Marianne North
Painted by Mary Hall, at Hastings Lodge, Hastings, 1866
A Vision of Eden
The Life and Work of Marianne North

Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Foreword by Anthony Huxley

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Webb & Bower
EXETER, ENGLAND
As well as her outstanding contribution to art in natural history, Marianne North was also responsible for collecting a number of plants. Several species and one genus were later named after her.

*Above left:* Foliage, flowers and fruit of the Capucin Tree of the Seychelles (*Northea seychellana*).

*Above right:* A pitcher plant from the limestone mountains of Sarawak, Borneo (*Nepenthes northiana*).

*Below left:* A Giant Kniphofia (*Kniphofia northiæ*) near Grahamstown, South Africa.

*Below right:* *Crinum northianum* from Borneo. Although common in that country this species had not been previously described before collection by the artist.
Introduction

Anthony Huxley

In 1882, when Marianne North’s paintings were made accessible to the public at Kew Gardens, photography was in its infancy and television not even a Jules Verne dream. The British public, more and more aware of the diversity of life on earth, were avid for natural wonders and accounts of strange peoples. There were plenty of botanical explorers but they had to set down their experiences in writing, with the help only of engravings made from sketches: there was no way of achieving the instant access to audiences of millions which is the prerogative of the modern botanical traveller. Nor was it easy to travel in many countries: after long sea voyages it was a matter of horse-drawn transport, of riding, often of walking, along poorly made roads and tracks. Hotels were few and doctors scarce if illness struck.

It is against this background, at a time when women travelling on their own were rare and remarkable creatures, that Marianne North’s achievement, and the thronging of her Gallery in the years succeeding its opening, should first of all be considered.

Skill with the paintbrush was not in fact unusual in young ladies of her time. It was but a year after her birth that J. C. Loudon wrote in his Gardener’s Magazine that “to be able to draw flowers botanically, and fruit horticulturally... is one of the most useful accomplishments of your ladies of leisure, living in the country.” A great many young ladies of leisure, indeed, had all too little to amuse themselves until – unless – they married. They were often taught music, as was Marianne, as well as painting, and the combination of painting and an interest in plants was frequently strong.

If Marianne North had married – if she had not had a widowed father whom she looked after and travelled with until his death – if she had not subsequently had adequate means – her works might still be largely unknown, like the flower paintings of her sister Catherine who married John Addington Symonds.

Miss North, however, was not only reasonably talented but fortunate. She travelled quite widely with her father in her earlier years, sketching and painting as they went. On his death, when she was almost 40, she overcame her grief by painting, and later set her sights on recording tropical crop plants and flowers. The urge to travel deeply ingrained, the possibility of marriage apparently never offered, combined to make her continue her wanderings and painting for the next fifteen years.

In her youth, at the same time as acquiring dexterity with the paintbrush, she must also have learned a good deal of botany. In the first place she was early on an enthusiastic gardener who cultivated both hardy and greenhouse plants. She recorded that when in London she often visited the Royal Horticultural Society’s Chiswick gardens (as they were then) and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew; and it is clear that while in her twenties she became acquainted, presumably through her father, with the Director of Kew, Sir William Hooker. Later his son Joseph Hooker became Director and again it seems that he and Marianne were on good terms. She also met
The Marianne North Gallery at Kew Gardens, which houses 832 botanical paintings. The Gallery is situated south of the Victoria Gate opposite the Temperate House and is open to the public all the year round. It was designed under Miss North’s supervision by James Fergusson, the architectural historian, to a plan which included features of Greek temple architecture, such as the
clerestory windows. Marianne North herself arranged the paintings and designed and painted the frieze and decorations surrounding the doors. These views show clearly the arrangement of the two inner rooms and the surround of 246 different types of wood which she collected on her travels.
A Vision of Eden

Charles Darwin who was in fact responsible for her deciding to visit Australia.

A painter and, close second, a really determined traveller – one is reminded of Lady Hester Stanhope in the Middle East or Mary Kingsley in Africa – Marianne North was also a fluent and prolific letter writer, and this ability she later developed to provide us, from letters, diaries and notes, with the free-flowing, carefree narrative of which this present book is an abridgement. I use the word carefree advisedly: there is practically no hint anywhere of the immense amount of planning her journeys must have involved, while scorching sun, drenching rain, fearful road conditions, travel sickness, leeches and giant spiders, and unsalubrious accommodation are all dismissed in a few airy words. She preferred a tent or barn to a formal drawing room, solitude to the company of local bigwigs, unpretentious people to servants of any kind. One must comment that the world she travelled in was one where strangers were often made incredibly welcome by today’s standards, though she mentions surly compatriots as when, on one ship, she “was put among a mixed lot of Britishers, and never spoke a word for four days.”

Difficulties of language and the vagaries of locals are hardly mentioned, though our author records at least one example of getting into “one of those rages which are sometimes necessary.” It is only of cold places that we hear the occasional complaint, because she felt the cold badly and it brought on rheumatic pains which, if protracted, rendered her almost immobile as the years went by. Thus she speaks unhappily of New Zealand because it was so cold and wet when she visited it; yet her paintings from there are as good as any others and some of the views more than usually fine.

The first impression of the Marianne North Gallery is almost overpowering. Apart from the narrow picture frames, the walls are entirely covered with paintings, fitted together like a jigsaw or, as Wilfrid Blunt describes them, “like a gigantic botanical postage-stamp album ...” where “yet further flowers scramble up the doorposts and across the lintels.” It is easy to take a rather cursory view and reel away bemused by sheer quantity, overall colour and a slightly appalled sense of incredible diligence, but a methodical, unhurried approach provides many rewards.

The paintings vary in size from a few square inches, often narrow horizontal oblongs, to the maximum of perhaps 40 by 15 inches devoted to a life-size rendering of the flowerhead of the great Chilean Puya whitei with its hundreds of florets. Apart from flowers, birds, insects and animals feature in many of the paintings; there are views of scenery with the emphasis on vegetation, some of which are pure landscapes while others show native buildings and local people. This varied approach must have been specially popular in the early years of the Gallery when, as I have suggested, people could glean so little visually about the topography of distant lands.

There is an equally varied approach to the plants which form the majority of the subjects. Sometimes we see the whole plant growing naturally in its setting; sometimes details of a flowerhead, of fruits, even of aerial roots in one case. I am not sure that the studies of fruits, usually with one peeled or pulled apart, are not the most pleasing of all. Many of the paintings are of useful plants; an unusual one shows the way in which prickly pears are used to nurture cochineal insects, being swathed in rags on which the insects have been hatched.

Some of the scenic views are partly framed by flowers close at hand - contrived pictures perhaps, but often very successful. Then there are many examples of flowers grouped: as her narrative explains there were many occasions when her local friends brought in quantities of different plants which she was always anxious to record. Again, the treatment of these varies. Some groups are arranged in containers, often interesting local ware like a mate gourd in Brazil: these might be likened to Dutch flower paintings in their treatment. Other groups appear laid on a table; in yet others, the plants are shown more or less as if growing, though tight-packed. One might say that Marianne North used her brush as the modern botanical traveller uses a camera, but in these groupings and some of the “contrived” scenes she achieves effects which a camera never could.

Another striking aspect of these paintings is the sheer variety of the plants portrayed. There are 832 paintings in the Gallery, and another 16 originally in the lobby now elsewhere. Although many of these are views, in total no less than 727