

You have a Dutch name and speak the language. How much do you identify with the homeland of your parents?

I feel more Dutch than Australian. Although I was born here, everything in my first seven years was Dutch: language, food and décor, even Dutch smells as we celebrated St Nicholas in the old ways. I am Europe-oriented and feel very much at home there, having spent more than three years wandering across its landscapes and cities in my twenties.



What was your formal training as an illustrator and artist?

Originally I began studying to be a science technician, but training of that nature wasn't for me. When I contracted encephalitis which put me in a coma for three months, informal drawing and practicing art stopped. After long months of rehab, I learned to walk and talk again, and to write and draw. When I was well enough, I enrolled in Advertising and Graphic Art at Stanley Street Art School in the late 1970s, and it was wonderful. The school's milieu suited me, I was in my element and had wonderful lecturers.

Did that study lead to a livelihood in art?

As soon as I could, I was off to the Netherlands to meet relatives for the first time. The welcome was warm, and I immediately felt I was home. I set up base there before spending most of the next three and a half years cycling around Europe, painting, and drawing, and swapping art for food, accommodation, and transport.

I drew people and faces, details of rocks and plants. Always I was looking and seeking out small things to focus on; with the back drop of dramatic mountains and cities, it was the minutiae that attracted my attention.

And of course, I gained an intense art education by visiting galleries along the way. Examining in detail the works of Rembrandt and the Renaissance painters, I wondered and studied how they did it?

After travels in Europe, employment followed as a scientific illustrator at the Adelaide Botanic Gardens Herbarium. How did that eventuate?

Finding that Flinders University had no scientific illustrator positions, I sought work at the herbarium. By the time I had settled into a position there, Flinders had created such a role but my future in botanical illustration was set.

In 1988, you won a Churchill Scholarship. That was a feather in your cap and a wonderful opportunity.

Where did you study and with whom?

I was thrilled of course and accepted the challenge to justify this recognition of my work. During a month at Kew Gardens in London I closely observed botanical artists. Through the Churchill Trust I could access specialist libraries where I researched in order later to produce a book on Australian flora. Moving next to the Netherlands, I spent 4 months in Leiden Herbarium, further honing my botanical drawing skills by working beside experienced botanical illustrators.

While in the Netherlands I took the chance to research my family heritage and discovered family links to a 16th century painter. Antonis Mor Van Dashorst must be a relative. Works of this portraitist in the European Royal Court hang in galleries in Florence, Madrid, and Warsaw, and there's even one in the NGV in Melbourne. But years later I too made links to European royalty by presenting two of my own works to Princess Mary of Denmark.

How well received was the 1990 publication of your book, *Plants of the Adelaide Plains and Hills*, which you illustrated in collaboration with John Jessop?

It did brilliantly, selling out quickly. People warmed to the way the detailed illustrations of more than 1200 species showed plants in flower and fruit and at various stages of their life cycles. The information proved helpful to both lay persons and professional botanists. Plans exist for a more extensive fourth edition.

What is the subject matter of your upcoming exhibition?

It's titled "**Gilbert's Garden**" and that's precisely what it is. The illustrations, made over the last three years, are based on plants in our garden, both native and introduced. This up-to-date and highly accurate work includes scientific microscopic views and dissections.

What do you want viewers to feel on experiencing your exhibition?

I want to move them to say WOW: to be impressed by the precise and detailed work a scientific illustrator does; to appreciate the knowledge necessary to identify and capture the essence and complexity of these plants; and to realise I'm more than the cheery man they see around town, that there's another more skilled and serious side of me.

Do people buy art with so much detail?

I think people are now buying this kind of art. There is increasing interest in the environment and native plants, an awareness of the information in intricate botanical art, and a respect for the skill required to capture such fine details of nature.

Are you interested in creating art other than in botanical illustration?

Although scientific illustration is my passion, I enjoy several ways of making art. Creating cartoons, caricatures, and portraits, plus landscapes and seascapes, all bring immense pleasure. I choose whichever medium best suits the subject matter and intended purpose. I might use pencil, gouache, oils, acrylic and water colours, all are part of my artist's tool box.



Everyone around town knows Gilbert of the bright shirts. Is colour always central to you and your art?

At art school I didn't have enough money to buy a full palette of colours, so I kept things as simple as possible by using only primary colours: blue, yellow and red. I mixed them in many variations and my trademark slogan became to *make these colours do what they were meant to do*. I consulted with printers and chose to buy the brand they used as standard so that reproductions of my illustrations would be in exact colours. I'm fixated on colour and am forever noticing the colours around me, their variations and thinking how I'd match them with my brush and palette. And yes, I always dream in vivid colour.

What's your art practice?

I work in a studio at home on the top floor while nurturing a dream one day to adapt the garage to this purpose. My schedule is erratic, working when I feel like it and can, fitting it alongside the business of earning a living. If I could just focus on art and scientific illustration I'd want to do it regularly every day, but I need an income. If only I could find a patron like my forebear who painted in the European Royal Court. Ah well, I must be realistic. If I have a commission or an exhibition I become obsessively focussed which is unfair on my partner, fellow artist Judith Sweetman.

For my botanical drawings I like to work with plants which are alive and fresh in order to get the colours and form exact. And when a flower is ready, that forces me to work on the spot. Often I can be working on multiple plants at once and lost in a world of my own.

WOW Gilbert, I look forward to your upcoming exhibition

Gilbert's Garden

Fleurieu Arthouse

202 Main Street, McLaren Vale

Monday 15th Nov 2021

until

Monday 10th Jan 2022

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