

A painter of roses

“I never paint modern roses, but I have an affinity with Old Fashioned roses and English roses. I can’t not paint them.” This is Tauranga artist, Susan Harrison-Tustain talking. “They have a magical glow - I like how the colours vibrate when the light catches them,” she continued. “And the petals all have a different feel to them - calico, crushed silk, tissue paper - I try to make the texture true to nature.”

Light and shade, depth of colour, authenticity of the flower, its leaves and its buds - these are characteristics of her paintings and never more so than when she is painting roses.

Before preparing the paints and picking up her brush, Susan spends a lot of time examining the rose. It is not only the flower that is important but also its leaves, the thorns, how the flower head hangs - all the components which make up the whole plant are crucial to the finished picture.

‘Constance Spry’, ‘Graham Thomas’, ‘Perdita’, ‘Abraham Darby’ are just some of David Austin’s roses which she has translated into works of art and she feels that the rose, if named in the painting, must be life-like. It can sometimes take most of a day to paint one leaf. It takes time to build up all the layers of colour which Susan uses to imbue her work with a translucency which seems particularly appropriate to paintings of roses.

Stiff, formal vases of flowers are not Susan’s style; reality is important and for this reason insects, or a chewed leaf may feature with the roses. Susan



remembers the day she was driving home from Kauri Creek Nursery with a bucketful of roses which were destined to feature in a picture. Gradually she became aware of an insistent buzzing coming from the bucket. She stopped the car to investigate, found a very energetic green vegetable bug amongst the flowers and promptly photographed it, so it too could appear immortalised amongst the painted blooms. “These details add life and movement to my work,” Susan explained.

It’s probably not a surprise to discover that Susan also grows roses. “I had nearly 50 rose bushes in our last garden. I would wander round at breakfast time, with a cup of tea and just enjoy looking at them. They fill in all the senses.” Now Susan, with her husband Richard, is planning a new house and garden. “I’ll plant lots of roses -

ABOVE: Artist Susan Harrison-Tustain loves David Austin roses and ‘Perdita’ is one which she has captured in her paintings that are notable for the luminous quality of light which she achieves.

English roses in groups of three,” she said dreamily, “with foxgloves and larkspurs.”

If she needed further inspiration, Susan found it last year when she went to Shropshire and spent a day wandering around David Austin’s rose garden, looking at all the plants in his glass-houses and talking with him. “I couldn’t believe how many there were,” she commented “and I was surprised how down-to-earth he was.”

Most of Susan’s work is done in water-colour which she likes for its gentleness and its ability to express the idea of grace. “I am now very familiar with them. The way colours react with the water is good for the soul and by building up layers of colour I can achieve the richness and depth of colour I want.”

Given the meticulous nature of her work, it takes Susan many months to complete enough paintings for the exhibition which she holds every year in Tauranga in November. Recently she has also been involved in preparing a book in which she discusses her work and which includes examples of her paintings.

She has been painting seriously only since 1991 and Susan is not sure now what she did previously. “Increasingly I look at everything in terms of colours on my palette. ‘How would I get that effect?’ I keep asking myself. As I have painted more, I’ve refined my ability to see and analyse colour.

“And when I see something as beautiful and fleeting as a rose, it gives great satisfaction to capture it forever.”