

# Tripping through history with tulips



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MAY 11, 2018 21:17 IST  
 UPDATED: MAY 11, 2018 21:17 IST

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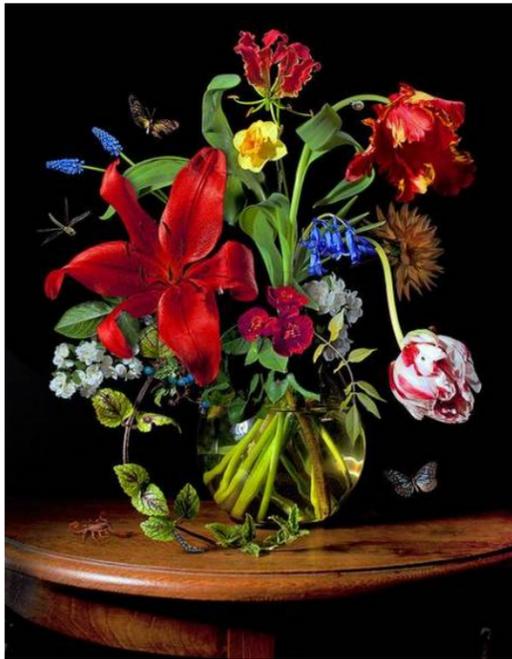
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## Dutch photographer Bas Meeuws' still-lives of flowers is as much a journey through the past as it's an art show

Can a single flower be used to help trace the history of a country? Can something as banal as flowers tell us about a nation's evolution? Of its culture, of its socio-economic temper and its art? In the case of what the tulip is to the Netherlands, this seems more than plausible. The tulip, not native to Holland, was introduced to the country during the seventeenth century, a time also known as the Dutch Golden Age,

owing to the state's prosperity in different spheres like trade, art, science and military reaching their zenith. The popularity of the flower led to 'tulip mania' or 'tulip fever' - a phenomenon where the prices for certain bulbs of the flower went through the roof, before finally hitting rock-bottom with a crash of the bulb commodity market in 1637. The tulip however survived the crash, becoming a national symbol instead. One that Holland has, alongside other exotic flowers, come to cherish through the centuries.

Photographer Bas Meeuws' new show at Tarq - *Spring in the Wintertime*, is ample proof of this reverence. A collection of 43 images, shot and compiled by Meeuws in collaboration with Tasveer and Dauble, the exhibition travels to the city after its run in Bengaluru in March this year. It brings together images from various bodies of the artist's work, which include his previously unseen *Mughal Botanicals & Mughal Still Lives*, specially created for his India showing. The work, as Meeuws claims, fall into a genre of their own, much like history painting that alludes to older work done by Dutch and Flemish masters. "History photography is a genre that has started around 2010. Dutch art historian [who specialised in photography] Maartje van den Heuvel first mentioned it after [photographer] Erwin Olaf's remake of old paintings in Leiden," shares Meeuws in an email.

Inspired by the 'flower paintings' of artists like Ambrosius Bosschaert, Jan Brueghel, Jacob Marrel and Jacques de Gheyn, Meeuws' images hark back to a time in European art, part of the larger Baroque movement. But unlike the Baroque style known for its high drama and extravagance, the Dutch school, strayed from the norm, repudiating excess and embracing a detailed realism of the everyday instead. Though sub-categorised as still life, the work is no different from a Vermeer that celebrates light caressing its subjects - laypersons and their equally ordinary surroundings. The focus here never veers from the subject in question, be it person or plant.

### In sharp focus

Meeuws' assortment of flowers, seem to emerge yet elapse into their inky black backdrops, reveling in sharpness, flaunting texture, pore and vein. This almost

Though Meeuws has been studying works by Dutch and Flemish masters since 2009, his interests are now global. “During my visit to India in 2015 I started researching Mughal flower arrangements which sometimes do not differ that much from the Dutch, and sometimes differ a lot being more symmetrical and almost graphic. I'm studying more Oriental, Far East, Japanese, Chinese arrangement styles and [have] started with a series of photographic homage to Sanyu (Chinese painter 1901-1966).” His research included looking up Mughal architecture with its floral patterns and ornaments, with extensive travels to Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. Meeuws came to realise that the flowers featured in Mughal art were often abstract and fictionalised and his goal became to “...find a way to translate those abstracted flowers into my hyper-realistic photography.”

### **Beauty through the ages**

With the *Tulips* series, Meeuws' focus returns to the singular bulb featured in each frame – a direct ode to the *Tulpenboeken* – illustrated albums of tulip varieties, which were essentially catalogues for growers, dealers and collectors back in the day. Which in turn is reminiscent of Mughal albums inspired by the West that often employed floral motifs in the borders of their manuscripts. While historically relevant, one wonders how Meeuws' work would be perceived today. He reminds us of how the Dutch Golden Age oil paintings in fact reflected the wealth – usually exotic treasures like flowers, vases etc. amassed by the Dutch East India Company's trade successes. His hope then is to draw us to valuing nature, beauty and the history that these flowers symbolise.

Much like Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* retells the Opium Wars through fiction, Meeuws' work too opens up a pathway to a historical past worth remembering. The bouquets, often “impossible constructions of flowers from different seasons,” cease to be just flowers, breaking barriers of time and space to help the viewer teleport herself to another realm. “I try to summon up the feelings in myself that the people looking at the picture then would have had. The awe that they must have felt for all the expensive and exotic flowers together,” he writes in his note. Whether the show will actually manage to evoke this sense of awe, of course remains to be seen.

Spring in the Wintertime *is ongoing at Tarq, Colaba until May 31*

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