

An Introduction

What is Composition?

Composition is the arrangement of elements of a painting or drawing on a page.

The main points to consider:

1. The arrangement of the subjects in relation to each other
2. The arrangement of the subjects in relation to the edge of the paper or space that the elements sit within

This is a fairly simplistic description and there are lots of other considerations, such as overlaps and negative space with many alternative ways to arrange the elements on the page. Variations range from the simple 'floating' subjects with one or two components, to complex mixed floral arrangements or traditional botanical illustrations, which must show the relevant parts of a plant for scientific purposes. We will begin by looking at a few alternative approaches to composing a botanical work.

Approaches to Composition

There are a number of approaches to composing the subject on the page but you should be guided by the individual subject. Here are some common scenarios.

Single Subjects: Centre Page, Floating and Off-Centre

The difficulty is that although there are a number of compositional *guidelines* in art, none of these are hard and fast rules, thus you will always find excellent examples that break these so called *rules*.

The first point to consider is the difference between a guideline and a rule. Most examples are a guide not a rule so try not to be too literal.

For example, in a general instruction book you will probably be told never to place the focal point of a work in the centre of the page, however, as you will know there are many examples of centred subjects in botanical painting. Such as a 'floating' fruit or leaf. With a subject such as a pineapple or any fruit, there's really only one way of placing it – i.e. in the centre of the page as a floating subject with no cast shadow.

This is a fairly obvious example and many single subjects should sit centre of page because of their symmetrical nature and because they are the only intended focal point on the page.



Sometimes simple subjects such as leaves and seeds can be positioned at angles or off centre, this creates more interest in the work.

In the maple leaf, the dead leaf creates the appearance of falling in space, so is typical of an autumn leaf. The positioning and curves make for a more interesting visual. It's not accidental positioning but one that is considered at the outset and which makes a more interesting painting than a 'face-on'



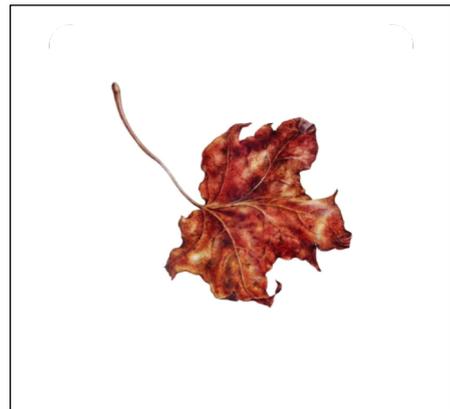
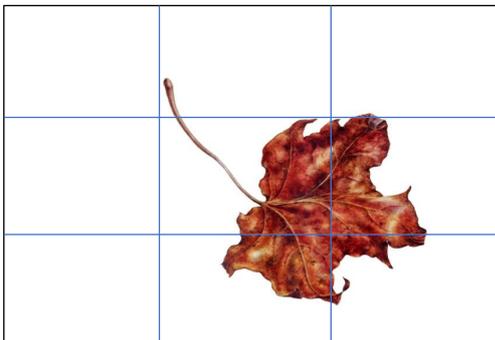
leaf portrait. This is a technique that **Rory McEwen** used frequently.

It is also possible to make use of the white space to create atmosphere in a painting and positioned this type of subject **off-centre**, which works with a leaf but not with a round symmetrical subject.

Shown below: on the left, the leaf sitting off-centre within a larger white space uses the **Rule of Thirds** to position it – here you can see an imaginary grid divides the shape equally, with three horizontal and three vertical lines, we can then use areas where the lines cross to position subjects (we will cover this later)

Below right: the leaf sitting in the centre of the white space, where the main body of the leaf is in the middle and distance from outer edges is the equal.

How much white space you use will also influence the framing options, if you have a lot of white space you do not need a wide mat and may prefer no mat (with a spacer between the glass), whereas in a painting with a fairly tight space a broader mat will be needed to provide breathing space around the work. This spacing is also worth considering at the outset.



This act of planning the layout of even the simplest subjects is an important consideration when first observing your subject.

There are many things to consider and the observation phase is critical in identifying a suitable focus for your composition. You need to make choices so it's worth taking your time to consider options. You must convey the character of a plant or subject to make a successful painting. After all, once you commit brush to paper you're pretty much stuck with the composition. Do not rush!

The most important point is to find the approach that's right for your style and the subject, while capturing the character of a plant.

Tall Plants, Small Plants and Plant Parts

For tall 'leggy' plants you have the option of trying to paint the whole plant, as **Coral Guest** did in her large work portraying *Lilium regale* (search on Google to see) however, this is usually impractical because of paper size limitations.

We know that in botanical art it is always preferable to paint subjects at life-size but this places some restrictions on what we can actually fit onto the page. Scaling down is an option for very large plants but for most tall plants the most commonly used approach is to cut the stem (visually not literally) and overlap parts, as shown in this foxglove.

Small dissections can be scaled up if required and used to fill the space to create a balanced composition.



This technique is also useful where parts are disproportionate, such as small flowers with large leaves, and it is also an effective method when dealing with small white flowers which can be positioned in front of darker leaves to show off the pale flowers more effectively than placing them on a white background.

This overlapping method is commonly used in more traditional scientific botanical compositions as seen many of the black and white Margaret Flockton Award winning illustrations. The best approach for this type of arrangement is

to draw the component parts on tracing paper and arrange on the page to see the best arrangement, as shown in this Hellebore.

You will need to spend some time repositioning in order to make good overlaps and to avoid misleading touching parts.

Disappearing under the mount: Some purists might say that subjects should not disappear out of the frame, yet artists such as **Pandora Sellars** or **Beverly Allen** are both successful in using this approach. The most important point is to find the approach that you feel is right for the individual subject while capturing the character of a plant or habitat. In the example with the calla lilies below, the stems are below the mat or mountboard at the bottom of the painting. This seemed like a natural way to emphasise the gentle curves of the stems which had been moulded by the wind as they emerge from the ground. This method is particularly useful for vines and plants with a downward or horizontal growth habit. The can exit at and side of the mount but should never exit at the growth end of the plant.



Mixed collections and **shadows**, some artists use shadows and others don't. We're told in botanical art that shadows are not permitted, because technically this makes the work a still life, but really it depends on where the work is going to be exhibited and the feel you are trying to achieve. Personally I think shadows can be perfectly acceptable, and a walk around any botanical exhibition will usually reveal several such examples, again Beverly Allen or Susan Christopher Coullson use shadows in 'table top' style compositions with collections of found objects are laid on a flat surface. Below I have used shadow in the example on the left and a floating composition in the rosehip example on the right.



Above: table top study of found objects versus 'floating' in space composition



Traditional Botanical illustrations: This approach is predominantly about showing all of the plant parts and /or plant life cycle but should always aesthetically pleasing to the eye too. Bud, flower in various positions, reproductive parts, fruit, seed etc. are generally illustrated.

In some circumstances the habitat is shown too. This approach used in many of the old master illustrations, which were created to document plants

before the days of photography but is still popular today and used by a number of artists.

Here are two typical botanical illustrations of mine. Above is a *Pulsatilla vulgaris* and on the right *Lessertia frutescens*.

Note how both illustrate the growth habit of the plant with different views of flowers, seedpods and dissection etc. Parts are scaled only when necessary to make the information clearer and too much repetition of parts is avoided but the



growth habit of the *Lessertia* means that it has to show multiple leaves and flowers because that is a feature of the plant, showing single flowers and leaves isn't appropriate, in the case of the *Pulsatilla* flowers are single and leaves grow from the base so it can be portrayed differently. You will need to make decisions on a plant by plant basis regarding what to include.

Mixed Florals: This is probably the most challenging approach and it can be difficult to know how just many stems to include. Floating compositions seem a more obvious choice for the cut stems but it can work equally well when the subject disappears below the mount. With mixed compositions the combination of plants is of considerable importance. Subjects should sit together naturally, for example by colour combinations or in complementary sizes of the subject; some combinations just don't belong together!

In this mixed floral I used a bouquet of flowers based on their colour combination. Having selected a few stems from the bouquet. I looked for natural shapes; you can see how the leaves lead the eye around the central focal point in an outer spiral. It is a symmetrically balanced composition and I have worked with odd numbers e.g. 3 white flowers, 5 lilies in total and one of each other type of flower and five stems at the bottom. This is known as using the *rule of odds*. The rule of odds creates visual interest, this happens because our brain pairs things naturally so when dealing with more than two subjects it's better to use odd numbers. We will discuss this and other theories later.



Now that you have read about some of the different approaches to composition try taking time out to look work by different artists, I've named a few in this document but you should do some of your own research too.

Always make a point of viewing works by different artists and look at different interpretations of the same subject to discover how different artists have handled composition and also how their compositional style has become an integral part of their work.