



MARIAN ELLIS ROWAN

August - September 2021

online exhibition

LAURINE·DIGGINS·FINE·ART



The Sheltered Nest
watercolour and gouache on paper
52.5 x 27 cm
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan

Marian Ellis Rowan (1848 - 1922) was a remarkable woman, inspired by the flora and fauna of the world to create her elegant artworks. The delicacy of her paintings and fragility of her materials, predominately watercolour and gouache on paper, belie the challenging conditions she travelled to capture her subject, usually painted in situ and from life – including the rainforests of Queensland; wildflowers in remote Western Australia; tropical Papua New Guinea; mountains of New Zealand; the foothills of the Himalayas; a decade long trip to England where her work was collected by Queen Victoria; and America where she collaborated on texts

which became standards for botany students (*A Guide to the Wildflowers* 1899; *A Guide to the Trees*, 1900; *Southern Wildflowers and Trees*, 1901).

Ellis Rowan blurred the lines between fine art and natural history illustration with artworks characterised not only by their detailed accuracy but also her own compositional charm and touches of dramatic interest, such as the inclusion of insects. Although her work was used to identify many new species, she did not paint flowers like a botanical specimen, dried and pressed to the page to carefully record details of leaves, petals, stamens. Earlier examples were often painted on coloured paper with the flowers arranged



(Tree Fungi)
watercolour on silk
19 cm diam.
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan



Fungi
watercolour on silk
19 cm diam.
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan



Western Australian Wildflowers
watercolour and gouache on paper
14.5 x 35.5 cm

like a posy, usually in the middle of the picture, whilst later works incorporated more narrative elements, citing the plant in a setting, perhaps cloudy skies or drizzling rain or sometimes even a background landscape. This extends to her imagery of birds where they are carefully positioned amongst branches and foliage. The later works tend to fill the paper – sometimes with hanging or drooping leaves, or growing and reaching up, showing a greater compositional concern rather than botanical identification. There is also her tendency to sprinkle narrative touches such as butterflies, caterpillars, beetles and other bugs, adding more life, colour, movement and giving a sense of scale.

The botanical nature of much of Ellis Rowan's oeuvre has perhaps been a factor in her being somewhat sidelined in art history, consigned to the realm of science rather than art. However, the individual way she painted wildflowers with a compositional focus, not only in the placement of a specimen but the inclusion of other narrative details and her use of bold colour reveal a strong artistic flair, one that she developed over many decades of her successful career.



Curl Crested Manucode
watercolour and gouache on paper
23 cm diam.
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan

Ellis Rowan was certainly much recognised and feted in her time, holding solo exhibitions since 1893 and winning numerous awards. She won her first bronze medal in 1872 at the Intercolonial Exhibition in Melbourne. Other accolades include the gold medal at the World Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, 1893; the gold medal at the opening of the Exhibition Buildings in Melbourne, 1880; gold at the International Exhibition, Melbourne in 1888 and gold at the Adelaide Jubilee Exhibition the same year; the silver medal at the International and Intercolonial Exhibition, Sydney, 1879; and international recognition in India, Europe and America, including medals in exhibitions in Calcutta; Amsterdam; St Petersburg; Denmark. Her achievements were sometimes surrounded by controversy, mired in the outcries of

fellow male artists who deemed her a mere female flower painter. Despite the gender bias of the times, in 1893 The Australian Club in Melbourne commissioned her to complete a series of large murals, which can still be admired today in the Ellis Rowan Room.

Certainly flower studies were considered an appropriate subject for a female painter in the late nineteenth century. The fact that Ellis Rowan looked for botanical accuracy and diversity, subsequently pursuing this at an international level was, although not unique, quite rare. The English artist Marianne North was another such artist who likely inspired and influenced Rowan, after they first met in 1880.

However, Ellis Rowan has perhaps not been given her due in the canon

(Alpinia Zerumbet with Butterflies)
watercolour and gouache on paper
41 x 22.5 cm
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan





Petrea Volybilis Trop America Verbanaceae
watercolour and gouache on paper
57 x 38 cm
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan



Palm Cockatoo
watercolour and gouache on paper
23 cm diam.
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan

of Australian art history until more recent rethinking over the past few decades, which has seen a general increase in the status of women artists overall. There was sufficient interest in Ellis Rowan in her time for her to publish an autobiography, when only half-way through her remarkable career, *A Flower Hunter in Queensland and New Zealand*, 1898. Margaret Hazzard's 1982 biography *Flower Paintings of Ellis Rowan* did much to reignite interest, as did Patricia Fullerton's exhibition showcasing the holdings at the National Library of Australia in 2002 with the accompanying illustrated catalogue, *The Flower Hunter Ellis Rowan*.

Although Ellis Rowan is known for her extensive global travel, she was particularly inspired by the gardens of her youth at Mount Macedon when her father acquired Derriweit Heights in 1872 : 26 acres with garden layout designed by W. R.

Guilfoyle and government botanist Ferdinand Mueller advised on plantings. As Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne, von Mueller encouraged Ellis Rowan to submit her artworks for identification, recording many exotic species. He also provided her with useful contacts, particularly internationally. Her husband, Captain Frederic Charles Rowan also encouraged her artistic career, following their marriage in 1873 and his travels allowed her to accompany him and continue her pursuit of depicting wildflowers. After his premature death in 1892, Ellis Rowan was able to renew her travels with a greater freedom, spending time in New Zealand; London; New York; California; Cuba; the Caribbean; Papua New Guinea; Queensland; Kalgoorlie; Broken Hill; the Grampians.

The selection of artworks in this exhibition provide a glimpse across

Ellis Rowan's oeuvre and interests and are indicative of her travels and her stylistic developments.

(*Blue Flowers, possibly Scaevola Basedowii*) is indicative of her earlier work on coloured paper with the flowers more centrally placed. The spidery network of branches juxtaposed with the delicate small blue flowers. *The Sheltered Nest* shows a narrative development, with the viewer captivated by the baby birds peering through the curtain of rain, teardrops of water surrounding their protected nest. The flora here seeming to provide merely a backdrop for the story of the small creatures hiding in the dark against the highlighted leaves and berries. Contrast this with the vivid colour and lush tropical feel of (*Hanging Flowers*) and (*Alpinia Zerumbet with Butterflies*). *Petrea Volybilis Trop America Verbanaceae* is sometimes known as the tropical wisteria, or Queens or Purple Wreath, and is native to Central America and Mexico.

Moving to what can be better described as a landscape rather than a flower painting, *Western Australian Wildflowers* shows a carpet of vivid



Bird of Paradise
watercolour and gouache on paper
22.5 cm diam.
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan



Great Pitta Bird
watercolour and gouache on paper
23 cm diam.
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan



(Hanging Flowers)
watercolour and gouache on paper
40.5 x 21 cm
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan

wildflowers set in the bush landscape showing her passion for capturing the beauty of Western Australian wildflower season which may date from her travels in 1906 to areas including Kalgoorlie, Laverton and Goongarrie, or from earlier travels to Albany in 1880.

The painting of Mt Cook in New Zealand dates from 1893 when Ellis Rowan undertook a series of black and white landscapes, which were reproduced in *The Town and Country Journal* in December 1893, along with an account of her trip.

Also included are a series of bird paintings. These date from her travels to Papua New Guinea in 1916-17 where she attempted to illustrate every bird of paradise, which at the time numbered over 50 species. The fact that they are round in shape likely is a result of her commission from the Royal Worcester Porcelain Company in England, following her foray into painted china for the Flavelle Brothers in Sydney.

In 1918 Ellis Rowan held an exhibition at the Fine Art Society

Melbourne featuring her works from Papua New Guinea, including 172 flowers, 40 birds of paradise, 72 fungi, 2 coral, a bat, a squirrel and a fish. It was noted that "The artist is proud of her mushroom collection, only one of her specimens being known to science." (*The Sun*, 13 March 1918 as cited in Fullerton, P. *The Flower Hunter Ellis Rowan*, National Library of Australia, 2002, p.14)

The last exhibition in her lifetime was at Anthony Hordern's in Sydney in 1920 where there was a

concerted push for the nation to acquire her collection. This celebrated and prolific artist with her reputation for painting wildflowers is represented in many public collections including significant holdings at the National Library of Australia and the Queensland Museum; as well as the National Gallery of Australia; the National Gallery of Victoria; the Art Gallery of New South Wales; Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art; the Art Gallery of Western Australia; the Royal Botanic Gardens, Adelaide; the National Herbarium, Melbourne; the National Trust of Australia; the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

Ruth Lovell

With thanks to the staff at the National Herbarium, Melbourne for their expert advice regarding identification of selected artworks.



Little Corella
watercolour and gouache on paper
6.5 cm diam.
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan



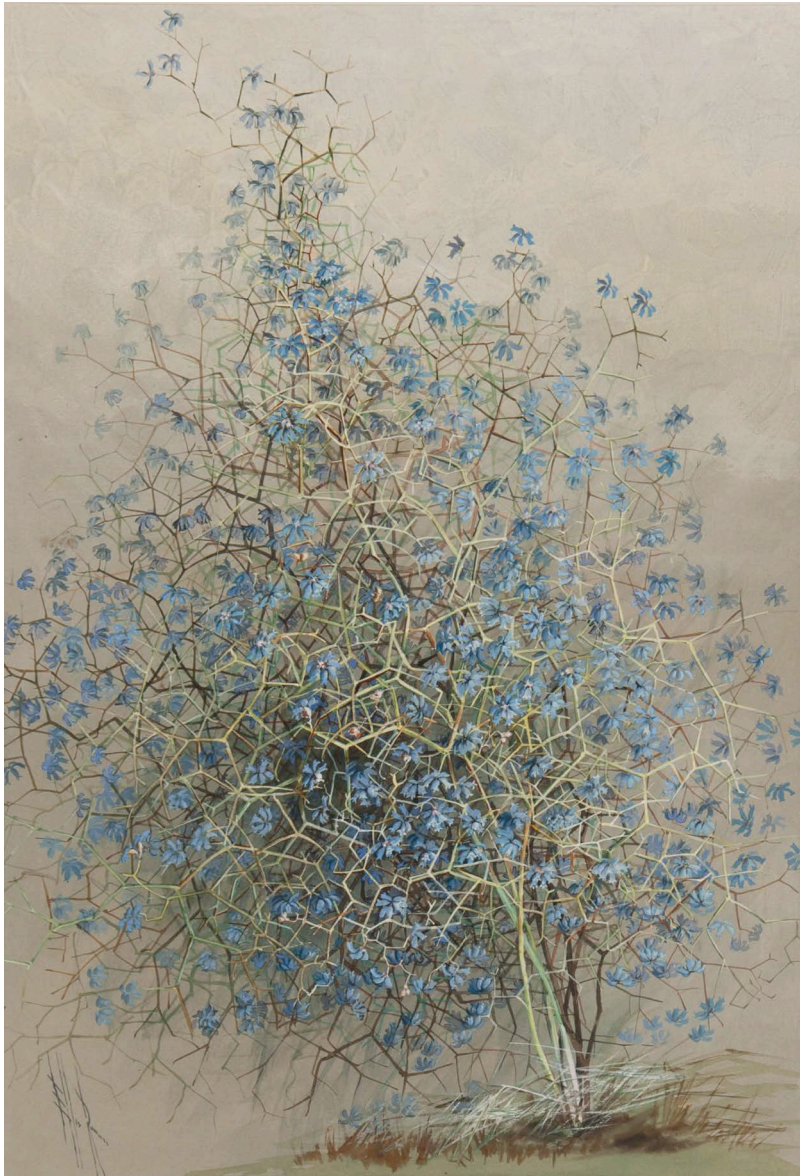
Mt Cook from Governors Bush New Zealand
watercolour and gouache on paper
42.5 x 27.5 cm
signed lower left: ER



Eclectus Parrot (Female)
watercolour and gouache on paper
22.5 cm diam.
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan



Eclectus Parrot (Male)
watercolour and gouache on paper
22.5 cm diam.
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan



(Blue Flowers, possibly Scaevola Basedowii)
watercolour and gouache on paper
53 x 36 cm
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan

COVER:

(Hanging Flowers) detail
gouache on paper
40.5 x 21 cm
signed lower left: Ellis Rowan

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