

## Emil Nolde's *Still Life, Tulips*

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In Northern climes, spring comes in Christmas cachepots. Living rooms, studies, schoolrooms, sickrooms, offices—windowsills everywhere burst with color: reds, yellows, blues, purples, mauves; amaryllis, tulips, hyacinth, jonquils, daffodils. Natural spring takes a little longer, but the delay only intensifies the longing. The season is poignant because it is so long awaited and so quickly gone, yet it is perhaps this very brevity that makes it so desired. Its beauty is like Eden, or grace, or a gift of love: it is ours to enjoy, but not to possess. We may desire it, ardently, but we cannot command it. It is its own season and—except for cachepots—spring comes when it will. Though repeated every year, it is a phenomenon that never grows old, its surprise never dulled. Each is as startling as though it were the first, yet as familiar as though it had been and would be forever.



Emil Nolde (1867-1956), *Still Life, Tulips*, c 1930, German. Watercolor on paper. 47.6 x 35.2 cm.

But it is consoling to know that while spring passes—even cachepot blooms eventually dry up and die—beauty is a constant. It is like music: long after the singer has gone, the song lives in the grooves of the record and can be recalled at will. It is this reality that the German Expressionist painter Emil Nolde (1867-1956) captures in *Still Life, Tulips*, one of the many watercolors he painted over his long lifetime. Born Emil Hansen in Schleswig in the village of Nolde, he adopted the village's name as his own. His family had tilled the land there for nine generations, and he knew and loved the solitude and bleakness of the north. At first he was employed as a furniture carver, but he made drawings on the side. He did not make his first painting until he was 29. He was a restless painter, trying first this style, then that style, first this school, then another. But he was noticed, even by the younger painters. In 1906, shortly after Die Brücke was founded in Dresden, he became a member, invited by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. At age 39, he was the oldest member, some 17 years older than Rottluff, its youngest. The association did not last long. Perhaps it was the generation gap, perhaps it was the culture gap, perhaps there were temperamental differences, but after only a year and a half, Nolde left the group and returned to the north. But there had been mutual benefits: Nolde taught the Die Brücke members engraving, they taught him woodcutting.

*Still Life, Tulips* was painted more than 20 years later, in 1930, when Nolde was in his 60s and his reputation was at its height. For color he raided the rainbow, capturing its indigos and blues, its greens, its yellows, mauves and reds, and conjured them into images taken from the earth: flowers, stems, leaves. Most of the blooms are cut off at their edges; the frame is too small to contain their exuberance. And as is appropriate for the uncertain season, they are set against a stormy sky. But they have courage: standing tall, the amaryllis trumpets spring's imminent return, while the tulips, more foolish than courageous, perhaps, lift their turbaned heads to see.

Meanwhile, a lone white bloom—homage perhaps to Van Gogh's lone white bloom in his *Iris*es of 1889—accents the work.

The amaryllis and the tulips that inspired Nolde bloomed more than 70 years ago (if indeed, they bloomed at all; he often worked from what he saw in his head). At any rate, we, at least, have never seen them—and yet we have. From our memory Nolde evokes all the amaryllis and all the tulips and all the springs we have ever seen and distills them into the perfect tulip, the quintessential amaryllis, the eternal spring. It is like the song. Long after the singer has gone, the music can be recalled.

Could it be, perhaps, that the *raison d'être* of winter is spring? If so, the price seems not too dear.

**Courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh (<http://www.ncartmuseum.org>); bequest of W. R. Valentin.**