



Fashioning Flowers **Constance Spry** gives arranging tips to the clothing designer **Hardy Amies** in 1960.

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Flowering Inferno

By [CHRISTOPHER PETKANAS](#)

When Prince George received his mother, Queen Mary, for lunch, Constance Spry, who did his flower arrangements, deployed carnations, her *bête noir*, in conventional containers, which she loathed. But when the queen wasn't around, the "flowers" were more likely to be kale and lichen-crusting branches massed in serving pieces that Spry raided, to the amusement of her royal client, from his Meissen dinner set.

No one flinches at similar combinations in unorthodox holders today, but as a practitioner of "flower decorating," a term she insisted on, Spry broke new ground rescuing humble materials that usually went out with the wheelbarrow, including grasses, berries and vegetables. As the garden writer Beverley Nichols noted, Spry was "the first floral artist who ever walked straight from the herbaceous border to the cabbage patch." There hasn't been anything truly new in floristry since Spry died in 1960 at age 73, a point of which readers of a new biography, "[The Surprising Life of Constance Spry](#)" (Macmillan), by Sue Shephard, are easily persuaded.

Whatever its factual faults (e.g., Elsie Mendl's husband was hardly wealthy), the book makes you fall utterly in love with its subject. The other life of Spry, Elizabeth Coxhead's 1975 "Constance Spry," has the same effect. In other words, I don't think it's possible to write a bad book about Spry. Even if you're not interested in flowers, such was Spry's sure, clear vision, irrepressible liveliness, quickness of mind and humanity, that flowers are neither here nor there.

If her life was a tale of ragweed to roses, she herself was as plain as her "mixed bunches" were pioneering — Spry is credited with single-handedly defeating the edict that there be only one species per vase. Following a gritty childhood as the daughter of a science teacher, she became an agent of social reform in her 20s, battling tuberculosis in Ireland under gruesome conditions. And to think she went on to dethrone the Edwardian dinner table's barricade of fern-packed epergnes. Spry waved away these and other prosaic holders in favor of junk-shop soapstone urns, fish poachers or even bird cages.

The queen withstanding, royals and cafe society were quick to realize that when working with Spry, minimal interference netted maximal results. She had full picking rights at Fort Belvedere and dined there with the Prince of Wales himself. When, as the Duke of Windsor, he married another of Spry's clients, Wallis Simpson — whom she adored despite her cluelessness about flowers — Spry did the honors with peonies and Madonna lilies.

It was "the sort of decoration Constance loved best," Coxhead wrote, "the grandeur of florist's flowers framed in the rich informality of garden picking." Spry lectured her staff on the need for discretion: "These are two of our best customers, none of you have had anything but kindness from them, and I want you to be absolutely silent and loyal." Sixteen years later, she would design the processional route for Elizabeth II's coronation. At Spry's disposal, Shephard reports, were "10 acres of flowers to be grown to bloom on exactly the right day." If the House of Windsor had reservations about hiring the same talent as the king who had abdicated in favor of his punctilious American mistress, they pretended (as they did with Cecil Beaton) that the association didn't exist, so as not to cost them a petal of pride.

As important to Spry as her royal clients were the cottagers she inspired to stick dahlias in jam jars. She appeared on "What's My Line?" but the public at large knew nothing of the woman behind the celebrity. Her first marriage, to a

coal mine manager, produced her only child but grew violent when she refused her husband sex. Though much of the material in the Spry biographies is redundant, Shephard's addresses three facts that Coxhead neglects: that Constance never legally married her second husband, Henry Spry, her boss at the Munitions Ministry during World War I; that he had an affair with her top employee; and that Constance had an affair with the cross-dressing artist Hannah Gluckstein. The last bombshell first exploded in a 1988 book on "Gluck," who dumped Spry for Nesta Obermer, a fast-living American, but not before recording her love in delicate paintings of "Connie's" compositions.

Shephard's book begins with the dust-up over a Spry exhibition in 2004 at the [Design Museum](#) in London. The show so offended James Dyson, the museum's chairman, that it was a deciding factor in his resignation. Terence Conran, the founder of the museum, referred to Spry's "high-society mimsiness" (as in "miserable" plus "flimsiness") and questioned its "suitability" for the institution.

The limp old question about the floral arts — major or minor? — is still being asked, as it will be forever. If a botanical painting by an old master like Brueghel is a masterpiece, why not the arrangement itself? Spry didn't copy the great 16th- and 17th-century Dutch and Flemish flower painters, but she was influenced by their sumptuousness, texture, line and color. Are vacuum cleaners worthier of a design show than one of Spry's brilliantly judged centerpieces, a sighing tumble of figs and agapanthus seed heads, rhubarb leaves and marrow blossoms, peas and poppies? We know what Dyson thinks.

Lost in the museum brawl was Spry's most important message: that flowers are an intrinsic, necessary part of interior decoration. Many choked on the irony of Conran objecting to the exhibition, given that his retail colossus preaches her gospel and shares her goal of democratizing style. "When you visit one of Conran's shops," wrote the poet and author James Fenton, "and find some amusing table decoration — a nice little aquarium full of broad beans or whatever some zany and fetching assistant has thought up that day — all that derives from Constance Spry."



Wizard of Vase A 1947 photograph of Spry's flower shop on South Audley Street in London