

Grahame Booth

flowers and gardens

Flowers are a wonderful subject for painting. Strong colours and strong contrasts combine to provide the painter with rich subject material. Flower paintings can range in style from the almost academic botanical study to the almost unrecognisable abstract. I feel that a mid point between these extremes provides the most interest. There is a tendency with flowers to choose a rather formal composition - the bowl or vase of carefully arranged blooms, but it is more exciting to go for a more casual arrangement. This can be a carefully arranged casual arrangement in a bowl or vase or a naturally occurring casual arrangement in a garden or woodland. Too much repetition in a composition can kill it so take care to look beyond the flowers and consider the other factors that can make or break a picture. In the garden situation look for a contrast between the natural flowers and a man made object. Pots, walls and fences can all work well. Don't go for too much. A single bloom may well provide a better picture than too much of a mixture of colours and sizes.

Painting flowers in watercolour requires boldness and an ability to accept failure. If you want a fresh loose result you need a big brush full of paint and water and you must be as economical with your strokes as possible. Attempting to carefully painting the perfect flower will result in a forced, unnatural look. In flowers more than anything else, one stroke is best. Practice with your brushes in order to paint the various shapes of flowers. A standard round



Petal shapes, using a round brush

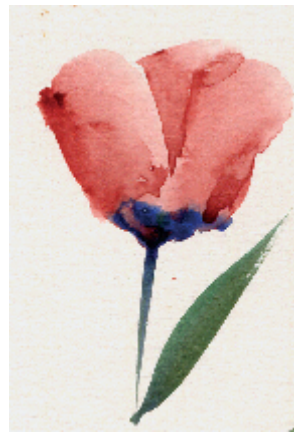
brush can paint a typical narrow petal very easily and the shapes can be grouped to form the complete flower. Often, a flower picture is let down by a poor or nonexistent back-



A poppy shape, painted with the side of a round brush

ground. Flowers painted against the white of the paper tend to look like a flower study rather than a flower picture. I suggest the controlled wash method to provide a background. Wash over the entire sheet with fairly weak

but definite colours, more or less positioned correctly but not worrying too much if the wash wanders around a bit (as it will). When this is completely dry, the various areas can be defined with a second, more specific wash, using both hard and soft edges. It is very important to ensure good contrast. A light coloured flower must be painted against a dark background and a dark flower against light. Using both hard and soft edges creates interest.



If you don't feel comfortable with the controlled wash method then try to paint direct with the correct tone value. This means going straight in with darks rather than building them up. The result will be a much cleaner, more exciting watercolour. Painting the stalk of a flower at the same time as the flower itself, allows the two to merge - a much more natural appearance (*see left*). Be careful not to have too many flat and uninteresting light or dark shapes, especially in the foreground. It is straightforward enough to deal with light shapes (simply add some darks) but to relieve dark shapes it is best to be quick and act while the paint is still wet. A dab with a tissue is a simple solution or you could use a fingernail to lift out a stalk or leaf. (*see right*) To do this you need to wait until the paint is just starting to dry - any earlier and the line fills up again, any later and you won't be

able to push the paint off. Painting light over dark is not possible with pure watercolour, but you could use masking fluid, or gouache, or if the flower is large enough you can simply paint around it. The gouache option is excellent for daisies. Use a rigger to place the paint but make sure that you vary the flowers to give various viewpoints - remember that with a bunch of daisies, the individual flowers will be at various angles to the picture plane. They will also overlap to some extent. This is important to achieve a feeling of depth.



Finally, try to resist correcting "mistakes". 99 times out of 100 the correction will look worse than the mistake. If the mistake is really bad, start the painting again.