

Greetings

American elm

Ulmus americana

Leaf n.° 86



I present this beautiful elm leaf to welcome you with open arms to my collection of fall leaves. This is a salutation from both of us, the leaf and me, to thank you for honoring us with your visit. You are our guest, invited to celebrate Nature in a festival of color, form, inquiry, and vision, where your participation enriches it with meaning and value. As you share our experience, we become part of you, and you become part of us.

This leaf comes from a giant elm tree in my yard. It is looking at you face-to-face, inviting you not just for an inspection but for a conversation and an exchange of impressions. It is the harbinger of similar encounters to come throughout the following pages: presenting its image, its characteristics, and its story, while enticing your own reflections.

The leaf invites you to discover her secrets. It displays an intricate, challenging, and creative anatomy, having curled itself inside out as it ages. It guides you first to its outside, anterior surface, showing it on the right side, surrounded by a fringe of sharp points. Then the central vein displays its ribs running their parallel, sideways courses. They disappear on the right under the cavernous shadow created by its own concave wing. On the left side, however, they bend outward, creating a convex surface outlined by sequentially decreasing arches that display attractive patterns between them. The crescent-shaped shadow, in its constant dialogue with light, casts an outstanding presence that provides volume, depth, and pertinence.

As shadows and light are indispensable to each other, you and I are also connected.

I welcome you not just to visit my world of art and ideas but to become a part of it—to observe, critique, create, and share your own universe of thoughts.



Introduction

ONE LEAF, ONE LIFE contains 50 portraits of autumn leaves and one flower (THE ARTICHOKE), all drawn by me in colored pencils. I also share essays and anecdotes to showcase each piece's relevance in my life during my years of jubilation. In Spanish, my mother tongue, people don't retire at the end of their careers. They jubilate.

When my years of toil as a physician ended and leisure began, I happened upon the instrument that would change the course of my life: a set of colored pencils that were left behind by one of my children. This unintended discovery converted me into a pilgrim journeying through the pathways of art.

The scarcity of instructional material and classes on colored pencil technique surprised me. I would be told that colored pencils lack the prestige of other media. So, observation and persistence, survival habits acquired during my time in the operating room, became my first preceptors.

Learning any craft is based on the acquisition of experiences and knowledge in progressive spirals, where yesterday's light illuminates the road ahead. This process leads you to master the skill and, more importantly, to a deeper insight into yourself.

Why leaves? As I found inner peace through my discovery of art, I recognized a metaphor in the silent gesture of an autumn leaf. We, the leaf and I, were at comparable stages in our lives. Our transition and our scars were similar, but unlike me, the leaf dressed herself up as if for a gala to celebrate her wandering toward sundown.

Three masters lit my way in botanical art: Marlene Hill Donnelly, who gave me direction; Derek Norman, the English wizard who encouraged my fondness for pencil drawing; and the renowned Heeyoung Kim, a visionary and an undeterred perfectionist with a disarmingly humble presence.

In addition to filling me with blessings, my dedication to painting taught me that the anxiety of a future project is mitigated by the reward of a piece I've just completed. This unusual interaction generates a chronic tension that is the fount of creativity and accomplishment. Art opens me to a persistent quest, a constructive contest, and a transcendental purpose for my life.

My art, a metaphor of life

This book is about fall leaf portraiture, brought to life with colored pencils. It is also an array of anecdotal images from a lifetime spilled into essays. A way to find the soul imprisoned in a perishing leaf and give voice to my own transcendence.

The paintings convert the soft-spoken colored pencils into assertive tools through covenants of perception and dialogue. They hoist a leaf as a banner and provide a stand to craft constructive messages from personal inventories.

I use imagery to compose not a botanic compendium—of which there are many and all excellent—but instead to follow the tracing of a lineage of experiences; evocative ripples of one realization leading to another, and this, in turn, to another. It is an invitation to navigate nature's algorithms through imagination and the universal language of art.

Botanic art originated from the need to document scientific information by skilled artists. A botanical artist is an accurate, precise illustrator gifted with technical and analytical skills in the service of science, transforming scientific documentation into splendid artistic renditions.

Portraiture—though just as accurate, whether human, animal, or landscape—hinges more on the subjective. It is a complex amalgam of likeness, character, and mood; all reflected in expression. Conjuring a subject's essence requires aesthetics veering toward the intuitive.

Both disciplines—painting and portraiture—are much the same, but with a different view. Perspective, the core reason for this book, is our inner lens to the outside. I offer you mine. I long to hear yours.

I portray not the decline of a leaf but the spark of life in its impermanence, the poise of beauty in imperfection, and the prayer of grace in its subtlety. These leaves have talked to me about the majesty of aging, of humbleness, and of simplicity.

I also portray my life; a life scarred and blemished, viewed through the prism of an approaching farewell. The same fire that once made me a physician remains kindled in my art. It still heals, in body and soul.

I intend this book to be a deed between the reader and myself. I pledge to provide a perch to find perspectives as varied as imagination may provide. To create simple art from simple tools and construct a refuge of curiosity and transcendence that allows us to loosen the yarn and cast oneself to soar.

Join me on this journey.

A portrait in portraying

How does one harness the essence of a leaf and transform it into a portrait? How do you bring the remote glint of a star into the pupil of an eye?

As with any endeavor: by investing purpose and heart. By seeing beyond your eyes and feeling the swell of desire. By embracing the foreboding of the inevitable with the submission of a lover. That first glance transforms the image into a query—a riddle inviting exploration.

It is a state of intuition, where the technical carpentry of painting no longer exists and is replaced by knowing beyond any other knowledge.

Indescribable, but much like inspiration, where repressed energy surges from the wellspring of daring and the provocation drags you in. You become, willingly or not, the prisoner of the mirage you want to imprison.

By turning inward, into the infinite space of your seclusion, only you can experience the transformation. It is through your surrender that the subject yields and agrees to undress its innermost essence...If you are lucky.

But be aware that, in the portraying, you are being portrayed yourself.

Artichoke⁵

Cynara cardunculus

⁵ Literally, this is the flower of an artichoke, but I included it here among the leaves because its sepals resemble leaves and also because of its beauty. It was chosen to be shown as part of the International Exhibit by the American Association of Botanic Artists in New York; November 2019.



The artichoke I held in my hand was a perfect example of geometric design, graceful contours, and harmonious proportions. Its poise and authority overcame my hesitation to render it on paper, tendering a mischievous invitation to conjure the spell of depicting the fruit's sphere and its tangled crown of petals.

An emperor thistle dressed for coronation; its body was covered by spiraling protective bracts, like in a coat of armor, and topped by a resplendent crown of purple florets.

It spoke an ancient language that reflected the hardships of soil and climate. Its voice was serene and composed, having escaped the customary decapitation of its flower in the service of epicurean tastes.

I was able to hold in my hand a relatively rare specimen: a flowering artichoke!

As I gazed at the artichoke in majestic bloom, I felt my creativity stir. I paused at the gate of the unknown, collecting myself for a familiar yet perennially new task. A latent feeling stirred up within and kindled the chromatic choreography. Painting carries me through a course where anxiety and expectation fuse. At my prompting, my colored pencils awaken, and a vivid dialogue ensues between us, inviting my hand and the surface to begin the task.

The color palette of the artichoke consists of maturing greens at the base, transitioning into grays and purples in the mid-section, where the drying scales adopt an earthy, brownish-beige color, and continues to just below the top. At the crown, the flowers display royal purple, various shades of blue, and even a prankish pink.

The image emerges gradually, casting its semblance, architecture, and stamp. The choke's globe lifts itself from the sturdy stem, unimpeded, portly, and docile. Seeing it now, it may be hard to believe that the crown issued a vociferous challenge defying me: DARE!

Heightened sensitivity was demanded to orchestrate balance and integrity to the model's character: maturity, turning to senescence, and still with a hint of youth at the crown.

Painting invites me to enter a sensual circle of intuition, sensitivity, and passion, where believing in oneself allows the impossible. The picture I create on paper is a reflection of its image in my mind, entailing an intellectual and emotional journey from one to the other. From the moment I hold a specimen in my hand and perceive the whispering of its voice; from the first tracing of an outline to the final shading, I enter into a pact with myself: to turn Nature's work of art into my own personal work of art.



Provocation

Red maple leaf

Acer rubrum

Leaf n.° 17

Presented in New York at the 19th International Exhibit by the American Association of Botanic Artists; November 2016.

Close your eyes and perceive the harvest. Baptize yourself in the leaf's downpour. Smack the subtle air. Look up and catch a falling leaf. Submerge yourself in her language, in her expression. Own her, and then cast her into the breeze. No, not yet. This is not the one.

I always feel restless and apprehensive when selecting a topic until, magically, I find a subject that I sense harbors a story. It is, in effect, the subject who chooses me. It may be a leaf that exudes a certain confidence, flaunts an attitude, or is openly flirting. My response to this leaf is less rational and more sensual. I then capitulate to its summons with gratitude. I obey.

Once my theme is found, composition is my most challenging task. The solution is often latent, waiting to be unveiled through observation, dialogue, and submission.

My favorite tools of expression are the Cinderella of media: colored pencils. Beneath their humility lies great potential. Colored pencils are the Rosetta Stone for my perpetual chromatic anguish. More than understanding their language, I feel it.

Color, to me, is complex and fickle; it is always subject to the volatility of light and renders both a provocation and a chance. The very physical perception of hue is only possible through keen observation and deliberate concentration.

My red maple leaf demanded serious vigilance in just two fickle colors: lavender pink and mineral blue.

The challenge was to gain a balance between the leaf's flight agility and its steadiness and poise. I invite you to engage with the linear dynamism that bursts from a central point and radiates outward into graceful, curved lines.

Yin-Yang


Poplar Leaf

Populus deltoides

Leaf n.º 1



*In memory of my dear friend,
Dr. Enrique Luján.*



That morning, on Lake Michigan's Door County Peninsula, I had picked up a number of poplar leaves that the wind had woven into a ruffled rug. As I culled my gatherings, the dry leaves rasped like crumpled parchment. One of them, in particular, stood out for its prominent contrast between light and dark, similar to the yin-yang symbol of Taoist philosophy, the *Taijitu*.

The leaf curved in perfectly preserved, symmetrical lobulations. The smooth, finely undulated surface was crisscrossed by a reticulation of minute veins. But the real character of the drying specimen was in its contrasting colors: one side was dark, the other was light. Even more remarkable was to discover an island of black in the light half and an ashen blue island in the black half, quite like the eyes in the *Taijitu*.

When I photographed the leaf, tangential lighting plunged the depressions into deep shadows while illuminating the prominences. Portraying the specimen offered a study in grays. Rambling shades of ash gray mingled with others of sober charcoal. A splotch of light ocher and flecks of light blue enlivened the whole. The leaf's tiny veins demanded my focused attention to trace their meticulous course, from dark to light, then from light to dark.

Taijitu is the representation of universal dualism. It embodies the belief that every situation, instance, or condition has another opposite, constant, and complementary force in an interaction of continuous renewal and balance. Nothing is absolute, and nothing is permanent. Darkness follows light, and light follows darkness. Life springs from death, and death brings life. And so, the cycle continues eternally.

This latent mystery revealed itself to me as I painted a simple leaf.