

[244] WILLIAM SEUFFERT
AN EXQUISITE MARQUETRY CARD
TABLE

Wholly composed of New Zealand woods in minute subdivision: the woods comprise totara, puriri, kahikatea, rewarewa, rimu, rata, kohutuhutu and many others, while the contrasting and blending of the varied tints are carried out with extreme skill. Depicting yellowhead and whitehead mohoua shown amidst titoki and hangehange seeds and New Zealand fantails (piwakawaka) eating kohuhu and karaka seeds. A central rectangular panel depicting a horse-drawn carriage at Fern Arch in the Buller Gorge. Supported on an English, inlaid Sheraton Revival-style base of four legs and platform stretcher. One of the most detailed of all the Seuffert tables. Inscribed in pencil on the underside: "Scene Red Mans Bar Archway / On The Buller River Otago" Provenance: Acquired by Ernest Benjamin and gifted to his sister Mabel de Pass c 1888-1890. Ernest Benjamin's grandfather was David Nathan, original founder of L D Nathan; Ernest, too, became a partner at the firm. Ernest together with his mother, brother and sister relocated to England. A letter of provenance accompanies this piece written by a descendant of Ernest Benjamin, Oliver Sebag-Montefiore, dated December 1977. Oliver Sebag-Montefiore gifted the piece to his nephew, the current owner.
D. 575mm, H. 710mm
\$50,000 - \$70,000

This marquetry table by William Seuffert is one of the most exquisite examples to emerge from the renowned Seuffert workshop. While there is no doubt it is an important example of the Seuffert family's undisputed craftsmanship, the table is also a progression from the more formal European designs of William's father Anton. It is executed in an altogether freer, more decorative style, reflecting the colonial spirit of a young nation, a nation confident enough to start forging its own identity distinct from its European roots.

Work by the Seufferts is always distinguished by its use of distinctly New Zealand imagery, flora and fauna and is executed in local timbers of dazzling variety. With excellent design and superlative craftsmanship, their work is truly world class.

The depictions of native New Zealand plant and bird life surrounding the central panel are identical to those used in the table in the Paris residence of the New Zealand ambassador. The Maori village scene illustrated on that table, based on an 1852 painting by John Gilfillan, has been described by Seuffert authority Brian Peet as "the most detailed and stunning of all the Seuffert tables" (Brian Peet, *The Seuffert Legacy*, Brian Peet publishing, p.121).

The central cartouche on this table depicts a well-known landscape feature in the Buller Gorge, known as the Fern Arch, and is based on a photographic postcard by Wheeler and Son from about 1885. The Fern Arch was a popular subject for postcards at the time but was usually shown from the other side, where the ferns were clustered on the shadowed side of

the arch. The wagon and horses have been added by Seuffert to enhance the composition but are typical of similar scenes in other postcards. Such was the arch's renown that Prime Minister Richard Seddon spoke nostalgically of his first sight of it in Parliament at the introduction of the Scenery Preservation Bill of 1903. It was later demolished to make way for State Highway 6.

The birds at the top are yellowhead and whitehead mohoua shown amidst titoki and hangehange seeds; they are copied from the 1872-73 edition of Walter Buller's *A History of the Birds of New Zealand*. Below them is a pair of New Zealand fantails (piwakawaka) eating kohuhu and karaka seeds.

The base of the table is English in the Sheraton Revival style typical of late Victorian fashion and is of excellent quality. The top has had no other base and was likely to have been transported to England soon after purchase where a quality firm was commissioned to craft the base. In a nice switch, British cabinetmakers used locally available timbers to mimic the pale exotic species from New Zealand, in this case satinwood and walnut.

Purchasing a top alone was a common practice and many Seuffert tables have been located in the UK in recent years with English-made bases. Cost may not have been the only issue; the logistics of transporting a Seuffert piece back to Britain were considerable. Each piece had to be soldered into a tin container to protect it from the elements during its long voyage north by sailing ship.

The Seufferts incorporated veneer



from remote parts of New Zealand including the Chatham and Three Kings Islands. Anton would recruit sailors to obtain samples for him in their travels, but he was also known to select pieces from his fireplace wood box. Burr puriri surrounds the outer edge of the top with kohekohe, kowhai, kanuka, maire and mangeao amongst many other species used. The inscription on the underside, which reads: "Scene Red Mans Bar

Archway / On The Buller River Otago", indicates that Seuffert geography was incorrect. The Buller River Archway is in Westland, not Otago. The Red Mans Bar appears to be another error. It may refer to the radical Red provincial superintendent John Robinson who drowned in 1865, along with three others, attempting to cross the Buller River bar — a well-known incident at the time. Of course, the bar is out to sea and has nothing to do with the river inland.



[245] AN IMPORTANT ANTON
SEUFFERT NEW ZEALAND FERN
AND FLORAL MARQUETRY CARD
TABLE CIRCA 1880

An Exquisite Fern, Clematis and other Floral Marquetry Card Table c 1880. Executed in native New Zealand timbers including mottled kauri, rata, totara, pohutukawa, pukatea, matai, orata and kohutuhutu. Supported on an unmatched, New Zealand timber, 'Gypsy'-style base, original to the top. The base of mostly rimu has been laminated with different native species then turned to create patterning to the wood surface. The table has undergone expert restoration.

Original 'Seuffert Workshop' label affixed to underside.

D. 610mm, H.660mm. From a private Sydney, Australia Collection.

\$35,000 - \$45,000

Anton and his son William worked together on many pieces and it is difficult to separate much of the output from their workshop; however, this design is almost certainly Anton's. William Seuffert described a tabletop of almost identical design that recorded 5,824 individual pieces of timber in 27 separate species, included amongst them mottled kauri, rata, totara and pohutukawa. The label affixed on the underside was not used until 1868 which indicates manufacture after this time.

By utilising subject matter perfectly suited to the materials, Anton Seuffert's zest for design and technical skills find full expression in this tabletop. The fern fronds are particularly well realised by the detailed marquetry and the effect is further enhanced by the fine engraving on the surface of the wood. The virtuoso work in the centre is balanced by the clematis vine curling lazily through the bold interlocking parquetry bandings that seem to surge about the top. The classic rewarewa parquetry basketwork

background adds yet another dimension to the overall visual impact while the gently scalloped kohekohe banding that separates the central design from the specimen-wood edge seems to bulge as if unable to hold its contents. This design is executed with the exacting precision that characterises pieces from the Seuffert workshop.

This tabletop is one of a number featuring this pattern and is very similar to a table presented to Countess Aberdeen by the Irish Women of Auckland in recognition of her good works for the advancement of women on a visit to Auckland in 1887. Because of this, the table was featured in a contemporary arts magazine which detailed the design and recorded the timbers used. The ferns in the centre are maidenhair surrounded by hen and chicken (probably *asplenium gracillium*), both executed in pukatea wood on backgrounds of matai and orata respectively. The clematis flowers and bud are made of kohutuhutu.



