

BOTANICAL ART & PHOTOGRAPHY SHOW

“You get to see extraordinary things most people never see”



Jackie Isard won a gold medal at last year's RHS Botanical Art Exhibition at London's iconic Saatchi Gallery. Here she reveals her painstaking approach and the challenges of fieldwork

How did you get started in Botanical Art?

I was made redundant from my job as a graphic artist in 2012 and used the money to retrain as a garden designer, which is how I discovered my love of painting plants. I'd never touched watercolours before, but I just went for it, using subjects from my own garden.

In 2015 I joined the Society of Botanical Artists (SBA) and entered the RHS competition.

I was accepted first time round, then spent five years preparing and researching my entry.

Why did the submission take five years?

Once your work has been accepted, you're allowed five years to enter. I was accepted in 2016 but it took me two years to decide what to paint, then track down the right habitat. Eventually I found Trewalkin

Meadow near the Black Mountains in Wales, and Great Traston Meadows in Newport, Gwent – both owned by The Wildlife Trusts. Visits were complicated by the pandemic, as they shut the bridge into Wales during lockdown.

When the bridge was opened, I went back and forth for about three years to study the plants across the seasons, with kind permission from Welsh Wildlife Trust. I booked a lodge during the summer of 2021 to be near my plants and painted every day. I also grew the plants in my own garden at home – but you have to be careful to buy seed from a reputable supplier and be aware of the fact nutritious garden soil can have a big impact on the plants' growth habit.

Why did you choose these plants for the RHS exhibition?

It's vital to choose a subject you're passionate about – it helps to motivate you through all the research and fieldwork. Wildflowers have always been

close to my heart, and I wanted to draw attention to their importance, and decline. There are only a few hectares of wet meadow left in the UK and yet these flowers play a crucial role in nature, which is why I included their pollinators too. If devil's bit scabious (*Succisa pratensis*) didn't exist, the marsh fritillary butterfly would die out – it's a vital food plant for the caterpillars.

How did you feel, winning gold on your first attempt?

I was so happy my cheeks ached for a week! I was hoping for a silver-gilt medal, so to get gold was fantastic. I was thrilled, tired and elated, having worked a full eight-hour day every day, and at weekends, for months, so I gave myself a couple of weeks off. I'm still not over it!

How do you typically get started?

I'll start off by spending a lot of time researching the plant's botany and examine it carefully, before I start to draw. First I'll make sketchbook studies and botany notes, create colour swatches and rough drawings of the plant parts so I can create an attractive composition. You're aiming at telling the story of the plant clearly and concisely, showing the whole plant rather than just flower heads or small parts.

My drawings are very detailed and form a map for me to follow. I paint slowly in layers and mainly use soft washes, filling in the fine detail with a dry-brush technique. I'll adjust the colours with toning glazes during painting. Underlay colours are usually Permanent Rose, Winsor Violet, Winsor Blue Red Shade and Transparent Yellow depending on what I want to achieve.

Some of Jackie's preparation studies and colour mixes for her award-winning series, including a dissected devil's bit scabious



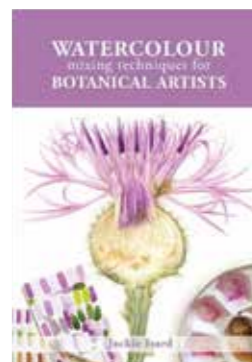
What materials do you use? Winsor & Newton professional watercolour, Fabriano Artistic HP extra white paper and transparent pigments. I mix all my colours with a limited palette, mainly using different sets of primaries – red, blue and yellow.

How does botany inform your paintings?

Competition judges are strict about accuracy, so for the RHS exhibition I had the help of botanist Liz Leech, who tutored me alongside my painting. Dissection really opened my eyes, revealing the smaller details. You typically take a couple of flowers and gently pull one apart counting and measuring the parts. The other one is dissected in half to draw. Parts can be really tiny and fragile, which is where a microscope comes into play. You learn so much and get to look at amazing things most people never see.

See the exhibition The RHS Botanical Art and Photography Show, 16 June-9 July 2023, 10am-6pm, is at Saatchi Gallery, London. RHS Members go free with the following code: RHSART23. Tickets £7. Family and concession tickets available.

● Visit: saatchi-gallery.com/tickets



Jackie's book *Watercolour Mixing Techniques for Botanical Artists* (£12.99, Crowood) is available from all good bookshops and at amazon.co.uk



Take part!

New botanical artists keen to exhibit with the RHS must first present examples of their work to the judging panel for pre-selection. The next Selection Meeting will be held this autumn: see rhs.org.uk

Some of Jackie's botany notebooks for her Wet Meadow Wildflowers series and a beautiful painting of *Cardamine pratensis* (cuckoo flower, right)



Some of Jackie's award-winning paintings. Left, *Geum rivale* (water avens) and above, a detailed cross section of the dissected flower

