



Liverance's award-winning artwork, *Nevisian Ladies* is a 40-by-30-inch oil painting of cattleya orchids he saw at a property on the island of Nevis in the Caribbean.

PAINTING LIFE IN Full Bloom

Botanical illustrator and plant portrait creator Bert Liverance is most happy when viewers fight the urge to reach out and pluck a petal from his hyperrealism three-dimensional paintings.

STORY BY PATTI VIPOND

IMAGES COURTESY BERT LIVERANCE

Physical dissection of one's subject is not part of the creative process for most visual artists. However, if your goal is to produce true-to-life botanical renderings and plant portraits, applying a sharp edge to a blossom may be crucial.

At least, that's how award-winning botanical illustrator and painter Bert Liverance approaches his craft.

"I take lots of photos and if the flower is not endangered, I'll bring it home and dissect it to fully see every part," explains Liverance, whose brilliant, three-dimensional hyperrealism plant portraits and true-to-life botanical renderings make viewers feel they could reach out and stroke the petals. "I study them quite carefully and usually do a series of measured drawings in the actual scale of the flower or leaf. For botanical illustrations, it must be scientifically accurate."

Liverance's hyperrealism technique resulted from early sculpting skills combined with understanding the importance of the direction of light to make a two-dimensional image appear three-dimensional. It depends on where light illuminates and shadows the flower, how the light interacts with the subject.

"Flowers are one of the few subjects where the light can shine on it or through it," he says. "Water is another one. That makes them fun to paint and I like the challenge."

After measuring and completing a series of drawings of a flower, Liverance does a tonal study to understand and establish the direction of the light. The three-dimensional effect can take several coats of oil paint. Watercolour may require more layers to achieve the pigment intensity needed for shadows that bloom painted flowers into life.

"Art is my true passion," says Liverance, "As a kid, I sculpted with clay and built a balsa wood model of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in England. In university, I did an art appreciation class that was mainly a lab where you could try different mediums. That's when I got hooked on oils. I painted for a number of years, took some lessons and learned how to stretch canvases. Now, I hope my artistic journey is leading to a two-year Master of Fine Arts at the Ontario College of Arts + Design University (OCADU) in Toronto."

If Liverance is accepted at OCADU this year, he will work on his fifth – or is it his sixth – degree. His latest, a Diploma in Botanical Illustration with Merit, was completed in 2017 through the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in Scotland. However, his previous degrees include a Master of Business Administration and a BA in Economics. Painting had been part of his life through a 10-year career in the United States Air Force and 25 years as a project manager for such companies as Nike and Coca Cola.

"Because I've not had to rely on my artwork as a livelihood, it's given me the freedom to paint what I want and at my own speed," says Liverance. "It took the pressure off. My wife will tell you painting is my peaceful space."

"There are so many flowers in North America alone that I could paint a different flower every day of my life and still wouldn't paint all of them."



The elegant lady slipper, which belongs to the orchid family, is one of the flowers showcased in Liverance's exhibition, *Georgian Bay Wildflowers* at the West Parry Sound District Museum.



Before painting his watercolour botanical illustration of the lifecycle of a water lily, Liverance did a series of composition drawings before being satisfied with a final design.



Liverance has also designed tulip and rose floral coins for the Royal Canadian Mint, and been recognized by the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, the Botanical Artists of Canada and the American Society of Botanical Artists. However, many residents in the Parry Sound/Georgian Bay area likely know him as the Reeve of The Township of the Archipelago and/or as a long time cottager in the Sans Souci area. Liverance's passion for art is almost matched by his passion for Georgian Bay.

The two loves are united in his stunning four-foot by eight-foot oil painting *Sunset on Georgian Bay*. Inspiration for the vividly toned artwork came through loneliness for the place Liverance calls his spirit home when pandemic restrictions kept him at his home in Goodwood, a village near Uxbridge. The evocative landscape hangs in his dining room and serves as a stand-in for the Bay when cottage season ends.

Though it has fewer than 700 residents, Goodwood became renowned as a film location for the award-winning *Schitt's Creek* comedy TV show. Most villagers have a *Schitt's Creek* story and Liverance has his own.

"I was cutting my lawn when I saw a big cargo van go by and behind it was a black Lincoln Continental with Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara," he recalls, smiling. "When they won all those Emmy awards, Goodwood was just overwhelmed with people who wanted to see the Tropicana Café and Daniel's Rose Apothecary."

When he started painting, Liverance was attracted to landscapes and often painted plein air, meaning outdoors. Thanks to his Air Force background, he also chose airplanes and fighter pilots as subjects. One day, he happened to see a photo of a wild iris in a copy of the *Muskoka Times* and decided to paint it. The graceful flower changed his artistic trajectory.

"I realized that flowers encompass the whole spectrum of the rainbow," he explains. "When painting botanicals, you paint true to life and don't simply add colour like a colourist. There are so many flowers in North America alone that I could paint a different flower every day of my life and still wouldn't paint all of them."

When beginning an oil painting, Liverance will often start with the background and work inward, but for a watercolour he will typically begin with the subject.



As a child, Liverance was steadily supplied with drawing materials by his parents and still has a 1967 crayon drawing, proudly displayed at his cottage, about why he loves Canada.



Though the structure of flowers like the Canadian columbine are particularly complicated, Liverance always makes sure the finished painting of the flower makes sense to viewers.



Liverance's sunny three-dimensional oil painting, *Country Girls* features a larger-than-life bouquet of daisies that look as if they've been freshly picked from a field.



Before painting a botanical illustration, Liverance makes many measured drawings of individual parts of a flower to be sure everything will fit well together in the final artwork.

Liverance's latest show, *Georgian Bay Wildflowers* is running from May through September 2023 at the West Parry Sound District Museum in Parry Sound. The exhibit is a series of watercolour botanical illustrations created as part of his third year project for his Diploma in Botanical Illustration. Wildflowers in the show include swamp rose, water lily, wild iris, pale corydalis, slender leaf false foxglove, lady slipper and Canadian columbine.

"I had been painting botanical subjects for decades in oil but when I tried watercolour, the results were a muddy mess," Liverance recalls. "With the RBG Edinburgh course in watercolour, I learned how to create

scientifically accurate measured drawings, tonal studies and colour matching. In the third year, we were asked to create a series of paintings on a specific theme and I chose Georgian Bay wildflowers."

The first painting in Liverance's series displays the full life cycle of the lady slipper, a member of the orchid family. Liverance is particularly fond of orchids. One of his orchid paintings recently won Best in Show at both the Ontario Orchid Show and the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington.

No matter what variety of flower appears on Liverance's canvases, the plant must connect with the artist on a deep level to become an artwork.

"The subject has to speak to my heart because I spend months working on these very detailed paintings," says Liverance. "Though some artists work on more than one painting at a time, I completely stick with one painting until it is done. So, the flower really has to talk to me or it would be possible to lose interest. For commissions, people ask for flowers that hold meaning for them.

"I'll never forget when I was at an art festival in Michigan and a woman looked at my hydrangea painting and started to cry. She said her mom used to have hydrangeas on her dresser and it meant so much for her to see them.

"When you see someone have a connection like that with one of the flowers, it brings joy to my heart. Each one of the flowers speaks to me in a certain way, but to have them speak to the people who see them is wonderful."

At the gallery in the Aurora Cultural Centre in Aurora, the 2023 summer group exhibition *Letters to the Earth: Between Despair and Hope* included Liverance's 2022 artwork *Greed*. Inspired by the environmental crisis, the oil painting

shows a stream of blood flowing out of Earth as a skeletal hand squeezes it. The blood runs down a human hand clutching dollar bills. The declarative painting is a major departure from his regular work.

In his accompanying letter to the Earth, Liverance wrote, "I am eternally sorry, please forgive us. Clearly the human species does not know how to be a responsible master of the Earth and its creatures."

"Mother Nature continues to challenge me, inspire my creations and is my muse always," says Liverance.

When asked where he believes an artist's creativity originates, Liverance says he believes a sense of curiosity drives creativity.

"Creativity starts with being curious about a particular thing," he says. "As an artist curious about flowers, I discovered that to make them look real, you've got to be patient. Very patient." 🐾

Oil and watercolour botanical illustrations and plant portraits by Bert Liverance can be viewed at the Uxbridge Studio Tour on Sept. 16, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday, Sept. 17, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. www.uxbridgestudiotour.com/site/home and at www.bertliverance.com.



Through his study of botany, the scientific study of plants like this wild iris, the artist learned about the range and use of plants and threats to their survival and sustainability.

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