

## The Agony and the Ecstasy: Going for RHS Gold

Painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is a doddle compared with trying for an RHS gold medal. Here are some things you will need for the latter:

- Planning and logistics skills (so you can paint all year round even if your subject is only available in summer)
- Someone to bring you tea and sandwiches while you paint (so you don't have to stop for meals)
- Ox gall liquid (for painting large leaves in 37C heat)
- Fingerless gloves (for painting when it is so cold that your water pot is frozen)
- Industrial-strength Velcro (to fix your finished work to the RHS display boards)
- Stamina and endurance (including the ability to get by on two or three hours sleep a night during the RHS Botanical Art Show itself)

This I learned from a wonderful Zoom workshop with Simon Williams on 24 April 2021 about the long and arduous process that led to the joy of his gold medal at the 2018 RHS Show. You can see the set of six paintings that won him the medal at [swillustrations.com/botanical-art.html](http://swillustrations.com/botanical-art.html)

Simon's subject was *Nepenthes*, the tropical pitcher plant, a genus with more than 160 species and countless hybrids, offering a kaleidoscope of patterns of green, crimson and maroon on their variously shaped pitchers (called "traps"). Many of the specimens he grew himself, so add "green fingers" to the above list of requirements if, like Simon, you love exotic plants.



*Simon grows 40 Nepenthes plants. Most are in his heated greenhouse and have to be misted three times a day, but the trickiest are grown in his tropical terrarium*

Simon uses a dry-brush technique, the brush in question being a size 2 from Winsor and Newton Series 7 (other brands are too "whippy"). As for dryness, he does not need a normal palette with edges and wells, so white bathroom tiles are ideal. He lets his paint mixture dry completely on the tile to see what shade it becomes and then picks up the dry mixture with a wet brush. He showed us

how he preserves the point on his brush by mixing with a circular motion and giving a final twist to the brush as he lifts it from the tile.

To fill areas, he holds the brush at a slant and paints with the side, but for fine details he holds it almost vertical, his fingers on the metal ferrule, and paints with the tip. He demonstrated the process of stippling, which he uses to change colour, show texture or shift from light to dark. Here Zoom came into its own, as all 13 of us could have a front-row seat and seemed to be watching him work from just inches away. As he added brownish-red stippling to a trap he was painting for us, Simon said he was looking at his specimen every couple of seconds.

Zooming out (excuse the pun), we had already seen how Simon would place his huge piece of paper – actually illustration board – under a hanging basket containing a large *Nepenthes* plant, its traps dangling in all directions. To the side was another *Nepenthes* standing on a wobbly-looking tower of pots. As we had all muted ourselves, it was impossible to know



*Stippling – a key part of Simon’s dry-brush technique. Note also how Simon has allowed himself a little artistic licence with the left edge of this trap, making it show up better by adding extra red to what was a mainly green edge on his specimen*



*Pictures of pitchers. Sourcing specimens to paint is part of the challenge. Simon’s beloved Nepenthes may come from his own terrarium or the Czech Republic or anywhere between*

whether there was a chorus of sharp intakes of breath as the 13 of us simultaneously noted this precarious arrangement. I, for one, was thoroughly alarmed, imagining all kinds of disasters. In fact, Simon told us, the wind did once blow a plant over and the insect-digesting liquid in its traps spilled on to his half-finished artwork. Undaunted as ever, he redesigned his composition so that the brown mark was covered.



*Simon takes photos of his work at different stages. He suggested we should do this too, to remind ourselves later how our work developed and to give ourselves confidence if we ever felt discouraged*

Glaze, detail, glaze, detail, repeated multiple times, is the way that Simon builds up his paintings. For each glaze, “quickly and bravely put it on” he advised. Inevitably it will slightly blur what it has been washed over, so the lines and edges then have to be sharpened up again. He creates highlights by lifting paint off, sometimes using a Size 0 brush, though he never uses this size for applying paint. He may work for two days just to paint the bulging, shiny, ridged lip of a single trap.



*Above left: photograph of a multi-coloured lip (peristome) which Simon spent two days painting  
Above right: part-way through the painting*

Simon's basic green is made from Winsor blue (red shade) and transparent yellow. He showed us three marvellous shadow colours called perylene green, perylene violet and perylene maroon, which he uses in every picture. Another of Simon's favourites is raw sienna, which can warm the edge of the shadow inside a *Nepenthes* trap or tone down a leaf that has turned

The most astonishing thing for me in this very informative workshop was Simon's remark that he normally discards the specimen when he feels his work is about two-thirds finished. He waits 24



*This dissection shows why the pitcher-shaped leaf tips are called traps. At the bottom (below the white pieces of debris) are the remains of insects that have slipped down the peristome and are being digested by the plant*

hours and then returns to the painting, finishing it off from an artistic point of view only. For example, he ensures that it looks thoroughly 3D; this entails a fine balance between getting the colour correct (essential for winning RHS gold) and the need to use "wrong" colours to show the modelling. In the later stages of a painting, even the direction of the brush marks can help indicate contours.

Simon also guided us through the complex process of exhibiting at the RHS Show. The RHS are rigid and rigorous; some might say ruthless. They assess you for a medal on the weakest of the six artworks you submit. If a painting accidentally drops off the board on to the floor you are disqualified. Judges look at the composition, draughtsmanship, colour, mount, frame, hanging and also the unity of your whole six-piece exhibit. Simon has noticed that, in the last few years, the educational information an artist places alongside their paintings has become increasingly important.

Simon's gifts and versatility are amazing – also his modesty. The dry-brush watercolour skills that won him RHS gold are merely a sideline. Usually he paints in gouache and currently is doing digital art. His take-home message was: find your own style in painting and enjoy it.

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Report by Caroline Kerslake, published in *Palette and Petal* (Summer 2021), the magazine of the South West Society of Botanical Artists