

## **ESTABLISHING STANDARDS FOR BOTANICAL ART - THREE CORE CRITERIA FACILITATE AN ACCREDITATION PROCESS**

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**Summary:** Article published in the newsletter of the American Soc. Botanical Artists (ASBA) No.32 - Summer 2004. This article sets out how the establishment of core criteria can aid the establishment of standards for botanical art. The article proposes this concept could be applied to the process for selection of artwork in ASBA exhibitions and provides an example of how such standards can be successfully implemented to establish a teaching program.

Sixteen years teaching botanical art and looking forward to more! The more I teach the more I learn about teaching and about botanical art. This is a comment made by teachers who find their interaction with students has them reviewing the processes involved in creating their own art as well as their teaching methods from time to time. I am always seeking better ways to introduce various concepts and techniques while ensuring classes continue to provide a well-balanced mix of satisfaction, challenge, and enjoyment. Through the years, especially while directing the program for my Australian botanical art school, I came to realize that designing a comprehensive curriculum and teaching at the various levels are as much of a creative process as drawing and painting but of course teachers need to do both. Wonderful opportunities have allowed me to share knowledge and ideas with students and teachers from around the globe and now once again I look forward to sharing a little more with a view that it may initiate further meaningful on-going discussion.

### **Why three criteria?**

We create our art through passionately recording accurate botanical detail and composing it into what we hope will reflect those elements that inspired us to artistically describe it. At least that is my view of the art that I now indulge in. (The other was created while working as a botanical illustrator, a field I enjoyed and one that also allowed me to earn a living! This type of artwork is created for the purpose of graphic scientific description in the service of plant science and unlike the former is generally not regarded as inspiring or having wall appeal.)

Most of us hope our art will be suitable for exhibition and as artists we also hope those elements that inspired us to paint a subject are also those appreciated by the viewer. The reality however can come as a bit of a blow. Much contemporary botanical artwork now wins appeal if it follows a trusted formula – paint a popular subject or one with bright color or abundant detailing. In other words create a botanical study of a popular subject (or a flower within the primary color range) and spend ten to twenty hours adding detail and you will probably have it in the bag! For some of us to continue in this vein without a more creative approach is tedious and if everyone adopted the trusted formula this art would surely lose its luster.

To create botanical art everyone knows it must portray accurate botanical detail and exhibit mastered skills in the application of many techniques in order to record the fine detail. But how does a teacher instill an appreciation for the more subtle elements that can transform an accurate and finely rendered illustration into a more inspiring work of art? How can our art be defined to ensure students learn to recognize the difference? This is a challenging area of teaching - one that deals with concepts that need introducing over a longer time than most workshops can accommodate and one that keeps me interested in continuing as a teacher of this art.

Defining this element and two other criteria has influenced my instructional programming where I now integrate into a comprehensive program what I regard as three core criteria - *Botanical accuracy*, *Draftsmanship* and *Artistic sensitivity*. In my opinion these are the criteria that when fully appreciated lead to the creation of beautiful botanical art, creating a balance between pure graphic description and artistic sensitivity where an eagerness to reveal all is set into balance with a deeper appreciation and sense of enjoyment in the full creative process, creating botanical art that will lead to inspiring exhibitions and the displacement of what I have come to view as the present trusted formula.

### **Assessing your progress**

Most of you would have attended a number of introductory classes in botanical art, perhaps with different teachers and at the end of that period of instruction have found yourself satisfied with your progress. Some of you however may have felt quite intimidated or disheartened by your progress due to unmet expectations. So how should your personal progress be assessed?

Here are some questions for you –

1. How does your work compare with the majority of those who have participated in introductory classes elsewhere in the country?
2. Are you a *beginner, intermediate or advanced level student* - these terms are becoming more widely used in teaching circles but how are they defined?
3. What did your teacher/s say you should achieve with the successful completion of their classes?

Many in the visual arts community would describe this art form as a “highly skills-based art” – meaning there are many techniques to master before your artwork meets the standards required for a juried exhibition. But it is due to this fact that an objective approach to assessment of botanical art can be readily accommodated.

### **School’s standards of achievement & program planning**

Currently further teaching opportunities see me involved in developing the policies, organizational structure and botanical art curriculum for a new school of botanical art and illustration to open its doors to the community in September 2004. The three criteria I have mentioned are the mainstay of the program designed to facilitate a certain degree of credibility for the school and have been used for developing *recognized standards, designing syllabuses*, providing students with *tangible short-term goals* and an *objective assessment* process for core subjects.

For the purpose of formal assessment the school has set the following standards for its core subject curriculum, namely – *Basic, Intermediate and Advanced*. A student who successfully completes all of the core subjects at a particular level will know they have met all the required skills to meet that standard.

The objectives set for each syllabus (subject) in the intermediate and advanced level core subjects, that involve creating botanical studies, are designated under the three core criteria to ensure all aspects of this art are presented. For a subject not directly associated with plant studies the criterion of “botanical accuracy” is replaced in the syllabus plan with “observation” for the purpose of setting objectives for creative concepts that rely heavily on the development of this cognitive skill. Obviously objectives under this criterion relate to others designated under - “artistic sensitivity”.

The mandatory criteria for botanical art are more fully explained below.

- ❖ Botanical accuracy (*achieved through observation and knowledge of plant morphology*)
- ❖ Draftsmanship (*skill exhibited in the traditional technical applications*)
- ❖ Artistic sensitivity (*exhibited through knowledge and appreciation of visual art concepts relevant to this art form*)

Some may rightly come to the conclusion that the selected criteria of *draftsmanship* and *artistic sensitivity* should be regarded under one criterion - “artistic skills”. However, with the increasing interest in contemporary botanical art I feel strongly about the need to place more emphasis on the creative process and therefore to distinguish the mastering of *technique* from the more elusive *creative concepts*. Teachers should encourage advanced level students to progress from relying on rules and technical skills in order to create carefully rendered “botanical studies” and move on to the creation of “botanical art” that includes botanical accuracy and fine draftsmanship but also “artistic sensitivity” to facilitate a deepening awareness and a more personal involvement in the creative process – one that ultimately leads to inspiring artworks.

The example below is taken from my “Guidelines for Teachers” for the school’s core subject teachers and lists the objectives for achieving the intermediate standard. At attaining this particular level, certificate

registrants are presented with the school's *Intermediate Level Achievement Award* as an incentive to continue on to the advanced level subjects. Evidence of the student having finally achieved proficiency in botanical art while participating in the school's program should be exhibited in work presented as their final portfolio submission and certificate project and formally recognized with the awarding of the school's certificate.

#### AN EXAMPLE OF THE SCHOOL'S ACCREDITATION STANDARDS:

##### INTERMEDIATE STANDARD

Attained the Basic Standard and successfully completed the following -  
***Painting II, Dimensional Study & Botany for Botanical Artists.***

##### Botanical Accuracy

- A full appreciation for macro plant structures through increased knowledge and developing observation skills; a desire to enquire into plant adaptation and a basic understanding of plant nomenclature and systematics.
- Draws at a level of accuracy that allows the subject to be readily identifiable at genus level.

##### Draftsmanship

- Illustrates an ability to enhance 3-D in the creation of botanical studies by appreciating the form of surfaces in perspective in order to correctly interpret and render these surfaces in graphite or watercolor.
- Confident at color mixing – creating a full range of unified color using three selected pigments
- Exhibits satisfactory brush control over all illustrated surfaces
- Skilled in the necessary color applications required to create a small *botanical study*.

##### Artistic sensitivity

- Structural patterns
  - Awareness & enjoyment in recognizing natural design elements
- Color perception - increased through further instruction & observation
- Composition
  - emphasis and focal points in particular
  - increasing appreciation for *tonal composition*
- Botanical Art History - 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (suggested reading)

(The study of composition is integrated through all core subjects beginning with *Drawing I*.)

#### **School information**

The aim of the new *Brookside Gardens School of Botanical Art & Illustration* (under the jurisdiction of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission) is to offer a unique community art program that welcomes all who seek to discover the delights of a world where art and plants intertwine. If you would like to receive further information about the school program or if you have questions or comments regarding curriculum development please do not hesitate to contact me at - [margaretsaul@covad.net](mailto:margaretsaul@covad.net).

#### **Seeking points for future discussion**

With the increasing number of classes springing up across the country and no recognized set of standards available I feel it would be beneficial, if those members interested in the educational aspect of botanical art could contribute discussion that would lead to developing a recognized set of standards at the introductory levels of instruction.

The three mandatory criteria used for setting standards at the school in my opinion can be successfully applied in the objective assessment of artwork submitted to a jury for a botanical art exhibition. This is another area I have been interested in seeing developed further and I would be pleased to send copies of my proposed exhibition and jury guidelines particularly to those members who have had experience on a jury panel for a botanical art exhibition so this also may generate any constructive points for further discussion.

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