

Jeni Neale Botanical Artist



Jeni Neale

You know what it's like, you flick through the Open Studios brochure, looking for something different, and suddenly, there it is. The most wonderful tulip, painted in the manner of traditional botanical illustration. Some 20 minutes later I was wandering around Jeni Neale's sitting room in Long Itchington, looking at both her own work and that of her students. It was all impressive, a carefully controlled abundance of floral and plant forms. I was, therefore, delighted to be able to welcome her as our first morning speaker of the autumn season.

Jeni's interest in plant life began on her father's allotment as a small child and perhaps a first awareness of art came from her portrait artist mother. Later, she was fortunate to have as a teacher AnneMarie Evans, a well known botanical illustrator, who lit a flame. By the age of 16, she was doing plant illustrations and we were shown a sketch book with drawings of a rose. Being brought up in Leicester, it was not surprising that her artistic talents led her into designing for the knitwear industry and we saw sketches and colour swatches for a project with Kaffe Fassett, resulting in a Fair Isle waistcoat, which she admitted, her mother

helped her knit!

Jeni explained that plant illustration comes in various forms. Firstly there is scientific botanical illustration, which requires an academic knowledge of botany. The aim of this work is to enable plant identification and to record details, which it would be difficult to do in any other way. Despite modern technology, Kew Gardens still employs, on a piece work basis, a team of botanical illustrators. The need for speed means that work is not coloured and shading is of the minimum necessary to convey information. Jeni has done some work of this type and is a long standing member of the Chelsea Physic Garden Florilegium Society, whose aim is to record in paint and drawing, all the plants in the Society's garden. Jeni's contribution has been the "Long Red Florence Onion". She is fond of vegetables and prefers them to flowers.

Jeni's main way of working is as a botanical artist. This approach maintains accuracy and traditional white grounds, but allows a little more artistic licence and is less reliant on scientific knowledge. She will rearrange a plant to produce a more pleasing composition, but will always aim to inform by including the full flower, the back of the flower and a bud, as well as leaves and stems. Traditionally, using the AnneMarie Evans method, there was a strict approach in which paint layers were built up, beginning pale, gradually introducing modelling and then further colour in a seven stage system. Pages include colour notes and shade samples and are a collection of information about a plant.

One of the difficulties in botanic art is that plants, in particular flowers, do not stay in the peak of condition for as long as the artist needs to actually paint them. In recent years, computer technology and digital photography has assisted with this, though colour accuracy has to come from the artist/observer. Jeni has created a large collection of annotated colour samples, worked on strips of heavy weight water colour paper, which she uses to match and record colours when they are at their freshest and to support digital records.

Jeni Neale Botanical Artist continued

Jeni's large tulip paintings all begin with a photograph, but photography is not an instant path to satisfying composition and achieving the perfect image. Up to 100 might be taken in different lights and backgrounds, before the right image is achieved.

As a group of artists, we were interested in the practicalities and basic tools of her work. Jeni uses sable brushes with a fine point, but a fat belly, Numbers 4 and 5, which hold a lot of paint. "Raphael" is her current preferred make. Her paints are mainly Windsor and Newton and she has experimented with Sennelier, but finds them a bit short on pigment. She is beginning to work with an American brand, QoR, which have a high pigment content and include a particularly pleasing transparent orange, which has brought fiery tones to one of her tulips. Her preference is always for tubes, rather than pans.

Most of her colours are mixed, especially the greens, using a six colour system and complimentary colours. Some colours, pinks and purples, have to be bought. Traditionally white is not allowed in botanical work, but nowadays it is often used for tidying up edges and for putting in veins. One method of tidying is to use white acrylic ink, then overpaint with watercolour tints, as needed, to match the ground. Traditionally, botanical work is always on white, but Jeni has been experimenting with coloured grounds. We saw a part completed artichoke on dark green board. Her usual white surface is heavy weight Fabriano Artistic. The very old herbals were worked on vellum, ie calf skin, which gives a distinctive glow to work as well as being of much greater longevity than paper. It is very expensive, around £100 per skin, but Jeni uses it from time to time. The only remaining producer is William Cowley of Milton Keynes, whose main client is the Government, as vellum is used for the archive copy of all Acts of Parliament!

Different surfaces require a different approach. Fabriano will take a fluid, wet way of working. Board and vellum need a dryer method, preventing layering. One advantage of vellum is that watercolour can be lifted off, if something is not quite right. Where a wet approach is needed, ox gall is added to paint water, breaking surface tension.

And, by this time, we had all taken in as much as we could at one session and it was time to gather round the stunning collection of work, which Jeni had brought with her and, of course, purchase her cards.

Further reading:

Jeni Neale's inspirational teacher was AnneMarie Evans, find out about her life and work [here](#),

Remember Kaffe Fassett, knitwear designer? [Experience his rich colours and patterns](#).

Fancy a visit to the Chelsea Physic Garden click here or want to know more about the [Florilegium Society](#),

Jeni's amazing orange paint comes from, [Qorcolors](#) and the last remaining vellum and parchment makers are, [William Cowley Ltd](#)

Jeni's more usual surface is from [Fabriano](#)

Finally, if you missed the talk, check out Jeni [here](#),

Katharine Barker.