

## INFLORESCENCE

## How Constance Spry rearranged the floral arts.

It is worth imagining oneself in the time and place in question: the year 1928, on Old Bond Street in London, in front of Atkinson's perfumery shop. The police have been called to subdue a crowd jostling to catch a glimpse of some rather extraordinary flower arrangements in the shop window. *Did you hear? They were created by a forty-something woman, a bit of a free spirit—divorced, did you know?* The stirring sight in question featured such peculiarities as clematis seed heads, blackberry brambles, golden hops, and dried leaves, right alongside a smattering of spindly green orchids.

Sometimes, revolution comes dressed in a pinafore and pearls. So was the case of Constance Spry. Dazzling and dismaying sidewalk passersby was just one chapter in Spry's surprising life. Others include a stint as secretary of the Dublin Red Cross, headmistress of a girls' school, an affair with a gender-nonconforming painter by the name of Gluck, and authorship of thirteen volumes, including a well-known cookbook. Born in the town of Derby on the banks of the River Derwent in 1886 and raised in Ireland, Constance Spry was the daughter of a railway clerk, not born to rags nor to riches. Still, her precipitous ascent to floral fame began when most women of her time were relegated to the domestic sphere. Less than ten years after her Bond Street debut, she counted the dukes of Gloucester and Windsor as clients, and she would go on to direct the entire coronation ceremony, luncheon included, for the Queen of England in 1953.

Drawing from her background in gardening rather than formal education in floristry, Constance Spry, or Connie as she was known, favored chard and hedgerows, cow parsley, and kale over more popular flora. Wildflowers, weeds, moss, fruit, and vegetables were equally embraced, perhaps drawing inspiration from the sumptuously odd panoplies depicted in 17th-century Dutch paintings. She scoured junk shops and attics for unique vessels. Stuffed with concealed chicken wire (a Spry innovation), her soaring assemblages appeared to defy gravity. She paid no mind to the rules of the day: that arrangements ought to include just one species or color, or that a vase should be tightly stuffed to convey mastery and abundance. The regimented opulence of Victorian and Edwardian styles did nothing to stir her spirit. And a stirring of the spirit was what she sought.

"Do whatever you please, follow your own star," she wrote in one of her books, before enumerating opposing options ranging from baroque to bare. Other notable Spry-isms: *Beware of stylizing. Accept no rules. Open your mind to every form of beauty.* "You are not human unless you have a way of expressing yourself," she cautioned. Today, we're accustomed to floral arrangements painted, bedazzled, even spiked with cannabis leaves (ahem). All of this freedom might have Connie to thank. After Spry, the sky was the limit.

In 1961, a year after Spry died, the very first English rose cultivar was introduced to the world. Named the "Constance Spry," its globe-like pink blooms are versatile, willing to climb to great heights or thrive as a hardy shrub. Its classic beauty may not have been Connie's cup of tea. But the vivacity and resilience—that's quite right. Words by Dana Covit. Photography by Paul Popper/Popperfoto.



"I think she has a genius for flowers, and you have a genius for paint, so that ought to make for happiness," wrote the friend who introduced Spry and Gluck. Gluck's painting of the goddess Flora, naked and resplendent with a cape of blooms over her shoulders, hung in Spry's shop and home.

Spry's vase of choice was something between a gravy boat and an urn, wide-mouthed enough to let the blooms explode out instead of up. Moro Dabron's Of Gardens Candle nods to Spry—it's poured into a double-handled stoneware vessel inspired by the ones she designed for Fulham Pottery ([moro-dabron.com](http://moro-dabron.com)).