

Assignment: Apple Branch

Tressa Vellozzi
Keyserkill Studios, Inc.
www.keyserkill.com
tv@keyserkill.com

Our assignment was to create a watercolor painting of an apple branch in the Fall. Since we had an apple tree in our back yard, we enlisted it as a model. Here is a diary of that assignment from start to finish.



Reference Photos:

Reference photographs are always a good idea. We took several, and pinned them to our studio bulletin board. Plants tend to wilt, shrivel, drop leaves, and succumb to other misfortunes after you pick a sample to draw.

At the very least, they lose their “perkiness”. We certainly don’t want to draw a plant that looks sick! When drawn over a period of time, the original attitude and aspect of plants tend to change, and the photographs will help us to remember and recapture their original appearance.

Preserving Plants:

When you pick a specimen, you should be prepared to get your preliminary drawing done as soon as possible. Most of the time, however, the drawing is done during several sessions, and the plant should be stored carefully between sessions. Some tips we use for preserving a plant are:

1. Keep it moist. For small specimens, moisten a paper towel and place the specimen upon it. Then, place the specimen with the towel in a shallow dish and cover it with plastic wrap. Store in a cool place.
2. Put it in the icebox. This usually works for larger specimens. One lazy artist kept an entire *picea Alba* (spruce) branch in the refrigerator for three weeks, and it still looked good.
3. Draw the flowers first. These are usually the first to go “wilty” on you.

Studio Setup

Prop your specimen in a pose it can hold firmly. For small specimens, we use long sewing or quilting pins stuck through a thin balsa wood block. Other methods are to use florist’s supports, which are green Styrofoam blocks. These blocks are soft enough so that a stem may be thrust through them, but firm enough to hold it in place. Another method is to use a hobby “grabber”, a jointed beam mounted on a stand with alligator clips on either end of the beam.

A one-inch grid will help you place the landmarks on the drawing. Landmarks include leaf nodes, flower positions, branch origins, etc. The grid will also give you the rough proportions of the plant, and assist you in interpreting the angles that leaves make with the stem, their “spread” relative to the plant, and especially will help you to draw leaves correctly in perspective. Grids may be placed behind the plant, or transparent grids may be placed in front of it. (The latter method was a trick invented by Renaissance artists.) Large background grids may be made by drawing one inch squares on a piece of foam board or mat board. Transparent grids may be made from sheet acrylic. They also may be purchased ready-made in a quilt shop! (Quilting rulers are transparent, 24 inches long by about 8 or 9 inches wide, and are commonly available.)



Here's our apple branch in the studio. We picked a representative specimen, and are experimenting with various "poses" for the branch. Note the "grabber" holding the branch and the grid in the background.

For really accurate work, you could use a duplicate grid on your drawing surface. This approach is used mainly for close-up work on plant structures, where absolutely correct placement is essential. With larger specimens, such as this one, the grid is used mainly for gross proportions, relative widths, and as an aid for "eyeballing" the attitudes of leaves and the directions of twigs relative to the main stem.



Happy with our placement, we left the studio for the day, leaving the setup overnight. The next morning, we discovered that the studio's resident mouse had been at the apple. (Where is that damn cat when you need him?) Not only that, the leaves were starting to wilt and become brittle, and the branch was sagging due to the weight of the (half) apple left to us. With a sigh, we propped the (half) apple on a book, rearranged our droopy branch, ignored the stiff and broken leaves, and started drawing.



The pencil drawing was done with an HB pencil on a Strathmore 400 regular surface pad. The pad is 18 by 24 inches. The length of the stem is about 18 inches. The apple is magically restored to its pre-mouse status, the leaves are as perky as they were before they spent the night in the overheated studio—thanks to frequent glances at our reference photos.

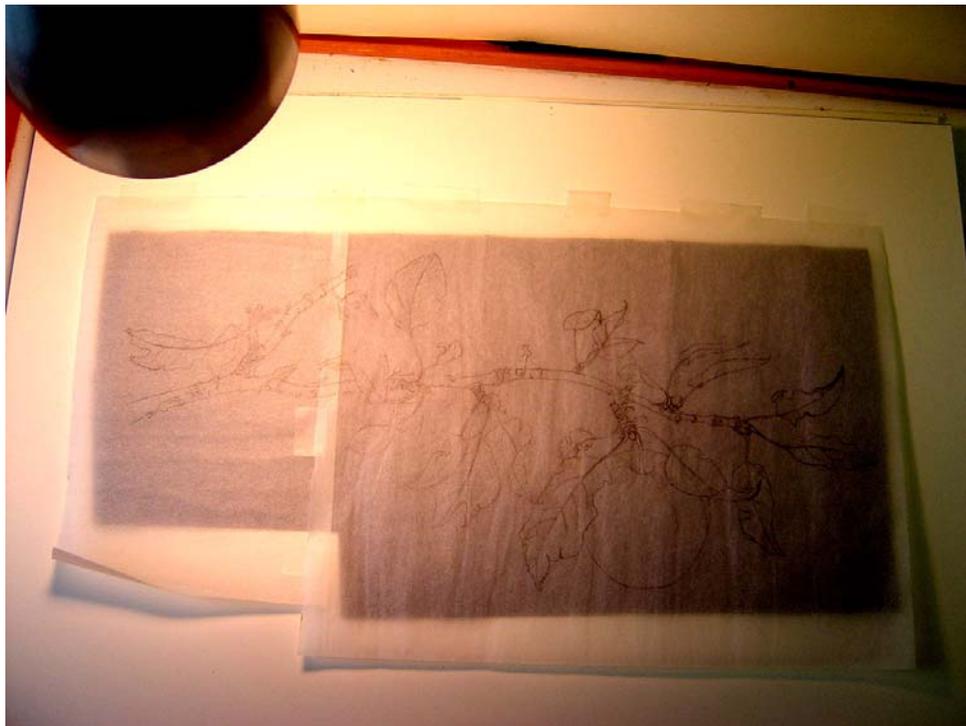
We always think of the pencil drawing as the hardest part of the job. The Strathmore 400 paper will take a lot of erasing, but sometimes it's necessary to start all over again. We managed to do this one on a single try, being reasonably satisfied with the drawing. Things we had to watch out for were the arrangement of the twigs on the branch. They are arranged in a spiral, and the tricky part was getting them to recede or advance at the correct angles. The leaves on the twigs are also arranged in spirals, and their correct attitudes took some care. The drawing is not just an outline, but models the surfaces with shading. This shading will be used for reference when we start to paint. In all, the basic pencil drawing took about six hours over two sessions.

Transferring the drawing to the rendering surface:

Our rendering surface is going to be Arches 140-pound hot-press watercolor paper. The 140-pound weight won't buckle using our techniques, since it is mounted in a block of sheets held together by the manufacturer with thick tape. If we were to use a single sheet instead, we would have chosen the 300-pound weight.

You can choose between two methods for transferring drawings. Both of the transfer methods begin with tracing the original drawing onto tracing paper. Trace only the principal lines of the original drawing, not the modeling. Once the tracing is complete, we have two choices for transferring the tracing to the watercolor paper:

- One method is to flip over the tracing, and rub the principal lines with a 4B pencil. Then place the tracing, right-side up, on the watercolor paper and fasten it down with Scotch 601 tape. This tape has glue similar to that of the famous yellow sticky notes, and may be removed and repositioned without damaging the watercolor surface. Then go over the lines on the tracing with a stylus or ballpoint pen, without bearing down too hard. You want to avoid putting grooves in the watercolor paper. The 4B pencil lines will act like carbon paper, and will transfer to the watercolor paper. You can easily see which lines have been transferred by flipping up the tracing.
- The other method is the one we used here. We used Saral tracing paper, which is graphite-based rather than carbon-based. The Saral is slipped between the tracing and the watercolor paper and held down with Scotch 601 tape. This is less messy than using the pencil-on-the-reverse method, and suitable for larger drawings. The disadvantage of the Saral method is that you mustn't keep flipping up the Saral to see how much you've traced, since it tends to smudge if you do



this. Therefore, instead of a stylus you should use a red pencil.

This red pencil should be fairly thin and sharp. When the tracing is completely transferred to the watercolor paper, the tracing looks like this (the lines are all red).



If some of the lines in the original tracing are still black rather than red, we know we're not done yet!

Rendering:



In our first rendering session, we quit worrying about wilting or mice, since the pencil drawing tells us everything we should know about the form, and the reference photos and any color notes we made in our sketchbook will tell us what colors we should use. So you might say that this is the fun part!

The colors we used for our first session are Winsor & Newton watercolors, using rather stiff, small brushes in sizes 0 to 2. The pigments used are Sap Green, New Gamboge, Hooker's Green Light, and Burnt Umber. We usually protect the surface not being worked on with sheets of paper towel or tissue, exposing only those areas currently being worked. The method is a modified dry-

brush, keeping washes to a minimum. Tone is built up keeping the leaf structure in mind always, remembering that the leaf stalks and central veins are commonly a light color bordered by deep shadow.



In our second session, we start to render the color and texture of the main branch, thoughtfully leaving a clear space for the interesting patch of lichen to be added later. We added some Payne's Gray to the twig on top, making it recede a bit, and as an undertone to the mostly Burnt Umber color of the branch.

Note: we have been criticized for being overly fond of Payne's Gray by persons who should know these things. We don't insist upon Payne's Gray. But we like it.

By Session 5, we finally got to the apple. Colors used were Cadmium Red, New Gamboge, Quinacridone Violet and Burnt Umber.



And finally, after Session 10, we're just about done — except for the inevitable afterthoughts, that is! The next task is to cut a mat for the painting. Watercolors should be protected from dust, (mice!), and mechanical dings in storage. Backing the matted painting with archival board and wrapping it in “breathable” tissue will help preserve it.



We like to keep a journal or diary of projects, giving roughly the number of hours spent doing various parts of a project. There's a practical reason for this: it helps to estimate how long a new, similar assignment will take. In all, the project took about 20 man-hours.