

# The kōwhai and mānuka: Mary Delany's "paper mosaicks"

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"Her method consisted in placing the leaves of each plant with the petals, and all the other parts of the flowers, on coloured paper, and cutting them with scissars accurately to the natural size and form, and then pasting them on a dark ground; the effect of which is wonderful, and their accuracy less liable to fallacy than drawings." Erasmus Darwin (1791).

This quote from the notes to Darwin's poem *The loves of the plants* describes one of the achievements of Mrs Mary Delany: the preparation of her *hortus siccus*, a collection of nearly one thousand paper collages of flowers or "paper mosaicks" as she called them. Mary Delany is remembered today as a feminist, for her skills in embroidery, in painting, in shellwork, in garden design, and for her letters which are famed for their account of life in the upper reaches of Georgian Britain. It is, however, her *hortus siccus*, *Flora Delanica*, that is most interesting to horticulturists and garden historians.

Mary Delany has been the subject of several biographies (Hayden, 1992; Campbell Orr, 2019) and there is a scholarly appraisal of her artistic endeavours (Laird and Weisberg-Roberts, 2009).

## Life

Mary Delany (née Granville) belonged to the cadet branch of a distinguished Tory family which became somewhat tainted at the time by its Jacobite leanings. She was born in 1700. At the age of 17 she was married to Alexander Pendarves, a wealthy Member of Parliament, more than forty years her senior. This was not a happy marriage and it was to her relief that he died six years later. She has been adopted by some feminists because of her criticisms of marriage and men in general:

"Matrimony! I marry! Yes, there's a blessed scene before my eyes of the comforts of that state. A sick husband, squalling brats, a cross mother-in-law, and a thousand unavoidable impertinences; no, no, sister mine." (Mary Delany, 19th March 1727, quoted Moore, 2005).

"Would it were so, that I went ravaging and slaying all odious men, and that would go near to clear the world of that sort of animal; you know I never had a good opinion of them, and every day my *dislike strengthens*; some *few* I will accept, but *very few* ...". (Mary Delany, 17th January 1731, quoted Moore, 2005).

Nevertheless, after a long period of almost twenty years as a widow in Dublin and London, she did find one she

could accept, a widower, an Irish clergyman, Dr Patrick Delany, the Church of Ireland Dean of Down. One of the attractions was his large, 11-acre (4.5-ha) garden which was eventually to become part of the National Botanic Gardens of Ireland at Glasnevin, Dublin. Mary Delany spent much of her time during this second marriage improving the garden, in line with the current fashions in English landscaping. After Dr Delany's death in 1768 she shifted back to London leading a very full and busy life (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** Mrs Mary Delany about 1786. This drawing, possibly by Thomas Lawrence, gives a much better indication of the strength of her character (and her interest in fashion) than the better-known portrait by John Opie. Pencil on brown paper, original size 36.4 × 28.0 cm. E.580-1929, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

It seems that, especially because of her many family links, she knew everybody worth knowing. She had taken painting lessons from William Hogarth; she had been inspired by Handel playing on her spinet; she was a frequent correspondent of Jonathan Swift, Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin; she was a correspondent of Horace Walpole; she knew Samuel Johnson and Alexander Pope; she was associated with the Bluestockings, a group of women intellectuals; she knew John Wesley, a leader of a Methodist revival movement; she was a friend of Lord Bute, former Prime Minister and passionate gardener, and often stayed with his family at Luton Hoo; she danced with George II; she was a particularly close friend of George III and his wife, Queen Charlotte, meeting them, in her last years, several or more times a week. There were many others.

Mary Delany died in 1788.

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## Bulstrode

From the years 1768 until 1785 Mary Delany spent much of the year at Bulstrode, the estate in Buckinghamshire of Margaret, Duchess of Portland, the richest woman in Britain. Mary Delany and the Duchess were very close friends. The Duchess was a keen naturalist and an avid collector; she even had a catalogued collection of bird nests. After her death it took nearly 40 days to auction her collections.

These fabulous collections, probably the best in Britain, and the visitors who studied them made Bulstrode a centre for natural history research. A distinguished botanist and close friend of Joseph Banks, the Rev. John Lightfoot, was the Duchess's chaplain and librarian and curated her collections. He knew most of the leading botanists of the day, including the founders of the Linnean Society. A frequent visitor was John Fothergill, the eminent botanist and friend of Joseph Banks. Another visitor was Daniel Solander, a former student of Linnaeus. Solander encouraged the use by British botanists of binomial nomenclature and of the sexual classification system of Linnaeus, based on the number of stamens and pistils in the flower. He had accompanied Banks on the first Cook voyage. He was employed to catalogue, each Tuesday, the Duchess's enormous shell collection, including shells collected during the voyage of the *Endeavour*. Banks himself visited, and Mary Delany and the Duchess made a reciprocal visit to Banks' home in London to inspect what he had brought back from the South Pacific. The brilliant flower painter, Georg Dionysius Ehret, was employed at Bulstrode as a drawing instructor and completed many hundreds of drawings and paintings on vellum for the Duchess. He and Mary Delany spent many hours together.

Mary Delany had her own set of rooms at Bulstrode. She had no commitments other than social obligations.

“No children to teach or play with; no house matters to torment her; no books to publish; no politicks to work her brains? All this is true but idleness never grew in my soil ...”. (Delany 1777, quoted Laird, 2015).

This was a real understatement because Mary Delany had a ferocious work ethic.

### Mary Delany's paper mosaicks

In 1772, at the age of 72, Mary Delany invented a new way of imitating flowers, an idea that first came to her when she was staying at Bulstrode. She saw the similarity in colour between a pelargonium petal and a sheet of scarlet Chinese paper. She cut the paper in the shape of the flower and added some green pieces of paper as leaves and stem (Babilas, 2013). Even as a child she had been skilled at cutting silhouettes. Over the next decade she perfected her techniques and prepared almost one thousand paper mosaicks. Most of these (known collectively as the Flora Delanica) are now held in the British Museum ([www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?agent=Mary%20Delany](http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?agent=Mary%20Delany)), with a few in the Royal Collection at Windsor.

She started by dissecting the flower, just as Ehret often did. Then she cut small pieces of coloured paper copying the flower parts life size, the petals, the calyx, the stamens, the gynoecium, the leaves, their veins, the stalk and then assembled and pasted them down on paper that had usually been painted, not with Indian ink as previously thought, but with water-based carbon black paint to give a matt black background. A stem might have ten or more separate shades of paper. A “complicated” flower, such as *Passiflora*, might consist of more than 200 little pieces of paper. She used different coloured papers or painted sheets of paper with watercolour to achieve exactly the right shade. The paper was cut using fine scissors or a sharp knife. Reeder (2009) gives an excellent account of her methods.

Some authors (e.g., Moore, 2005) have emphasised the sheer sensuality of Mary Delany's flowers, the way in which the sexual organs are blatantly exposed. The labels on her finished work indicate that she was following the revolutionary systems of nomenclature and classification promoted by Linnaeus. It was essential for correct classification to know the numbers of styles and stamens.

Many of Mary Delany's flower subjects were collected at Bulstrode, especially native plants, but some of the more exotic plants came from the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, the Chelsea Physic Garden, or the gardens of horticultural enthusiasts such as Lord Bute. Being a companion of the Duchess, a friend of Joseph Banks and, above all, an intimate friend of the King and the Queen undoubtedly helped her getting specimens for her mosaicks. Many mosaicks were prepared at Bulstrode, some at her home in St James's Place, off St James's Street in London, others when she was visiting friends such as Lord and Lady Bute at Luton Hoo (Laird, 2009). It could take at least a day to complete one mosaick – one month she would complete 28. This was definitely commitment and hard, painstaking work. She continued until she was 82, when her eyesight deteriorated too much for the fastidiously fine details.

According to Joseph Banks, Mary Delany's representations of plants were:

“*the only* imitations of nature that he had ever seen from which he could *venture* to describe botanically any plant without the least fear of committing an error.” (quoted Reeder, 2009).

However, the accuracy of her imitations can be exaggerated. E.C. Nelson (quoted Reeder, 2009) has pointed out that in some plants the styles and stamens are simply too small to cut out and represent by pieces of paper and are instead just omitted. Furthermore, a side-by-side comparison of her mosaick of the bee orchid, *Ophrys apifera*, with a watercolour of the same plant by William Kilburn shows how much more can be revealed by a good drawing (Edmondson, 2009). Nevertheless, Mary Delany's flower mosaicks are both extraordinarily striking and very beautiful. Unintentionally, they also indicate to garden historians when a plant was introduced to Britain and in cultivation.

## Paper mosaicks of New Zealand plants

Mary Delany prepared paper mosaicks of two plants originally from New Zealand. As far as I know, neither of these mosaicks has previously been reproduced in a New Zealand publication.

The labels on the back of the mosaicks state that the specimens had come from the Chelsea Physic Garden. The Garden had been established by the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries in 1673 and shifted to an adjacent site on the banks of the Thames, Chelsea, in 1772. Philip Miller was in charge for almost 50 years and under his direction it became one of the world's leading botanic gardens, with a particularly active programme of seed exchange. His successors as head gardeners and curators worked closely with Joseph Banks and specialised in raising plants from throughout the world.

The paper mosaick of what is now known as *Leptospermum scoparium* (mānuka) is a little smaller than most. It shows a very attractive spray of flowers and is labelled “*Philadelphus aromaticus* / new Zealand Tea / Solander” (Fig. 2). It is signed in the lower left-hand corner with her cipher “MD”.

*Leptospermum scoparium* was one of the small number of plants that were successfully introduced from New Zealand to Britain as a result of Cook's first voyage. It is listed in Aiton's *Hortus Kewensis* (Aiton, 1789) under Daniel Solander's name of *Philadelphus aromaticus* as having been introduced by Joseph Banks in 1772. It is now known as *Leptospermum scoparium*, the name published by the Forsters in 1776. It was first illustrated in the authorised account of Cook's second voyage (Cook, 1777) as “The tea plant of New Zealand”. Cook encouraged the use of the green leaves to make a substitute for tea, sweet and aromatic at first, then turning bitter with prolonged infusion. Twigs of the plant were also brewed with young rimu (*Dacrydium cupressinum*) shoots to make beer. The tea and the beer were considered as useful remedies for scurvy.

The other paper mosaick of a New Zealand plant is of *Sophora tetraptera* (kōwhai) (Fig. 3), also listed in Aiton (1789) as being introduced by Joseph Banks in 1772. The mosaick shows a shoot with golden-yellow flowers. The text accompanying an illustration a decade later in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* (Curtis, 1791) reads:

“This magnificent and highly curious species of *Sophora* here represented, is one of the many plants discovered by Sir JOSEPH BANKS at New-Zealand, where it forms a tree of considerable size.

A finer sight can scarcely be imagined than a tree of this sort, extending to a great breadth on a wall with a western aspect, in the Apothecaries Garden at Chelsea [Chelsea Physic Garden], where it was planted by Mr. FORSYTH about the year 1774, and which at this moment (April 28, 1791) is thickly covered with large pendulous branches of yellow, I had almost said golden flowers; for they have a peculiar richness ...”.

This was presumably the tree that supplied the flowers used by Mary Delany.

## Acknowledgements

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**Fig. 2** Paper mosaick of *Philadelphus aromaticus* (now *Leptospermum scoparium*). *Flora Delanica* Vol. VII, 61. British Museum Number 1897,0505.661. Composition made at St James's Place, London, completed June 1778, plant from Chelsea Physic Garden. 25.1 x 19.2 cm. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 3 Paper mosaick of *Sophora tetraptera*. Flora Delanica Vol. IX, 26. British Museum Number 1897,0505.827. Composition made at St James's Place, London, completed 21 April 1779, plant from Chelsea Physic Garden. 31.0 x 21.5 cm. © Trustees of the British Museum.