

Aloe perfoliata

FORMERLY KNOWN AS ALOE MITRIFORMIS

Kingdom
PLANTAE
TRACHEOPHYTES
ANGIOSPERMS
MONOCOTS
ASPARAGALES
family
ASPHODELACEAE
subfamily
ASPHODELOIDEAE
genus species
ALOE PERFOLIATA



spine
Aloe stalk

THIS ALOE
PERFOLIATA
ALSO KNOWN AS
RUBBLE ALOE OR
MITRE ALOE IS
INDIGENOUS TO THE
WESTERN CAPE OF
SOUTH AFRICA.
THEIR THICK, SPIKY
LEAVES RESPOND
TO FULL SUNLIGHT
BY TURNING RED.

Quilla
talk
OF W.A.
THE CALLIGRAPHERS GUILD

Creating artwork



WHERE DO I START?

This worksheet addresses your personal artwork rather than jobs for clients which usually come with decisions chosen by the client – nearly always a text, a hand, a design style, a size, media colour, substrate colour and substrate type. When these choices are up to you, the possibilities open up immensely, limited only by your experience, skill, confidence, materials available and window of time.

Finding inspiration, deciding on a project, text, approach, style, layout - these are considerations that may confound you. The blank page, especially a beautiful, pristine piece of expensive watercolour paper, lands on your work desk with a daunting series of pre-loaded conditions. These may perch in your front brain shouting out warnings (don't stuff this up – it cost \$14.00 for this sheet!) or may be more insidious, reclining back and guiding you to the land of indecision by suggesting an extensive list of possible approaches, resulting in frozen procrastination.

Avoid these traps by being prepared. List the non-negotiables first and take it from there. Be aware of the criteria that will determine the success-for-purpose of your final result.

Everyone has their own method, ranging from the ordered and methodical left-brained to the spontaneous, reactive, and intuitive right-brained approach and everything in between. It is to your greatest advantage to be flexible enough to operate within the whole range. Identify which approach is the most effective for your intended outcomes.

At the moment, I am enjoying myself by trying a wide range of starting points for calligraphy pieces. This may be starting as most calligraphy starts, with a chosen text that needs to be expressed visually through your choice of hand, graphic elements/decoration. Or it may be working from the other direction with a background partially completed that you then hunt for an appropriate text that will complement it. Exploring this concept can be useful in stretching your design muscles as you may need to respond to quite specific design issues.

If you grew up in Australia in the 1960 and 70s you will probably remember a childrens' show on the ABC called Mr Squiggle. The premise was that children would draw a few random lines and Mr Squiggle, a marionette with a giant pencil for a nose, would take these lines, usually turning them upside down, then transform them into something recognisable. He was accompanied by a grumpy Blackboard and Bill Steamshovel, the gruff comedic foils to Mr Squiggle's creativity and an agreeable, helpful female assistant always addressed as Miss Pat or Miss Jane.

There are a few take home pearls of wisdom from Mr Squiggle. Turning things upside-down changes your perspective – anyone who has tried Betty Edwards Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain will have experienced this with the exercise where you copy a line drawing, then try it upside-down. Usually, the results dramatically illustrate how much more accurate the upside-down version is compared to the right side up one, particularly with faces. Changing your perspective allows you to see things more accurately without the filter of what you think is there rather than what is really there.

I suspect that I absorbed quite a bit of the Mr Squiggle design approach in my childhood which is reflected in my fondness for trying to make connections between things that seem quite discrete and unrelated, not only in artwork but other aspects of life as well! This is also evident in my love of sacred geometry, particularly the Flower of Life (FoL) progression. The underlying concept is that everything is connected by the most basic of shapes, the circle and that those circles overlap in such a way that they form a network of stability/strength that expands ad infinitum. This can be found throughout nature.

The piece I will examine is an example of allowing relatively random factors influence my design choices. There is a term for this approach – **aleatory**, meaning design or composition created by random chance. This is definitely the reactive right-brained approach which is my default position when it comes to design. I am most comfortable when I have turned my talking brain off and allow my hand to do its thing in the state of flow. For this reason, I always work with music playing as I believe this allows the right brain more space and taps into the deeper, most creative part of the mind, the place of flow. I have tried working with the radio, podcasts or tv on but that often results in me writing out words that I have just heard, unintentionally! I believe it takes my mind to a different area that is more concerned with processing information rather than making visual connections.

Creating artwork

This piece started out when I found a spent aloe stalk in the garden and spent some time looking at it. I found the shape, texture and character pleasing and decided to draw it in pencil. If you have been doing calligraphy for a while, you will have a stock of offcuts, long bits of good paper cut off from previous pieces. As the stalk was quite long, I found a long offcut of cream Canson paper and sketched the stalk in graphite pencil. I wrote Aloe stalk up the side of the main stem in italic using a 3mm Tape nib and added spent to the left. It sat in my studio in my pile of background papers that range from minimal background treatments through to pieces that haven't worked that need a major radical overhaul.



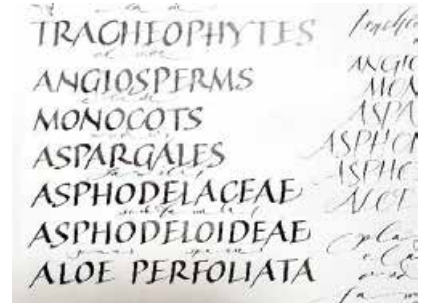
When Martin mentioned doing a follow up session at the Guild for the Let Us Spray workshop (which combined spraying media, cutting paper and using the cut paper to create stencils using sacred geometry forms for spraying and embossing), I rifled through the Drawer of Backgrounds and pulled out about a dozen potential backgrounds of different sizes and stages of completion that would suit the next stage of the workshop concept.

This is the integration phase where text, style layout, images come together to create a harmonious whole. In theory! My intended outcome for this piece is to utilise something partially finished and add the cut stencil, sacred geometry and spray techniques with appropriate text to achieve this integration, unity and harmony.

I applied 4 different sizes of cut flower of life stencils as I enjoy contrast of scale in design and sprayed Moonshadow Mist in random places over each of the sheets. For some with darker sections, I applied Pan Pastel through the template with a foam wedge. After pressing the pages to flatten them, I selected several of them to work on simultaneously. I find this a helpful technique as I can bounce ideas from one piece to another if appropriate.

Back to the aloe stalk. I love doing botanical artwork and favour an amateur naturalist/journal approach with botanical nomenclature and details of the specimen, which is Aloe perfoliata.

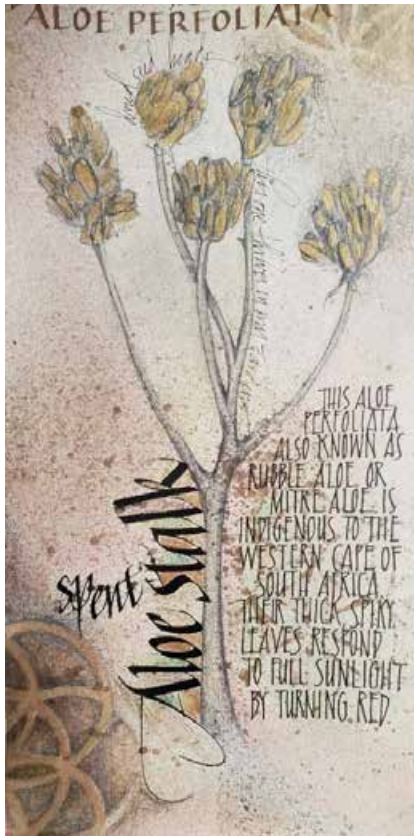
I wrote out the sequence from kingdom to species in my layout pad using a few different styles, conscious of then available space (*above right*). I settled on walnut ink using a 1mm Tape nib in basic majuscules, flooding where necessary so the walnut ink stayed visible over the sprayed Moonshadow Mist. The identifying categories (kingdom etc) I wrote in black ink in a Brause EF66 in a loose gestural script akin to a manuscript interlinear gloss. The space available was bounded by two convex arcs so I fitted the lines in by eye with the intention of using the text to unite the top and bottom sections. Having the pointed pen script in between was a useful device for balancing out uneven spaces, an inevitable consequence of doing things by eye.



These tests are taken straight from my layout pad and are clearly unretouched!



Creating artwork



With the now dried sections of sprayed FoL shapes in different sizes, I used coloured pencil to accentuate shadows behind the flower shapes to bring them forward, as well as to add different colours and tones to the whole page – some pinks, greens, grey blue, light brown and sepia. This was the longest and most involved aspect of this piece. I am an inveterate fiddler and will happily spend hours focussing on minutiae.

Essentially, I focus on one chunk of a piece and work it up until I'm happy with it. Usually without too much thought, more a response to what I see and trying to make it work more effectively. This continued over several days of intermittently popping back to my studio ("just for 20min"!) and just adding extra bits. I painted the seedheads in Finetec gold as I adore the work of Yoann Lossel, a French artist who does exquisite work using graphite pencil for his beautiful, sensitively rendered figurative works and complementing it with gold leaf with outstanding skill. The piece now has 4 sections of FoL spray and pencil enhancement, gold seed heads and some text.

Next stage (*left*) was to add the text block of information summarised from Wikipedia. This was done quickly without lines or attention to

consistency with a Derwent Graphik 0.3mm Linemaker pen in a condensed monoline Roman with some Art Deco characteristics. The purpose of this is to introduce interest (an appropriate information panel), contrast, unity (using an elongated form to echo the shape of the paper and the vertical emphasis also the o shape follows the seed head shape and the inner flower panels) texture and balance the present text to the left (by creating a dense text block). I should point out that I am not thinking of these factors when I chose these additions – this is more of a post-event left-brain analysis of right-brain intuitive response.

I added the large text *Aloe perfoliata* (*right*) using a 3mm Tape nib and black ink to link with the large italic text already present (*Aloe stalk*) in my standard compressed italic following the arc of the large FoL shape. I added a line there in tiny Roman caps as the area seemed too bright and functionally separated the large and smaller text. The loose handwriting style script along the stem and around the seedhead was added to imply personal context akin to a journal.



As mentioned, there is a constant process of going over, continually using pencil to intensify and define, as well as using a scrunched up dry tissue to blend and soften areas. I decided to add a flourish to the I in *aloe*, which proved spectacularly unsuccessful so I had a design problem to solve. The flourish loop which may have worked in another context was not pleasing in this one as it was too loopy and heavy for the position which is central top and arguably the first place to which your eye is drawn. As annoying as this was at the time, it was an excellent opportunity to remedy the mark in a manner that suits the media. It was also an opportunity to override my annoyance, relocate it in a less judgemental place and view it as another design criterion factor (remove design elements that do not enhance the work as a whole). Much of the work is done in pencil so if I did my usual technique of scrape with a scalpel then erase, then there could be a problem keeping the integrity of the background.

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Admittedly I probably could have managed, using the scrape and erase method especially as pencil is very forgiving and I was not planning on writing over it in ink. However, this was a good opportunity to stretch my fixing muscles, so I scraped the offending lines, not

completely but so it looked like a faded line receding into the background. In fact, I did the opposite of my standard fix which would be to remove all traces of the unwanted line. I chose to leave a remnant of this flourish and used a tissue to spread the brown pencil shading over the whole area.

I'm satisfied with the result, as I like the idea that it has a quality of a palimpsest where the historical artifact is still visible and part of the piece. It is also a helpful reminder that tonal variation in backgrounds makes fixing mistakes so much easier.

The finished piece (right) has met the criteria I set when I began. Disparate random elements combined to create a piece with a sense of unity, harmony, contrast and interest. I seek to connect script and background, script and pattern by embedding and usually layering these elements together. Often the best connections emerge unintentionally in contrast to those that look contrived or forced and therefore uncomfortable, disrupting or distracting from the overall harmony of the work.

There are many of my most favoured default techniques and hands – lots of contrast with several different hands, different sizes of lettering including compressed large italic in an arc, harmony with earthy tones, a varied background, use of multiple media particularly Moonshadow Mist and coloured pencil, a figurative pencil drawn element, embedding or nesting elements together for unity, repetition of design motifs (particularly the FoL) for connection, adding gold, colouring in counter spaces for interest.

Perhaps my next design project criteria will restrict usage of these approaches! It is important to move out of your comfort zone for your design skills to improve.

In the meantime, inspire yourself with work from your favourite calligraphers and artists, immerse yourself in their vernacular, absorb those qualities you aspire to channel and direct them in a way that feels natural for you. My design motto is just keep working on it until it is right.

