

Archiving the landscapes of the nineteenth century world

Marianne North and more-than-botanical art

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Marianne North (1830-1890), a British woman painter, was commonly referred to as a botanical artist, and also as one of the “Victorian lady travelers” (Middleton, 1965). Her preferred destination broadly coincides with the Global South in the contemporary sense of the word, including South America, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and Oceania, although she also visited Continental Europe, North America, and Japan. This preference might reflect her own pursuit of rare and curious flora species resulting from a kind of exoticism and romanticism. She donated to the Kew Royal Botanic Gardens her own paintings. She also donated a small building to store and display her own collection (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 1914, 2018). The Marianne North Gallery opened in 1882, and since 2003 it has been inscribed as a designated heritage asset within the world heritage site of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (Fig. 1). Many of her paintings depicted not only botanical features but also other natural and human landscape elements of the nineteenth century. Her collection was once displayed in the corner of “Geographical Pictures” at the Exhibition of Educational Appliances in Geography held by the Royal

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Geographical Society in London in 1885 (Royal Geographical Society, 1886). It might be therefore reasonable to consider her collection as a sort of landscape painting, and moreover, as “more-than-botanical” art rather than as mere botanical art. This paper will reconsider the Marianne North Gallery as a sort of “landscape archives” and will discuss potential merits and limits in situating Marianne North and her gallery within the history of geography. In addition, what her imperial gaze toward the Global South and Asia has brought to her audience and its implications will also be discussed.

Fig. 1 - Marianne North Gallery, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (2008)

Source: Wikimedia Commons



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