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Botanical Art Discovery

By Sophie Braccini



Catherine Watters at work in her Orinda studio
Photos Sophie Braccini

"The minute I entered that class I knew that this was what I would be doing for the rest of my life," says the painter. Watters continues to grow in her chosen art form, dedicating an increasing number of hours to teaching it.

"I can teach botanical painting to anyone," she says, "even if they haven't had any formal training." Watters says that it takes one to two years for her students to start mastering the techniques, if they apply themselves consistently. "I can tell right away if someone has a gift and will become excellent at it," she says, "but all can become very good."

Botanical painting is the art of reproducing exactly, and to scale, plants, flowers, or pods that come from nature. "You always work with live material," says the artist, "ideally, you will achieve the first drawing in one sitting, take pictures of your plant before it wilts, and work with similar live plants to finish the work." A painting can take from 50 to 200 hours of work and is made with only natural elements: natural pigments for the watercolor, ceramic bowls to hold the paint, sable brushes, and cotton or calf skin canvas (vellum).

"When the masters of the 18th century developed this art, it was for scientific purposes," explains Watters, "but they attracted art loving patrons, too. Such was Pierre-Joseph Redouté who was beloved by Marie Antoinette and the Empress Josephine (Napoleon's first wife, who had a passion for roses). Then photography supplanted painting and for some years, at the beginning of the 20th century, the art form became dormant. A revival movement arose in the early 1980s and in 1995 the American Society of Botanical Artists was founded. It started with 40 painters and there are 1300 of us now."

According to Watters, a painting provides a very different rendition than a photograph. "The colors are exact, the size is always to scale and we work with a magnifying glass to capture the smallest details." But there is more to botanical painting, a spiritual quality that real artists can capture. "First you observe your plant, you don't glance over it," says Watters, "you choose what you want to represent, you smell it, you feel its energy and you capture its soul." Watters says that when she paints she is appreciative and feels complete. She has noticed the therapeutic effect of the art on her students, too.

The exhibition in Berkeley will run January 16-29, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. It is free with garden admission. On Saturday, January 23 from 1:00-2:30 p.m. Watters will talk about Botanical Art through the ages.

For more information go to <http://www.catherinewatters.com> and <http://botanicalgarden.berkeley.edu>.

The UC Botanical Garden is a non-profit research garden and museum for the University of California at Berkeley, having a notably diverse plant collection including many rare and endangered plants.

Established in 1890, the Garden, which is open to the public year round, has over 13,000 different kinds of plants from around the world, cultivated by region in naturalistic landscapes over its 34 acres. The garden conducts 100 programs every year with topics including native plant dyes, orchid division, bird walks and much more. The garden protects rare plants and conducts extensive research involving plants.

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