

The Flamboyant



St. Martin's Tree of Freedom
in Culture and Art

The Flamboyant

The Flamboyant tree (*Delonix regia*) is originally from Madagascar, off the coast of East Africa. Over the centuries, it's been widely introduced in tropical areas around the world, including the Caribbean. The Flamboyant is known as one of the most beautiful flowering trees in the whole world. It can grow to over 15 meters tall, and has a magnificent umbrella-shaped crown.



Bertha Hoola van Nooten, 1880



The name Flamboyant comes from its gorgeous flame-colored flowers. It's also locally known as the July Tree, because here on St. Martin the trees bloom at their blazing peak in July.

Photo courtesy of Nathalie Beaurain

The Flamboyant is an important heritage tree across the Caribbean. It appears in folktales, and it's used in traditional medicine. Its long seedpods were dried to make musical instruments, toys, and fuel. Children played traditional games with its flowers, and its seeds are still used to create bead jewelry and other crafts.



Children used to play a game called “cock fight” with the flower buds of the Flamboyant tree.



The long seedpods of the Flamboyant are traditionally dried and used as percussion instruments. They're called “shack-shack” or “chac-chac” for the unique sound they make when they're shaken and the seeds rattle around inside.





Flamboyant trees on St. Martin most commonly have bright red flowers, but they can also be yellow, or even orange.



On St. Martin, this special tree has a rich cultural and historical connection to emancipation. Emancipation in the North of the island took place in July 1848, when the Flamboyant would have been in full fiery bloom. Rejoicing St. Martiners danced the Ponum around the brilliant tree, and waved branches of its flaming blossoms in celebration.

This powerful connection is one reason the Flamboyant is known as the national tree, and regarded as a symbol of the entire island. To this day, the Flamboyant tree and its fiery flowers are part of cultural activities for Emancipation Day, to mark the end of enslavement and honor St. Martin ancestors and their fight for freedom.

Photo courtesy of Government of Sint Maarten



The brilliant Flamboyant tree has inspired generations of St. Martin artists. It's the signature subject in the work of master painter Sir Roland Richardson.

Photo courtesy of Roland Richardson Gallery Museum

The Fiery Red Flamboyant Tree

by Sir Roland Richardson

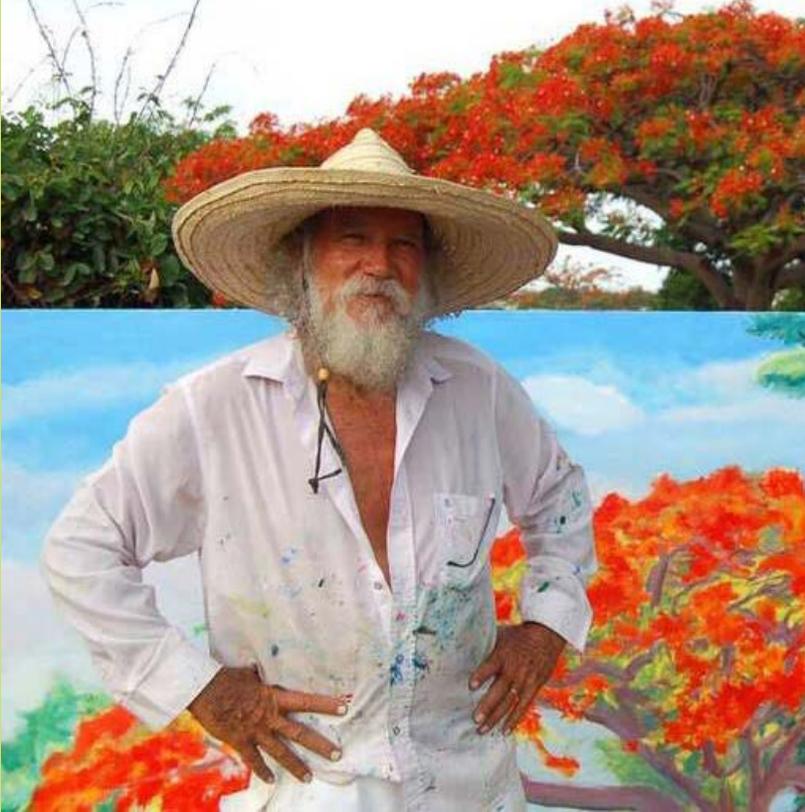
The familiar world around us is a deep, beautiful mystery. All of life emerges from and depends on Light, but Light itself is invisible to us. We can no more look steadfastly at the sun than our bodies could live on its surface. Yet, we depend on it for our being. Mysteriously, Light transforms itself into color and thus becomes visible. This miraculous transformation, this manifestation of color out of invisible light, is a gift of Grace allowing us to see. This is the gift of sight; this is how we are able to see that which is created for us from the invisible.

The first or primary colors revealed are pure, are three, are Red, Yellow and Blue. They are the outward, visible aspect of an inner, invisible quality. The infinity of space, our sky, goes away from us, is reflected on Earth in the cool, deep blue sea. Yellow: the engaging, enlightening glow of sunlight, flitting here and there, radiant. Red seems the most close to us, full of dignity, serious and hot yet other-worldly. Magically it manifests itself as the largest red flowering tree in the world...the Flamboyant.

The Royal Poinciana is named after Philippe de Lonvilliers de Poincy, the 17th century governor of the French Antilles, who is supposed to have brought it to the region from Madagascar. Ranging from a rare, pale yellow through several hues of orange, to deep, majestic, fiery red, it is called by many names: the Flame Tree, the July Tree, the Formosa Tree, the Freedom Tree, but the Flamboyant Tree is the most popular name and is most expressive of the character of its color.



*Photos and painting images courtesy of
Roland Richardson Gallery Museum*



Encircling the Earth in this tropical zone with its vibrant blooms, it is classified as one of the ten most beautiful trees in the world. It loses its feathery leaves and is bare-branched in late Spring, bursts into fiery bloom, cascading to the ground from May to September, then envelops itself in cool dense blue-green foliage, tipped with yellow, and broods in deep shade waiting to explode once again. It has been adopted in our Caribbean region as the national tree and flower of most of our islands, including St. Martin.

From childhood, it has attracted and enchanted me. I love its cool shade, its umbrella shape, its wonderful smell, and most especially its beautiful fiery flamboyant red color. I've spent the better part of the last thirty summers exploring it in my paintings.





Image courtesy of Roland Richardson Gallery Museum



Image courtesy of Roland Richardson Gallery Museum



Image courtesy of Roland Richardson Gallery Museum



Thank you to Sir Roland Richardson and the Roland Richardson Gallery Museum for generously contributing the painter's essay and imagery of some of his beautiful Flamboyant works for this ebook!

Image courtesy of Roland Richardson Gallery Museum



This book was developed as a companion to Amuseum Naturalis, St. Martin's free museum of nature, heritage and culture. The Amuseum, and this book, were created by Les Fruits de Mer.

Les Fruits de Mer is a non-profit association based in St. Martin whose core mission is to raise awareness about nature, culture, and heritage. The organization carries out this mission through a free museum, publications, films, and public events. Learn more at lesfruitsdemer.com and amuseumnaturalis.com.

