

Are We Artists? - by Margaret Saul

Summary: Article published in the newsletter of the American Soc. Botanical Artists (ASBA) No.19 - Spring 2000. Written in response to a letter in the previous ASBA newsletter this article seeks to promote discussion about (1) whether botanical art can be viewed as art and (2) defining "botanical illustration" as a branch of botanical art that is created in the service of science.

Art is the *expressive* arrangement of elements within a medium born from creativity or imagination, and skill. This is surely a reasonable explanation and includes all aspects of artistic endeavor - not just the visual arts but also that of music, literature, drama, and dance. *Botanical Art* is embraced by the fine artist who enjoys exploring the artistic elements found in the world of plants. Inspiration can be gleaned from the diverse range of fascinating shapes, forms, colors and textures. A direct influence and one that makes this art unique, is the artist's inquisitive nature, a desire to probe into the "how & why" or the science of plants. This wonder can be magnified ten fold or more as the botanical artist studies the subject through a hand lens or stereo microscope while endeavoring to create a work of art in graphic detail.

Do we find creative expression in botanical art? Is it really art? What is the public's perception? A recent letter to the editor by Martha Kemp (*The Botanical Artist No 18*) notes her concern for the apparent disdain for botanical art expressed in the column *Mole* in the British *Gardens Illustrated Magazine*. The remarks which feed the perception that this genre is not art, are not uncommon. A questioning of the quality of some paintings selected by prestigious organizations for exhibition, and thoughts expressed about replacing it all with photography as a much cheaper alternative should not be passed off high-handedly. All professional botanical artists should find this particular jab at botanical art disturbing, especially when a publication such as *Gardens Illustrated Magazine* would surely include many potential clients for botanical art. Are the tools we use to be the only distinguishing factor between photographs and botanical paintings? All should realize that a photographer with access to the latest digital technology and printing methods can reproduce botanical subjects against the traditional white background on watercolor paper to look for all the world like a detailed painting but sold for much less. Thankfully this technology works to the advantage of savvy artists where reproductions of their work can barely be distinguished from the original. The only immediate clue nowadays to a work being an original botanical watercolor painting is perhaps an ever-so-slight *cockling* around the edges of the paper.....and the price!

My concern here is that this journalist's observations about contemporary botanical art may be justified! Numerous examples of so called botanical art from ages past can also be accused of doing little to inspire or to promote botanical painting as an art form. Perhaps at the time it was painted, even the illustrator did not view it as art. The appeal for many of these earlier paintings has often more to do with their age and at times interesting history rather than their inspiring nature born from any artistic sense. Contemporary botanical artists should intuitively (or knowingly) imbue their work in a high degree of artistic sensitivity. Teachers in this field need to ensure not only that a high standard of craftsmanship is attained in order to illustrate exquisite detail but equally important in my view, should instill a deeper awareness for artistic concepts which, when infused into the development of botanical *art* pieces, creates further dimension and added pleasure in this creative pursuit. Suitable examples are certainly embedded in the art's traditional base found in the outstanding works of the more notable botanical artists. The development of an "artistic sense" is a major element flowing through the program I have developed for my school of botanical art and illustration in Brisbane. For some, these concepts are intuitive but for many they can be learned and appreciated to a major degree. The results are impressive and prove that not only can students learn how to draw and paint in detail, but can learn how to interpret their subject *through the eyes of an artist* - utilizing their broader appreciation for art when applying the elements and principals of composition - *choosing the composition's structure, its range of values (the "tone" of the piece perceived through its degree of contrast), appreciating contrasts in texture and color intensity*, all of which are influenced by the artist's emotional involvement!

We *are* calling ourselves artists - are we not? *Please consider* - our botanical subjects can evoke a gamut of emotions (painting a subject on a white background does not inhibit) and when the *artist* is involved with their subject in this way their beautifully detailed work can be both captivating and inspiring and rightly called a "work of art". We should all be receptive to this way of thinking and so to explain further - consider the emotions that can be conveyed to us by gnarled branches, a striking *Protea* or *Banksia*, sunlit sunflowers, the delicate pansy, a stately *Camellia* or the writhing stems of a poppy or tulip, that wonderful painting by Leslie Berge of the cycad bearing its

golden cones on the front cover of Dr. Sherwood's latest book, "*A Passion for Plants*" - the emotional impact of which can be surely no less than that found in artworks of renown in other genre.

With 31 years of involvement in the art field where I have worked as a professional illustrator, botanical artist and a botanical art teacher, I believe I have sufficient authority to offer further meaningful comment about the genre as it exists today and to present a succinct definition for botanical art, one which in my view, is more appropriate for contemporary botanical art practice. I sincerely hope my views will be given serious consideration and that it is understood they look beyond the focus of this particular society. I hasten to add this has been presented out of genuine concern and a desire to see this art form continue to thrive globally, not to raise the ire of those who may have been instrumental in formulating a definition.

Indeed, it is unfortunate that the line between botanical art and botanical illustration is seen as blurred! Conversely, a clear distinction *is* evident between the two categories and a perception to this effect should be engendered by its practitioners in order for botanical art to maintain its vitality and to generate interest in the community. Contemporary botanical art should exhibit an appreciation for artistic concepts and is created by artists largely for their own pleasure and ultimately for exhibition and sale. It may also be linked to the artist's freelance business where work is produced for publications which appeal to a particular sector of the general public. Botanical illustration on the other hand is strictly in the precinct of the biological science researchers - *it can be quite technical and allows little scope for "painting or drawing with passion"*.

In its true meaning, the word, "illustration" is not perceived as art! The dictionaries describe illustration simply, *to clarify by use of examples or to explain*. Are some of us using it too loosely? When the word is strictly applied there is a clear separation between art and illustration. In today's world, failing to see that distinction (which seems to be more clearly understood by others outside our field) can generate negative responses as we strive to promote our work as an art form to both the visual arts community and the general public. Botanical illustration should be regarded as a specialized field within botanical art which is carried out under the direction of a botanist ultimately *for the advancement of science*. It is used as a graphic aid to further explain the scientific texts written by plant taxonomists in the field of plant systematics. There is very little room for *artistic expression* in true botanical illustration which may be in the form of ink or full colour illustrations and contain the defining characteristics of the species as prescribed to the illustrator by the botanist - an application which is still preferred to photography. This requires an extremely disciplined and often technical approach where numerous restrictions can be placed upon the illustrator. (I should state that my years spent working as the botanical illustrator at the Queensland Herbarium in Australia were extremely interesting and enjoyable.) For all the restrictions placed upon them a botanical illustrator, who should be an artist at heart, will endeavor to maintain a degree of artistic integrity in their work. Unfortunately the more aesthetic elements sought by the illustrator are often not appreciated or seen as of little consequence to the botanist. A joke shared with botanists at the herbarium was that they could only recognize a plant species that was pressed flat and taped down onto the herbarium sheet! This is how plant taxonomists view plants and what they traditionally refer to for identification or to *describe* a new species. To make a living from illustration there is a need to keep pace with time saving techniques and the latest available offerings in technology. The Guild of Natural Science Illustrators, of which I have been a member since 1986, is a wonderful support for artists in the field of natural science illustration and many ASBA members also belong to this Guild, however this is not the scene for many of you presently involved in botanical art.

Botanical artists should not regard their work as botanical *illustration* unless it fits the explanation above. There are many wonderful exhibition pieces (some exquisitely detailed) plant studies I have viewed over the years which botanists would reject as botanical illustration. My concern here is twofold. First, our art is often perceived by those outside as "only" illustration. My second concern is that if the stringent rules required for botanical illustration are used to define the boundaries of botanical art, then this art form will stagnate. So I cannot imagine why we would hanker for the restrictions that apply to the science illustrators, other than perhaps for the misguided belief that it may add prestige to bind it strictly to the restrictive perceptions of the art's traditional base - or to directly associate it with science, by stating that it serves science. It is prudent to note that the various rules for botanical illustration, *some* of which are valid, have been subject to change since scientists and the artistically challenged (who feel qualified) began to control any flow of artistic endeavor - either through a need to reassert their authority over a field containing concepts not fully understood by them or simply in an attempt to guide those "draftsmen" completely lacking artistic intelligence.

While contemporary botanical art is linked, by varying degrees, to its past traditions and is distinguished from other forms of flower painting by its precise representational nature this should not be an inhibiting factor in the creation of botanical studies which are “works of art”. Botanical art is inspired by nature and through *creative expression* the artist can visually demonstrate an appreciation, or even passion, for the artistic elements of nature’s design in which the subject is bound. If this be the case, today’s botanical art should be, first and foremost *artistically sensitive*, and secondly, portray the subject as an *accurate graphic study*. When these two elements are successfully incorporated they do not conflict with each other but rather lead to the creation of work that can be inspirational!

A concise and simple definition for “Botanical Art” would be: ***An inspirational art form which portrays plant subjects as botanical studies in graphic realism, with artistic sensitivity, in an endeavor to truthfully describe a species or part thereof.*** (This definition *does not exclude* three dimensional botanical art which can add further dimension and interest to a botanical art exhibition.)

(My understanding of the aim of the ASBA is to promote the art of drawing and painting botanical subjects, hopefully in the manner defined above, but its focus is on continuing the art’s traditions. It would be understood by its members that continuing botanical art’s traditions implies a well defined but very limiting criteria for ASBA exhibition submissions - there is really little room for debate here at this stage.)

If the essence of my proposed definition is fully understood and accepted there is no need to stipulate the media to be used, or to restrict the type of composition, or as John Cody questions in a letter, *The Botanical Artist* No. 17, that white backgrounds are mandatory. (I would comment that other than for the case of uniformity, traditional illustration “rules” state that white backgrounds are necessary in order to clearly define the plant’s structures. If this logic is carried through then white flowers should not be depicted against a white background.) Personally I like the dignity a white background imbues on botanical studies and my workshop, “*White Flowers - capture the perfume*” (*perception of color in white flowers on a white background*) helps to open the eyes of the artist in my students.

With a less regulated approach individuality can be alive and well and the artist’s personal involvement with the subject can emanate through their art - from their design of the overall composition, to the media chosen. Like all creative works with well designed compositions set to inspire, we should strive to nurture and promote botanical art that provides diversity not monotony, with a balance between harmony and contrast, while we maintain a clear unity of purpose and that one unifying thread that holds it all together is that of the artists’ passion of all things botanical (well nearly all) and their desire to truthfully portray their subject.

Have I successfully defined botanical art? Will I remain a voice in the wilderness? I have recently become a member of the ASBA and look forward to being an active participant. I appreciate this opportunity to introduce myself and to share my views and concerns and in so doing seek constructive responses that will help to clarify the definition of botanical art. I also welcome comment on whether it is seen as beneficial to define the line between botanical illustration and botanical art within this genre.

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