

# Flower power

Her colour-rich floral portraits have adorned Royal Mail stamps and her bold, graphic style is in a league of its own. **Carol Sharp** reveals the craft behind the beauty.

WORDS: TIM McCANN PICTURES: CAROL SHARP

**A**WAY FROM THE HUSTLE BUSTLE OF THE city streets, Carol Sharp's loft studio in Shoreditch, East London is an oasis of calm. Clusters of sweet-smelling flowers compete for space in vases dotted around the room, some basking under lamps, others sleeping in the shade. At the far end, a tangle of lamps, stands and cameras wait for their next job. For Carol this is home during the week as well as her place of work.



## About Carol Sharp

Carol specialises in images of flowers, plants, food, fruit and still life, and has worked for clients such as Royal Mail and Marks & Spencer. See [www.carolsharp.co.uk](http://www.carolsharp.co.uk)

Carol's love affair with flowers is something that has blossomed over the course of her career. After graduating from Brighton Art College with a First in Visual Communication, she set her sights on becoming a pro photographer. Having little studio experience, she cut her teeth assisting a string of London-based still life photographers. But it wasn't long before she developed her own distinctive style. "My early work was mainly small still life arrangements – extremely tight and controlled. There wasn't anything around like that at the time, so I quickly got work," Carol explains. Since going it alone she has built up a huge portfolio of commercial clients, including two commissions for Royal Mail. Today her trademark colour-rich floral close-ups and strong, graphic overhead style are ubiquitous and just as at home on supermarket packaging as they are hanging on the wall of a gallery or Chelsea penthouse.

You might be forgiven for thinking plants and flowers are comparatively easy models to work with, but Carol begs to differ. She does, however, have a repertoire of tricks and remedies to make her fickle flowers do exactly what she wants. Most of the time anyway. "First you need to work out which flowers you need well in advance of the shoot, so you can get a

decent amount of lead-up time", says Carol. This gives her chance to source and order in the stock she needs and to check whether or not it's available. "I'm doing a shoot for a client who makes air fresheners and they want to use wild roses, which are out of season here and not even available from my contacts abroad because it's a plant that's not commercially grown."

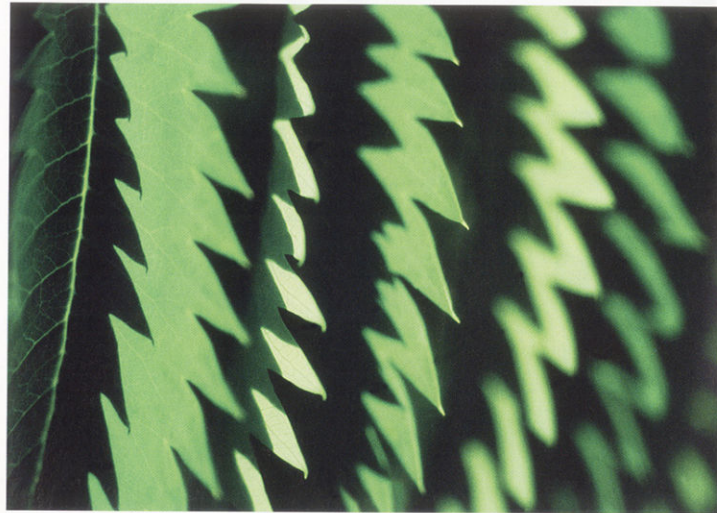
With the clock ticking down to studio day sometimes the only solution is to



Left: Carol's distinctive style shines through in this stunning cordyline portrait, which was shot for a 9ft loft interior poster.

Right: This soft pastel-coloured pine cone portrait adorned the 68p stamp during Royal Mail's Christmas 2002 campaign.





### Passionate personalities

It's hard for Carol to hide the passion and love she has for her subject. While she has built up an almost encyclopedic knowledge of plants over the years, she's also fascinated by their human qualities and believes that their shape, size and colours determines our response. "Each flower has its own character. They talk to you. And it's my job to capture the qualities that give it that distinct personality."

recreate the flowers she needs artificially. When she hits obstacles such as this Carol turns to two professional model makers, who skilfully and delicately build replica flowers out of wax-soaked tissue. Not only does this technique reproduce the texture and appearance of the flower, it also allows the light falling onto its petals to produce a translucent effect, making it indistinguishable from the real thing.

When she does work with real specimens, an intensive routine of care and attention is given to each plant to ensure it's looking perfect on the day of the shoot. "We use lights in the studio to slow down and speed up the time it takes for a flower's petals to open," says Carol. Pointing to a vase of white lilies she explains that once open, the flowers are moved outside to keep them cool and the petals open. "People don't realise that the flowers can move on set too. They will turn towards the light and carry on growing and opening through the shoot." For Carol her most demanding blooms have to be lilies. Single-minded to the last, only they decide when they're going to open and if that's too soon there's the added worry of the pollen falling and staining the petals.

Carol hit one of her worst crises earlier this year, and once again those seemingly harmless looking lilies were threatening to ruin the shoot. She'd been asked by the Royal Horticultural Society for some ideas on a promotional poster they were designing for the Hampton Court Flower show. "It's really a show about water gardens, so I said it would be good to feature a water lily," says Carol. However there are only two times a year you can buy water lilies – summer in the UK and in the winter when they're shipped over from India.

"Fortunately I managed to locate some, but they weren't cheap at £5 a head. Playing safe I bought ten, cut the stems, gave them plenty of warm water and food, and lots of light. Hey presto, they didn't open. So I ordered another set but unfortunately they didn't open either." However, all was not lost. Helping Carol avoid complete disaster was her stock library, Flowerphotos, a spin-off from her studio-based business set up in 1996. A shot of a water lily was found, cut out and dropped onto the background. Client happy, job done.

Having the luxury of a large stock library at your disposal is something few photographers enjoy. From the outset Carol wanted her library of flowers, fruit and vegetables to be discerning. "I'm always looking for something different, which isn't easy today as the competition is so fierce," says Carol. "I don't want to pad the collection out. That's our strength and point of difference. The benefit is that customers see a small selection of high quality shots, instead of having to wade through thousands."

### Painting with light

To create her distinctive style Carol often uses a combination of paper backgrounds and gels to match colours and for overhead work often shoots through layers of glass on a lightbox. "Light is your paint and it's so important to study it. That's what makes these plants and flowers come alive. The craft of lighting has been lost in a lot of commercial photography – people are happy to snap away."

"An intensive routine of care and attention is given to each plant to ensure it's looking perfect on the day of the shoot"



## Cutting edge



Her next challenge is breaking into the lucrative but fiercely competitive American market. "We tried to market directly to the USA but we were just a drop in the ocean. I've realised that it's far better to place my images with libraries over there who have the distribution network and contacts needed to get our images seen."

On the days when Carol is in the studio and preparing a shoot, it's an early start and all being well she'll get the composition right and the first film off to the lab before lunch. The flowers will have been delivered the day before. She has come to depend on a handful of suppliers, including the renowned florist Paula Pryke. For some jobs, however, she sources her own plants from her garden in Norfolk.

"I'll set up a shot early on, sort the lighting and composition and get some ideas before the client arrives. We then look together at the flowers and decide which ones suit the brief. There are all kinds of things that determine their suitability – colours, shape and whether they enforce the message we're trying to convey."

The Flowerphotos library may be catalogued digitally but Carol shoots on film, using a combination of large and medium-format cameras. In the studio she uses two Sinar F2 view cameras fitted with a range of Schneider lenses. Large-format gives her that edge to be able to produce large prints with more detail and tonality. And while these heavyweights are bulky and tricky to use, the process of making a photograph is altogether more considered.

Although Carol's intricate work conveys the beauty and colours of plants and flowers, her latest project marries her art with alternative medicine. "I'm exploring how the colour of plants, flowers and herbs can work as a healing medium in my images. I think photos of healing plants can be very powerful and we're trying to demonstrate that images of plants are more than just pretty pictures." ■

Left: This intricately woven collage of herbal flowers was recently used by Asda on its herbal medicine packaging.

### PRO ADVICE

## Carol's top tips for shooting flowers

- Cut stems at an angle to preserve your flowers. This allows them to drink water more easily.
- Look for a flower's best feature. Some have translucent petals and look best backlit, while others have central interest that requires more direct lighting.
- Don't use spray unless deliberately shooting outdoors. It looks fake and dated in the studio.
- Invest in a lightbox. This will provide backlighting when shooting down onto a composition and will only set you back around £40.
- Try to light the background evenly otherwise the variations in tone will interfere with how well the flowers are lit.
- Don't overpower the flowers with too much light. Small but over-lit flowers will lose detail.
- Tungsten light can help to enhance saturation in the colours and gives the image a pleasing glow.
- Don't be afraid to use window light. You can mask off part of the glass to produce a directional strip of light.
- Shoot from below to give an impression of power and size.
- Composition is mostly intuitive so forget the rules and see what feels right.