

In Renaissance wedding portraits, carnations often symbolize love, betrothal, and the bond between two people. Their meaning depends on the painting, so a flower alone is not proof that a portrait records a wedding.

Why carnations suggest love

Renaissance artists used familiar objects to add meaning to portraits. A flower could make an idea visible without putting it into words, and carnations were among the flowers associated with affection and marriage.

A carnation held by a sitter can draw attention to a relationship rather than simply decorate the picture. In a portrait of a couple, it may support a reading of the painting as a celebration of their bond. In a portrait of one person, it might point to a betrothal or to someone who is not shown.

The flower can also be beautiful in its own right. Its fringed petals and strong color gave a painter an appealing detail to set against clothing or skin. Beauty and symbolism need not cancel each other out.

How to read the flower in a portrait

Start with what is visible, then look for information about the picture. A carnation becomes more persuasive as a sign of marriage when other evidence points in the same direction.

- **Look at the sitter.** A flower held prominently in the hand is likely to matter to the composition, though its precise meaning may remain open.
- **Notice the setting.** Another sitter, a ring, or joined hands can help establish a relationship between the people depicted.

- **Check the title and date.** A museum may identify the sitter or connect the portrait to a documented marriage. Titles added long after a painting was made are not always certain.
- **Read the interpretation.** A museum catalog may explain why scholars associate a particular flower with betrothal and where the evidence is limited.

What the color and setting can tell you

Red carnations can reinforce an association with love, but it is risky to assign every color a fixed message. Meanings changed across places and periods, and modern flower dictionaries do not necessarily reflect what a Renaissance painter or patron intended.

Setting matters too. Carnations appear in religious art as well as portraits, where their associations can differ. A flower in a devotional image should not automatically be read as a sign of marriage, just as a flower in a portrait should not automatically be read as a religious emblem.

Think of the carnation as a clue rather than a caption. The identity of the sitter, the purpose of the commission, and the objects around the flower all help narrow the possibilities.

Common questions

Does a carnation always mean a wedding?

No. It can suggest love or betrothal, but a portrait may have another purpose. Look for supporting evidence before calling it a wedding portrait.

Is a carnation the same as a pink?

Carnations belong to the genus Dianthus, whose flowers are often called pinks. The names can overlap, so a museum description is useful when identifying a flower in a painting.

Did every Renaissance viewer read the flower the same way?

Not necessarily. Viewers brought different knowledge and expectations to an image, and the intended meaning of a particular flower may be uncertain today.

A useful next read: https://greensys2019.org/pochemu-srezannye-cvety-vyanut-ranshe-vremeni/