

## The first Swiss Abroad in Oceania

John Webber (Johann Wäber, 1751-1793) accompanied Captain James Cook on his third voyage (1776-1780) around the world as the expedition's artist – and thus became not only the first Swiss citizen but the first Swiss Abroad to set eyes on the islands of the Pacific.



John Webber's father, Abraham Wäber, was a Swiss sculptor who moved to London, changed his name to Webber, and in 1744 married a Mrs Mary Quant. John was the second of six children and probably the eldest surviving. When John was six, his parents sent him to Bern to live with his father's sister, Rosina Wäber. He must have shown ability in art, for at sixteen he was apprenticed

to a leading and popular landscape artist in Switzerland, Johann Aberli. He spent three years in Aberli's studio, and then stayed four years in Paris, where he studied drawing and oil painting at the Académie Royale. Eventually he returned to London to work and to continue his studies at the Royal Academy.

In 1776, Webber's work at an exhibition caught the eye of the Swedish botanist Daniel Solander, who had accompanied Captain James Cook on the first voyage of exploration to the Pacific. Solander knew that the Admiralty was still looking for a suitable expedition artist for Cook's forthcoming third voyage. He met Webber to sound out his interest in the task, and then recommended him to the Admiralty for the job.

John Webber was twenty-four years old when he was offered a place as expedition artist on the explorer's third Pacific voyage. It must have seemed an amazing opportunity to an artist in the early stages of his career. And indeed, that voyage became a launching pad for the direction of Webber's work for the rest of his life.

Webber's appointment was a success. He was popular with his shipmates, and his work was appreciated too. He was obviously an assiduous and enthusiastic worker. He penned, crayoned, and water-coloured his way around the world, producing a large volume of material – from lightning quick field sketches, to worked-up drawings, to complete compositions. He amply fulfilled his task of making an accurate record of landscape and 'memorable scenes', as well as doing competent portraits.

One of his first tasks on the expedition's return to England in 1780 was to complete the portrait of James Cook he had begun in 1776, which he then presented to Cook's widow. The Admiralty employed him for several years making oil paintings based on his drawings. These were the illustrations for the official account of the voyage. He then supervised the engravings made of the pictures to enable them to be printed and published.

Webber's reputation as an artist was thoroughly established by his work from this voyage. His representation of Pacific places continued to fascinate an audience with a thirst for the exotic. One outcome was his involvement in the creation of stage scenery and costumes for the 1785 London stage spectacle loosely based on Cook's voyages.

For the rest of his life, he made regular tours drawing landscapes in Britain and Europe. He continued to do portraits and paint compositions based on the drawings of his Pacific travels, such as his painting of Ship Cove. He was one of the first artists to make and sell prints of his own works. He was made a full member of the Royal Academy in 1791 – a distinction in those days for someone who was regarded primarily as a landscape artist. He died from kidney disease in 1793 at the age of only 42, leaving 'a considerable fortune'.

Sources: Museum of New Zealand; Dictionary of Canadian Biography



John Webber: Sketch of a possum, Tasmania, 1777. State Library of Tasmania