WILD AT HEART

Botanically inspired masterpieces from Monet and Mapplethorpe perfectly complement Chaumet's naturalistic jewels in a new exhibition. *By Kate Matthams*

"**THERE IS A** very prescriptive botanical gaze there. The drawings really stand as works of art in their own right." The botanist Marc Jeanson is describing two beautifully detailed 19th-century floral studies to me on a video call from Marrakesh, where he is botanical director of the Jardin Majorelle. The coloured pencil drawings by the Blaschkas, Czech-born father and son glass artists, are among his favourite works in *Botanical, Observing Beauty*, an exhibition he has curated for Chaumet. As the name suggests, it is about far more than exquisite jewels.

Held at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, part of the Beaux-Arts de Paris art school also supported by Chaumet, *Botanical* is a rich treasury of art and jewellery inspired by plants. Jeanson structured the exhibition like a herbarium, with artworks depicting 27 species of plant immortalised by Chaumet arranged alongside the jewels themselves, some of which have been restored for the occasion. The exhibition begins with a cardboard forest by contemporary artist Eva Jospin alongside a reproduction of a 7,000-year-old cave painting.

But this is no Chaumet showcase—the house has taken a wide-angle view to better contextualise its own famously naturalistic work. A quarter of the 400 exhibits are from the Chaumet archives, including showstoppers like the Wheat Sheaf tiara made in 1811 for Napoleon's second wife, Empress Marie-Louise.

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FORCE OF NATURE Clockwise from top left: Chaumet gingko leaf; Nature Study by Achille Quinet; Chaumet hair ornament; Two Carnations by Bartolomeo Bimbi; Chaumet rose brooch; Chaumet design for ivy tiara; Chaumet ivy tiara model; The Cedar by Philippe Lelièvre; Chaumet ivy leaf bracelet; Spring by Giuseppe Arcimboldo; Peonies by Joseph Chaumet; Chaumet grapes bracelet; Study of Lily of the Valley by Jules Fossin; Triticum Aestivum by Michel Adanso; Chaumet kingfisher; Iris by Nicolas Robert; Marc Jeanson.

Chaumet CEO, Jean-Marc Mansvelt says: "Curation by a scientist gives the exhibition a singular point of view. It challenges the viewer to look at the jewellery from different perspectives and blur the boundaries between art and science."

Works by Monet and Mapplethorpe are displayed alongside less famous creatives like Anna Atkins, whose 19th-century cyanotypes of algae look strikingly modern. "We have managed to display a very free-ranging collection of works," says Jeanson. "In giving these species visibility, artists create a connection with plants; scientists, perhaps, cannot quite inspire in the same way."

The artworks portray specific plants—there are no landscapes—and the only depictions of the human form are two Giuseppe Arcimboldo paintings on loan from the Louvre. And it's not just about flowers either. "Chaumet's relationship with plants goes beyond the purely ornamental," says Jeanson. "This show is about embracing diversity." Around 70 per cent of it is bark, buds and branches. *Botanical* was directly inspired by Chaumet archives spanning over two centuries, which include some 65,000 gouaches, alongside sketches, photographs and other materials relating to the jewels themselves. The elegant shadow of its first great customer, Napoleon's first wife Empress Joséphine, herself a passionate botanist, is never very far away.

Instead of audio guides, experts will share the stories behind the exhibits, such as a breathtaking hydrangea brooch with quivering diamond blooms set *en tremblеuse*. At once fragile and strong, it was made in 1807 as part of a parure belonging to Josephine, then passed to her daughter, Hortense, who in turn gifted it to a Benedictine abbey in Switzerland in thanks for good counsel. One of the most extraordinary jewels on show is a diamond corsage recently re-made by Chaumet in 2020 according to the original 18th-century design, which was discovered after an 18-month search of the archives.

"The exhibition will be a success if people feel an aesthetic and emotional jolt," says Mansvelt, whose enthusiasm for the project, three years in the making, is tangible. The show was conceived as an "eco-exhibition" using recyclable materials, with 90 per cent of loaned art from European institutions to minimise air transportation. It's a thought-provoking exploration of our relationship with nature, but above all, *Botanical* is about the beauty of the vegetal that has always been an inspiration for Chaumet's designers. *Botanical, Observing Beauty, Palais des Beaux-Art in Paris; June 16-September 4.* ■

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