

Conversations with our Artists

By Joyce Westner

Anita Walsmit Sachs

Across the “pond” Anita lives and paints in the Netherlands, a mere twenty-minute walk from the North Sea. She had to postpone talking to the ASBA Journal to travel to England to meet with Prince Charles—something you do when you’ve been commissioned to paint plants on his Highgrove estate.

“I love to work in the morning when the light is very bright.”

How did you get into botanical art?

I’ve been a painter all my life as far back as I can remember; I did many different things but the last things were still life in oils. But I got fed up with the loneliness of the studio and wanted to do something different. I saw the book of Shirley Sherwood and then I thought, “That’s what I want!” I started as a science illustrator at the National Herbarium at the University of Leiden [in the Netherlands].

Are you a plant person or an artist at heart? An artist; my subject is plants.

Where do you get your subjects? The Netherlands has many huge flower cultures—it’s easy to grow all kinds. There are many nurseries, and flowers are rather cheap – roses, hortensia, tulips – and I have a nice garden. My husband Hans is a great gardener. We live just behind the dunes of the North Sea.

What’s your favorite medium? For the moment, watercolor; I did many oils but in the end I became allergic to the fumes. Perhaps now you can get [something less irritating] but I like watercolor very much.

Do you enter juried shows? Three times I have entered the Royal Horticultural Society exhibits and once the Scottish Royal Horticultural Society exhibit; I won a bronze, a silver-gilt and two gold medals. My paintings have appeared twice in *Focus on Nature* at the New York State Museum in Albany, NY, and at the

Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation. I was also invited to join the Highgrove Florilegium [of Prince Charles’s estate]. I painted an *Acer* and a double white *Syringa*. I am in the second Highgate book just published in May of 2009. (When asked if she has a copy of the book, she said that despite an artist discount of 1,000 English pounds, the book is still out of her budget at 11,000 English pounds.)

When do you paint? I love to work in the morning when the light is very bright; I start at about 9 and work until 4. Three days a week I’m at the Herbarium. I’m quite busy.

Where do you paint? I have a house with north light, a studio upstairs and also a room near the garden, so I have two possibilities. The studio looks out at a small forest of oaks, pines, and birches on the dunes. You can walk to the sea in twenty minutes.

Do you teach, and if so what special aspect of botanical art? Yes, at the Hortus

Botanicus in Leiden [one of the oldest botanical gardens in the world], founded in 1592. I have four week-long classes a year, summer, fall, winter, spring with 14 pupils.

What technique are you still trying to master? I try to make my compositions more interesting, by looking at other pictures, and by making sketches on tracing paper and moving around parts of my drawing.

What one thing do you do that would surprise other artists? I

founded the Dutch Society of Botanical Artists three years ago [Anita is also a member of the Society of Botanical Artists in England]. Every year we have had a members’ exhibition, twice in a very nice castle in the country and once in a natural history museum. We have

100 members, most are supporting members, twenty members paint. When I saw the last exhibition I thought it’s getting much better than before – everyone’s getting very enthusiastic about it. We are organizing projects and now we are painting the plants which Philipp Franz von Siebold introduced into Europe from Japan [where he lived starting in 1823]. In April 2010 we will have an exhibit of them at the Leiden Japanese museum which houses his collections. Also, the Highgrove Florilegium will come to the Netherlands and we will have an



Clematis
Konigsburg, watercolor, ©
Anita Walsmit Sachs

exhibition of *Royal Florilegia* including the florilegium of Josephine, the wife of Napoleon.

Joan McGann

Joan lives in Tucson, AZ, with, as she likes to think of it, the biggest back yard in the country. She is drawn by the unique desert beauty; capturing specimens as disparate as found anywhere on earth.

“You can let everything else fall away.”

How did you get into botanical art? I earned a degree in fine arts back in the 70s [at Wichita State University]; everything I did back then was very abstract but I did a lot of colored pencil with minute detail – I always liked minute detail. I put everything away when I started a family and right about when the kids were heading off to school, I took a class in nature art with Susan Fisher at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum Art Institute. I took to the whole study of plants. When I moved here in 1980 from Kansas I fell in love with desert plants; they are treacherous, they are intimidating but once you start looking you see so many incredible things going on, the spirals, the blossoms, so many things I'd never seen before.

Are you a plant person or an artist at heart? An artist first, but with so much more to learn. I worked in a Wichita Art Gallery for landscape architects. In 1980 the firm I worked for opened an office in Tucson, so I took the opportunity to try a new place that I really knew little about. Now my husband and I have a landscape architect business. And I do the art and sketches for plans and reports.

Where do you get your subjects? Right in my backyard! I recently finished a piece which was accepted into the ASBA/NY Horticultural exhibit [a Pima pineapple cactus]. It's an endangered species that the desert museum might have salvaged. I draw in their nursery and they called me to say it was about to bloom. They've been most helpful. I did it in colored pencil and the pen and ink version is going to be in the *Losing Paradise* exhibit. In my yard, I have any number of prickly pears, cholla, mesquite trees, ironwood trees. My barrel cactus is going to be

in the Phoenix show.

What's your favorite medium? I always loved drawing. I've always done a lot of graphite and colored pencil. I need to learn watercolor and want to, but it's letting go of drawing – it's very tactile to me. I've been doing pen & ink and I sometimes wonder why. It takes forever. But you can let everything else fall away.

Do you enter juried shows? The Colored Pencil Society of America show was the first one I entered, four years ago, and I was thrilled to get in. I've entered ASBA exhibits and I've been invited to enter shows. The [ASBA artists] are the nicest, most sharing group of people you could come across. The help Susan Fisher has given me is terrific.

When do you paint? I'm trying to get out of my day job. I take a day off now and then. I do my art all weekend long and also when I get home at 3 o'clock. I work until dark or longer if I'm in the middle of something. Then I'm either working on it or stewing about it. It's making my life very simple – I'm either working or drawing.

Where do you paint? At home in a couple of rooms that belong to the kids [Joan's two boys are in college]; I have a beautiful north light and I call it 'the drawing room' until the kids come home. Or I can take my work to my office if it's transportable.

Do you teach, and if so what special aspect of botanical art? No, I'm still learning.

What technique are you still trying to master? Oh, absolutely watercolor. I continue to take classes.

What one thing do you do that would surprise other artists? I ice down my elbows and my wrist if I've been drawing for a long time, especially after pen & ink. And I really enjoy using a journal; when I'm out and around I take pen and watercolors. I never realized how delightful it can be to look through my journals; they're very telling of the places I've been.



Coryphantha robustispina, colored pencil, ©Joan McGann 2009