

Illustration or Fine Art?

By Maria Cecilia Freeman

It's an old debate—is a representational painting an illustration or a work of fine art? The issue comes up with regard to natural science illustration and botanical fine art. To evade the distinction, my own business cards say *Art and Illustration*.

Who cares? The distinction matters to galleries and exhibition venues, agents, art dealers, and instructional programs, not to mention the artists/illustrators trying to make a living or at least pursuing their niche in the art world. Let's face it—illustration is somehow less important than art in many minds. Illustration is for magazines; art is for galleries and dining room walls. Illustration has a practical application; art appeals to higher aesthetic sensibilities. Illustration commands a set fee; art may (or may not) be purchased, and its value is a moving target. Illustration is created to enhance or clarify a concept or a story, while the creative expression of art is its own *raison d'être*. We don't say "illustration for illustration's sake."

The difference is clear, people might think, and it often is. But in fact the territorial border between illustration and botanical fine art is elusive and porous. The primary goal of scientific illustration is to inform the viewer, but this may be accomplished with a truly beautiful and aesthetically delightful presentation. Traditional botanical art strives primarily to portray plants with artistic and aesthetic sensitivity but requires detailed accuracy in presentation. In either case, the artist's creative intuition and imaginative expression guide such choices as composition, perspective, selection of details, suggestive use of color and the light-to-dark range of values. Considerations like these can create a new perception of the plant—a new way of seeing and understanding—and move an accurate representation into the realm of enduring art.

There was a time when I was concerned about where work like mine fits in, but I thrive on the insights and techniques that come from both rich historical traditions. I live in the buffer zone between natural science illustration and botanical fine art. My preoccupation with imparting information about the plant I'm drawing or painting is unconventional for traditional botanical art; and my overriding concern with aesthetic composition and watercolor technique strays from the main goals of science illustration. But the world of fine art allows traditional boundaries to be crossed and encourages innovative expression.

The brilliant painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) famously said in one of his essays, "Art is hidden in nature and he who can draw it out possesses it." That's an enduring goal for me.

I belong to both the American Society of Botanical Artists, and the Guild of Natural Science Illustrators. Check out their websites at www.asba-art.org and www.gnsi.org. Both national organizations have chapters in Northern California. For those who would like to study botanical art and illustration, we have a highly esteemed Botanical Art Certificate Program nearby at Filoli in Woodside, and a nationally renowned Science Illustration Program at CSUMB (formerly at UCSC). For an introduction to a process and techniques for creating botanical art/illustration in watercolor, come to my workshop in November.

More information and images can be found at Maria Cecilia Freeman's website, www.mcf-art.com.



"*Rosa gigantea*"
Maria Cecilia Freeman



"*Santa Cruz Cypress*"
Maria Cecilia Freeman



"*Avocados*"
Maria Cecilia Freeman