

PRESS RELEASE

The Gorgeous Nothings: Flowers at Chatsworth
A new exhibition in the house and garden at Chatsworth
15 March – 6 October 2025



Flowers in all their forms take centre stage in the exhibition *The Gorgeous Nothings: Flowers at Chatsworth*, opening across the Grade I listed house and 105-acre garden on 15 March 2025. Curated by Allegra Pesenti and designed by Pippa Nissen from Nissen Richards Studio, the exhibition is inspired by the estate itself, from the rare botanical volumes and illustrated manuscripts in the library to its garden and grounds. *The Gorgeous Nothings* builds on the work of an important lineage of landscape designers, gardeners, scientists and botanists at Chatsworth over the past six centuries. The thematic display features contemporary and historic artworks and objects from the Devonshire Collections, supported by key loans and a new site-specific commission.

Weaving through Chatsworth's interiors, garden and greenhouses, the exhibition is structured around a series of themes that reflect the contrasts and complexities of human life — from hunters and gatherers to mythology and magic — all seen through the lens of plants and flowers. Temporal and genre boundaries are broken down as contemporary and historic works from the Devonshire Collections are shown with important national and international loans. The varied artworks include Chatsworth's seventeenth-century painting of the *Madonna della Rosa* by Domenichino, artist Alessandro Piangiamore's flowers cast in concrete, a silk orchid hat by Philip Treacy from the Victoria & Albert Museum, and the botanical drawings of Emma Tennant. Contemporary artists feature prominently, with works ranging from the vibrant canvases of painter Frank Bowling displayed in the Painted Hall to the immersive collages of Elliot Hundley presented in the Chapel. A site-specific commission by Berlin-based artist Ana Prvacki is planned for the garden.

Scientific research and specimen collecting, or 'gathering', is engrained in the history of Chatsworth and its collection; this practice is reflected in many of the objects and artworks featured in *The Gorgeous Nothings*. Examples include Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire's findings of flower fossils, and Anna Atkins' photographs of over 400 species of British sea algae taken in the 1840s. The exhibition provides a rare opportunity to look inside an impressive collection of illustrated botanical books. Ranging from sixteenth to nineteenth-century examples these books combine scientific discoveries with exceptional, often hand-painted, illustrations in vibrant colours. The process of gathering and cataloguing is also reflected in the curation of the exhibition; all of the Delft flower vases in the Devonshire collection are displayed together, as are all the fossils and minerals. A group of

rare eighteenth-century British floral lace collars, carefully sourced and collected by previous generations, also feature.

The exhibition takes its title from a poem by Emily Dickinson and references the author's habit of composing poetry on scraps of paper and used envelopes. These 'gorgeous nothings' she refers to in the poem are in fact the vital substance of her work. The process of gathering scraps together to create something bigger than the sum of its parts is mirrored in the work of the early botanists who catalogued flora. *The Gorgeous Nothings* sheds light on lesser known female botanists, some of whom were contemporaries of Dickinson, who have historically remained in the shadow of their more famous male counterparts.

"The eclectic charge of the installations in this exhibition voices the urgency of the environmental condition in the world today, but also the resilience and persistence of nature. Each flower represented here is associated with deep-rooted myths and symbolisms. Individually, they may be considered gorgeous nothings, but together, they manifest life and endurance against all odds."

Allegra Pesenti, Curator of *The Gorgeous Nothings: Flowers at Chatsworth*

Gorgeous Nothings is supported by Sotheby's, Chatsworth's Arts and Exhibitions Partner.

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Notes to editors:

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Image credits (L-R)

Anna Atkins, *Photographs of British Algae, cyanotypes*, 1843-53, Courtesy The Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth

Christoph Jacob Trew, *Hortus nitidissimis omnem per annum superbiens floribus, sive amoenissimorum florum imagines (Nuremberg)*, 1768-1786, Courtesy The Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth

Delft flower pyramids grouped in the fireplace in the State Bedchamber at Chatsworth. © The Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees

About Chatsworth:

Located within the Peak District National Park, Chatsworth comprises a Grade I listed house and stables, a 105-acre garden, a 1,822-acre park, a farmyard and adventure playground, and one of Europe's most significant private art collections.

Chatsworth is also a registered charity. Chatsworth House Trust is dedicated to looking after the house, collections, garden, and parkland, for everyone. Visitor income funds essential conservation and an ambitious programme of exhibitions, events, learning and community outreach. Every penny generated by ticket sales and membership is reinvested into the charity to make this possible.

Chatsworth plays an important role in the local community as a thriving cultural and educational destination, a nationally important historic landscape, and a working estate that operates with a mindful approach to the environment and sustainability.

www.chatsworth.org

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About Allegra Pesenti:

A native of Milan, Italy, Allegra Pesenti did her undergraduate studies at the École du Louvre and University College London, and received her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the Courtauld Institute of Art where she specialized in the study of Italian drawings of the 15th and 16th centuries. She began her museum career as an intern in the prints and drawings departments of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, and the Louvre before joining the drawings department of the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1999 as assistant curator. At the Hammer Museum, she oversaw the Grunwald Center's collection of 45,000 prints, drawings, photographs, and artists' books dating from the Renaissance to the present. She curated the exhibitions *Gouge: The Modern Woodcut, 1870 to Now* (2008), *Rachel Whiteread Drawings* (2010) and *Zarina: Paper Like Skin*, and was one of the co-organizing curators of *Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone, 1955-1972* (2012). Allegra was hired as Chief Curator of the Menil Drawing Institute in Houston in 2013 where she presented her exhibition *Apparitions: Frottages and Rubbings from 1860 to Now* (co-organized by the Hammer Museum and the Menil Collection). She re-joined the Hammer Museum in 2017 as Associate Director and Senior Curator of the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, and co-curated a major retrospective of drawings by Victor Hugo (2018). More recently, she curated *Drawing Down the Moon* (2022), an exhibition on the iconography of the moon, and the first museum survey on Picasso's cut papers/*papiers découpés* (2022-23), both for the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Allegra now works as an independent curator based in Rome, and her current projects include *Invisible Questions That Fill The Air: James Lee Byars and Lee Seung Taek* at Palazzo Loredan in Venice (2024), *Arturo Herrera: Fare un Giro* at Supernova in Rome (2024) and *The Gorgeous Nothings: Flowers at Chatsworth* (2025).

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