Orchids and art

The RHS London Orchid and Botanical Art Show on 12-13 April will feature not just plants, but some of the finest examples of botanical art from across the globe.

Author: Johan Hermans, Chairman of the RHS Orchid Committee and a Research Associate of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Orchids in botanical art

The RHS Orchid Committee was established in March 1889. It is one of the seven RHS Plant Committees, and the Society’s source of expertise and support on all matters regarding orchids.

There are 24 members today, plus corresponding members; several from overseas. Membership is voluntary, drawn from plant breeders, nurserymen, botanists and amateur growers.

The committee’s flower quality awards system (such as Award of Merit and First Class Certificate) is widely used across the world. Orchids are now the most popular house plant and interest in their cultivation is increasing rapidly; the Orchid Committee is actively encouraging this trend.

The committee meets monthly at various venues around the country to discuss business and assess plants for awards.

In addition to flower quality, the committee recognises the skills of individual growers with its Certificate of Cultural Commendation. Recently, the committee has begun selecting orchids to be given the RHS Award of Garden Merit, and providing guidance on the orchids best suited to growing in the home.

The Orchid Committee’s role is to digitize the paintings; to assess plants for awards.

The portraits collection now numbers more than 7,000. It still forms an important tool for the Orchid Committee in assessing plants; because of the trueness of scale, colour and proportion, paintings are still seen as the most reliable way of recording awarded orchids.

A programme has begun to digitise the paintings; the ultimate aim is to make the whole collection available online – history going forward into the future.

Future plants. The paintings were to be of uniform standard, frontal views and life-size in scale.

The first official artist was 24-year-old Nellie Roberts, appointed in January 1897 to paint all plants given a First Class Certificate or an Award of Merit. The collection grew steadily – at her retirement almost 60 years later there were no fewer than 4,500. Several other fine botanical artists followed in Roberts’ footsteps as official artist to the Orchid Committee, among them Jeanne Holgate, Iris Humphreys, Gillian Young, Cherry-Anne Lavrih, Gillian Baillie, and the current incumbent, Deborah Lambkin.

The portrait collection now numbers more than 7,000. It still forms an important tool for the Orchid Committee in assessing plants; because of the trueness of scale, colour and proportion, paintings are still seen as the most reliable way of recording awarded orchids.

A programme has begun to digitize the paintings; the ultimate aim is to make the whole collection available online – history going forward into the future.

The portrait collection now numbers more than 7,000. It still forms an important tool for the Orchid Committee in assessing plants; because of the trueness of scale, colour and proportion, paintings are still seen as the most reliable way of recording awarded orchids.