

World Travels



Merton and Annie travelled extensively, bringing back crates full of 'objets d'art', as Merton described them in his memoirs. These were to fill almost every room of the house alongside Merton's vast art collection and, in some cases, inspired the Russell-Cotes to alter and adapt rooms to a particular theme.

Merton writes of their travels in his memoirs "Home and Abroad", which was privately printed shortly after his death in 1921, by his son, Herbert Russell-Cotes. Merton was very much obsessed with his place in society; consequently he included many copies of letters between himself and members of local society, government and other prominent people.

The difference between Merton and Annie's characters and interests are reflected in the places they visited and the objects which they bought back. Merton's primary interests were in decorative and fine arts - Annie's world cultures and natural history. Merton's writings are in many ways a testament to Annie's personality and strength of character as her interest in natural history and other cultures led to visits that most 'genteel' ladies of the time would never consider.

Their first major tour was on the advice of Merton's doctors who felt a three month tour of Australasia would be beneficial to his health. Merton, Annie and the children arrived in Adelaide in 1885, where Merton immediately went about establishing contacts with important people. Annie, on the other hand, was

intrigued with the local flora and fauna and she spent much time walking, examining plants and flowers and observing local wildlife.

During this tour of Australasia they met many indigenous peoples and it is here that their different characters really show. Annie was fascinated by the traditions of the Aborigine and Maori people and, although she admitted that she thought them rather primitive, she showed empathy and respect for their culture. Merton, though fascinated by their art, tends to make the reader feel he would have been much more content to wander through a gallery.

After visiting many other parts of Australia, including Melbourne, The Blue Mountains and Tasmania, the family went on to New Zealand, from where the children returned home. Merton's health was still not improving so the couple were advised to extend their travels for a further 12 to 18 months. They went on to the Hawaiian Islands and, whilst exploring the floor of a crater at Kilauea, Annie was injured in a fall. Her injuries were not treated properly and caused her great pain. Because of this a doctor in San Francisco advised them to travel home via Asia, and not go overland through America. They stopped in many countries in Asia, the most influential being Japan. From here they bought back so many objects that on their return they created a Japanese Room in their hotel. Years later Merton was inspired to adapt the Blue Bedroom at East Cliff into the Mikado Room that we know today.

In 1889-90 they travelled to the West Indies and from there to Panama, the United States and Canada. From Quebec they travelled to Boston, where they boarded 'The Pilgrim' to return to New York and then home, arriving on 1st August 1890.

After Merton's mayoral year (1894-5), their travels took them to Africa, where they met Sir Cecil Rhodes. They went on to Egypt and 'The Holy Land'. In 1898 they travelled to Russia and Scandinavia, where they were particularly taken with the vistas of St Petersburg.

In the years between these 'grand tours' Merton and Annie took many shorter trips to various locations in Europe - Norway and Sweden seem to have been favourites, as well as Switzerland. Their last major trip abroad was to Spain, Portugal and Gibraltar, where Merton felt very honoured to be introduced to the Governor.

Their travels had a great influence on the rooms and decoration of East Cliff Hall, a fascinating mixture of styles, cultural influences and 'objets d'art' from all over the world.