

“Meconopsis and botanical illustration”

by Dr. Janet Watson and Sharon Bradley

(written up by Norma McDowall)

*“Good God, when I consider the melancholy fate of so many of botany’s votaries
I am tempted to ask whether men are in their right mind who so desperately
risk life and everything else through the love of collecting plants.”*

*Carl Linnaeus
Glory of the Scientist
1737*

Dr. Janet Watson and Sharon Bradley, who gained their Diplomas in Botanical Art last year, gave a joint presentation on "Meconopsis and botanical illustration" via an excellent PowerPoint presentation.

Historically, botanical art was the only way of showing the detail of plants....there were no photographs until the mid 19th century. Early Illustrations from Himalayan Plants for J F Cathcart of Bengal Civil Service 1855 showed *M. simplicifolia* and *M. nepalensis*. The botanist Walter Hood Fitch was born in Glasgow in 1817. He was a great friend of William Jackson Hooker and was sole artist for Kew Magazine.

Janet and Sharon commenced their presentation with the inspirational plants and gardens which set them on the way to seeking diplomas in botanical art, with *Meconopsis* at Dalemain, *M. ‘Slieve Donard’* and Tom Shearer’s garden at Broughton.

They used their own plants, and those supplied by Evelyn Stevens, to provide further inspiration for their paintings and a supply of material.

It has taken Sharon ten years to attain the high level of competence and artistry shown.

Research

The detailed drawings and the tables of scientific measurements were shown. Each part of the plant under study has to be meticulously measured as a botanical drawing must represent all the parts of the plant - leaves, buds, flower (and view inside it) and the seedpods.

Artist’s Tools

Sharon showed and explained the main equipment - we all admired the fineness of the sable brushes....as well as the costs involved.

Hot pressed paper - the colour can alter the final colour of the painting

Artists quality paints - highest quality, not student quality

Sable brushes - Windsor and Newton Series 7 Sable Brushes

(introduced for Queen Victoria)

Magnifying glass essential to see fine detail clearly

Proportional dividers - will enlarge and reduce proportionally....saves time

Dissection kit - scalpels etc needed to examine parts of the plant

Colour chart - water colours - RHS Mini Colour chart containing 244 colours, not many blues in it so has to be adjusted

Water - for watering down the paint

Pencils - different grades

.....and the window ledge of 'essentials'!

Photographs and printers

Sharon explained that working from photographs the colour portrayed by the different printers varies...so colour matching is a big problem, if working from photographs. It is best to work in conjunction with the plant itself. A good camera is needed, and a macro lens for picking up fine detail.

Line drawings

We were shown the line drawings made for Paul Egan ([see the drawings on p18 and p25 of the article 'Introducing two new newly described species of *Meconopsis*](#)) and Prof David Rankin's article on '[Meconopsis wilsonii subsp. orientalis](#)', and the problems of colour matching, which is done under different lighting conditions.

Janet referred to *MM.* 'Bobby Masterton', 'Ascreavie', 'Jimmy Bayne', '*punicea*', '*horridula*' and '*simplicifolia*' to show the different phases of a botanical painting, bringing together all the elements, and finally the colour matching in the flower or leaf.

Sharon next referred to colour matching. 116 ready mixed in tubes. 3 primary colours of red, yellow and blue, mixed together give secondary colours, and then mixed again for tertiary colours...giving thousands of options. The different types of transparency and opaqueness matter too on the paper for matching flowers and leaves. This was illustrated by explaining the colouring matching for *Meconopsis wilsonii subsp. orientalis*. As students they mixed the yellows and blues to make a chart.....and this now saves time when they take the chart to the plant.

Biscot 2011 Exhibition

Janet continued by showing the work she had largely completed for the Biscot 2011 Exhibition at Gardening Scotland from 3rd - 5th June. She will be exhibiting 8 paintings of big perennial blue poppies. The paintings will then be transferred to the Fletcher Building at the RBGE and exhibited there for another 2 - 3 weeks.

The *Meconopsis* cultivars Janet has painted are *M.* 'Jimmy Bayne', *M.* 'Ascreavie', *M.* 'Barney's Blue' of the George Sherriff Group and *M.* 'Mrs. Jebb', *M.* 'Slieve Donard', *M.* 'Bryan Conway', *M.* 'Maggie Sharp' and *M.* 'Bobby Masterton' of the Infertile Blue Group. These cultivars were chosen because each one has very distinctive definitive characteristics of leaves, flowers and fruits. The paintings - images of the upper part of the flowering stem - are all life size and include buds, newly opening flowers, fully open flowers, seed heads, leaf whorls and cauline leaves.

Final stages

Sharon explained the build up to the final painting, starting with the buds and flowers as they will die before the painting is finished. A light source is needed - north window suits - to give the painting depth.

Finally Sharon showed the magnificent finished botanical painting of *Meconopsis wilsonii subsp. orientalis*. which was used in the article by Prof David Rankin in Curtis' Botanical Magazine.

This was a superb joint effort by Janet and Sharon to take us through the art of botanical painting and we must thank them for all their hard work on our behalf. Words here cannot show the beauty of the paintings!