

THE PIONEERING LIFE OF CONSTANCE SPRY

In 1914, as the Great War ravaged Europe, 28-year old Constance Marr was appointed secretary of the Dublin Red Cross. It would be another 14 years before Constance opened her first flower shop and revolutionized flower arranging. It is perhaps fitting, on International Women's Day, to mention these formative years.

Constance belonged to the first generation of women with enough hard-won currency to leave their husbands. So, in an age when the divorce rate was less than 0.25%, she did just that – closing the door on an abusive six-year marriage. We might wonder at the courage it took to break free from this domestic hell and forge ahead as a single mother. But courage, and a willingness to embrace the new, would turn out to be recurrent themes in Constance's life.

“Do whatever you please. Follow your own star: be original if you want to be and don't if you don't want to be. Just be natural and gay and light-hearted and pretty and simple and overflowing and general and baroque and bare and austere and stylized and wild and daring and conservative. And learn and learn and learn. Open your mind to every form of beauty.”

- Constance Spry

Constance spent a decade as a successful career woman before the phrase was coined. In 1917, she took a senior position at the Ministry of Aircraft Production. In 1921, she became headmistress of the Homerton and South Hackney Day Continuation School in east London. And in 1926, she broke with convention by taking a new last name – despite not being married to its owner.

Constance – now Spry – opened her first flower shop, *Flower Decoration*, two years later. Almost immediately, her revolutionary approach to floristry garnered interest amongst the Glitterati. She democratised the form, marrying traditional flowers of choice with “unusual” and uncelebrated plant material like kale and pussy willow. Inspired by the Old Masters of the Dutch tradition, her work was at once vibrant and subtle, wild and elegant. She collected unconventional vessels – from jam jars to attic curios – in which to house these creations.

“Spry's work remains as fresh today as it ever was. When we started LFS, it was clear to me that we should celebrate the importance of her work in the flower industry. Recently, there have been a huge number of young florists creating work that hearkens back to Spry's influence. I feel it's important to honour this pioneering mind, which is where our 'Two Days Inspired by Constance Spry' course comes from. Students are invited to put her work in perspective and understand the fundamental principles of Spry designs. The results amaze me every time.”

- Wagner Kreusch

Spry infused floristry with authenticity and originality – in her private life, she was no less pioneering. Her relationship with Henry “Shav” Spry was one of convenience: while he romanced Constance’s shop manager, she embarked on a long-term lesbian relationship with the painter Gluck.

Spry was the first “domestic goddess” – the author of 13 books, responsible for the flowers at Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation and “Coronation Chicken”. She was also a revolutionary figure whose approach to aesthetics, gender, and sexuality was, perhaps, more in-line with the decade she just missed out on. Constance passed away in 1960. She continues to exert a tremendous influence on modern floristry, and remains a potent figure of female liberation.