

Botanical brushstrokes: The Sarah Featon stamps

Lynette Townsend¹

Sarah Ann Featon (1848–1927) was an English-born botanical artist. She created a series of watercolour artworks that showcased and celebrated the beauty and variety of Aotearoa – New Zealand’s flora, particularly the colourful range of flowers here. Following in the footsteps of Georgina Hetley, who published *The native flowers of New Zealand* (1887–1888) in England, Sarah Featon and her surveyor husband Edward “wished to prove ‘fallacious and incorrect’ the assertion that there were no flowers in New Zealand” (quoted in Field-Dodgson, 2003, p. 62). The Featon’s publication, *The art album of New Zealand flora* (1889), was the first of its kind to be printed and published within New Zealand².

Using colour chromolithographic plates, Sarah and Edward Featon created a large, deluxe publication comprising of 40 plates of New Zealand’s native flora. Chromolithography was a new but extremely expensive process. Although the technique was cutting-edge and the resulting publication highly desirable, the project bankrupted the Wellington publishing firm Bock & Cousins Ltd soon after publication. It also personally cost the Featons £1,400, a huge amount at the time, for one thousand copies. The book was intended to be the first of a set of three, but sadly the other two were never published (Field-Dodgson, 2003, p. 61).

The art album of New Zealand flora was comprised of Sarah Featon’s vibrant watercolours, accompanied by Edward Featon’s detailed botanical descriptions. Chromolithographic print technology enabled a high standard of production, so much so that one reviewer proclaimed it as “one of [the] most artistic and perfect pieces of chromo-lithographic work that have ever been executed in New Zealand” (Anon., 1889). Even so, on close examination some of the detail in the original paintings was lost in the print process. Featon’s original watercolours are truer to the actual colour of the plants she illustrated.

Fortunately, 134 of the original watercolours were purchased by the Dominion Museum in 1919 for £150. Dr Rebecca Rice, Curator of New Zealand Historical Art at Te Papa, explained: “At the time, Featon was widowed and desperately short of funds.” (Rice, 2019.) Today they are part of the collection at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, and digitally available via the Collections Online section of their website.

Featon’s colourful, expertly illustrated watercolour botanical artworks were well placed to form the basis of a New Zealand Post stamp issue. Designer Hannah Fortune and I took the opportunity to visit Te Papa and view the original artworks, each of which show clear detail and vibrant colour. In addition, we discovered that each painting has a handwritten label of the plant’s botanical name, common name and/or Māori name, and each is personally signed by the artist. These intimate touches add a personal layer to the artworks that tangibly link each one back to Featon herself. It was these additional elements that our designer felt compelled to include on the stamps, miniature sheet (Fig. 1) and first day cover (Fig. 2), to be released 5th May 2021.

The design also includes samples of handwriting taken from Featon’s letters held in Te Papa’s archive. Very little was done to alter the original artwork, apart from the removal of a few of the dark foxing marks (spots or blotches). The images selected were chosen in collaboration with Te Papa curators who picked their favourites based on research interests, aesthetic appeal, and a desire to present an interesting and varied mix of New Zealand plant specimens. We also took into account practicalities such as the size of stamps and which illustration would or wouldn’t work well on these tiny canvases. Wherever possible, we aimed to accurately represent the original watercolours.

Although a surge of interest has peaked in recent years, Sarah Featon and her artwork remain relatively unknown. Te Papa held a small exhibition in 2019, and the Tairāwhiti Museum in Gisborne, Sarah Featon’s adopted home town, is planning an exhibition in 2022. Research and a publication on Sarah Featon’s life and art (Fig. 3) is also underway.

The collectable stamp programme at New Zealand Post is influenced by a broad range of factors – commemorative events, a desire to create stamp sets that appeal to our loyal collectors, and an aspiration to produce a well curated, diverse range of stamps that reflect our history, culture, our past, present and future. By focusing on the work of Sarah Featon, we not only create a stunningly beautiful set of stamps but also highlight the work of a talented and relatively unknown artist – one of our unsung national treasures.

¹ Collectables Programme Manager, New Zealand Post; Lynette.Townsend@nzpost.co.nz

² *The art album of New Zealand flora* was originally published in three parts, the first in 1887 and the next two in 1888. In 1889, the three parts were issued as a single volume.



Fig. 1 New Zealand Post, Collectables, Miniature Sheet. Design by Hannah Fortune, 2021. Individual stamps illustrate the following watercolours of New Zealand indigenous plants by Sarah Featon: top left, *Clematis paniculata*, puawānanga (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/105, as the synonym *C. indivisa*); top right, *Corynocarpus laevigatus*, karaka (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/63); bottom left, *Clianthus puniceus*, kōwhai ngutu-kākā (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/71); bottom right, *Pleurophyllum speciosum*, Antarctic daisy (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/95).



Fig. 2 New Zealand Post, Collectables, First Day Cover. Design by Hannah Fortune, 2021. The spider orchids illustrated on the right are *Corybas macranthus* (syn. *Corysanthes macrantha*).

References

- Anon. (1889). The art album of New Zealand flora [review]. *Auckland Star*, Volume XX, Issue 108, 8th May 1889, p. 2. Available at <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AS18890508.2.6>.
- Dawson, B. (1999). *Lady painters: The flower painters of early New Zealand*. Viking, Auckland, New Zealand. pp. 61–75.
- Featon, E.H. Mr and Mrs [S.] (1889). *The art album of New Zealand flora: Being a systematic and popular description of the native flowering plants of New Zealand and the adjacent islands*. Bock and Cousins, Wellington, New Zealand. [Parts 1 and 2 are available online at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/24349>].
- Field-Dodgson, C. (2003). *In full bloom: Botanical art and flower painting by women in 1880s New Zealand*. Master's Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 143 pp. Available at <https://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/handle/10063/4681>.
- Hetley, C. Mrs [G.B.] (1887–1888). *The native flowers of New Zealand: Illustrated in colours in the best style of modern chromo-litho art, from drawings coloured to nature*. Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, London.
- Rice, R. (2019). Overview [Sarah Featon collections]. March 2019. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa: Collections Online: <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/>.
- Sampson, F.B. (1985). *Early New Zealand botanical art*. Reed Methuen, Auckland, New Zealand. pp. 93–95.
- Websites (accessed December 2020)**
- New Zealand Post: Collectables: <https://collectables.nzpost.co.nz/>.
- Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa: Collections Online: Sarah Featon: <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/agent/4876>.
- Wikipedia: Sarah Featon: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarah_Featon.



Fig. 3 Examples of Sarah Featon's watercolours reproduced from Te Papa Tongarewa's Collections Online (<https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/agent/4876>). **A**, *Beilschmiedia tarairi* and *B. tawa* (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/53). **B**, *Celmisia* species (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/32). **C**, *Coriaria arborea*, tutu (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/85). **D**, *Dysoxylum spectabile*, kohekohe (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/76). **E**, *Metrosideros excelsa*, pōhutukawa (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/67, as the synonym *M. tomentosa*). **F**, *Ourisia* species (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/86). **G**, *Pachystegia insignis*, Marlborough rock daisy (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/6, as the synonym *Olearia insignis*). **H**, *Pomaderris kumeraho*, kūmarahou or gum-digger's soap (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/75). **I**, *Ranunculus lyallii*, the "shepherds lily" (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/73). **J**, *Sophora tetraptera*, kōwhai (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/72). **K**, *Solanum aviculare*, poroporo (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/87). **L**, *Vitex lucens*, pūriri (Te Papa 1992-0035-2277/61).