



## **Part 1 Different Styles and Beginning with Simple Composition**

Before you begin I want you to consider your style and interests. In the introduction you read a little about different types of composition and also explored the work of other botanical artists. You may have noticed that many of these artists have distinctive features in their work that makes it unique to them, whether in medium, subject or design, their work is recognisable by a certain style. If you have ever attended an RHS show or looked at the work of RHS artists, you will notice that most medal winning artists paint a series of paintings, again they have a particular interest or style, so having a focus to your work can be important in defining you as an individual artist.

You may have a clear idea about your own interests and style that define you as an artist or perhaps you are still trying to find your niche. At this point it is worth thinking about the type of subjects that appeal to you and also your preferred style in interpreting that subject. A key component of your work is how you compose a painting or drawing.

### **Suggested exercise: Your Interests and Influences; researching different compositional styles**

- Think about the subjects that interest you. There are many to choose from, for example it could be a particular plant family, such as orchids; native plants from a particular country or area; herbs; dead or decaying subjects; trees; cultivated fruit. Perhaps you like to paint small discreet plants or big exotics if you like to explore many subjects, think about a few that you want to illustrate.
- Now use Google to search for artworks of those subjects and see how other artists have portrayed them, which style appeals to you the most? Is there any approach you feel more in tune with your own style? Are you drawn to the more traditional style of botanical illustration or do you like more contemporary work. There are usually paintings of most subjects to compare. It's always worth doing such a search with any new subject and avoids any awkward similarities that might occur too! But can also give you ideas about how you could portray a plant differently.

## Simple Compositons: Positioning Elements on a Page

There are simple and complex compositions. We will begin by thinking about simple compositions.

By simple composition I mean with one or two components that portray only one aspect of the plant rather than being a botanical illustration that shows many, such as a flower head, seedpod or leaf etc. You need to look at the various aspects of the subject such as positioning and lighting etc. your aim is to in portray key features whilst creating create interest to engage the viewer.



It may be surprising to hear that a single subject, such as this Rudbeckia, has to be considered in terms of composition but achieving the most appealing and informative angle and lighting it well is all important. Be sure to use directional lighting on the subject to get the most out of it tonally and to show off the key features of that subject so that there are no areas of confusion. I needed to show the central flower disk and surrounding florets in a way that is appealing, using softer areas at the rear creates distance and depth. The angle leans to the right because the flowers tend to tilt out as they grow. I generally prefer positioning this sort of subject at an angle rather than using a vertical stem but it depends on the subject, I find it softens the overall appearance.

In the first agapanthus bud I used a straight stem as it reflects that phase of the plant before the weight of the flower head causes it to tilt over. In the second image I used the curve. There is no right or wrong but some approaches are better than others.



The important part is to think about and to consider your options.

With two subjects on a page, the relationship between them is important. Below are 3 examples of compositions. In each I have made use of complementary curves and shapes as well as staggering the subjects to comfortably fill the total area of the page without cramping them in order to allow sufficient space around the subjects.



In the freesia, the two 'curvy' stem shapes complement each other by following a similar-but not quite the same curve. The flower heads show different angles and phases of the flower to create interest. The leaf on the left balances the composition and shows another aspect of the plant, as does the bud stem, which fills any center gap. The flowers spikes are pointing in the same direction with space being used efficiently by having the right-hand flower sitting below the left-hand flower, the composition would not work if they were the same height. Also try to imagine if the two flower stems were pointing in opposite directions or towards each other – do you think it would work? The answer is no, because it would leave a large white space in the center of the page and either side so would use up a very wide area of the paper with far too much awkward white space. So, this arrangement I found was the most efficient and attractive. I tweaked the shape of the actual stem to make it more appealing, it's quite acceptable to do this as long as it's not altering any feature of the growth habit. It's called artistic license.

The Guelder rose fruit and leaf are also staggered and at different angles – the aim is to fill the overall space efficiently in an interesting manner. When painting a simple subject like this, the level of detail and finishing needs to be of a very high standard because simple studies are focusing on just one or two aspects and are therefore open to more scrutiny.

In the tulips a cross-over stem is used, this can be a problem because it draws attention to the 'X' and away from the focal point of the flowers, so it must be sufficiently off-center to work, also the small leaf distracts from the cross, it works ok but I think if I did this again I would stagger the stems and not cross them over.

## Observation

The first part in the process when composing a painting or drawing is to **observe your subject**. Using a chosen, **look and consider the characteristics that typify the plant**. **A simple study page is always a useful approach because it allows you to 'get to know' the subject**, so use your sketchbook to make rough sketches and notes. These can be simple structural drawings. Many students feel that their botanical knowledge lets them down but remember that you don't need to be a botanist to paint botanicals, you simply need to be able to **observe and understand each subject**. By comparison think about a figurative painter, they do not need to be qualified in anatomy or physiology to paint or draw the human form!

### Observe and note the following:

- Look at the overall size and shape of the subject, e.g. is it taller than it is wide?
- Take measurements, overall and of parts.
- What is the most notable feature of the subject? E.g. Flower or leaves etc.
- What is the main supporting structure, the stem is generally the backbone of the plant is it straight or curved, what are its features?
- Decide on the basic simple shapes within the plant looking carefully at leaves and flowers, e.g. are they oval, disc shaped or tubular and how do they connect to the stems etc.
- Look at the connecting stems, junctions. How does the plant 'fit together' e.g., how are the leaves arranged around the stem?
- Make a note of any interesting features

### **Suggested Exercise: Create simple sketches using different angles and relationship:**

**Get to know your subject on the page by make a sketches of a single subject and one with two components using simple line drawings and notes, you can also use tone and colour if you wish, depending on your available time. Rework them until you are happy.**

**Think about the points mentioned above and critique your sketches to decide what works and what doesn't. Think about what you might have done differently to improve your composition.**

**These exercises are not for assessment but for your own practice and self evaluation, you don't have to do them but will find them useful in developing composition skills**