

Meriel Thurstan & Rosie Martin

a step-by-step guide

Botanical Illustration

for beginners



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Meriel Thurstan
Rosie Martin

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This bisection of a tulip captures its exotic colours as well as its structure.

Introduction

Learning botanical illustration from scratch can be a daunting prospect, so we have tried to simplify matters. Together with examples and explanations, we have set out step-by-step exercises for you to follow, with notes on how to tackle each project. Most are quite simple; others are moderately easy and a few are more challenging.

This book will give you basic and vital information on drawing, colour recognition and mixing, how to lay watercolour washes, understanding and applying watercolour, coloured-pencil techniques, and how to superimpose one colour over another for depth and vibrancy. These are the building blocks of botanical painting.

We also discuss aspects of botanical illustration that you may find more demanding: pattern and texture, composition, complex forms, painting white flowers (without using white paint) and how to paint black flowers and berries.

As botanical illustration can be enjoyed from both an aesthetic and scientific perspective, there is also information on botany and the accepted use of Latin when naming plants.

With time and practice, you should become a competent and proficient artist, able to tackle any botanical subject with confidence. For those with some experience already, remember that however successful you may become, you never cease to learn.

Rosie and Meriel



The trooping crumble cap fungus, or fairies' bonnets (*Coprinus disseminatus* syn. *Psathyrella disseminata*) turns into a viscous black liquid after a few hours, so has to be painted quickly.

Early botanical art

The earliest known depictions of indigenous plants were carved into rock in c.1450 BC to adorn the walls of the Great Temple of Tuthmosis III at Karnak, Egypt. Of the 275 plants shown, not all are identifiable, but they are a timeless record of 'all plants that grow ... in God's Land, which were found when his majesty proceeded to subdue all the countries ...', as the inscription declares.

The Middle Ages

Medieval monks drew on vellum or parchment using a goose feather quill and ink made out of oak galls. Provided that the artwork was kept safe from predatory bugs and mildew, it survived to inform and give pleasure to many future generations.

Once the printing press had been invented in the mid-fifteenth century, artwork was available to many more people; but once again, these prints had to be suitably preserved in dry, shaded conditions if they were to last for any length of time.



The *Vienna Dioscurides* is an early 6th century illuminated manuscript of *De Materia Medica*, the Greek Herbal of Dioscorides.

This page from the antique scientific text shows the earliest representation of the Orange Carrot, at the time considered a medicinal plant.

Seventeenth century onwards

Artists who used oil-based paints on canvas, like the Dutch flower painters of the seventeenth century, ensured that their work would survive for centuries, if not forever.

Now, in the twenty-first century, we benefit from the expertise of generations of artists and scientists, and can make sure that we have the best possible materials to hand for our work.



The seventeenth-century painting *Still Life of Flowers* by Dutch artist Jan Davidsz de Heem (1606-84).

Materials and equipment

Naturally, today's botanical artists want their work to last, so choice of materials is an important consideration. A workman is only as good as his tools, and poor tools will make for substandard work. It can be tempting to economize by buying low-quality paint, paper and brushes, but your work will suffer, so buy the finest that you can afford.



By mixing your own colours from a limited palette, you can create all the many colours found in nature.

Watercolour paints

Research on the manufacture of watercolour paints and their durability has really taken off in the last few decades. Some colours are known to be fugitive, but modern manufacturers' colour charts have notes on the lightfastness of each paint, so we can make properly informed decisions.

- Initially, keep to a limited [palette](#), but be sure to buy artist's-quality paints. They are a bit more expensive than the student's-quality range, but they last longer, the colours are better because they contain more pigment and they are worth every penny.
- Watercolour paints come in pans, half pans or tubes. If you opt for pans or half pans, take an empty paintbox and fill it with your choice of colours. If you use tubes, squeeze a small amount on to the palette. If you don't use it all, allow it to dry for next time. It is easily reconstituted with water. Tubes can sometimes be difficult to open. Hold the cap in hot water for a few seconds to loosen.
- Occasionally, you may need white for small hairs or bloom. Add to your paintbox some Chinese white, titanium white or white gouache.
- Learn to mix your own colours from your limited [palette](#).
- In particular, learn to mix greens, the botanical artist's most frequently used [colour](#).



Coloured pencils are a good medium for the dry leafy bracts and nuts of the hazel.



Learn to mix greens. Green is the colour that causes most problems for the beginner.

Pencils

Pencils are sold singly or in boxed sets. You will find it useful to have a range of pencils from 4H (hard) to 2B (soft). Anything softer than 2B tends to leave loose graphite on the paper, which can spread and dull the image when you begin to paint. (If you do end up with loose graphite on your drawing, try gently rolling a 'sausage' of white tack across it to pick up the surplus.)

Some artists prefer to use refillable clutch pencils, which have the advantage of never changing length and so retain balance in the hand. Leads are available in different grades and thicknesses.

Sharpening your pencils

It is important to keep pencils sharp at all times, so use a pencil sharpener or very sharp craft knife. To get a particularly sharp tip, try using wet-and-dry abrasive paper (about 400 to 500 grit size) or a fine emery board, gently twisting and rubbing the lead in a rolling action across the surface. Wipe off the surplus graphite with a tissue. A truly sharp pencil should hurt when pressed into your fingertip!



Coloured pencils

You may be happier with coloured pencils than with a paintbrush. There are so many colours available that you could end up with a glorious rainbow of hues from which to choose. Alternatively, opt for a basic palette of, say, a dozen colours to mix and blend in the same way as watercolours ([more on coloured pencils](#)).



This magnolia seed head was worked in coloured pencils over watercolour on HP Fabriano Artistico 300 gsm (extra-white).

Glossary

Blender pencil: a colourless pencil consisting of wax and fillers, used to blend layers of coloured pencil into a smooth finish.

Burnisher pencil: the same as a blender pencil.

Burnishing: the same as blending with a blender pencil.

Cartridge paper: a medium weight paper for drawing and design.

Construction drawing: an initial drawing placing each element in its correct place, with no fine detail – also called structural drawing.

Double-mount: two pieces of mountboard, one larger than the other, placed one over the other inside the picture frame.

Edge-to-edge painting: a design showing no unpainted areas around the edge.

Embossing tools: smooth, blunt metal nibs used to indent the paper in order to leave white lines or dots when applying coloured pencils

Fugitive colours: colours that fade in the light.

Gone off: a term used in wet-into-wet washes, when the initial coating of water has a ‘sheen’, not a ‘shine’.

Graded tone: smooth transition from light to dark.

Highlights: areas where light falls on a shiny object.

Landscape format: a composition where the width is greater than the height.

Layout paper: a thin, relatively cheap paper for preliminary drawings

Lifting off: the same as lifting out.

Lifting out: removing paint: when wet, blotting with an almost dry brush; when dry, by flooding with clean water and blotting with absorbent paper.

Light source: where your main light comes from.

Limited palette: two yellows, two reds and two blues, a warm and a cool version of each.

Line: usually made with a pencil to define an object.

Lowlights: areas where light falls on a non-shiny object.

Magic sponge: a non-abrasive block of soft melamine foam.

Mount board: a heavy grade of card cut to surround a painting inside the frame and behind the glass.

Non-directional shading: smooth pencil shading that shows no discernible pencil marks.

Opaqueness: the quality in many watercolour paints that does not allow the white of the paper to shine through.

Optical mixing: layering one colour or tone on top of another – see superimposition.

Pastel primer: an undercoat for pastels.

Permanence, bleaching: see fugitive colours.

Portrait format: a composition where the height is greater than the width.

Ruling pen: a pen-like device that holds ink between two adjustable tapered metal jaws allowing lines to be drawn of differing thickness.

Stain: some paints are absorbed more readily into the paper and are therefore more difficult to remove.

Stippling: to increase depth of colour and tone with small dots or dashes of paint done with a fine brush.

Structural drawing: an initial drawing placing each element in its correct place, with no fine detail - also called construction drawing.

Superimposition: another term for optical mixing: layering one colour or tone on top of another.

Tone: any shade between and including very light and very dark.

Transparency: the quality in many watercolour paints that allows the white of the paper to shine through.

Washes: ways of applying watercolour paints.

Watercolour paper: paper specifically produced for watercolours.

White/blue tack: a putty-like re-usable adhesive.

Work up: to build up colour and/or tone.

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