

MARIANNE NORTH

Sandy Monk

Did any of you see the 2016 BBC programme, 'Kew's Forgotten Queen'? It was about the life and work of Marianne North, an exceptional Victorian woman. I first encountered her after visiting an exhibition of botanical art at the Shirley Sherwood Gallery in Kew Gardens. On leaving the exhibition, I noticed a building nearby with steps leading up to it. Intrigued, I went inside, and discovered the extraordinary Marianne North collection.

Marianne was born in 1830, into a fairly wealthy family. Her father, Frederick North, to whom she was devoted, was MP for Hastings. Marianne was taught flower painting when she was about twenty years old, by a Dutch lady in London. Before her mother died in 1855, Marianne, who had no desire to marry, promised her that she wouldn't leave her father. Marianne's passion was for painting and plants, and adventure. She continued to paint for pleasure, and visited Chiswick Gardens and Kew, longing to visit the tropics where many of the exotic plants originated. Joseph Hooker, curator at Kew, was a friend of her father, as was Charles Darwin. In the summer recesses, Marianne and her father travelled to many countries in Europe, North Africa and the near East.



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Marianne North, photographed in Ceylon by Julia Margaret Cameron, 1877



'Brazilian Orchids'

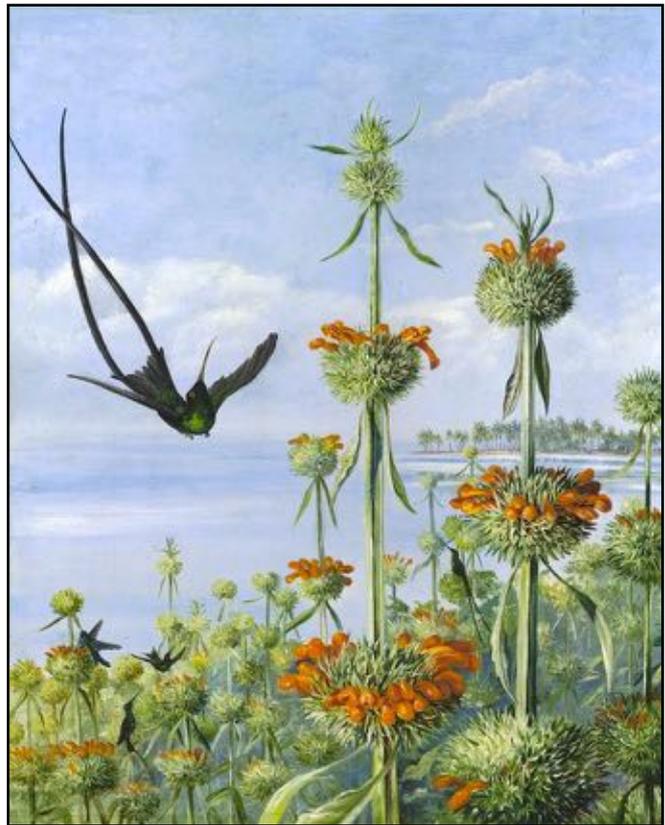


'North American Carnivorous Plants'

When her father died just before her fortieth birthday, Marianne had to learn to live without him and fill her life with other interests. She decided to devote her life to painting from nature and learning from the world around her. Around this time, she was introduced to oils, and painted with them from then on. From 1871 until 1884, Marianne visited five continents of the world and seventeen countries, painting as she went.

In Victorian times, it was considered highly unusual for a woman to travel on her own, and going abroad entailed considerable discomfort and illness.

In 1871, Marianne first visited Canada and the United States, then travelled south to Jamaica the following year; her first introduction to the tropics. She painted some landscapes, but mainly chose to depict flora and fauna in their natural setting. From Jamaica, she went down to Brazil and then, from 1875 to 1877, she travelled to Tenerife, California, Japan, Borneo, Java, Ceylon and Singapore, producing many more paintings.



'Leonotis nepetaefolia and Doctor Humming Birds, Jamaica'



'Nepenthes northiana'



'Morning Glory, Natal'

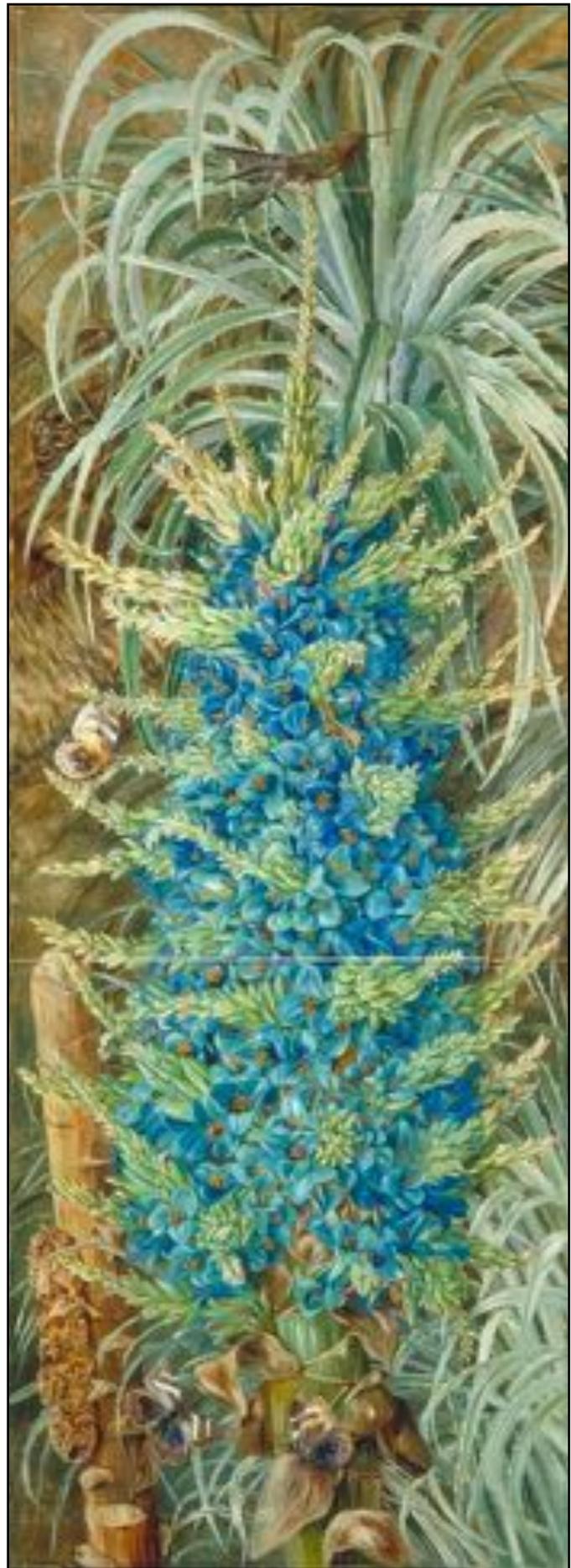
Returning home for six months, she then set sail to India, stopping en route in Portugal, Gibraltar and Malta. One of the chief aims of her visit to India was to build up a collection of paintings of plants held sacred in the literature and religion of India. These are displayed in a group together at Kew. She made a second visit to Borneo, and then went on to Australia in 1880-81, painting there at the request of Charles Darwin. The 300 paintings she made there supported Darwin's Theory of Evolution, which he had published in 1859 and which had been read by Marianne.

From Australia, she travelled to Tasmania and New Zealand, and then returned to the United States. At this stage, the only continent Marianne hadn't visited was Africa.

In 1882, she sailed to South Africa, painting for some months there before voyaging to the Seychelles. After exhibiting her paintings in London in 1879, Marianne had decided she wanted to leave her paintings to Kew. She paid for the Marianne North gallery to be built, and she even planned how the paintings - all 833 of them - were to be displayed. The gallery opened in 1882. In 1884 she made her final journey, to Chile, and painted a number of plants, including the blue puya, *Puya alpestris* - a bromeliad - in its natural habitat.

Marianne North discovered several new species of plants, including *Crinum northiana* and the pitcher plant, *Nepenthes northiana*, which are named after her. She collected and dried specimens which are now housed in Kew's herbarium, allowing botanists to compare the specimens to the original plants in the paintings. Her legacy is her huge collection of paintings depicting many plants in their natural environment, greatly increasing our understanding of the natural world. Sadly, many of the pristine environments in which she worked no longer exist.

Marianne died at the age of 59. The travelling, hardships and illnesses she endured no doubt shortened her remarkable life. If you go to Kew Gardens, be sure to visit her gallery; it has the most amazing collection of vibrant paintings that I have ever seen. According to Kew, it is the only permanent solo exhibition by a female artist in the UK.



'Puya alpestris'



The Marianne North Gallery at Kew Gardens

With thanks to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew for providing the images for this article.

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