

CHERRY



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and Mary Newman*

REAKTION BOOKS

*To our husbands, Tom and John, who have been with us
every step of our cherry journey*

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Cherry blossoms in Fukuoka, Japan.

Introduction



I want to do to you what spring does with the cherry trees

PABLO NERUDA¹

The appreciation and obvious pleasure gained by simply observing the cherry fruit or its stunning blossoms is universal. Everyone likes cherries, and seemingly no one can resist the beauty of the flowering cherry tree. But what is most fascinating is the range of metaphorical meanings and almost visceral sensations conjured up by both the blossoms and the fruit of this amazing tree.

The ripe, sensuous, irresistible fruit can symbolize such divergent concepts as fertility, innocence and seductiveness. The blossoms can foretell the new beginnings of life in the spring, fertility writ large. They also represent the beautiful, fleeting and fragile quality of life, as well as the sadness of premature death, or sometimes even the Japanese concept of the 'perfect death'.

The cherry can also represent something as fundamental as the letter 'c' in a child's alphabet book, or even the primary colour red. The double-stemmed shape is instantly and universally recognizable, so much so that one of the first food emojis used in social media was of two cherries, symbolizing the situation of being in a relationship. Helena, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1605), refers to the double cherry as a close relationship:

So we grew together,
 Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,
 But yet a union in partition;
 Two lovely berries moulded on one stem . . .

The seventeenth-century painter Titian, the twentieth-century writer D. H. Lawrence and pop culture figures like humorist Erma Bombeck and graphic artist Andy Warhol are among those who have used the cherry as a symbol in a variety of creative ways. Even if one has never read Bombeck's book *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?*, the sentiment is universally understood. Cherries and their blossoms have been the subject of songs in many cultures, from the Japanese *sakura* songs celebrating the blossoms from as early as the eighth century CE, to the 1866 French song 'Le Temps des cerises' (Cherry Time), and the 1966 'Cherry, Cherry' by singer-songwriter Neil Diamond. The message in the Palme d'Or prize-winning Iranian film *The Taste of Cherry* (1997) is that eating cherries can be one of the small but intense pleasures in life that might even save someone from suicide. In the last scene of Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick*, when the ship is in its final battle with the great white whale, second mate Stubb cries out for 'one red cherry ere we die!'

Philosophers have used the image of cherries to explain complex concepts of beauty and, in some cases, reality itself. Scholars have used the fruit-laden cherry branch to explain Kant's concept of pleasure, good and beauty. Kant based his analogy on 'Berkeley's Cherry'. George Berkeley, in *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), argues that 'to be' is 'to be perceived', using a cherry as an example:

I see this cherry, I feel it, I taste it: and I am sure nothing cannot be seen, or felt, or tasted: it is therefore real. Take away the sensations of softness, moisture, redness, tartness, and you take away the cherry, since it is not a being distinct from sensations. A cherry, I say, is nothing but a congeries of sensible impressions, or ideas perceived by various senses.

Fruit-laden cherry
branch, Fundão,
Portugal.



In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), Freud used the example of a child's dream of eating cherries to characterize dreams as a form of wish fulfilment, embodying the core of Freudian theory.

So powerful is the word 'cherry' that it creates a universally descriptive image in one's mind that helps to define terms and expressions that have little or nothing to do with the fruit or tree: cherry tomatoes, cherry-picking, cherry bomb, bowl of cherries, cherry on top. To lose one's cherry is but one of many sexual phrases from urban slang which actually have their origins in sixteenth-century poetry.

Cherry can also refer to something new or unused, or to a novice. In contemporary slang, a cherry refers to a first offender. During the Vietnam War, aviators lost their cherry after taking their first hits by enemy fire. There is even a meaning for 'cherry' in ten-pin bowling: the striking down of only the forward pin or pins in attempting to make a spare. Chapter Five examines cherry imagery as an element in mythology and religion, as well as in the arts and popular culture.



We begin the book with the origins of the cherry tree, its distribution around the world and the ways it is cultivated. We look at how the fruit is harvested, processed, marketed and turned into various food products. Cherries and cherry bark are used as an ingredient in medicine, and cherries have even been called a superfood because of their antioxidant properties. On the other hand, there are toxins in the leaves, stems, stones (or pits) and bark that can kill people and animals.

But this isn't just a book about the ubiquitous cherry fruit; we also discuss the cherry tree's various components, such as its blossoms, wood, bark, leaves, stones and sap. For example, in the Middle East the kernel of the cherry stone is used as a flavouring for many sweets. In European folklore cherry wood is thought to make excellent magic wands, and a blossoming cherry bough could predict an impending marriage opportunity.

Recognizing the economic value of cherries, tourist departments in cherry-growing regions of countries such as Portugal, France and Italy have created 'cherry routes', from train trips to hiking trails. In Japan a number of historically famous cherry blossom viewing spots can only be reached by boat. The focus of all these events is to capitalize on people's widespread desire to experience cherries as both a blossoming harbinger of spring and a glorious, highly perishable early summer fruit.

This book should be considered a 'cherry route' of sorts. We hope you enjoy the journey. Pun intended, we have cherry-picked the most interesting facts and stories about the cherry from the vast amount of information we uncovered. We look forward to sharing with you the energy, vitality and sense of renewal implied in the lines of Neruda's poem.



'Early Morello' variety in a watercolour by Mary Daisy Arnold, early 20th century.

five
Literature, Legend and Lore



There is a garden in her face . . .
There cherries grow that none may buy
Til cherry ripe themselves will doe cry

THOMAS CAMPION¹

Human beings are attracted to bright, shiny objects. Research shows that we equate ‘shiny’ with ‘pretty’ – gold or diamonds, for example; but we also are drawn to objects that serve our innate needs. Studies suggest that ‘shiny’ reminds us of water. The colour red both warns and attracts us. Red cherry fruit against green leaves is a powerful complementary chromatic relationship. It is not surprising, then, that cherries, the shiniest, sweetest and brightest of red fruits, are irresistible to most of us.

In Chinese culture red is associated with joy, happiness and good luck. It is the colour of choice for traditional Chinese wedding dresses, and red clothing is worn during the celebration of Chinese New Year, when children receive red envelopes of money. Ripe red cherries are also considered a lucky gift, the red symbolizing prosperity and fortune, and the roundness of the fruit symbolizing perfection and eternity.

Humans are naturally attracted to sweet foods, a preference that begins with our first taste of breast milk. Sweets are the reward food of childhood, and, when the choice is fruit, cherries are among the sweetest of all.

Cherries are represented in every genre of painting, from still-life, landscape and portraiture to history and religious painting. It is a deliberate choice on the part of artists to paint cherries: their season is short and they are fragile. They are not an easy fruit to set up in a still-life or genre scene, yet their colour, shape and shine are alluring.

The earliest known cherry illustrations are found in classical Greek and Roman times, when artists delighted in portraying everyday objects such as flowers and food. One of the most unusual representations of food is in the collection of the Vatican Museums,



Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Vertumnus*, c. 1590–91, oil on canvas.

Vintage Valentine's Day postcard, 'Lips of Cherry', early 20th century.



where cherries – and even cherry stones, along with other food waste – are depicted on a mosaic tile floor fragment. The term for this clever variation of *trompe l'œil* is *asarotos òtikos*, or 'unswept floor'. The high status of the wealthy Roman host is brought home to his guests by the artistic rendering of remains of a luxurious meal.²

A Roman mural showing a sour cherry tree is preserved on the garden courtyard walls in the House of the Orchard at Pompeii, Italy, which was buried when Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE. Birds, particularly parrots, and cherries were a popular subject in murals discovered in the ruins of Pompeii. A specific type of cherry known as 'bird cherry' continues to grow in that area.

During medieval and Renaissance times Christian symbolism developed into a complex language that assigned allegorical meaning



Wall-painting of birds and cherries, Pompeii, 1st century CE.

to many fruits and flowers, including the cherry, which many associated with femininity, fertility and the Virgin Mary. A cherry tree is listed among the trees and flowers planted in a nobleman's garden in the French allegorical love poem *Roman de la Rose* (The Story of the Rose). In an illustrated manuscript of that poem in the collection of the British Library, all the trees and flowers in the lush, walled space symbolic of the Garden of Paradise, including the cherry trees, miraculously come to fruit and blossom simultaneously.³

In the painting known as *The Garden of Paradise*, by an unknown Rhenish artist, the Virgin Mary sits in a garden paradise, safe from evil and corruption. She reads a prayer book as the baby Jesus plays nearby on a harp-like instrument. St Dorothy is picking cherries from a tree covered in fruit and placing them in a basket, which becomes an identifiable emblem of her sainthood. The basket refers to the miracle of fruit and flowers that appeared in her empty basket as she was martyred. The harvesting of the fruit could allude to the apocryphal story of the cherry tree bending down to allow Joseph to pick the fruit on the Holy Family's Flight into Egypt. It is possible that the twisted trunk of the cherry tree is meant to invoke an image of the serpent in the Garden of Eden.⁴

The symbolism and meaning of cherries in the iconography of Christian paintings, particularly of the Holy Family or the Madonna and Child, have been variously explained as representing the blood of Christ or referring to the Fruits of Paradise. The sweet red fruit



Upper-Rhenish Master, *The Garden of Paradise*, c. 1410–25, tempera on wood, showing St Dorothy picking cherries in the enclosed garden.



Frans Ykens, *Madonna and Child with Attendant Angels in a floral cartouche with cherries*, c. 1650, oil on panel.



Unicorn Tapestries: The Hunters Enter the Woods, c. 1495–1505, with cherry trees and fruit in the centre of the tapestry.

of the cherry symbolizes the sweetness of character that is the result of good works, or the delights of the blessed.

Set in an equally miraculous, lush environment, *The Hunt of the Unicorn* is a series of seven large tapestries woven around the year 1500. The action and images of the unicorn are modelled on a medieval stag hunt. They can be interpreted symbolically as a tale of lovers and a metaphor for the life and death of Christ, or as a meditation on the voyage of the soul in the afterlife. In any case, the cherry tree shown prominently in the first tapestry of the series stands as a

symbol of both purity and innocence, as well as the fertility that all fruit represents.

Many of the wall tapestries from that time had fruit-and-flower garland borders, a motif derived from the Roman practice of draping garlands or swags of fruit and flowers on the sarcophagi of the deceased as part of the burial ritual. 'Garland paintings' became a specific genre in sixteenth-century Flanders, and cherries were often



Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1490–1510, oil on panel, detail of centre panel showing figures frolicking with cherries.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434, oil on panel. Cherries are just visible through the window behind the man, indicating summer.

included along with other fruits to create a motif of abundance. This was a bit of artistic licence since in real life the fruits would not have all ripened at the same time.

Cherries are a prominent motif in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, a fascinating and mysterious work painted by Hieronymus Bosch



Detail of cherries from
Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*,
1434, oil on panel.

between 1490 and 1510. The central panel of the triptych is the most difficult to explain, as it is neither heaven nor hell. One curious section of it depicts an owl perched on top of an egg that covers two dancing figures decorated with cherries. Equally curiously, a cherry is being offered to a bird that balances on a reclining human foot in the front right corner of the panel. Though the interpretation of the symbols in the painting may have been obvious to educated viewers of that

time, today there are many conflicting interpretations of Bosch's symbolism, and very little agreement on what the painting actually means. Art historian Peter Glum suggests, 'Four women carry cherry-like fruits on their heads, perhaps a symbol of pride at the time, as has been deduced from the contemporaneous saying: Don't eat cherries with great lords – they'll throw the pits in your face.'⁵ Another art historian, Michael Beyer, suggests, 'The voluptuous nude figures can be interpreted as either portraying man in a primal state of nature and peace, or the beauty and allure that the Devil uses to encourage sin.'⁶ Alternatively, the American writer Peter S. Beagle describes the painting as an 'erotic derangement that turns us all into voyeurs, a place filled with the intoxicating air of perfect liberty'.⁷

Cherries have been considered symbols of fertility and the sweetness of love, as represented in the 1434 *Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck. A tiny slice of the outside world showing a cherry tree in fruit is barely visible through the window in the upper left, indicating the summer season. Strangely, there is no known explanation of why the couple is depicted richly dressed in heavy fur-trimmed winter clothing.

While Van Eyck depicted the cherry tree in a secular, domestic setting, many artists used the fruit image in a Christian context. Cherries as Christian symbols, the Fruits of Paradise, the heavenly reward for a virtuous life, may symbolize the purity and innocence



School of Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin and the Child Holding a Branch of Cherries*, c. 1765, oil on canvas.

that prevailed in the Garden of Eden before man's temptation and sin. There are numerous paintings of the Madonna and Child, and the Holy Family, in which baby Jesus is holding cherries or cherries appear as a detail in the scene. A good example is the painting *Madonna and Child* from the workshop of Verrocchio painted around the year 1470 and now displayed at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

One of the most famous depictions of this theme is *The Madonna of the Cherries*, painted by Titian in 1515. St Joseph is seen in the shadows on the left, and Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, is on the right of the Madonna, while the child John presents cherries to the Madonna and baby Jesus.



Workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1470, tempera on wood, with cherries symbolizing the blood of Christ.

Another sixteenth-century Flemish painter, or possibly a studio of painters, known as the Master of the Parrot, created works depicting the Madonna and Child with cherries as well as a parrot. A bird that miraculously takes on human characteristics of speech, the parrot is a metaphor for the essential Christian miracle of the virgin birth and appears in numerous examples of paintings of the Madonna and Child. From as far back as the early Roman wall paintings, the depiction of birds with cherries has been a symbolic combination favoured by artists.

Still-life painting in the western European tradition emerged from the symbolism of earlier Christian painting and developed into a complex visual language during medieval and Renaissance times. The realistic details in the religious paintings began to show up in contemporary surroundings, and eventually became the subjects of the painting themselves, with the religious narrative in the background. Joos van Cleve, in the early sixteenth century, painted several versions of the Holy Family, reflecting the growing trend of portraying



Titian, *Madonna of the Cherries*, c. 1515, oil on canvas.



Abraham Brueghel (1631–1697), *Still-life*, oil on canvas. The fruit and flowers include cherries.

the Madonna in an everyday environment. According to researchers at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, when an artist places fruit in a prominent place in the foreground of a domestic setting, he is referencing Christ's incarnation and sacrifice.⁸

Images of edible fruits, including cherries, are found in many genre paintings such as market and kitchen scenes, and can be appreciated on different levels by different audiences for their religious and secular symbolism, as well as their delightful, even astonishing, realism. The seventeenth century saw an explosion of interest in still-life paintings, particularly in the Netherlands. Dutch merchant ships returning from the Far East and East Indies trade centres brought back new plants, precious porcelain and rare trade goods. This new class of wealthy merchants became avid collectors and commissioners of art, including paintings depicting exotic plants and flowers from every season, sometimes unrealistically portrayed in a single bouquet. The price of a still-life painting for the patron would have been determined by its size and the number and type of details included,

with cherries favoured for their attractive bright red colouring and shiny reflective surfaces.⁹

The Dutch enthusiasm for new optical devices such as the camera obscura, the telescope and the microscope also created a new demand and appreciation for scientific observation and illustration. New agricultural technology and horticultural innovations, including the use of fertilizers and irrigation systems, led to abundant food yields that were reflected in kitchen and market scenes.

While the Protestant Dutch were not interested in decorating their homes (or their churches) with religious scenes, one of the main themes of the Dutch masters was the idea of the 'vanity of vanities' or *vanitas*. The impermanence of all things and the proximity of death were the topics that most worried Protestant theologians in the opulent bourgeois society of that time. Cherries, with their short harvesting season and limited shelf life, represented, and continue to represent, a culinary luxury. The materialistic display of conspicuous consumption was both a matter of pride and a warning of the sin of culinary excess.

A subgenre of still-life, breakfast paintings illustrate simple fare typical of a Dutch meal. The food was often depicted on a table with a dark background and a monochromatic colour scheme. As with *vanitas* paintings, the intent was to remind viewers to follow moderation in all things, as in the consumption of cherries, which were certainly not among life's necessities.

Unlike contemporaries who painted beautiful portraits of upper-class ladies and children in their finest, Caravaggio, a seventeenth-century artist who often used fruit imagery, was particularly known for his paintings of everyday commoners who 'never washed their hands before eating'.¹⁰ In *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, a young man is reaching for sensual cherries with filthy fingers. Art critic Jonathan Jones writes, 'These cherries and all Caravaggio's fruits are not so much full meals as sex snacks.'¹¹ The young man recoils in pain and surprise as a small lizard he had not noticed in the pile of spoiled fruit nips his finger. Painted in typical Caravaggio style, emphasizing



Caravaggio, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, c. 1593, oil on canvas.

sharp contrasts of dark and light, the flowers and fruits are detailed and highly realistic, including both dark and light red cherries. Jones continues:

The painting also contains complex sexual symbolism, which would have been quite clear to educated audiences in

Caravaggio's day: The bared shoulder and the rose behind the boy's ear indicate excessive vanity and a wish to be seen and admired, the cherries symbolize sexual lust, the third finger had the same meaning in the seventeenth century as it does today, and the lizard was a metaphor for the penis. The boy becomes aware, with a shock, of the pains of physical love.¹²

The fruit represents good and the lizard evil in Caravaggio's unique illustration of the battle between the two forces. Even darker and more frightening is Rembrandt's version of the *Rape of Ganymede*, a Greek myth painted for a Dutch Calvinist patron in 1635, in which a dark eagle violently carries away a plump cherubic baby who is gripping a bunch of cherries while crying and urinating in fright. Ganymede, who Homer tells us is the most beautiful of mortals, is abducted by Zeus, who appears here in the form of an eagle, to serve as a cup-bearer for the gods on Mount Olympus. While Rembrandt has chosen to represent Ganymede as an infant, he is most often portrayed as a beautiful young man. The myth suggests the Greek social practice of pederasty, described as an acceptable erotic relationship between an adult male and an adolescent male.

Art historian Margarita Russell suggests that in Rembrandt's time the bunch of cherries would have been recognized as a symbol of purity. 'Rembrandt must have seen examples of the motif; he probably knew the original or a copy of Titian's *Madonna of the Cherries*, which was once in the Netherlands.'¹³

Rembrandt's use of cherries is likely meant to be a substitute for the cup of nectar that Ganymede offered the gods of Olympus in other illustrations of this story. In a Christian interpretation of this pagan theme, the beautiful baby Ganymede represents the pure human soul who was presented as a symbolic gift to God. This was possibly a theme that would have comforted a family whose child was taken from them by death and is now represented as being with God.



Rembrandt, *Abduction of Ganymede*, 1635, oil on canvas. The terrified child is clinging to a bunch of cherries.

Not as terrifying as Rembrandt's eagle and more reminiscent of the Master of the Parrot are paintings that depict children feeding cherries to parrots or other exotic birds, which wealthy families often kept as pets. Representing luxury and exotica at a time when new worlds were under exploration, birds were also seen as symbols of the soul and are a recurring theme of childhood innocence.



Christina Robertson, *Children with Parrot*, 1850, oil on canvas. Portraits of children and families with birds and cherries were a common theme among the wealthy in the 19th century.

The Scottish painter Christina Robertson (1796–1854) lived and worked in Russia and was commissioned by the Russian imperial family to paint numerous portraits, including several of their children, who always appeared sweet and virtuous. In one portrait, titled *Children with Parrot*, now in the Hermitage Museum, the cherry theme suggests the children's innocence. Many portraits of children include baskets of cherries.

In *The Cherry Pickers*, a work that was highly criticized yet very popular with his patrons, François Bouche portrays rural innocence

with a hint of eroticism. The boy and girl in the painting are too stylishly overdressed for the job of harvesting cherries, indicating they are more at play than seriously working.

The painting *A Bearded Man and a Woman Feeding Cherries to a Parrot*, by the seventeenth-century Flemish artist Jacob Jordaens, shows an elegantly dressed young woman who could be assumed to be a 'kept woman' or high-class courtesan, a lovely creature who is 'caged' or kept as an exotic bird. The erotic symbolism of both cherries and the parrot kept as a pet would have been obvious to viewers of Jordaens' time.



Jacob Jordaens, *A Bearded Man and a Woman Feeding Cherries to a Parrot*, c. 1637–40, oil on canvas.