



[Wildflowers with insects including, *Oxalis*, *Potentilla*, *Taraxacum officinale*, *Glechoma hederaceae*, *Viola*, *Waldsteinia fragarioides*], watercolor on illustration board by Anne Ophelia Todd Dowden (1907–2007), 18 x 41.5 cm, for Dowden, *Secret Life of Flowers* (New York, The Odyssey Press, 1964, pp. 6–7), HI Art accession no. 6306.03, Courtesy Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pa.

## LASTING IMPRESSIONS: Beyond Accuracy, Creating Art

*Images that inspire contemporary botanical artists*

### SHEVAUN DOHERTY on the work of ANNE OPHELIA TODD DOWDEN

I have always thought of botanical art as a form of visual story telling. In its simplest form, it provides an elegant and accurate description of the plant. Some paintings go far beyond that and intrigue viewers with a narrative that fills them with wonder. One such painting is this beautiful illustration of *Wildflowers with insects* by Anne Ophelia Todd Dowden (1907-2007), now part of the Hunt Institute's collection.

There is so much that I love about this painting. It evokes many happy childhood memories of watching butterflies and bees flying amongst the wildflowers on summer days. The artist's delight in her own observations of the natural world is evident in the skillful way she has put this scene together. The design flows beautifully across the page in a glorious tangle of leaves, buds, flowers, and insects.

Every line has been carefully placed to lead the eye comfortably across the composition, from *Oxalis* to *Potentilla* to *Taraxacum officinale*, *Glechoma hederacea*, *Viola* and *Waldsteinia fragarioides*, cleverly interspersed with ladybirds, bees, butterflies, and beetle. The painting invites the viewer to look closely and marvel at the tiny details.

Dowden was a keen advocate of painting from life, happiest when out studying plants in their natural habitat, observing "the most beautiful world of intricate relationships." Her illustrations always began with detailed studies of each plant shown from different perspectives. It was this understanding of the plants' basic structures, how they grow and interact, that allowed her to be selective in her final designs, and enabled her to describe each plant in a beautifully simple and eloquent manner. Her composition is balanced,

informative, and appears perfectly natural on the page.

Technically it is brilliant. It is the perfect mix of precision and fluidity, with incredibly fine detail and loose brushwork. The pencil lines at the base of the study add charm to the work. Her clever use of tone creates depth within the painting—she has caught the essence of sunshine on the leaves and made great use of the dark negative spaces to bring the plants into focus. A softening of tones and desaturation of color creates the effect of plants receding into the background. Her drawing is superb—just look at the foreshortening on the leaves.

Botanical art is about sharing your passion and delight in nature. This painting is a love story, an uplifting celebration of life.  -SD