

THE CLEMATIS



S P R I N G I S S U E



The Illustrator's Challenge

Lesley Alexander describes how she tackles the process of producing a completed watercolour of a clematis.

I was thrilled to be asked by the Editor to produce a painting of a clematis for *The Clematis*. I have always admired botanical illustrators, especially those whose drawings or paintings came 'alive' on the page whilst still imparting information to the observer. My background in scientific illustration had taken many paths but I had rarely touched on botanical illustration.

After a trip to the library, and phone calls to various horticulturally knowledgeable friends, I ended up with a pile of books, a rather sorry looking plant and an empty sketchbook. Now it was time to begin!

When I draw something completely new to me, I usually spend time just observing, making mental notes, even written notes, and quick sketches to remind me of specific features. Such as how many leaves, leaf vein patterns, the beautiful, colours of the petals, and the rich maroon brown of the stems and the greens of the leaf stalks and the leaves themselves. I was wondering how I was going to get the details of the flower, when I realised that after 2 weeks indoors a tiny bud was developing. With lots of TLC the bud grew, more leaves started to sprout – at last things were looking up. I got my sketchbook out and started to draw.

I like to sketch on good quality, fairly heavy paper, usually 220g/m² which allows me to use a variety of different media, from pencil and pastels to watercolour, without the paper buckling or the paper tearing after lots of rubbings out. It is also worth getting hold of acid-free paper, as this will last a lot longer without discolouring. I use a soft B2 or B3 pencil for loose initial sketches, but for detailed drawings such as these sketches and the tonal pencil drawing I used an ordinary propelling pencil with an HB lead. These come in different thicknesses – I use an 0.5mm lead for all but the tiniest detail when I might change to an 0.3mm lead. I find these pencils are great for accurate drawings, as the line thickness is always consistent and I never have to sharpen my pencil.

Time was not on my side – I had a deadline to meet, plus three small children about to break up from school for the Christmas holidays – no chance to do much while they were at home. I hoped to observe the bud opening and draw it at various stages,



but what was once a very tight bud was suddenly a nearly a fully opened flower. I almost missed witnessing the flower opening and as I had wanted this illustration to be as accurate as I could, I needed to see this myself.

I would liked to have been able to take the flower apart to understand its structure better, but as I considered myself very lucky to have such an obliging plant which flowered out of season, I thought better of it.

Gradually my observational drawings began to take shape. I had seen the bud form, open to become a beautiful flower, wilt, then eventually loose its petals before transforming into a fantastic seed head and had documented it in the form of a series of sketches.

As I wouldn't have the flower in front of me for reference when I did the final painting, I had to make sure that I had all the information I would need to complete the job. I needed to have very good colour reference, and I initially made colour notes in pencil crayon as I find this is a quick and effective way, especially out in the field. Watercolour crayons are very good for outdoor work away from the studio, as they are not messy and need very little water.

Once I had decided that my colours were accurate, I started to mix colours in paint, using the plant and crayon colour references. It is important to use the same paper as the final artwork for colour trials as different papers have different properties e.g. more or less water absorbent, and it is amazing how the colours of papers differ, some are a definite white whilst others are decidedly creamy. So to keep the colours consistent, I have to use the same paper.

I then had to work out a design for this painting. It is just as important to know what to leave out as well as to know what to show. I had decided by this time that after having seen the flower evolve through all its stages I would use this chance to illustrate each stage in the same painting. I decided that I would show a bud, flowers from various angles, a fully opened flower, and a seed head as well. As all these were relatively pale in colour, I would use the green of the leaves to offset them. Small, thumb-nail sketches, give me a rough idea of how to fill the page to show flowers at their best, hopefully looking natural. When I eventually decided on a design I liked, I drew it larger, adding more detail, getting proportions right, and letting the negative shapes, created by the spaces between the leaves and flowers, add to the overall composition but not be too overpowering. Thumbnail sketches and finished design are shown elsewhere. Keeping the green leaves to the left and bottom of the image naturally frame the main flower, helping to draw the viewer in. The not quite opened flower to the top right of the picture unframed by leaves, suggests to me a sense of the flower still growing upwards towards the sun.

I transferred the final layout to a new piece of paper so I could do a tonal drawing of the plant. To do this I use a piece of home made carbon or graphite paper. I take a piece of thin tracing paper slightly larger than the finished drawing and with a very soft pencil, 6B is ideal, scribble hard over the whole of one side of paper, until no white is showing. I then use a tissue to wipe off any excess loose bits of graphite and gently rub over the paper to 'fix' the surface. Next, I turn the graphite paper face down on the paper I want to transfer the outline to. I carefully position my final design on top and tape them down at the corners so they don't move. Then with a blunt but thin instrument, a dried-up biro or knitting needle is ideal, carefully go over the drawn lines. I need to press reasonably hard, but only enough to transfer the graphite, not to make grooves in the paper. I take a little peek to see if the image is transferring properly, lifting only one corner at a time. Once I had completed this, I used a putty rubber to gently lift off any excess graphite on the transferred image.

Although this could be seen as a piece of artwork in its own right, I use the time doing the tonal drawing to work out all highlights, decide where the light source on the plant is coming from, usually over my left shoulder add the shadows, lowlights and highlights and work out different tones to suggest depth of field in what is a 2-D piece of paper. Once I have finished the drawing, I have already worked out all the problem areas and corrected all my mistakes – it is much easier to rub out pencil than watercolour, which is a rather unforgiving medium to work in. Also I love working in pencil, so this gives me the best of both worlds.

Time to paint! For this painting I used watercolour stripper board, which is paper already stretched and bonded to a stiff board to prevent buckling. I transferred the outline of the flowers in the same way as before, carefully dabbing off any excess or heavy lines with my putty rubber, leaving a very faint line. I like to paint with the board propped up at about 60%, so the paint doesn't pool. I use good quality pure sable brushes in sizes 8 for the main body of the work and a 6 for finer detail. In any case, I always have a 2nd brush, slightly damp in my other hand to fade out the edges of the wash, or to pick up any excess paint. I mix my colours and use it very dilute to paint a wash over all the areas, so I can get a general idea of the layout.

Before I touch the painting with a paint-loaded brush, I always dab it on a test strip. This is a strip cut from the edge of the same board that I will do the final painting on. I use it as a safety net, to double check the colour and tone of the paint before I apply it to the painting. After a while this strip will not only be a failsafe device but a colour chart to see how colours work harmoniously together. Once I am happy that I can see the form of the flowers, leaves and stems with the washes, I use my putty rubber to very carefully remove all traces of graphite outline.

I add further washes of colour, gradually building up the colour. All the time I am referring to the plant, tonal drawing, sketches etc, working up all the different areas at the



same time, to create form, to get an illusion of 3-D, not allowing one area to become more finished than another. One trick that I use if I am not sure that another wash of colour will take something on top, is to take some thin tracing paper and when the paint is completely dry, lay the tracing paper over the problem area and with a pencil, gradually add more contrast to see if it enhances or detracts from the form or depth I am trying to convey. Also a wash with just water on the brush does much the same thing, since wetting the paper darkens the colour already down. I am always surprised how much lighter the wash looks after it has dried! As a general rule, to bring things forward in a picture they need more contrast, darker shadows and stronger highlights than things further away. To create the illusion that something is in the background such as the flower pointing away from us, the colours are more muted and the contrast between light and dark is much less.

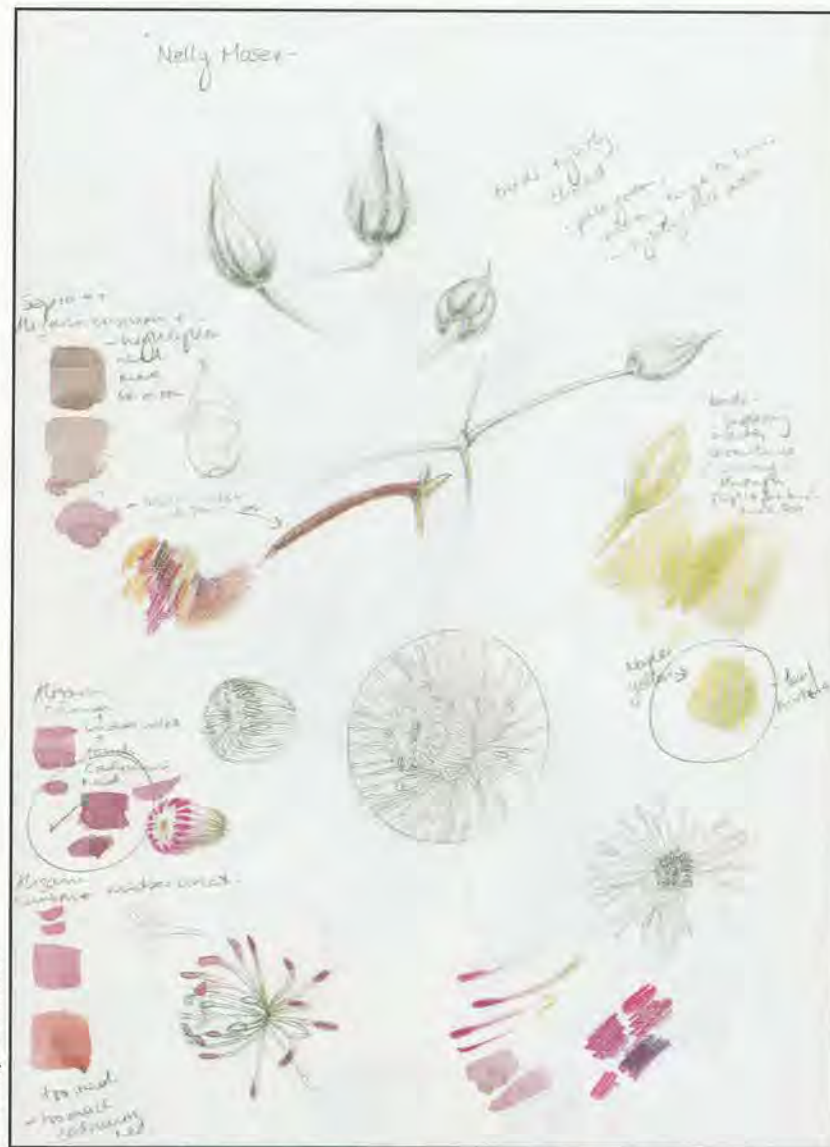
By slowly building up the colour washes, leaving the white of the paper to shine through as the highlights, I feel I get a rich, soft quality to the painting. I try not to use white paint at all as white paint is rather opaque and 'deadens' the picture, which is the total opposite to the feeling of vibrancy and life I hope I have conveyed in the painting.

At last my painting is finished! I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I now have a much more healthy looking plant beside me which deserves to be planted out in some appropriate spot in my garden where in the spring and summer I can enjoy looking at the beautiful flowers. However, I am sure the lure of painting *Clematis* will prove too great – and I am already absentmindedly flicking through my now numerous books on with an eye to painting my next one. The finished painting can be seen on the cover of this edition of *The Clematis*.

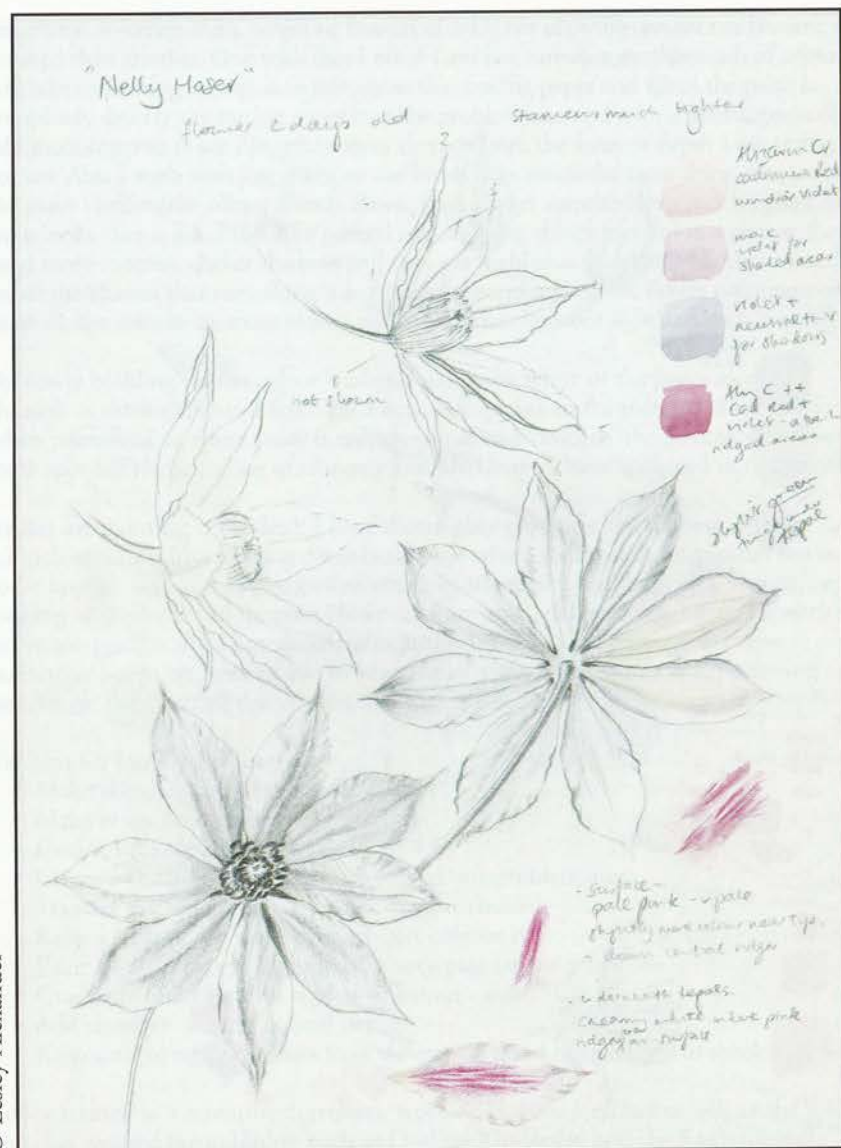
Ten tips for budding painters

- Make sketches and detailed drawings
- Make notes on colours
- Decide on a design and layout
- Create a tonal drawing in pencil to sort out problem areas
- Transfer the final design to paper of your choice
- Keep a strip of the same paper to test colours on
- Paint all areas except highlights in very pale colour wash
- Gradually build up thin washes of colour - don't rush
- Add stronger colour for final details
- Keep comparing the colours from different areas of the painting to check they work.

Lesley trained as a scientific illustrator, working in New Zealand as well as the UK. She has worked for publishers such as Dorling Kindersley and the Encyclopaedia Britannica. If you would like to purchase the original painting Lesley Alexander can be contacted at 23, Halstead Road, Enfield, Middlesex EN1 1QA. Tel 020 8367 4252.



Sketches of the developing bud showing detail and colour matching.



Sketches of the flower from different angles and colours which will be used in the final picture.



Seed head and leaves sketched for colour and form.

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The small sketch (bottom left) is the design layout which was transferred into the full sized tonal sketch which was then copied in paint to become the illustration on the cover of *The Clematis*.



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