Camellia, a funeral plant in western culture

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Since the beginning of the human race, men have always honoured the dead in some way. Indeed, the burial ceremony is a way of honouring the dead, of showing man’s awareness of the role played by death and, consequently, a criterion of humanisation in itself.

Among the many rituals linked to burials, the use of flowers is present in all kinds of cultures and has a millennia-long tradition. The strong symbolism of these rituals is expressed in different ways by different cultures, using the local flora.

Despite their differences, present-day cemeteries in the western world are the product of the hygienist and functional trends of the mid-18th century and our eagerness to deconsecrate death, to remove it from churches and to secularize the management of burials. Only the second of these developments was entirely successful. Nowadays, most cemeteries are under municipal management. However, the profusion of Christian symbols and texts (epitaphs) on graves clearly reveals that the Christian interpretation of death is still widely held in most Western European societies and their sphere of influence.

Not all symbols and traditions are universal. Symbols are culture-dependent and change as the world changes. Every symbol is a form of language, a means of communication that is only successful if the recipients are able to interpret them. They only have a meaning within a culture with a linguistic environment that has the necessary decoding keys. The language of flowers in Shakespeare’s Hamlet is different from the language of flowers in Álvaro Cunqueiro’s Don Hamlet, which deals with the same tragedy of the prince tormented by the murder of his father and the unjust usurpation of the throne that should have been his. The language of flowers, which plays a crucial symbolic role in the story, belongs to the Anglo-Saxon view of the world in Shakespeare’s play while the connotations are typically Christian/Catholic in the play by Álvaro Cunqueiro (Jarazo, 2006).

In Japan camellias have long been associated with noble families and samurai warriors, particularly the so-called Higo camellias, a type of camellia named after Higo (present-day Kumamoto), a region of the Island of Kyushu where traditionally the plant has been cultivated. Higo camellias are simple flowers with 200-300 very striking yellow stamina in the centre of the flower.

During the Edo period (1603-1867), Higo camellias were only cultivated by noble families, priests and warriors and were grown to please the emperor and honour dead relatives. Consequently, few could enjoy the beauty of these flowers. Samurai warriors greatly valued these plants for their beautiful flowers in winter, braving the low temperatures. As a result, the plant was seen as a symbol of endurance, bravery and fearlessness, virtues typically associated with the samurai.

In the 1860s there was a troubled period in Japan and dramatic political and social changes eventually brought about the end of the Tokugawa shogunate and the rise of the Emperor Meiji. After the long siege of Kumamoto Castle and the ensuing hostilities between the two rival factions, Saigō Takamori, the last samurai, died. After the disappearance of the samurai, Higo camellias were no longer widely cultivated and only a few plants remained in private cemeteries and gardens, both civil and religious. What had once been the magnificent symbol of samurai bravery and of funerary tradition was forgotten until the 1950s, when the Hana Ren Society and then the Higo Camellia Society were created to locate and rescue the long forgotten cultivars. Nowadays camellias are once more one of the plant symbols most commonly seen in Japanese cemeteries (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Cemetery of Nippori (Tokyo, Japan)
In the early 18th century, Mary Wortley Montagu promoted the use of flowers as a secret language among a small group of people. Later, Charlotte de la Tour, probably a pseudonym of Louise Cortambert, made a universal phenomenon of this practice with her book *Le langage des fleurs*, published in the early 19th century (1818). The practice established itself in elite societies and since then there have been many books dealing with this language of the flowers. Today, information about the language of flowers is transmitted via electronic means thanks to social networks in a way hard to imagine only 25 years ago. Modern social media offer lists of plants, including camellias, with the special meaning for each one. Plants have become symbols of specific sentiments, doubtless no longer secret, related in some cases to the colour of the flowers or to the symmetry and arrangement of the petals.

Some of the meanings relating to camellia flowers are a good example of that western symbolic language. Camellia (in general): admiration, perfection, good luck, falling in love, gratitude, passion, sophistication, excellence, ‘My fate is in your hands’. Pink camellia: ‘May you have a long life’. Red camellia: ‘You are the flame of my heart’. White camellia: ‘You are wonderful’, ‘You are perfection’.

It is not easy to incorporate a symbol out of context. However, camellias are not entirely alien to the culture and sentiments or the funerary customs of Western societies, as can be seen in these symbolic practices. The characteristics of camellias make them a suitable plant for the material and symbolic requirements described by C. Barallat (1885) for funerary flora. They appear in European literature and are widely cultivated in many European countries, also in cemeteries (Figure 2).

The vivid, dark green of the perennial leaves of camellias convey solemnity but at the same time brings radiance to this resting place of the dead. It is here in the graveyard where the joy of a glimpse of sun, which is so closely linked to funerary traditions and the resurrection, brings a ray of hope as the spirits of those who have left us seem to wander through the dense foliage in the form of flowers.

Camellias, unlike other tree-like species, are covered with beautiful flowers during the saddest time of the year. The flowers stand out against the dark background of foliage as if the souls of those who rest close by were looking out of their vaults. Is there a better adornment than the beauty of camellias for a place full of the nostalgia and memories, which invade our soul and fill us with melancholy? In a cemetery there is nothing to compare with this austere tree, which lives for many years and whose shining leaves remain the same all year round and whose flowers are like happy smiles.

Camellias have their special symbolism in Europe too and they are not foreign to the funerary tradition. In the past camellias were used in Eastern Europe and they have been present in the graveyards of various Western European countries and so the use of camellias in the gardens of the dead finds no obstacle in pre-existing traditions. The same values, which are associated with camellias in the world of the living, can be transposed to the world of the dead. Just as camellias express gratitude among the living, they can also express gratitude to the dead for what we received from them during their lifetime. Camellias are the flame burning in our hearts keeping our memories alive. We still believe that those lying in the grave are wonderful people and we want to remember them through a flower.

Traditionally camellias can be found in many graveyards, public gardens and beautiful private gardens in Galicia (Spain). Camellias are also a constant in popular gardening, an important element of the surroundings of the inhabitants of

Figure 2. Cemetery of El Ferrol (El Ferrol, Spain)
the fusion of languages and symbols shared by far-flung races with common sentiments (Figure 4).

Acknowledgments: I am very grateful to Carmen Salinero for her photos of the cemetery in Nippori.

References
More camellias and cemeteries

An unknown camellia in the churchyard at Chapelle Drennac, close to Fouesnant in Brittany, France.

Camellia planted against the wall of the Chapelle Drennac

The magnificent *Camellia japonica* ‘Latifolia’ in the cemetery of La Trinité sur Mere, east of Carnac in Brittany, France.

This association is not confined to Europe: these pictures show the Unitarian Cemetery in Charleston, Canada, were taken by Joan Perry and reproduced here with her kind permission.