



John Haynes An Accurate Survey of the Botanic Gardens at Chelsea, with the Elevation and Ichnography of the Green House and Stoves, and an Explanation of the Several Parts of the Garden, shewing where the most conspicuous Trees and Plants are Disposed, The Whole Carefully Survey'd and Delineated by John Haynes 1751. Engraving. Wellcome Collection, London

Cover:  
Jan Frans van Son  
Flowers in a vase (detail)  
c. 1685  
Oil on canvas  
Collection of Christchurch  
Art Gallery Te Puna o  
Waiwhetu, purchased  
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Take a closer look at  
Jan Frans van Son's  
**Flowers in a vase**

**CHRISTCHURCH  
ART GALLERY  
TE PUNA O  
WAIWHETU**

Exhibition copy. Please do not remove



## Who was Jan Frans van Son?

Jan Frans van Son (1658–1701) was born in Antwerp, the son of leading Flemish flower painter Joris van Son (1623–1667) and his wife Cornelia Van Heulen. Aged just nine when his father died, Jan was able to study painting through a close family friend, the painter Jan Pauwel Gillemans (1618–1675), after whose death he moved to London. He established a strong reputation in England as a still-life flower painter, gaining valuable patronage through marriage in 1684 to Elizabeth Harler, a niece of Robert Streater (1621–1679), serjeant-painter to King Charles II. Van Son was said to have ‘succeeded to much of her uncle’s business’. His principal patron was the politician Charles Robartes, Earl of Radnor (1660–1723), who “had near eighteen or twenty of his works”.

Van Son had at least five children, born between 1685 and 1693; only two appear to have lived beyond childhood. He lived in London in Long Acre and later in St Albans Street, St James’s, where he died 17 January 1701; apparently heartbroken by the death several weeks before of his twelve-year-old daughter Bridget.

Jan Frans van Son’s reputation as an English painter was later recognised with the appearance of a biography and engraved portrait in Horace Walpole’s *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, published 1762.



Jan Frans van Son by Alexander Bannerman (1730–89), after Unknown artist. Line engraving, published 1762



## A mystery within an impossibility

Beyond art, the arrangement in this brightly lit still-life painting by Jan Frans van Son is an impossibility: he has pictured together flowers that did not bloom at the same time. This, however, was a common practice in the Dutch Golden Age flower painting tradition. The real anomaly of this painting belongs to its stars: six peonies, in red and shades of pink, whose presence here has perplexed British garden experts and historians. Painted in London at the end of the seventeenth century, it features a type of peony not recorded in England from this period, but recognised as having arrived from China over a century later.

Peony experts note that they most closely resemble the Chinese species *Paeonia lactiflora*, first documented by Western scientists in 1776; the first double peonies of this type are said to have reached London in 1808. A distinctive characteristic of peonies in this painting, also found in the Chinese species, is the ring of serrated petals above the base ‘guard’ petals, seen on the large pink flower at right (and possibly on the central red peony). While the flowers may be an unrecorded, lost European species, it might also be wondered whether someone in Jan Frans van Son’s circle – a skilled horticulturalist – had now-forgotten links to British trade with China.

Peonies had been cultivated and hybridised in China for over a thousand years when this was painted, valued for both their beauty and medicinal qualities. Britain’s first trading post in China was established in 1672; British demand for silk and porcelain led to the English East India Company opening a branch in Taiwan. Under strict controls, they were permitted to make regular voyages over the next thirty years to Amoy, Chusan and Canton.

The Antwerp-born, London-based Jan Frans van Son had connections in the British royal court and London political circles, as well as access to newly-introduced plants in Britain through the Chelsea Physic Garden. A brief biography (published 1762) noted that “Some of his pictures were eight or nine feet high, and in them he proposed to introduce all the medicinal plants in the physic garden at Chelsea, but grew tired of the undertaking, before he had compleated it” Founded in 1673 as the Apothecaries’ Garden, for the training of apprentices in the identification and use of medicinal plants, it was located by the River Thames; plants could arrive from many different parts of the world before being cultivated in Britain.

The peonies in Jan Frans van Son’s *Flowers in a vase*, then, are either a now lost European species or undocumented Chinese arrivals. What is clear from this painting is that van Son had privileged access to the most spectacular blooms in London.

*Ken Hall*

Top: Yun Shouping *Peonies* 17th century. Album leaf, ink and colours on paper. National Palace Museum, Taipei

Centre and bottom: Jan Frans van Son *Flowers in a vase* (details) c.1685. Oil on canvas. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, purchased with assistance from the National Art Collections Fund of Great Britain, 1973