

MARIANNE NORTH AT TABLE

FOOD, FLOWERS AND ETIQUETTE FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Anna Zappatini

Marianne North (1830–1890) visited New Zealand in 1881. This was the second journey around the world for the intrepid English traveller and painter, born at Hastings, England, in 1830. John Addington Symonds, poet, critic and North's brother-in-law, described her as, 'blonde, stout, tall, good humoured and a little satirical [...].' Her passions were music and painting, and, after the death of her beloved father in 1869, she devoted her life to paint flowers in their natural habitat with lively oil colours.

North travelled to the United States, Canada and Jamaica between 1871 and 1872, and to Brazil the following year. In 1875, she wintered in Tenerife, an island of the Canary Archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean, then she crossed the United States and reached San Francisco, where, on 16 October 1875 she embarked for Japan. In January 1876 she was in Singapore. Then she went to Indonesia and Sri Lanka and back in London in 1877. She was in India between 1877 and 1879. In 1880, she travelled to Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand, returning home via Honolulu, San Francisco and New York in 1881. She travelled to South Africa in 1882, to Seychelles in 1883, and to Chile in 1884.

In time, painting flowers became, for her, more than a common female engagement in botany. She called it 'work', a social and educative mission to let people know about the beauty and variety of flowers. In 1882, she

donated her paintings to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, near London, and founded a gallery to ensure their permanent public exhibition. Today, her 832 paintings still cover the walls of the Marianne North Gallery, a simple rectangular building, with red brick walls, stone decorations and a verandah, designed by James Fergusson FRS (1808–1886), friend and architectural historian.

The building of the gallery had just begun when North embarked for Australia. By the time she landed in Bluff, New Zealand, in February 1881, she had already been travelling for ten months. She had left Marseille, France, on the 18th April 1880 with Charles and Lady Margaret Brooke, the Raj and Ranee of Sarawak, accompanying them on their journey back home. They arrived in Singapore on the 15th May, and then travelled on to Borneo. On 19th July North embarked for Australia and, on the 20th January 1881, for Tasmania.

The antipodean travel had been prompted by Charles Darwin. They had met at Down House, his home in Kent. He was interested in her paintings, but too old to climb the stairs to her London apartment. She was flattered by the invitation from a man she greatly admired and recalled:

When he said not to attempt any representation of the vegetation of the world until I had seen and painted the Australian, which was so unlike that of any other country, I determined to take it as a royal command and to go at once.

Australian flora did not disappoint her: she completed around 80 paintings representing about 200 local species of plants, often depicted with fruits, small birds and characteristic landscapes. The small number of New Zealand paintings, instead, reflects the short duration of her stay on the island, due to the unbearable cold and rheumatism.

North recalls her life and travels in her memoirs, which were edited and published, after her death, by her sister, Janet Catherine Symonds