

**Scottish artist Rory McEwen's luminous plant portraits debut at
Davis Museum, celebrating nature's timeless beauty**
Free exhibition open to public: September 26 to December 15, 2024



Rory McEwen (Scottish, 1932-1982), Tulip 'Julia Farnese' rose feather, 1976. Watercolour on vellum, Private collection. © Estate of Rory McEwen

LINK TO IMAGES: <https://www.dropbox.com/home/Rory%20McEwen%202024>

WELLESLEY, MASS. (September 2024) - ***Rory McEwen: A New Perspective on Nature*** presents the vibrant career of the renowned Scottish artist, Rory McEwen (1932-1982). Focusing on his remarkable paintings of flowers and plants, the exhibition reveals McEwen's lifelong exploration of light and color. The exhibition portrays his unique concept of the natural object and flora's timeless, universal beauty and horticultural wonder. Over the course of his career, with his all-embracing perspective of modern art, McEwen developed a distinctive style, painting on vellum and using large empty backgrounds on which his plant portraits seem to float. In his paintings, he forged his own personal interpretation of twentieth-century modernism, portraying individual flowers,

leaves and vegetables as subject matter, “as a way to get as close as possible to what I perceive as the truth, my truth of the time in which I live.”

McEwen grew up in Scotland, surrounded by his five brothers and one sister at Marchmont House (www.marchmonthouse.com), where he learned to draw flowers at an early age. At school at Eton, in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle and at Trinity College, Cambridge, he came in contact with the work of the eighteenth-century flower painters of France, who recorded plants on vellum for the French kings, and later for Napoleon's wife, the Empress Joséphine. McEwen did not fully realize his talent, however, until years later, when upon finishing a tour of duty in 1952 with the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, he picked up a brush and found that “[his] hand had unknowingly educated itself.”

An accomplished blues musician as well as artist, McEwen initially pursued a career in music; he toured the United States in 1956, playing throughout the country with his brother Alexander, and studying the guitar styles of Leadbelly and southern folk and blues music. The brothers recorded the LP *Scottish Songs and Ballads* for the Smithsonian's prestigious Folkways Records label and appeared twice on the *Ed Sullivan show*. Upon returning to Britain, McEwen became best known as a guitarist and singer, appearing nightly on the BBC's *Tonight show* and in 1963 produced, presented, and performed on the seminal music program, *Hullabaloo*.

McEwen's true gift, however, was in painting, and from 1964 until his untimely death in 1982, McEwen concentrated solely on his work as a visual artist. “The ability to give life and luminosity to a spectrum of emotions is what gives McEwen's work those qualities that distinguish it from the ordinary,” asserts Ruth L. A. Stiff, Curator of the exhibition. “As Rory McEwen conceded to Wilfrid Blunt, his drawing master at Eton, ‘I have never really been interested in botanical illustration per se, but rather in that moment when painting starts to breathe poetry.’”

McEwen worked with a remarkable attention to minute detail given the smooth surface of the vellum on which he chose to paint, and the challenging nature of watercolor, his preferred medium. A posthumous 1988 exhibition of his work at the Serpentine Gallery in London is considered one of the major turning points in the development of contemporary botanical art, and his techniques have had a lasting impact on botanical artists today. Both the Queen Mother and her daughter, Princess Margaret, Countess of Snowdon, collected works by McEwen, and several of his paintings hung in the White House during President John F. Kennedy's tenure.

His botanical work predated and outlasted all others, and in it, paradoxically, he was most truly an artist of his time. For while a good many artists could work in these idioms of modernism, none could paint an auricula or an onion as he could, while possessing the consciousness of a modern artist.

—Douglas Hall, Keeper of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 1960-1984



Rory McEwen with perspex sculptures, 1967 ©Estate of Rory McEwen

Remaining authentic is evidenced throughout McEwen's oeuvre, and particularly in his later work, metal and Perspex sculptures, in which he explored abstract concepts. McEwen was attuned to the conceptual and performative work of other artists of his time, including German Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys.

Rory McEwen: A New Perspective on Nature presents 85 watercolor works on both vellum and paper, representing a wide range of the artist's impressive work. It includes works on loan from the Collection of the McEwen Family Estate, the Collection of Mellon's Oak Spring Garden Foundation, the Collection of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the Shirley Sherwood Collection as well as works drawn from numerous private collections, most of which have never been seen by the American public.

"McEwen's work presents many unique opportunities for interdisciplinary learning at the Davis, and we are particularly excited to collaborate with the Botanic Gardens and Paulson Ecology of Place Initiative as we concentrate on botanical illustration this semester," said the Davis's Interim Co-Director Amanda Gilvin. "At the Davis, we see ***Rory McEwen: A New Perspective on Nature*** as a springboard for studying multiple perspectives on nature, in order to better understand how people have shaped their relationships to plants and their relationships to one another with plants, over the last five centuries."

By presenting many of the well-known seventeenth-and eighteenth-century artists who influenced him –with works by Robert, Redouté, Ehret, Aubriet as well as early illuminated manuscripts and folio volumes drawn from the Mellon Collection, Oak Spring Garden Foundation and from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew – the exhibition offers viewers an unparalleled context to explore the rich inspiration for McEwen's artistic vision, honed during his early years at Eton and Cambridge.

To enhance viewers' understanding of McEwen's critical role in shaping new generations of artists, the exhibition also includes the work of numerous contemporary works by artists who in turn continue McEwen's artistic legacy, on loan from the extensive contemporary botanical Collection of Dr. Shirley Sherwood.

The exhibition honors three women who have played pivotal roles in Rory McEwen's life, work and legacy—Mrs. Rory (Romana) McEwen, Mrs. Paul (Bunny) Mellon, and Dr. Shirley Sherwood. The exhibition's U.S. tour opened at the Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, South Carolina in late January. After the Davis, the exhibition continues on to The Society of the Four Arts, Palm Beach, Florida and The Driehaus Museum, Chicago, Illinois in 2025.

McEwen's work can be found in private and public collections across the globe, including the British Museum; Victoria and Albert Museum; Tate; National Gallery of Modern Art, Scotland; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; Hunt Institute, Pittsburgh; and Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The exhibition, ***Rory McEwen: A New Perspective on Nature***, is presented by the Davis Museum at Wellesley College in association with Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (London) and Oak Spring Garden Foundation (Virginia); tour management by Landau Traveling Exhibitions, Los Angeles, California.

The Gerard B. Lambert Foundation has provided major support for the exhibition. Generous support for the Davis presentation is provided by Wellesley College Friends of Art at the Davis, the Alice G. Spink Art Fund, the Constance Rhind Robey '81 Fund for Museum Exhibitions, and the Kathryn Wasserman Davis '28 Fund for World Cultures.

ABOUT THE DAVIS MUSEUM

A vital resource for communities on the Wellesley College campus and beyond, the Davis Museum is one of the oldest and most acclaimed academic fine art museums in the United States. Its signature Rafael Moneo building houses collections that span the history of art worldwide, from antiquity to the present. Guided by commitments to diversity and inclusion, excellence and innovation, and access for all, the Davis is at the core of Wellesley's liberal arts mission of educating women to make a difference in the world. With exceptional encyclopedic holdings, rotating special exhibitions, and enriching public programs, the Davis warmly welcomes all visitors, including scholars and students of all ages. For visitor information: <https://www.wellesley.edu/davismuseum/visit/directions>.

ABOUT WELLESLEY COLLEGE AND THE ARTS

The Wellesley College arts curriculum and the highly acclaimed Davis Museum are integral components of the College's liberal arts education. Departments and programs from across the campus enliven the community with world-class programming—classical and popular music, visual arts, theatre, dance, author readings, symposia, and lectures by some of today's leading artists and creative thinkers—most of which are free and open to the public. Since 1875, Wellesley College has been a leader in providing an excellent liberal arts education for women who will make a difference in the world. Its 500-acre campus near Boston is home to some 2,400 undergraduate students from 49 states and 58 countries.

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