

MAXIM SHIRSHIN

AN ENGINEER WHO PAINTS

32 STORIES OF BOTANICAL ART
AND NATURAL HISTORY ILLUSTRATION



Author's note

Let me introduce myself. I'm Maxim Shirshin, a software engineer. I love my job, I've been working in IT my whole life, and I have never studied art formally. Yet in recent years, I found myself painting flowers, leaves, mushrooms, butterflies and birds, fruit and vegetables, for no particular reason.

Or maybe there was a reason. I love nature and adore its beauty, the beauty which no creation of man can rival. Painting is my way to reconnect with nature, and express my love.

In this book, you'll find 32 of my works which I wanted to share with you, accompanied by some extra thoughts and stories.

Connect with me on Instagram:
[instagram.com/max.shirshin](https://www.instagram.com/max.shirshin)

Write me an e-mail:
max.shirshin@gmail.com

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Are you into painting?

The answer shouldn't depend on whether you are a professional artist, an amateur, or just enjoy art created by others. How much art you produce per year, or how much you earn from it (if anything), matters even less to me. What matters is if you take art seriously.

If you said “yes”, I wrote this book for you, and I hope you like it.

Unlike other art books, this book won't offer you any systematic painting guidance. Instead, it's a collection of emotions, descriptions, and short stories – a glimpse into the mind of an imperfect artist striving for perfection.

Note on image quality

This ebook contains high quality reproductions of my artwork. Many may look small on the screen, but reveal richer details if magnified with the digital zoom function of your ebook reader.



Dry tulip petals

watercolour pencils on paper

When I started painting back in 2015, I wanted to do watercolours but didn't feel confident with the medium, and my motivation was no substitute for the lack of skill. So I came up with a workaround: I bought a set of watercolour pencils which I found easier to control than the ever-flowing paint.

I soon realised that the “workaround” almost doubled the amount of my work: I drew with pencils first, then washed them out with a wet brush to achieve the watercolour effect. Essentially, I painted the same image twice. After some attempts, I switched to “regular” paints, but watercolour pencils definitely helped me gain some confidence.

Dry tulip petals

This drawing was done using watercolour pencils. It all started when I collected dry tulip petals on a public flowerbed near Tegel, Berlin. In fact, I gathered a bag full of dry petals! The weather was already hot, and the end of the tulip flowering season was near, providing an abundance of dry petals of all kinds.

I brought them home, put them on the table, and tried to choose which ones I would paint. They looked like elvish treasure, wild and beautiful, sparkling in the sunset light like little gems...



Purple carrot

watercolour on paper

Purple carrot

One of the many things I was excited about when I started working in watercolour, was how clean the gradient transitions between orange and violet can be.

Colour theory is one thing, mixing all shades yourself is another. Many watercolour artists are afraid of "dirty" mixes which eat up saturation, giving the washes a greyish or brownish cast. I personally don't believe that "dirty" colours exist; it's just the overall balance that matters. It's only in the last century or two that artists have had access to permanent pigments which are saturated enough. Before that time, most available pigments would be "dirty", with brownish tones dominating the palette.



Violet tulip

watercolour on paper

My life schedule doesn't allow me to plan painting sessions well in advance, which explains why I paint a lot of dry objects, so that I can jump in and out of the process, and they stay the same in between sessions.

It doesn't always work out as intended.

Violet tulip

Once I had been painting a composition of several dry tulips. The fragile flowers were arranged precisely on a piece of cardboard and fixed with glue. When my painting was half-done, the composition was accidentally destroyed. I only then realised I didn't have any reference photos of it, which came as a shocking surprise, as it meant the painting could not be finished.

Instead I chose one broken tulip from the ruined composition and painted it on a smaller (DIN A5) paper sheet. It turned out to be one of my favourite pieces.

If you cannot go big, go small and see what comes out of it.



Queen Anne's lace (wild carrot) in winter

watercolour on paper

Queen Anne's lace (wild carrot) in winter

I love patches of dry grass in winter. Their crisp lines and earthy colours bring me peace of mind.

Where I come from, winters used to be snowy and calm; a time for reflection and rest, a recharge for a new start. As the planet gets scorched by a human-induced climate crisis, snowless winters don't offer us that same peace of mind anymore.

I miss that so much.



Red parrot tulip

watercolour on paper

This tulip was painted for an online Instagram contest. I was free to choose my subject, and I wanted to be original, so... No, I mean it. At least I tried. Sometimes, one just cannot resist.

Red parrot tulip

Many botanical artists, deciding to paint something “new and exciting” that they “never tried before”, would still choose a tulip every second time and portray it happily, not even noticing the controversy.

I'm one of those.

No, I can't explain how it works. That's the tulip magic. There are famous botanical artists out there who focus almost exclusively on tulips, and many not-so-famous ones who do the exact same.

Next time you grab your watercolour box, don't even pretend to resist. You know you want another tulip painting. Who doesn't?



Dry clematis seedheads

watercolour on paper

Dry clematis seedheads

Sometimes when you paint, your associative memory connects the painting with your own life events rather than with the subject being painted. I have some pieces which I remember as a “really bad mood painting”, or “it was a late spring night and nightingales were singing” painting, and so on.

This watercolour depicts dry clematis seedheads in winter. In my head, however, it's nothing else but a “lay off painting”. I finished it on the day when the software company I worked for at that time decided to shut down their Berlin office and lay off all the IT staff.

It all turned out for the better though.



Imperfect tomato

coloured pencils on paper

Drawing imperfect things is perfectly acceptable. What I actually mean is: drawing spoiled vegetables and rotten tomatoes is okay, too.

Botanical art had been focused on depicting “perfect” specimens for centuries. Then we realised that life was somewhat different: less perfect, and maybe a bit more colourful. So yes, it's okay.

I was at a farmers' fair near Brandenburg, Germany, in early September, where they hosted a contest for the largest vegetables grown in the region. Giant beetroots, enormous pumpkins, and very, very large tomatoes were all laid out on a long wooden table for everyone to adore.

Imperfect tomato

The sun was scorching, so most of the vegetables didn't look exactly perfect. One of the tomatoes caught my attention: sunburned on one side, dying but proud, this Goliath would have become nothing but a passing shade of its ripe glory in mere hours. But God it was beautiful to behold! I couldn't take it with me, but I was utterly enchanted. I took so many photos. On that very same evening, I started the drawing you see here.



The memory of a rose

watercolour on paper

This is my take on painting a rose without actually painting one. I'm not too keen on postcard-like paintings, as you might have noticed.



Cornflowers

watercolour on paper

Cornflowers

I pressed these cornflowers before painting, because I didn't feel like I had the skill to paint them well enough in three dimensions. I still liked the result.

If you'd love to try painting a complex subject but know it's still a stretch goal for you, look for ways to make it easier, without oversimplifying. I knew I could only capture these intricate shapes in 2D, but I worked harder on the composition and the colours to compensate (I used five different blue pigments for the petals alone!).



Italian stone pine branch

watercolour on paper

I probably shouldn't be very proud of this painting, but the branch I used as a reference came not just from Italy, but from the Vatican City itself. I picked it up from the ground near Pinacoteca and took it back to Berlin to be painted.

Since then, I often bring artwork references from different places I visit, the same way people buy souvenirs or postcards. The paintings become my tributes to those travel memories.



Seven Maltese olives from the Upper Barrakka Gardens in Valletta

coloured pencils on paper

Yet another reference I brought back as a souvenir, this time from Malta. I don't know if there's another botanical subject other than olives which works comparably well with coloured pencils. The original size is almost A3 and, yes, it took time... Perhaps I went for this larger-than-life rendering precisely because I wanted to spend more time drawing them.

This drawing was accepted for the Plantae 2020 exhibition in the Mall Galleries, London, UK. The show only took place online due to COVID-19 pandemic.



Artichoke in blossom

watercolour on paper

Artichoke in blossom

Here's a story of me falling in love with an artichoke. You might as well stop reading now :-)

I saw it at a grocery store in early August, sitting in a large wooden box full of other artichokes, trying to bloom amidst its brethren while waiting to be picked up by a passing customer. This desperate blooming, bold and foolish at the same time, caught my attention and I couldn't resist buying this rebel beauty. Not for cooking, of course. I kept watercolouring its subtle details for many evenings (almost a month, in fact), while the artichoke was spending most of its time in the darkness of my fridge. It survived until I was able to finish my painting. Unbelievable as it might be, this one was painted from a living specimen – almost as if the artichoke knew I needed it.

If that's not mutual love, I don't know what is!

This was also the moment I fell in love with Cobalt Violet, my favourite cold pink pigment so far. Its International Colour Index is PV14, and it's likely the most underestimated pigment for botanical painting: very permanent, saturated, freezing cold pink, granulating subtly in thin glazes, it looks very natural and “botanical” to my eye. The artichoke florets were painted with PV14 here.



Three orange-cap boletuses

coloured pencils on paper

These mushrooms were picked up in a Finnish forest near the city of Espoo.

This was my first art piece done with professional oil-based coloured pencils, and I only had a set of 12 at that time. I ended up using all the colours from the set! These days I have a somewhat wider selection of colours, but I still quite like this drawing.

I only use coloured pencils which are archival and lightfast. Not that I believe my artwork would survive for centuries (although it might), but art is fragile enough on its own, so I appreciate when vendors pay attention to archival qualities of what they sell to artists.



Three yellow beetroots

watercolour on paper

I don't quite like the idea of a limited palette. It's not that I don't enjoy paintings employing a limited number of hues (in fact, some of my most favourite paintings look exactly like that). It's because the concept of a limited palette mixes up the goal (producing an artwork in a limited hue range) with the tools (the number of paints) used to achieve it.

Proponents of a limited palette must assume that colour is the only important feature of a paint. It's hardly true for any media, but for watercolours specifically, it's nothing short of wrong. Watercolour paints have many properties: transparency, staining power, degree of granulation, saturation shift when drying, etc.

Three yellow beetroots

Even “colour” is not so simple: visually similar colours may behave quite differently in mixtures! Depending on the usage scenario, any of these properties may or may not be desirable.

This means you need to consider your palette choices in various dimensions, where colour is just one dimension of many. Additionally, many specific and useful hues just can't be mixed from primaries!

When I work with colour, I focus on the desired hue, but depending on the use case, I would often mix it from different pigments, even in the same artwork. This imparts a natural variation to the mixtures, leaving me plenty of technical freedom.

In this painting alone, 25 different pigments were used, which I list by their International Colour Index here: PO73, PY150, PV14 light, PV14 dark, PR233, PR207, PR179, PG23, PR206, PR101, PO49, PY42, PY43, PY227, PR255, PG7, PBk31, PBr7, PB29, PB29 (lapis lazuli), PB86, PV55, PV29, PV23, and PBk9.



Edelweiss flowers

watercolour on paper

This watercolour piece was painted during a particularly hot and dry summer in Germany.

I remember working on it in a rural hotel, with the windows wide open and hot suffocating air flowing into the room, drying the paints in no time. An hour after sunset, a weak rain began to fall intermittently; thick, hot drops barely beating down the dust, leaving spotted patterns on the sandy sidewalks. Even breathing was difficult.

Edelweiss flowers

The stems of the edelweiss flowers in the painting are quite elongated, which is not at all typical for this plant in its native habitat. My reference was a specimen bought from a local flower shop, and it's a known fact that phenotypically, edelweiss looks differently in its native high mountains compared to a regular garden. When cultivated, it tends to grow much taller and has less silver hair around the petals.



Cep mushroom (*Boletus edulis*)

watercolour on paper

This was my first painting accepted for an international exhibition, Botanical Art Worldwide 2018.

Cep mushroom (Boletus edulis)

During this event, simultaneous botanical art exhibitions featuring local artists opened in many countries around the globe. I was extremely proud to be among artists representing Germany when the exhibition opened in beautiful Thüngersheim, Bavaria.

Painting mushrooms is a cool thing for beginners (and I was more of a beginner back then!) Earthy colors are easier to handle, and one or two inaccuracies (either with the shape or with the colours) won't ruin your painting thanks to the great variability of the subject in nature. But beware: identifying mushrooms can be a real challenge. Snapping some photos with the intention to "google it later" typically won't work. Having a decent book about mushroom identification is recommended, as there may be tests you need to perform while the mushroom is still fresh, or you might need to write down some details you can only get on the spot where the mushroom was collected.

I learned this the hard way. I still have a couple of mushroom paintings where I'm not completely sure of the identification!



Portrait of a green woodpecker

watercolour on paper

Portrait of a green woodpecker

I've been an avid birdwatcher since my early years, but no other encounter left me as excited as my first sighting of a green woodpecker in the outskirts of Berlin. Right then and there, I knew I wanted to paint the bird. Unfortunately, for such a work, one needs good reference photos which I couldn't produce back then. A random Internet picture is of little use as well, not to mention potential copyright infringements. Furthermore, I'm not very good at painting birds, so I approached this project with care.

It took me a couple of months to find a wildlife photographer who not only had great photos of green woodpeckers in their portfolio, but also would agree to provide some of those in good quality as references. I'm exceptionally grateful to Thomas Nierle, a wildlife photographer who helped me find what I was looking for.

I spent several evenings in preparation, sketching, trying to find the right perspective, before finally settling on an image that didn't look very wildlife-like but reflected my vision of the bird's personality. That's why I called it a portrait.



A lilac floret portrait

watercolour on paper

A lilac floret portrait

Could a flower – just a single floret – reveal a story as personal and humane as a regular portrait would?

Had that flower whispered words in your ear, would you listen?

...He was born in Berlin the same year WWII ended, and lived in Berlin ever since.

The ghosts of the past war, which he himself didn't even witness, haunted his childhood years, as destruction and despair were all around.

Growing up calm, closed and distanced, he worked a variety of gardening jobs throughout his life: planted trees in city parks, looked after private villa gardens, sold plants and flowers in a local shop.

His favourite month was May, when the lilacs bloomed. He passed away in May, too, in a hospital in Pankow with an old park where he himself had planted lilacs years ago. Those trees outlived him, and they still blossom every spring.



“No I'm not okay”
(Noctua pronuba)

coloured pencils on paper

No I'm not okay (Noctua pronuba)

I found this large yellow underwing moth sitting right on the pavement, on a pedestrian walkway in the fields, not far from the small German town of Niemegk, in June.

The moth could barely fly and was probably injured, so I put it into the grass to the side, although most likely it didn't help much anymore.

Well, at least there's this drawing.



Croatian olives

watercolour on paper

It was October 2018 and I was on a trip through Croatia with my wife and child. The olive harvest season in Vodnjan, a small rural town, left its narrow streets almost empty, as most of the inhabitants were busy in their gardens. In one garden, a small tourist shop was open, so we bought some olive oil and had a chat with the owners. With the owners' permission, I took some reference photos of their olive trees. It wasn't until May next year that I began painting them.

This watercolour took me two months to complete; progress was slower than usual. First of all, a lot was happening in my life, and secondly, the subject itself was tough: dull, even boring at first glance, it demanded some precise work and attention to detail to reveal its hidden beauty.



Wild tulip

coloured pencils and acrylics on paper

Wild tulip

This was the first imperial size sheet of 140lbs 100% cotton professional watercolour paper that I bought.

Not that paper weights or surface types meant much to me back then, but the very moment I touched that paper, I knew I was in love. I had never handled anything like this before, so crisp and strong, its deckle edges sharp as blade, its surface silky-smooth yet finely, almost imperceptibly, textured. It gave out a surprisingly loud, almost musical sound when I lightly tapped upon it with my fingernail...

That paper made me think that if I was good enough to hold such a sheet in my hands, I was also good enough to try and paint something on it.

If all people, just once in their life, were given a decently large sheet of high quality, professional watercolour paper for free, many more of them would be in love with art.

I cut that large sheet into smaller pieces, and one of them was used to paint this wild tulip.



Summer grape leaf

watercolour on paper

Realistic painting and photography don't rival each other. An artist who paints realistically still chooses where to put the main accent, by means such as colour, contrast or composition, whereas a great photo would perfectly capture the accent set by the scene or the moment itself.

Summer grape leaf

In this watercolour piece, I focused on colour and experimented with many pigments. Some of the deepest, darkest shadows in this leaf were painted with a mixture containing the much hyped, recently synthesised pigment YInMn Blue (the abbreviation formed from the elements which it contains: yttrium, indium, and manganese).

Discovered accidentally during a chemical experiment, YInMn Blue has some unique properties no other blue pigment has – sadly, properties relevant mostly for industry use. Artists would still appreciate its highest lightfastness, chemical stability and near-perfect blue colour. Unfortunately, it's priced very high and is difficult to get.

The grape leaf painted here was collected in August, in the village of Strodehne in Brandenburg.



Summer poppies

coloured pencils on paper

Summer poppies

Poppy flowers are, for many among us, the flowers of remembrance.

These ones are my tribute to everything we lost in 2020, as the world had been going not only through one of the worst pandemics in recent history, but also through the realisation of human fragility, stubbornness, broken integrity and shuttered self-confidence. In a sense, this was my “pandemic drawing” of 2020. I knew many artists made these, on purpose, in reflection of what happened to all of us.

While watercolour and coloured pencils are both very popular mediums for botanical and floral art, they give artists quite different powers and drive them to different compromises. Coloured pencils, for example, let the artist work a bit faster compared to watercolours, but set a limit on the amount of detail and colour nuances.

I intentionally chose coloured pencils for this piece to not get lost in all the richness of the subject. Even though it took me many evenings to complete, it could have easily been twice the time if painted in watercolour. Since I still wanted a decent level of detail, the drawing was done larger-than-life.



Bullfinch

coloured pencils on paper

What's your sweetest childhood memory? Mine is certainly from when I was an eight-year-old boy: squinting out of the window on a quiet, cold November morning in Moscow, welcoming the very first snow of the year. The blinding contrast of a textureless white blanket of pure snow against bare trees and dark patches of soggy ground left me speechless.

Of all the backyard trees, two old poplars were the tallest; far up in their thin, translucent crowns, I spotted several bullfinches resting. The birds sat still, their features blurred by the distance but scarlet breasts shining brightly, unexpectedly colourful amidst the landscape of brown and white, so alien and yet intimately belonging to the scene.

Bullfinch

Each winter, small flocks of bullfinches appear on the streets of Moscow as they migrate closer to the warmth and food the city offers. The Russian word for “bullfinch” (снегирь) means “a snow-bird”; there is nothing “bullish” about it.

As a child, I frequently caught a cold in winter and had to stay home for many boring days, often spending hours at the window, gazing outside. My grandmother bought me a small spotting scope so that I could watch the bullfinches and other birds flitter amongst the tree-tops. That's how my birdwatching story began.

When I decided to draw this bird, I needed good quality visual references so I searched for long, high-resolution “birds at the feeder” YouTube videos featuring bullfinches and other common birds. The videos were perfectly suited for my purpose, but I learned later that their intended audience were... house cats! Apparently, watching those videos makes cats happier. Well, me too!



Pink rose bud

watercolour on paper

Pink rose bud

Some of us have issues with trust. I certainly do. Not just with people, but sometimes, with art as well – in botanical art in particular, where every detail matters. I often notice something that doesn't look quite right: a petal of weird geometry, a branch that looks like it should connect to the trunk in a different way, a shade of colour I wouldn't expect to see in that particular plant. More frequently, I do it myself: I paint things that don't look quite “right” to others.

Observation may contradict the expectations of our brain, which is not always good at discerning complex three-dimensional shapes, or capturing the colour.

I therefore developed a special method to look at botanical art. By default, I assume that the artist has captured everything perfectly. I command my brain to fully trust what I see. In many cases, it helps me better understand the creative idea behind the painting. If something still doesn't feel right, I try to isolate that feature from the rest of the painting and consider whether I could fix it, or avoid it, had it been my own piece to paint.

The best strategy to deal with imperfections in other people's art is: if you believe you could express the same idea better, go and do it.



Dry eucalyptus branch

watercolour on paper

Steal like an artist, they say... Well, if you're a botanical artist who loves painting from life (not from photos), the idea of stealing may occasionally cross your mind!

Most of the time, botanical artists are in search of beautiful or unusual plants to paint, and they often find them in the least expected places. These plants may be difficult to access; they may grow in a private garden, or grabbing them might be awkward or even forbidden (in public places, parks etc.)

Dry eucalyptus branch

I once had lunch in a Berlin restaurant owned by Australian expatriates. The food was good, but what I saw on the tables outside was even better: each one was decorated with a dry eucalyptus branch in a bud vase. I have a special drawing passion for dry plants, so obviously I didn't think much about lunch anymore but contemplated how I would arrange the eucalyptus composition on paper. I had to approach the restaurant staff at the counter and ask if I could take one branch with me to paint. They gave me a very special look. Later my colleagues at the office gave me another one no less special. However, in a week, I had a painting ready, and that was what mattered!



Poinsettia leaf

coloured pencils on paper

It was Christmas Eve in Berlin, rainy and grey. Your eyes get so used to that palette that any unexpected hues immediately catch your attention. On that day, I found a small but bright leaf on the ground just next to the apartment building where I lived. The leaf had apparently fallen from one of the balconies where neighbours grew various plants. Back then I didn't even know what plant it was, and honestly, I didn't care much. I just loved the colours!



Pressed fritillary flower

watercolour on paper

Pressed fritillary flower

Time is precious, especially when you have a baby. The year my son was born, I prepared a small collection of pressed flowers and petals so that I always had something “natural” to paint. Fritillaries were the stars of that collection. Soft and subtle flowers in their blossom, they dried out to silhouettes resembling predatory dragon heads.

This one was painted in an hour and a half, because that was the time allowance I had on that day – quite possibly my personal record on painting speed!

When I look at the result, it's not the flower that I see, but a dancing baby dragon of watercolour.



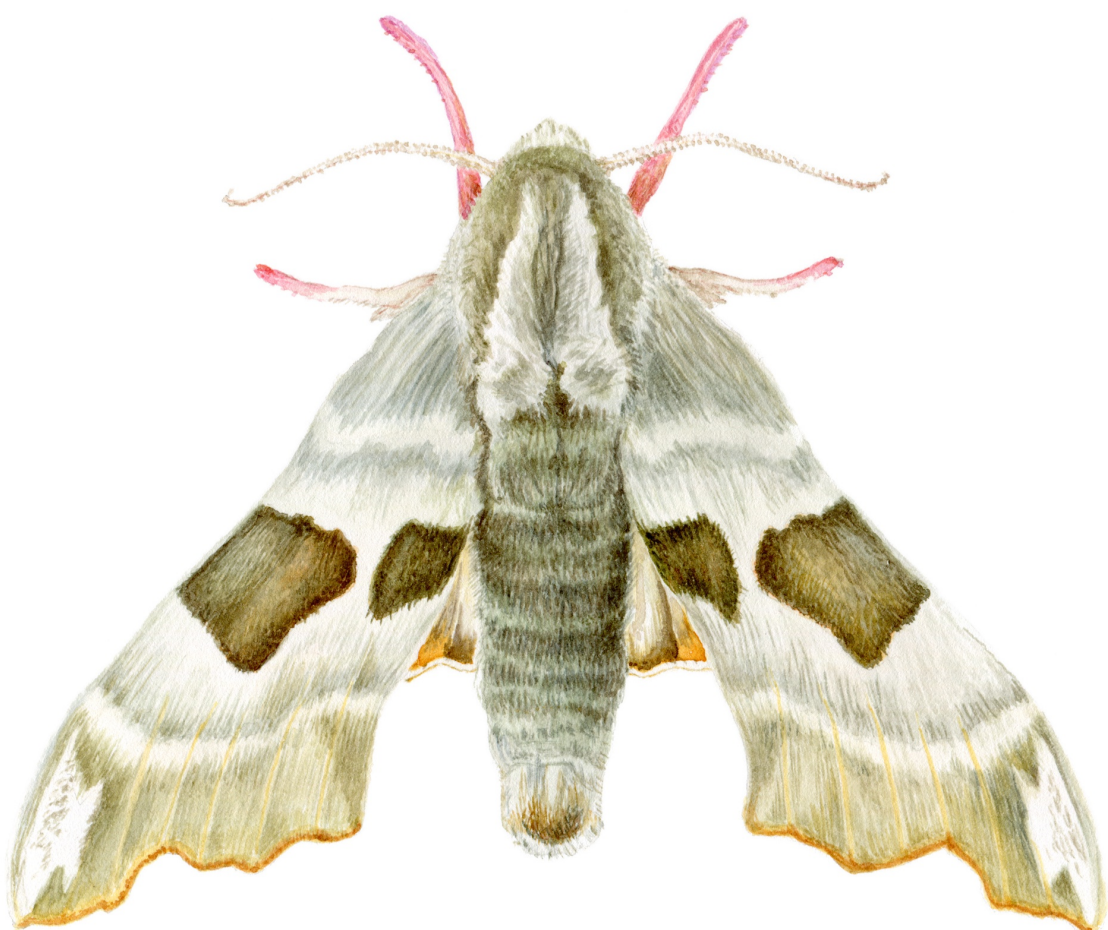
Branch with lichens

watercolour on paper

I believe that many ordinary things around us can be painted in a way that reveals their inner beauty. Photography, even though it comes close at times, doesn't exactly nail it. The human brain processes colour and shape emotionally like no pixel matrix can, making small adjustments to the natural subject properties. These small changes are like a secret code which conveys an emotional message that other people can see if they look closely.

When I paint something less conventional, such as this lichen-covered branch, I don't think much about how my colour choice encodes emotion. Instead, I make sure I adore the subject. The rest happens on its own.

If love is in the eye of the beholder, as they say, then I'd like to think that my painting could be a reflection of that love.



Lime hawk-moth

watercolour on paper

I'm a city kid. I grew up amidst concrete and poorly maintained city vegetation. I can't say I didn't have any connection to nature (quite the contrary, I used every chance I had), but it often felt like a compromise, like an experience inferior by definition – that's how many cities work, even when they're green. Parks are fake woods, and lawns are fake meadows.

Lime hawk-moth

Maybe that's why I love butterflies and moths. If there's an invisible line that separates fake nature from the real one, then butterflies surely fly along that line and beyond, on its greener side. I think I like moths even more, because they're... not mainstream?

This lime hawk-moth is a Berliner. I found it on a linden tree trunk and took enough reference photos to support this painting.



Devil's bolete

coloured pencils on paper

Devil's bolete

Frankly, I don't like painting greenery that much.

Healthy green plants often show little colour variation; I like it the most when I'm lost in colour. Mushrooms of all kinds are, therefore, a perfect exercise in nuances and colour shifts – as long as you're okay with pale colours and an earthy palette. The devil's bolete is a rare and wonderful exception, offering more saturated shades.

Since I tried to stay true to how this bolete looked, I wouldn't call this drawing a scientific illustration. The purpose of a scientific illustration is to present the “least common denominator” for many specimens of the same species, the Platonic ideal which almost never occurs in life but combines all the features crucial for identification. Here, I focused on details that were distinct rather than generic, clearly at the expense of the scientific value.



Crimson tulip

watercolour on paper

Crimson tulip

Some paintings have no particular story behind them. I love crimson tulips so I painted one.

Unfortunately, it's easier said than done!

How do botanical artists choose what to paint? That is by no means trivial! Each painting is a commitment. Botanical art progresses slowly; a small piece may take weeks. This is painstaking work with its ups and downs: the joy of creativity on one day soured by the frustration of mistakes on another. To go through all that, one must indeed love the subject, be emotionally connected to it.

So, we mostly paint what we truly love! Isn't that what makes botanical art amazing?



Maxim Shirshin

software engineer
botanical artist

[**instagram.com/max.shirshin**](https://www.instagram.com/max.shirshin)

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