



Émile Gallé and nature: types and influences in his glass

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Abstract

This article explores the importance of the botanical world for Émile Gallé. This fascination, begun in childhood, grew throughout his life and led the artist to help found the Société Centrale d'horticulture de Nancy, of which he was the Secretary, and to establish links with eminent botanists and horticulturalists. In his glass, Gallé delved into a repertoire of botanical forms to create new decorative motifs and new object shapes. Far from a servile imitation, Gallé uses the natural world as a point of departure for formal and aesthetic experimentation, realised and translated into glass by subtle effects of the medium.

The reasons for and origins of Émile Gallé's interest in plants has been examined in detail numerous times.¹ Since childhood, Gallé was surrounded by the vegetables on display in the markets of Nancy, not far from the family home were the city's Botanical Gardens and the surrounding countryside of Lorraine. He himself relates a number of anecdotes revealing this precocious interest, attesting that he first learned to read by looking at JJ Grandville's *Les Fleurs animées*, a fellow Nancean of a generation earlier.²

In addition to these personal inclinations, one must consider Nancy's unique position as a centre for horticulture in late nineteenth-century Europe. For various reasons, a number of horticulturalists decided to settle in Nancy in this period, such as the arrival of Léon Simon, a rose specialist whose family nurseries, celebrated since the eighteenth century, were situated in the Moselle region. These horticulturalists specialised in the hybridisation of new varieties, in particular hardy perennial shrubs, such as peonies, lilacs, clematis, gladioli and begonias. Large bourgeois mansions usually included extensive gardens and greenhouses attended to by gardeners. In the city, exhibitions of flowers and fruits were regularly organised, arousing the passion of professionals and the local populace.

The founding of the Société Centrale d'horticulture de Nancy in 1877 testifies to this vibrancy. Gallé built up close relationships with the horticulturalists whom he met within the Société Centrale d'horticulture, of which he had been the Secretary from its inception. However, Gallé surely had links with a number of these colleagues long before that date. Gallé's factory was adjacent to the glasshouses of Victor Lemoine, one of the great Nancean horticulturalists; the artist and his collaborators thus could easily visit and observe the latest varieties of plants and hybrids created by



Figure 1 *Gardens at the Gallé factory*, c1886 (original photograph) Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy

Lemoine. They could also see and study plants in the Gallé factory itself and its grounds (figure 1). In front of the studios and the industrial art offices, were a set of flowerbeds framed by climbing plants. The property which the Gallé family acquired in 1873 had a park of 1.5 hectares where the artist sketched and which he designed himself. He selected the trees, the flowering shrubs, indigenous French perennials, as well as those from Japan and North America which were planted in this garden and which were carefully attended to by both the proprietor and his gardener.

When Gallé entered the family crystal and porcelain business in 1867, his father Charles Gallé-Reinemer handed over the artistic direction of the firm. Thenceforward, the younger Gallé determined the aesthetic vision of the glass it produced. In the early years, Gallé did not make many changes, as the aesthetic emphasis was already upon motifs inspired by nature. For example, a glass service decorated with forget-me-nots and ribbons, dating to around 1868, testifies to the influence which the botanical world had already made upon the decorative arts of the French Second Empire. In a letter to Gabriel Mourey in 1901, Gallé explains that for thirty years, even before the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, his father and he had chosen to derive the shape of drinking glasses from natural forms and that: 'these adaptations of flowers were a preoccupation of my father's and of mine, all the more, as a botanist'.³ Nature is thus used from the earliest beginning of the artist's career to create the decoration, but also the shapes of glass.

In the 1880s, the influence of Japanese art starts to be felt in the artist's work. Since the Exposition Universelle of 1878, Gallé, like many artists and critics of the period, had discovered the art of Japan and he began to collect prints and objects. Far Eastern art had often been associated with the representation of flowers; the artist learned from the Japanese example and shared a sensibility with this civilisation as is discernable in his treatment of decoration. His free and graphic representations of flowers are distant from the image of Gallé the botanist where detail and scientific



Figure 2 *Mountain Lily Vase*, Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy

to 1889, illustrates Gallé's development (figure 2).⁶ Here the flower is isolated, reduced to its simplest form and its placement on the vase surface recalls the truncated framing devices of Japanese prints. The flower is also the source for the shape of the vase with its lobed mouth. Once again the treatment of the vase seems simple; colour has almost disappeared and is limited to a few touches which imitate the characteristic, tiger effect patterns of the mountain lily.

Gallé's experiments in glass from the 1880s are distinctive in their explorations of diverse and varied colour effects. It is also in this period that a number of works which demonstrate the artist's links with other Nancean horticulturalists emerge. The *Primavera Goblet*, dated to 1884, is the most emblematic of this group (figure 3).⁷ Conceived by Gallé for Victor Lemoine, it represents a number of primulas which Lemoine had hybridised, in particular one which he named 'Mme Émile Gallé'. Two somewhat opaque and unusual tonalities for this flower are used; the primula can be recognised by the silver grey silhouette of its flower; its leaf can be recognised within the pink layer. A verse from Dante, barely legible along the rim of the glass, completes this sombre decoration.

The *Gladioli Goblet*, dated 1889, illustrates one of the plant varieties which helped to confirm the glory of Nancean horticulture and Victor Lemoine in particular.⁸ A gladiola is represented, linked to a butterfly which is placed on the goblet like a headband. In this monochrome piece, Gallé strives to recreate the rose hue of a specific gladiola which he had discussed in an article in the *Bulletin du Société Centrale d'horticulture de Nancy* in December 1886. He likens Victor Lemoine's skills in hybridisation to those a decorator, developing new colour tonalities and perfecting the structure of certain flowers.

precision in the reproduction are paramount. In his *Écrits pour l'art*, Gallé states that: 'the Japanese artist knows uniquely how to translate very natural reproductions into evocative motifs'.⁴

The *Cornflower Vase*, dated around 1879, offers an enamel decoration recreating a landscape of cornflowers waving in the breeze.⁵ The flowers are represented in a very free and rather simple manner, their stems and leaves summarised in simple lines and curves. This decoration is elaborated on a glass devised by Gallé known as 'clair de lune'. Subtly coloured in a sapphire tone lightly infused with blue, this glass highlights the variety and refinement of enamelwork and its colouration that Gallé achieved. A later vase representing a wild mountain lily, dated

These four examples illustrate the point that Gallé was a knowledgeable botanist, respected by his peers, but he also knew how to balance his roles as botanist and artist. If science allowed him better to understand plants and organisms from their birth until their death, he was also aware that this scientific knowledge should never be applied literally in his works. The principle is summed up in a frequently cited passage from his 1900 speech to the Académie Stanislas: 'But who could imagine that an artist determined to reproduce a flower, an insect, a landscape, a human face and who seeks to capture character, innate sentiment, would not create a work more vibrant and full of infectious emotion than those whose tools are a camera or a cold scalpel?'⁹



Figure 3 *Primavera Goblet*, Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy

In the province of glass colouration, Gallé undertook wide ranging experiments. He personally oversaw complex mixtures of oxides and other materials which allowed the development of a much more varied palette of glass colours. These mixtures sought to emulate the effects not only of precious or natural hard stones, but also the diversity of nuances within nature. In the water lily vase, dated 1889, the flower, so often reproduced in Gallé's glass, here is translated into an unusual colour for this aquatic plant.¹⁰ This black tonality is one of Gallé's great innovations, pioneered at the 1889 Exposition Universelle. In this work, black is used to evoke the opaque, disquieting and mysterious ponds where water lilies flourish. Light plays through the base which is chiselled with little incisions, while the inclusion of metallic powders illuminates the water lilies.

The *Moonwort Vase* is dominated by a monochrome blue tonality, which is then heightened by the inclusion of powders and the engraving of the glass surface, at times rendering the glass almost opaque by incising away more or less of the surface.¹¹ The choice of the colour blue was not insignificant, recalling the vernacular name of the 'moonwort,' which is traditionally associated with the Honesty plant (of the genus *Lunaria*), often poetically invoked as 'the flower of oblivion'.¹² This plant is associated with the night or the rising moon and stars because of its distinctive translucent seedpods, but the colour blue is equally apposite in its referencing of the vernacular name as it is in the invocation of the moon, which is also associated in the collective imagination with this colour.

The *Black Bitter Apple Vase* is a most surprising piece.¹³ The black tonality, which was not infrequent in his work of 1889-90, is not natural to this type of plant whose form particularly interested



Gallé in his search for new forms. The typical recessed sections of the plant's shape are reconstituted, combined with the naturalistic rendering of the raised blisters and humps distinctive to this plant. The choice of a black tonality is linked to aesthetic aims, in that it highlights the effects of the material; light ricochets off the uneven surface. However, it must also be recognised that the bitter apple could take on this colour once it has degenerated into rottenness, into putrefaction.

If nature has a central influence upon decoration and materials in Gallé's glassware, it is also the key source for his innovative forms. As in Art Nouveau more widely, l'Ecole de Nancy challenged the use of historicism, encouraging the exploration of new modern forms. The renewal of forms was accompanied by a commitment to a principle dear to Gallé, the adaptability and the appropriateness of decorative form. The *Iris Bud Vase* deploys the shape of the barely opened iris, and this motif of the closed bud is also represented through additions of marquetry to the decorations on the vase's surface.¹⁴ This technique invented by the artist and for which he secured a patent in 1898, allowed him to chose his colours more freely and to vary them even more than in a vase made in several layers, allowing him to juxtapose more different tones as in nature. The *Cornflower Vase* adopts the same principles; the profile is inspired by the cornflower and most particularly by its bud, while marquetry is used to express the full blown blooms of the flowers, while a fine green stem extends along the length of the vessel linking in the base.

Around 1900, vegetables and squashes offered inspiration for an excursion into new forms; the natural contour, the flowing lines specific to these plants seemed to suggest new solutions to the task of creating objects. The *Garlic Vase* perfectly illustrates these researches, attesting to a great elegance, but more than that to the simplicity and purity of form afforded by this plant's limited palette.¹⁵ Nonetheless the work remains essentially naturalistic, most notably in the base which imitates the bulb of the garlic plant. The *Onion Vase* also deploys a simple form.¹⁶ The base is constituted of the bulb of the onion, while the surface decoration reveals itself to be more complex, in that it represents different stages of the flowering cycle; the plant's flowers emerge from within the onion's multiple skins. The preparatory model for the object, conserved in the Musée D'Orsay, perfectly confirms this desire to illustrate evolving nature. The repertoire of plants that Gallé used was vast and did not limit itself to typical Art Nouveau flowers such as the rose or the iris. More than 196 varieties of plants appear in his work in glass, wood and ceramics.

Throughout his life, Gallé would pursue his researches in glassmaking, seeking out new hot and cold working methods, adapting the decoration and the composition of the glass to variegate the effects of the medium. However through the intermediary of nature, he also sought to transcribe, to translate biological life into art; plants are not inanimate, they evolve, they develop, their structures, their contours, their nuances vary according to seasons and over time. It was this continuous evolutionary process that fascinated the artist.

Gallé's oeuvre reveals a predilection for plants imbued with a distinctive vitality. This vitality is particularly apparent in the works which deploy a vertical format. If verticality, within figure painting for

example, has as a general rule connoted concepts of invincibility, in the plant world this effect suggests the innate attraction of the beneficial effects of light necessary to growth. The *Meadow Flag Iris Vase*, dated 1900, is inspired by the bud of a variety known as the *iris germanica*.¹⁷ The verticality of the piece is accentuated by the choice to represent the unopened bud; the petals are still tightly closed and are deeply engraved in the glass. Only the bud is reproduced in this work. Cut, it rests on a simple support composed of a transversal base. In the *Columbine Vase*, dated 1902, the flowers and the leaves of this plant variety are disposed along the length of the vessel, stretching up to develop into fuller forms at the top.¹⁸ The pink-blue tonalities of the vase are particular to this flower, translated here by means of marquetry and metallic inclusions. The shape is also inspired by this plant whose flower's lobed opening is echoed in the four elements of glass which link the body of the vase to its base, recalling the characteristic curved spurs of the petals of the flower.

Verticality is also one of the primary characteristics of the hogweed plant, a feature that originally attracted Gallé to this plant to which he returned throughout his career in his furniture, his light fittings and his glass. The *Heracleum Vase* was displayed at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris (figure 4).¹⁹ The hogweed, of the umbel genus, is the source for the decoration and the form of the vase. The grooved stem of the plant inspired the tubular shape and filigreed surface, whilst the lacy flowers and leaves of the plant decorate the full height of the vase. However this vase also attests to a veritable hymn to nature reinforced by the green coloration and the inscription composed by Gallé himself: 'Our arts exhale the scents of the meadows / altruism and beauty will perfume our lives'. This passage can be taken to suggest subtly Gallé's public support of Dreyfusards in 1898. Green is a symbol of hope, the use of the future tense in the citation and the elevated aspirations it articulates evoke Gallé's hopes for a recognition of Captain Alfred Dreyfus' innocence.



Figure 4 *Heracleum vase*, Musée de l'École de Nancy

Another plant which greatly interested Gallé throughout his life was the orchid which he had collected on botanical excursions in the Lorraine countryside since his adolescence. In *Écrits pour l'art*, Gallé stresses 'the richness, the inconceivable strangeness of forms, types, scents, colours, caprices, the voluptuous and disquieting mysteries' of the orchid.²⁰ This variety reveals not only his interest in local flowers, but also exotic specimens; the artist did not subscribe to the preference for a hierarchy amongst plants, but rather was interested by all plant life, those which grow freely in the

countryside as well as those produced by the hybridisations and new researches of horticulturalists. In 1900, Gallé participated in an international botanical conference in Paris where he presented a paper on the anomalies within a variety of orchids. The floral decoration at the very top of an orchid vase dated 1892, closely associates the orchid with the dragonfly. A number of orchids are curiously reminiscent of these insects and in this vase this resemblance is accentuated by the petals which resemble the wings, and the heart of the flower, the head of this insect. The choice of colour could be seen as unusual for this flower, but a variety known as *vandal caerulea* does have this blue coloration. Sometimes orchids are not directly represented but rather associated with the ambience and evocation of a landscape.

In the same format, but dated 1900, the *Wild Flowers Vase* also has features in common with the preceding example, in that the orchids are also represented with insects, here butterflies whose similarities to the flowers is also underlined.²¹ However, the overall effect is very different, the filigree



work cuts across the vase vertically, a green tonality dominates, but most of all the representation of the flowers and insects is greatly simplified. The Forest orchid vase is also dated 1900, but its decoration is strikingly different, more naturalistic (figure 5).²² The simplicity of the vase's shape allows the representation of a forest landscape, brought into being by very fine engraving and marquetry work. Forest orchids extend on long stems, whilst in the background the silhouettes of trees are engraved; the whole is translated into a beautiful harmony of ochre-orange tonalities which suggest an autumnal landscape. The treatment is new, very different from the other work despite its contemporaneity.

Figure 5 *Forest orchid vase*, Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy

This interest in nature is not only linked to decorative concerns, but also forms part of Gallé's deeper preoccupations, with life, the mechanisms of life and from thence with creation as a whole. These broader questions also led to his study of botany and the natural sciences where he investigated the mechanisms of life, the engines of evolution and the variations in plant life resulting from their adaptations to environment. Oval in form, raised on a far eastern plinth, the *Easter*

Anemones Vase of 1892 seems to embrace a great simplicity in its restrained range of mauve tonalities.²³ The decoration is composed of a frieze of anemones, both buds and open blooms, evoking the different stages of flowering. The arrival of the anemone in spring announces the awakening of nature because these fragile flowers, vulnerable to chill winds, are reborn each year

and within the Christian religion symbolise the resurrection of Christ and the springtime feast of Easter. Anemones can also invoke the exodus into Egypt, and here implicitly refer to the Jewish faith of the work's commissioner Henry Hirsch, a close friend of Gallé.

The *Roses of France Goblet* (figure 6), dated 1901, is a work that was commissioned by the Société Centrale d'horticulture de Nancy in honour of its honorary president, Léon Simon.²⁴ Unlike other Art Nouveau artists, Gallé did not often include the rose in his repertoire of motifs, but here the rose was a logical choice as Simon was a recognised specialist in the species' cultivation. In this vase, the roses depicted are not just any variety; these are *rosa gallica*, also known as the 'French' rose. Tradition has it that this rose blooms on the heights of the Mont Saint Quentin in Metz, a symbol of this city which, in Gallé's lifetime, was no longer French but under the rule of the German Reich. By its very name, the rose of France thus contested the new frontier imposed by Prussia. Léon Simon



Figure 6 *Roses of France goblet*, Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy

originated from Metz and had been forced to leave that city after the German annexation. The roses are shown in different stages, as buds, as barely open and as full blown blooms, reproducing each stage of its evolution, but also symbolising the different ages of life. These roses are rendered by means of a variety of technical methods, by marquetry and application, while their stems create a network of lines on the goblet, resonant with the body's vital network of veins and arteries.

In the *Rhubarb Leaves Goblet*, the base and the vessel are made from the extremely curved leaves of the rhubarb plant; Gallé's use of patina across the whole surface of the goblet is particularly interesting.²⁵ He invented this technique - for which he filed a patent - in which the glass is allowed to be dirtied by dust, natural or artificial, whilst in the furnace, causing the surface of the glass to cool, creating the distinctive matt effect. Patina is used here to express deterioration, the withering of the rhubarb leaves, reinforcing that Gallé was always interested in the cycles of life (birth, development, decline), an interest which goes hand in hand with his attentiveness to the plant kingdom, especially at the end of his life.



If Gallé's first creations are still marked by historical and traditional styles, he would abandon them in the 1880s, favouring the inspiration of nature which holds the best and the worst, the beautiful and the ugly, life and death. The repertory of plant forms in his glass attests to a vast diversity of formal and decorative solutions. Techniques, profile contours, decoration, colour effects were all inspired by nature, but also try to emulate its diversity, variety, anomalies and evolution. The examples considered here suggest the many pathways pursued by Gallé, where synthetism, naturalism and aestheticism coalesce. Thus there was not one solution for the artist, not one established vision of nature, rather there were always more experiments and trials to attempt. In his writings, Gallé insisted upon the importance that nature held in his oeuvre: 'And we know well that the eloquence of a flower, thanks to the mysteries of its organism and its destiny, thanks to the synthesis of the plant symbol evoked by the artist's pencil, exceeds sometimes the intense suggestive power of the human face'.²⁶

This article was translated from the original French by Claire I R O'Mahony and any errors in translation should be attributed to her.

¹ François Le Tacon and Philippe Thiébaud have both evoked this question in numerous articles and books on Gallé.

² JJ Grandville was the *nom de plume* of graphic artist and caricaturist Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard.

³ Letter to Gabriel Morey dated 21 December 1901, current location unknown.

⁴ Émile Gallé, *Écrits pour l'Art Floriculture – Art Décoratif – Notice d'Exposition (1884-1889)*, Librairie Renouard, Paris, 1908, p 217.

⁵ Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv HD 8.

⁶ Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv VD 3.

⁷ Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv AV 1.

⁸ Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv LR 85.

⁹ Gallé, 1908, p 217.

¹⁰ Gerda Koepf collection, Dusseldorf Kunstmuseum.

¹¹ Dated 1892, Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv HH 8.

¹² Known in French as 'monnaie du pape' or 'lunaire'.

¹³ The botanical name for the 'bitter apple' is *colocynthis*. The vase is dated 1900-2, Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv 373.

¹⁴ Dated 1900, Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv 338.

¹⁵ Dated 1900, Neumann Foundation, Switzerland.

¹⁶ Dated 1900, private collection.

¹⁷ Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv JC 9.

¹⁸ Also known as aquilegia, Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv 002-9-1.

¹⁹ Also known as cow's parsnip of the umbel family, Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv HH 17.

²⁰ Gallé, 1908, p 224.

²¹ Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv JC 20.

²² Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv AD 61.

²³ Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv HH 12.

²⁴ Musée de l'École de Nancy, Inv AD 338.

²⁵ Dated 1902-3, Kitazawa Museum, Japan.

²⁶ Gallé, 1908, p 216.