

Botanical Illustration, Graphite

Composition and non-Graphite Tonal Studies Preparing for your Final Tonal Study



Tonal Drawings: Two different styles of composition both with a broad range of tonal values, showing various textures and perspective by Dianne Sutherland 2010

Introduction

Now that you have completed the exercises and studies in line and tone drawing and produced a study page, it's time to think about composition and begin preparations your final tonal drawing.

Your study page should have given you some ideas about how best to portray the plant in your final work and you may have already decided on the most important elements for inclusion.

The information in this document will help you to consider some different options regarding composition and to achieve the balance between a botanically accurate depiction of the plant and an aesthetically pleasing piece of art work. The challenge of producing work in graphite is dependent on precision in the line drawing and tonal work but also in the composition of the final piece, which is equally important.

Key Points for Composing a Botanical Illustration

A good composition should:

- Fill the space in an aesthetically pleasing way – it should be a well-balanced natural looking arrangement
- Show various aspects of the plant, e.g. different views of flowers and leaves or specific detail to create interest and tell as much of the story of the plant as possible
- Create interest by using subjects with a range of textures and tonal values

Things to Avoid

- Large areas of 'awkward' looking white space or uneven gaps - carefully consider the negative space (the white spaces on the paper) as well as the spatial relationships between plant parts including touching or 'kissing' parts - they should overlap or miss each other.
- Repetition - When including dissections and various plant parts try to avoid repetition
- Cramping - always allow sufficient white space by working on appropriate sized paper
- Crossed over stems in the center – or other features that draw the eye to a point that is not the intended focal point
- Even numbers – when using more than two flowers or stems, work with odd numbers 3, 5 or 7 etc.
- Holes in the composition - avoid white flowers in the center, this can look like a hole in the center of the drawing when viewed from a distance

Some Strategies for Composing a Drawing

All plants are different and it would be impossible to cover all of the various scenarios for a composition. Some 'general 'rules' are given however they are intended as guidance and you will no doubt find the exceptions that break the 'rules'.

Some generic scenarios are given in the next part of this document followed by more specific guidance on how to compose and carry out a drawing or painting, including:

- Scaling up and depicting small parts
- Dealing with tall plants
- Mixed flower compositions and arranging multiple component parts



Examples of botanical compositions (left to right): 1. *Agapanthus* (tall plant) 2. *Pulsatilla vulgaris* (multiple components parts arranged economically) 3. Turnip (complete plant view)

Scaling up Small Parts

In traditional style botanical illustrations, plant parts are illustrated to provide the information deemed important to identify a species, most are drawn actual size but others are enlarged, occasionally they are reduced. Many old and new botanical works utilise this traditional format, although today more botanical artists encompass a wider spectrum of more relaxed approaches. However, in a Botanical illustration your work should still depict the key features for identification purposes and should be accurate in size, which may include small parts. If you have completed your research in the study page exercise, you should know what is and is not important and it is up to you to decide whether or not to include the reproductive parts, fruit and seeds etc. If you do include small parts the main aim is to make sure that they are clear for the viewer to see, so scaling up by an appropriate amount for clarity may be necessary.



In this famous example of *Banksia coccinea* by Ferdinand Bauer¹, you can see that the reproductive parts have been arranged above line along both the bottom edge of the illustration and also at the sides (making best use of the space). It's a very symmetrical arrangement but one which suits the particular plant. It is the normal format to arrange parts along the bottom of the work by lining them up along the bottom edge. This can be done by ruling a very faint pencil line, which can be removed later. If parts are scaled used can be written below the part as for example 'x2' in pencil or a scale bar can be used. When drawing small parts in graphite the work must be very clean and is best completed with a fairly hard grade pencil (2H or H) and it can be depicted as a line drawing or a tonal study.

Suggested activity: Research examples of old illustration on the Internet and in books, there are many.

Dealing with Tall Plants

Botanical subjects should generally be drawn to size, however, it is not always practical to draw a large plant in full length as it grows from top to bottom. Coral Guest did it very successfully in her *Lilium regale* painting but many plants do not look good in this format and the constraints of paper size alone are limiting.

Fortunately there are ways of arranging the composition which allow you to keep to the accurate dimensions / height of the plant but which serve to save space. Often they make for a more interesting painting too.

In this Foxglove painting, I chose to cut the stem and overlap the parts. I didn't actually cut the stem on the plant but made drawings the whole plant on tracing paper and cut the pieces to rearrange.

Always make sure the cut ends fit together and decide where the eye-level view is going to be (usually in the middle).



Multiple Flower head Compositions

Compositions which intend to show different views of a plant at various stages requires the arrangement of multiple parts, this type of composition can be challenging. Arrangements need to be carefully balanced and should not look overly cluttered or too sparse. Particular care needs to be taken with light coloured or white flowers which can appear lost on the paper. Such arrangements will take more time to compose due to complicated overlapping parts and elements.

Try thinking about the **negative spaces** in between the components as well as the actual flowers, try to **avoid crossed-stems in the centre** and instead position them off-centre. Try not to lose sight of the general architecture of each plant and consider the **growth habit** of each plant carefully. You study page work will be useful when it comes to bringing everything together. You may also find it useful to make use of black and white photography to check if the composition is balanced tonally.



Beginning a Composition

The best approach is to start by **making numerous quick thumbnail sketches**. Thereafter, **work with the component parts on tracing paper to arrange**.

Of course a composition doesn't have to be all that complicated, sometimes a simple single flower or leaf in white space makes a beautiful illustration. If well drawn and positioned with good tonal values, a simple composition can make a very impressive work but still needs good planning.

Use Thumbnail sketches

Thumbnails small are small sketches, drawn by eye, they are intended to give a quick over-view indicating what does and doesn't work. You only need to draw the basic shapes of the components. I find working on a large piece of paper or A3 sketchbook is good for comparison, I draw squares and rectangles approximately 3 x 3 inches and 3 x4 (both portrait and landscape). These drawings are made very quickly. Try making 6 or more quick drawings showing different possible arrangements.



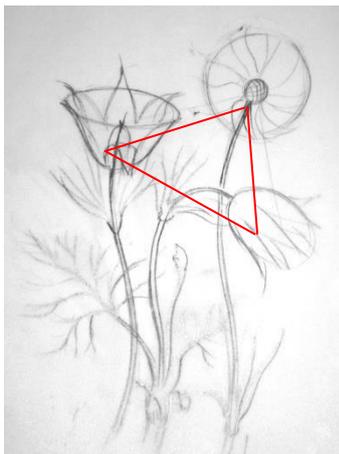
Looks for shapes and curves when making thumbnail drawings. Don't be afraid of trying different ideas or making adjustments. The examples on the previous page shows a couple of alternatives for a pair of tulips, the right hand version has better curves and the more forward facing bloom on the right is more interesting. However I quite like the curved leaf on the left hand tulip so might try a combination of the two



On the left is a page of thumb nail sketches showing possible composition ideas for a pair of sunflowers. It's clear to see that some work better than others. This exercise allows you to explore many different arrangements and to eliminate the ones that don't work, such as the cross-over stem on the middle row of sunflowers and then refine a couple of layouts for further consideration.

The first decision that you will need to make is what format best suits the plant, **square, portrait or landscape**. This is usually fairly obvious and dictated by the architecture of the plant involved but it can be worth playing with. The thumbnails will help with this decision too. Don't be afraid to overlap and place flowers in front of leaves. This creates structure and depth and can work very well with lighter coloured blooms.

Moving on to Composing the Parts



Once you have decided on a general format for the composition, start to refine the drawing and layout. This work can be completed on tracing paper. Don't be afraid to change your mind at this stage, remember that you can still eliminate or add parts.

From these initial rough drawings (e.g. *Pulsatilla* layout shown here). You may make drawings of the individual component parts on tracing paper, then cut out and arrange the components. This allows you to see the overall picture -you can still refine it, making small adjustments to decide if it works or not. Cutting and pasting' the tracing can save a lot of wasted time. When working with several components parts always try to form staggered arrangements.

If you look at the layout above you will see that a triangle can be formed between the two flowers and the seed-head, the flowers are the focal point so this makes a more aesthetically pleasing composition than if the featured components are positioned in a straight line.

Here you can see how producing tracings of the individual parts and cutting them out is used to review and adjust the arrangement before finalising it.

These tracings are also useful future reference material should you draw or paint the same plant in the future.

Once you are happy with your layout, make a final tracing of the entire composition piece. You are now ready to transfer the tracing to watercolour paper. Transfer can be made by carefully drawing on the back of the tracing with an HB or B grade pencil, then flipping back over, and fixing to the paper. The draw carefully on the outline on the front side, using a soft fibre tip pen. You can also use a light pad or lightbox.



Care with Overlapping Stems

Once you have composed the final layout you will no doubt find that it involves some overlaps. At this stage it's worth double checking that everything connects together as it should. Take extra care to ensure that stems, leaves and flowers continue smoothly and without gaps where they disappear and then reappear behind other plant parts. (Also discussed in the Perspective document).

One of the main reasons that paintings are rejected from botanical art society exhibitions is due to poor continuation of stems or gaps in overlaps, I see this all too often when undertaking selection for the Society of Botanical Artists. So always check alignment, a magnifying glass helps!



Shown above right is a crossed stem, the transition of the line must continue behind the other stem and in this case there is also a shadow which gives some depth to the painting.

Tonal Studies and Using Photography

Once that you have completed your drawing, you are almost ready to start the final tonal work but there are a couple more stages that can be used before you begin work. At this point I suggest a 'trial run' in the form of a rough painted tonal study. This is a quick monochrome study used to 'snag' the composition and to work out the tonal values and to consider the effect of light and shade on the subject as a whole. You can also make good use of black and white photography, again this helps to identify the values and check the lighting and composition

Tonal Value Study: A quick tonal study **can be painted with neutral tint, black watercolour or black ink (ink is more difficult)** This step can be **invaluable in checking whether or not your composition works in advance of starting a lengthy tonal drawing.** You can work in a fairly **loose style** because this is a reference piece. Work at the same size as your final drawing. This exercise **will allow you to observe the tonal values and lighting.** The way the light falls on the subject is important in bringing the work to life; it makes the work vibrant and gives it depth. **There needs to be a balance between highlights, mid tones and shades.** Play with the light source on the subject. If the light is too far away the subject will lack depth, if it's too close the contrast between light and dark is too strong and the mid tones are lost. Half close your eyes to try to see where the lighter and darker areas are, first look for the lightest parts and the darkest parts and then all of the mid tone areas in between....it really does help.

A very common problem is loss of highlights, so a simple tonal study will help you to avoid this problem. The brightest highlights should be left completely clear. Thereafter work up from the lightest to the darkest shades. You may need to reconsider your lighting if it isn't right i.e. if it lacks a good range of tonal values and looks flat.

Use photography to assist you with this process, it is relatively easy to convert colour photographs to black and white on a computer and or camera these days. It will **help you to identify the tones and to quickly check whether or not your lighting is correct.** When photographing the subject **do not use flash,** this will negate any efforts you have made to use directional lighting on the subject. Instead use natural light. **You can use your photographs (on screen or in print form) to identify the tones. Refer to your tonal strip by holding it against the photograph.** Pencil grades can be identified at by using the tonal strip.

Note: Remember to look for reflected light. This is the light that bounces back onto a subject from other surfaces where it is in shadow. Reflected light is always lighter than shade areas but never as light as a main highlight. Make notes about the light source.

Exercises for Composition and non-Graphite Tonal Studies

Once you have identified your subject material for the final piece you should use the guidance in this document to:

1. Make Thumbnail sketches for composition ideas
2. Draw the component parts and compose your final drawing ideas using line drawings on tracing paper
3. Make a tonal Study as a quick painting of the composition, using either black watercolour paint, neutral tint watercolour or ink
4. Take black and white photographs as reference

These exercises are not assessed but should be used as your preparation for the final study but you may email for quick advice but please submit them with your final drawing.

References

1. Bauer, Ferdinand (1813) *Banksia coccinea*, Illustrationes Florae Novae Hollandiae plate http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Banksia_coccinea_%28Illustrationes_Florae_Novae_Hollandiae_plate_3%29.jpg
2. Coral Guest's *Lilium regale* http://www.coralguest.com/gallery/v/precision/Coral+Guest+in+Studio+wth+Lilium+regale+painting_.jpg.html