

Audubon Adventure: Record the Natural World

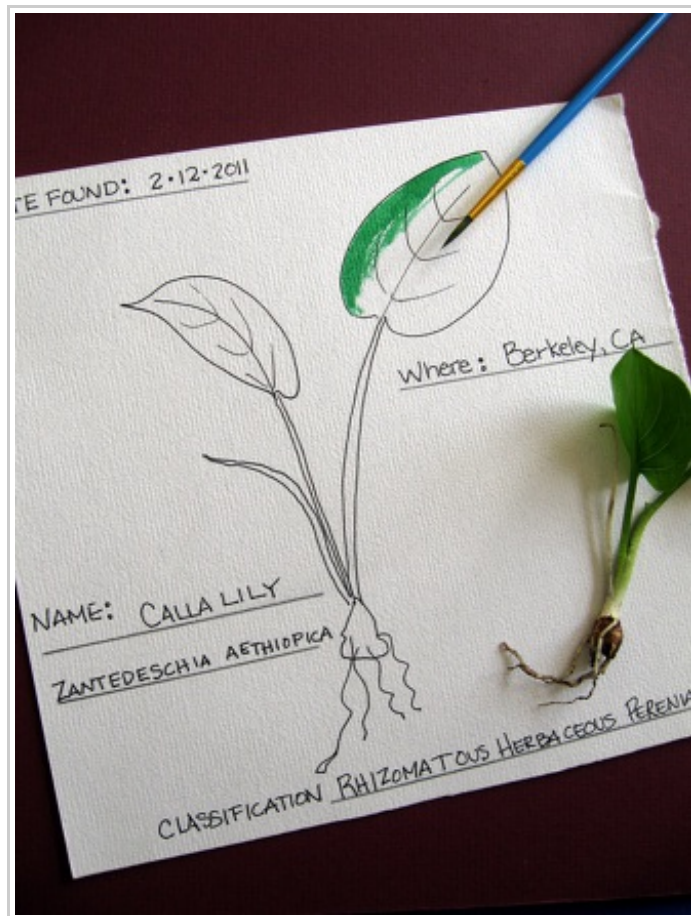
Enjoy being outdoors? Interested in art? Combine both! John James Audubon was a scientist and self-taught artist who did just that by studying the natural world and creating exquisitely detailed paintings of birds and nature. You can follow in his footsteps with this art project that has you create a naturalist painting. Use this guide to spend some time outdoors, appreciate nature, and learn to record the world exactly as you see it.

What You Need:

- Watercolor paper
- HB or softer pencils, found at any art and hobby store
- Eraser
- Pencil sharpener
- Natural specimen to draw (flowers, bushes, leaves, and other plants)
- Watercolors
- Containers for water and washes
- Brushes

What You Do:

1. *Pick a Specimen.* Go outside! Take a nature walk in your backyard or other area with plants, trees, and wildlife. As you walk, observe the natural world around you and note plants that catch your interest. For your painting, you'll want a natural specimen to draw such as a plant with stems, leaves, flower, bulbs, and roots intact, if possible. Once you find a specimen, sit down to draw outside or, if you're allowed, carefully take the plant home with you.
2. *Reference.* Take out your drawing paper. You can fill in this part later, but for reference's sake, print the following words: Name: _____ Date: _____ Where observed: _____ Classification: _____
3. *Placement:* Lightly, block out the general shape of the flower and stems, branch and leaves, and seeds and decide the most pleasing way to place them on your paper.
 - You may want to divide the drawing, showing the stem and everything above ground and maybe the root or bulb inside a circle or outline to the side.
 - Take a while to study how the plant is put together before you go any further with your drawing.
 - As you start drawing, remember that observation and detail are the most important aspects. Be prepared to slow down and take in all minute details. A botanical artist can take as long as 15 hours to complete one painting of a flower!
4. *Details:* Note and record details.
 - Pay close attention to various lines, veins, and spots on flowers; thorns and hairs on stems and branches; bundle scars on twigs; or the number of needles in a pine cluster. These are not accidental events, and to give your drawing accuracy, you will need to record in words and images. Leaves, for instance, are rarely perfect in nature; they will have tears and insect marks and bites.
 - Record what *is* rather than what you *expect* to see.
 - Make notes about your "specimens" around the edges of your drawing.
5. *Color:* Watercolor or colored pencils work well for botanical or other nature studies.
 - Watercolor is "built" by laying in color from lightest to darkest. Don't use black if you want to show natural color. Shadows are usually colors and very rarely include black.
 - Start with washes. This means using lots of water in your color and not much pigment. This gives a "washed out" transparent result and works well for backgrounds of leaves and petals. When the wash



is done, let it dry completely.

- You can now use a color with less water and lots more pigment to “draw” with your paintbrush. For instance, use green to draw the veins and mid-veins of a leaf or petal over the dry washes.
- You do not need to color the entire drawing, just parts of it to see how colors blend or fade, to note colors of shadows, and to remember which parts of the plant are what color.
- Let your painting dry.

Use this same general template for insects and other specimens that you collect or observe. Careful observation of details and practice will give you excellent results.

For more information on naturalist paintings, check out Audubon's work. Another good artist to study is Beatrix Potter, who created wonderful journals of the animals and plants where she lived. Her studies helped make her art accurate as well as charming.