the symbolism, you can learn more about what the Victorians appreciated about the designs, and you can see what designs have survived or evolved into our era. You can become more aware of the history of design by observing these objects.

Are there many remnants of them today? (Look at bridal and funeral customs Web sites)

<http://www.weddingbokay.com/symbol.html>

<http://www.tombstonetravel.com/symbol.html>

Furniture designers such as Ethan Allen create designs that have modified Victorian motifs.

<http://www.ethanallen.com/ea/com.ethanallen.ecom.HomePageServlet>

*Lily of the Valley:  
Return of Happiness*

### **Materials:**

Computer

Internet access

Flower/plant worksheet

Pencil/pen

### **Procedure:** Web Quest

1) Students will choose a flower motif on an object to research on the internet from those depicted in the ISM Web exhibits listed above, or bring a Victorian object they may have at home. They will find the symbolic meaning of the flower or plant from a web site on symbolism (checking against other sites for consistency), and write a brief description or history of the symbolism.

2) Students will show how they would adapt their flower and its symbolism by creating a simple drawn motif of the flower and tell how they would incorporate it into an object today.



*Red Tulip: Declaration of Love  
Oak Leaf: Strength; eternity*

**Presentation:**

Post the designs and their description of the symbolism for the whole class to see.

**Assessment:**

Student found the flower and its symbolism successfully on at least one Web site. (5 points per site)

Student wrote a short but clear description of the symbolic history of the flower. (10 or fewer points)

Student drew a simplified, but recognizable flower symbol of his flower to use as a design motif and told what the symbolism was. (10 or fewer points)

**Illinois State Board of Education Goals and Standards Addressed:****Social Sciences:**

**Goal 18.A.3 Middle School/Junior High:** Explain how language, literature, the arts, architecture, and traditions contribute to the development and transmission of culture.

**Visual Arts:**

**Goal 27.B.3:** Know and describe how artists and their works shape culture and increase understanding of societies, past and present.

**References:**

<http://www.victorianbazaar.com/meanings.html> a site that lists the symbolism of flowers.

Carr-Gomm, Sarah (1996). *The Dictionary of Symbols in Western Art*. Facts on File.

Ferguson, George Wells (1972). **Signs and Symbols in Christian Art**. Oxford University Press.

Hall, James A. (1979). *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. HarperCollins.

Ibid. (1995) *Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art*. HarperCollins.

Speake, Jennifer (1995). *The Dent Dictionary of Symbols in Christian Art*. Trafalgar Square.