

Japanese Ink Paste

Creating beautiful botanical marks with this exquisite method

STORY BY Marianne Hazlewood

WE HAD A FANTASTIC TUTORIAL from visiting artist Sarah Simblet early in the first year of our diploma course at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (Scotland). Sarah showed us her fabulous pen and ink technique using Japanese ink paste on heavyweight cartridge paper. Blown away by the results, on a subsequent trip to London I excitedly bought, pens, nibs, and a bottle of ink paste to share with my classmates.

Ink paste is a modern, easy-to-use form of the traditional Japanese sumi ink often used in calligraphy. It is traditionally procured as a solid form ink stick which is then ground and mixed with water. I use a premixed ink paste that is available in two colors, blue black or brown black, from Cornelissen's in London.

I chose to work with *Arisaema*, Jack-in-the-pulpit, during my final diploma year at RBGE. I had seen the amazing blooms over a few years at our local horticultural show and was aching for a reason to have some. I bought a variety of tubers and got planting. I planned to document various parts of the *Arisaema* in a set of watercolor paintings to suit the course requirements, including inflorescence, foliage, and fruits. I thought about incorporating the growing shoots and tubers, however, after some work on the compositions, I opted not to, as I didn't want to clutter up the white space in my layouts. Nonetheless, as I watched the growing shoots emerge from the soil and develop, I knew that I had to capture them somewhere, somehow...



Marianne Hazlewood
Photo by Nancy Macdonald

The growing shoots only hint at the adult plants they will become. Many *Arisaema* species have really distinct forms. They are very sculptural, and many have fantastic patterns featuring checkers and/or stripes; these elements are there in embryo form at this development stage. Early versions of foliage and inflorescence are all rolled up and folded in on themselves and, as they slowly grow and open out from their enclosing cataphylls, they unfurl and unfold creating lovely weird, alien, and insect-like shapes. I felt that the shapes and patterns would work really well in stark black and white, and knew that this technique would be well suited for this purpose. I decided to call the series “ink shoots” as they were literally the shoots depicted in ink.

I work with the black brown ink, diluting the mix further to create a variety of tones. I usually start with three dilutions and then add more water as I draw. I use a dip pen with varying pressure to create different line weights and work with the nib to scratch, cross hatch, and pull water about, depending on how loaded the pen is. I use a cartridge paper that is heavy duty enough to take some mistreatment, I use a plastic eraser to blend and lighten or soften areas, erasing with some force to impact on the ink. I love the deep blacks, but also the softer tones of the diluted inks that I can achieve through this technique. It lends an expressive element to my work which is a world away from the drybrush watercolor technique that I also work in.

The first pieces I worked on were smallish, A3 (A3 size print measures 29.7 x 42.0cm, 11.69 x 16.53 inches). I kept a rough edge on the cartridge paper and enjoyed the organic feel, I



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ABOVE, LEFT. *Arisaema griffithii* 1:1.3, Griffith's cobra lily, 70cm x 50cm, pen and ink using Japanese ink paste on Lambeth cartridge, ©2018. RIGHT. *Arisaema tortuosum* 1:1.3, whipcord cobra lily, 70cm x 50cm, pen and ink using Japanese ink paste on Lambeth cartridge, ©2018. OPPOSITE PAGE. (Detail) *Arisaema ringens*, Mushashi-abumi, 42cm x 298cm, pen and ink using Japanese ink paste on Lambeth cartridge, ©2016. All images ©Marianne Hazlewood

dripped the ink around as I got to grips with the technique and loved the effect, so I have incorporated this into my work. Particularly with these developing plants, I love depicting the crinkled and folded aspects of the foliage, and, of course, the patterning on the spathes. It's a fun task. I am now working on more complex and larger pieces, and have been playing with enlarging the specimens to a degree. This year at the VAS 2019 Open exhibition, I won the Open Eye Gallery Exhibition Award for two of my ink shoot pieces, *Arisaema griffithii* 1:1.3, and *Arisaema tortuosum* 1:1.3. The award is an exhibition with the prestigious Open Eye Gallery in Edinburgh next year (2020) for which I am now preparing new ink pieces. 🌿