



▲ *Faded Anemone*, watercolour, 10×13 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (25×35cm)

Pleasure in the detail

Part 1 The modern painter is helped immensely by new technology. Here **Helen Campbell** takes traditional watercolour layering methods into the digital age to produce botanical studies that simply glow

It is always a joy to paint flowers and fruit, but who could deny that attempting to capture all the different colours and tones is a daunting prospect? Students are always nervous about using watercolour, as it's a notoriously difficult medium to work with – that is until you get used to handling it properly. Once you have mastered this, its possibilities are endless and you will come to realise that it is a truly wonderful and versatile medium.

One of the questions I am most frequently asked is how to achieve such bright, vibrant colours. So often students assume working in watercolour means that you are only able to obtain weak, watery washes, but this simply isn't true. By carefully layering each wash and allowing it to dry before placing a further

wash over the top, it is possible to obtain deep, strong colours. Patience is key here. This method of watercolour painting simply cannot be rushed so be prepared to take your time. By applying too thick a wash, or not allowing your previous wash to dry properly, you will inevitably end up with a muddy mess.

Good materials are vital

I prefer to use hot-pressed paper. The smoothness allows me to achieve sharp, tight lines and these can be difficult to produce when using a NOT surface paper. I love Arches for this reason, as it has a particularly smooth feel to it.

If I could only use one brush it would be my No. 3 spotter brush from Rosemary & Co. These lovely little brushes have shorter bristles than regular brushes, and

have a strong, resilient point. I use them in a way similar to that of a felt-tip pen, rather like a colouring in process. The No. 3 brush has a very fine point and this is usually sufficient to achieve the finer details toward the end of my painting, as well as the looser washes at the very beginning.

Finally, I always use Artists' quality colours and my favourite brand is Winsor & Newton Professional Water Colours, though Holbein also has a good range of colours. It is important to know which colours are opaque, such as the cadmiums, and those that are transparent. It is the transparent ones, such as the quinacridones, that are best for glazing over existing washes as they allow the wash underneath to show through, thereby creating a good depth of colour.



▲ The original photograph of the peony taken in the garden

Working from photographs

I don't make sketches, take notes or colour swatches; I simply don't believe it's necessary. I work from photographs either photographing the flowers in situ – as Mother Nature intended – or in the studio. Working in this way makes my job a lot easier. Some of my paintings take up to three weeks to complete. If I worked from life, the bloom would be dead or wilted. If that isn't enough, there is the further problem of constantly changing light. So working from a good photograph is crucial.

Attention to detail is vital when botanical painting so take good, close-up shots; I use a digital camera with a 90mm macro lens. However, these days a good camera phone will work just as well.

Studio photography means that I can take my time when setting up the composition, positioning the fruit or flower exactly as I want it. I pay close attention to the negative space – that is, the space surrounding your subject – because this is often just as important. However, from time to time, and as the seasons permit, it's also possible to take good photographs *in situ*.

When I have placed my flower into position, I begin by taking a compositional shot. This is to see how the overall finished painting will look. When I'm happy with it, I begin to take a series of



▲ It's easier to decipher the exact colours within the flower when you're not distracted by a busy background. I removed the background from my original photograph using Magic Extractor from the Image menu in Photoshop Elements. If you don't have photo-editing software, you could photograph your subject with a piece of white card placed behind it.


photographs, focussing on each part of the flower in turn. This ensures that I have all the finer details recorded so that when it comes to painting, I have everything I need.

I then work from the reference photographs that have been transferred to my tablet, which allows me to zoom in on the section of the flower I'm painting. The picture quality is excellent and the colours are very accurate, both of which are vital for botanical painting.

Before painting, I usually take out the background colours in Photoshop (using its Magic Eraser function). By removing the background, the colour of the flower becomes more apparent. When I observe the pink colour of the peony on the white background it is easy to decide what colour to apply, but the original photograph is far too busy.

Sketching the subject

It is important to produce a good, crisp detailed drawing from the outset. From this I begin to build up layers slowly, often several washes are needed in order to obtain the depth of colour here. A good way of achieving strong colour is by simply allowing each wash to dry before adding another. This can be done in two ways: either by applying the same consistency of wash over the existing one, or by adding more pigment. I used this technique on the finished peony (seen right), adjusting the depth of colour and tone as necessary.

Next month I will take you through painting a botanical study of an apple, step by step. In the meantime, please start taking your own photographs and work from the peony demonstration you see below. 

Demonstration

Helen's working methods

Colours used

- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| ■ Winsor & Newton Professional Water Colours | ■ Holbein |
| ● Cobalt violet + Payne's grey (for the highlights) | ● Rose violet |
| ● Perylene green | ● Permanent rose |
| ● Olive green | ● Bright rose |
| | ● Opera rose |
| | ● Rose of ultramarine |
| | ● Carmine |
| | ● Sap green |

Step 1 Drawing the peony ►

The first and crucial stage is the drawing, which must be accurate.



Step 2 Initial washes ►

I always begin by looking for the highlight colour, which is nearly always the same mix of cobalt violet and Payne's grey, although in different ratios. The highlight colour is not always apparent, but it's vital that it's captured within the painting as it adds to the realism. The first mix is always very weak and watery then I quickly wash out the brush in clean water, dab off the excess onto kitchen paper and swipe the brush along the edge of the paint to create a soft edge. I continue to work around the flower, introducing colour. You can see that I have already added some darker colour and tone toward the bottom of the bloom; this will help when assessing colour.



◀ Step 3 Building up the layers

I continue around the peony, enhancing the colours that are already in place, adding various mixes of green paint and constantly cross referencing with the photograph. The darker colours are applied right at the end, as the paint is much thicker at this point.

Helen Campbell

Helen is self-taught and has been painting professionally since 2010. She was awarded a Silver Gilt medal by The Royal Horticultural Society for her work this year and now runs courses from her studio in the Cotswolds village of Winchcombe. For more information visit www.helencampbellart.co.uk or email info@helencampbellart.co.uk.



▲ The final painting *Bright Pink Peony*, watercolour on Arches Hot Pressed paper, 9½x13½in. (25x35cm)