

Nga Toi Maori: Maori art in Aotearoa New Zealand

By Professor Hirini Moko Mead, 1999

"Toi" is a traditional word that refers to knowledge, origins and sources, and to art in general, while the term "Toi Maori" is now used to cover the wide range of creative activities that Maori artists engage in.

Toi Maori refers to all the traditional arts such as whakairo (wood carving); kowhaiwhai (rafter patterns); raranga (weaving); tukutuku (lattice work); ta moko (tattooing); waiata (songs and chants); haka (dance); taonga puoro (traditional musical instruments); karanga (traditional call of welcome); whaikorero (oratory); and mau rakau (the art of weaponry).

Toi Maori also refers to all the artforms that contemporary Maori artists are exploring such as writing, stage production, contemporary dance, film, visual arts, claywork and sculpture.

The culture of the tupuna

From Hawaiki-nui, Hawaiki-roa and Hawaiki-pamamao, the distant homelands in Polynesia, Maori tupuna (ancestors) braved unknown seas on their voyages to Aotearoa. Navigation was by the stars and the sun. They used tidal currents and the migrating patterns of birds to discover the islands of Aotearoa, named by Hine-i-te-aparangi, Kupe's wife.

For more than 1000 years, Maori have lived on these islands and shared an intimate relationship with the land. This is regulated by tapu (codes of conduct that protect the life force) and whakapapa (genealogical descent). Genealogically, Maori issued from the land, emerging from the union of Ranginui, the Sky Father, and Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother.

The culture the tupuna brought with them to Aotearoa formed the foundations of what eventually developed into Maori culture. Applying their creative energies, skills and knowledge to the challenges of a new land, they produced the distinctive art that we know today as Maori art.

Each generation has contributed to the heritage of artforms as they adapted to the new environment and explored new ideas. Their knowledge was passed to the next generation through karakia (prayer), waiata (song), karanga (a ritual call performed by women), moko (tattoo), whakairo (carving), raranga (weaving), haka (traditional dance) and korero (oratory, spoken word).

These form the heart of Maori art, both traditional and contemporary.

A distinctive and magnificent visual arts tradition evolved. It was shaped by the country's geographic isolation, the need to adapt to a colder climate, an abundance of superb timber in vast forests, and the discovery of pounamu (greenstone, nephrite). New plants such as harakeke (flax), together with bones, shells, dog skin and feathers, added to the richness of this tradition.

Historically, Maori did not separate their creations into art, artefacts or culture: creativity superceded such classifications. Taonga, now admired as art, were originally created for practical purposes but were also associated with the terms mana (prestige), tapu (highly valued and restricted) and whakapapa (genealogy). Carved houses, canoes, paddles, weapons, agricultural tools, musical instruments and fishing gear often became beautiful works of art and always depended on the creative genius of the artist.

A new generation of Maori artists

Today, Maori artists are exploring new ideas and adding new forms to Maori art. Traditional artforms are still being created and preserved but contemporary artists are developing innovative new techniques within the styles handed down through the generations.

However, the social and cultural context in which today's artists create is very different from te ao kowhatu, the vanished world of stone tools.

Revival of waka culture

Since the 1930s, there has been a steady revival of waka culture. The programmes of Sir Apirana Ngata encouraged the building of waka such as Nga-toki-mata-whaorua (now housed at Waitangi) and the great waka tradition of the Waikato River carvers. In the late 1970s, Greg Whakataka Brightwell and Hekenukumai Busby oversaw the building of ocean-going vessels such as Hawaikinui and Te Aurere.

Large waka taua (war canoes) were built with Government funding for the 1990 celebrations commemorating 150 years since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. Some were constructed of fibreglass, some of laminated timber, some of the traditional wood totara. Tribal groups building totara waka revived many of the ceremonies associated with the felling of trees, and learned about the technology of building and carving timber waka. Navigational knowledge and other ocean skills that Maori had lost were also revived. It was an exciting time for Maori. Some of the waka made then are still in use today for special cultural events.

Building and carving whareniui

For many years carvers such as Pine Taiapa, Hone Taiapa, Henare Toka, Wiremu Poutapu, Eramiha Kapua, Tuti Tukaokao, Kaka Niao, Rangi Hetet, Pakariki Harrison and Clive Fugill have made great contributions to the building and carving of whareniui (meeting houses). Newer names in this field include Takirangi Smith, who was master carver for Te Herenga Waka at Victoria University, and Lionel Grant, the creative genius behind the meeting house at Waiariki Polytechnic at Rotorua. Te Hau Tutua and Te Waaka Mei are active at Whakatane, as is Tamiti Kruger among his Tuhoe people. Carved meeting houses are still being built in various parts of the country.

Te Hau Ki Turanga is the oldest fully carved house. It now stands at Te Papa Tongarewa, the Museum of New Zealand, in Wellington. Despite the innovations introduced by many carvers, this great whareniui remains a prime example of the best and most beautiful traditional arts of the carver.

Revival of ta moko

Ta moko (Maori tattoo) has been revived recently as an artform. Many men now wear moko on their faces and on their bodies. There are also many women with moko on their chin, their arms and occasionally their bodies as well. Several ta moko artists have emerged as the great names in this field. Best known are Derek Lardelli, Rangi Skipper and Laurie Nicholas. This rapidly developing artform is popular among Maori youth, especially among the performing artists involved in kapa haka groups.

Women experts in raranga

Carving, tattooing and rafter decoration were traditionally restricted to men, while women were the experts in tukutuku (reed panel work), raranga (weaving) and plaiting.

Tukutuku are panels made from reeds and stitched with a variety of symbolic geometric designs. They decorate the walls of meeting houses between carved ancestral figures.

Knowledge of raranga is said to have come to Maori from a fairy woman called Niwareka, who made the very first woven cloak. Most garments were woven from flax after the fibres were soaked in water, pounded and bleached. Women were tapu (sacred) while weaving.

A laborious ritualistic art, weaving involved making a wide range of kakahu (cloaks) including feather cloaks, dog-skin cloaks, finely woven cloaks with coloured woven borders, rain capes, and cloaks to provide protection in battle. Kete (kits), food baskets, piupiu (skirts), mats and headbands are also woven.

Prominent weavers over the past century have included the late Dame Rangimarie Hetet, her daughter Diggeress Te Kanawa, the late Emily Schuster, and Erenora Puketapu-Hetet and her whanau.

Traditional performing arts

Various kinds of haka (war dance) were performed by Maori warriors before battle to unite them in anger or courage, and to intimidate the enemy. The term kapa haka, however, has a wider meaning and includes more peaceful waiata-a-ringa (action songs), waiata tawhito (ancient songs that tell of his toric events) and the use of poi (a swinging ball used to train for dexterity). There has been a huge growth in the numbers joining kapa haka performance clubs as a result of the cultural renaissance of the past 25

years. It is a way of affirming Maori identity, both for those close to home and the many who are brought up far from their cultural roots.

Karanga, traditional calls performed by women, are often incorporated into kapa haka performance. The call is strongly spiritual and is a crucial part of any traditional formal Maori gathering. As well as introducing the purpose of the gathering and the people involved, it also aims to promote peace and goodwill among those present.

The ancient artform of whaikorero, or formal oratory, is also vital. Representing the mana or dignity of the group he represents, the speaker often recites chants used by his people for traditional activities such as battle, the hauling of canoes, or the honouring of the dead. He also refers to the early history of his iwi (tribe) and indicates how his iwi is linked to the visiting group.

The use of the koauau (traditional flute) has been revived in recent years. Richard Nunns and the late Hirini Melbourne have taken the lead in making and playing taonga puoro (traditional musical instruments), which are now often heard at the start of important ceremonies. About 40 different kinds of instruments are now known and can be demonstrated.

Traditional waiata are still performed and people can join classes to learn the waiata of their iwi (tribe).

Also enjoying renewed interest is mau rakau (the art of Maori weaponry) and the use of weapons such as the patu (short club) and taiaha (fighting staff). Mita Mohi is one of many teachers training Maori youth in these traditional activities. The use of the patu has become popular with women performers in kapa haka.

A new generation of visual artists

In the late 1940s and 1950s, a new generation of Maori visual artists emerged. Gordon Tovey, a prominent and visionary educationist, was responsible for mainstreaming Maori arts in New Zealand schools and tertiary institutions. He targeted young Maori artists (eg Sandy Adsett, Cath Brown, Clive Arlidge, Ralph Hotere, Fred Graham, John Bevan Ford, Hirini Mead, Mere Poutu, Para Matchitt, Pauline Yearbury, Selwyn Murupaenga, Muru Walters and Cliff Whiting) for training as specialist teachers and this group has had a profound impact on the development of Maori art. It is not surprising that many of these people have become leading figures in Maori art.

Several Maori artists have established national reputations with their claywork. They include Manos Nathan, Baye Riddell, Wi Te Tau Taepa, Paerau Corneal and Colleen Waata Ulrich.

Together, Cliff Whiting and Para Matchitt pioneered multimedia murals. This has resulted in the creation of contemporary Maori artworks in marae and in public buildings. In painting, the work of a number of Maori artists such as Robyn Kahukiwa, Kura Te Waru Rewiri, Emare Karaka and Shona Rapira-Davies have made an enormous impact.

A new urban Maori art, much of it theory-based, culturally ambivalent, witty and ironic, has emerged in the 1990s. Lisa Reihana's animated film, *Wog Features* (1990), and Peter Robinson's installation of paintings, *New Lines/Old Stock* (1994), confront racism. Shane Cotton reworks late nineteenth-century Maori folk art into highly poetic and nostalgic images, while contemporary fibre artist Jacqueline Fraser works with such materials as draperies, raffia, ribbon and wire to shape symbols drawn from her Maori heritage.

Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson, both affiliated to Ngai Tahu, represented New Zealand at the prestigious 49th Venice Biennale of Art in 2001.

A long history of writing

There is a long history of Maori writers writing in te reo Maori (the Maori language), as seen in early Maori newspapers such as *Te Pipiharauroa* and *Te Toatakitini*. Sir Apirana Ngata was a popular writer in Maori and a composer of Maori songs. The work of Reweti Kohere and Mohi Turei also appeared frequently in these newspapers.

More recently, the tradition of writing in te reo Maori has been confirmed and extended by such writers as Hirone Wikirihi, Maori Marsden, Ruka Broughton, Hepora Young, Hemi Potatau, Hirini Mead, Katarina Mataira, Merimeri Penfold, Timoti Karetu and Pou Temara.

Fiction writers Patricia Grace and Witi Ihimaera, and poet Hone Tuwhare have been published since the 1960s and have redefined Maori experience and rites of passage. They are internationally acclaimed and their works are studied in schools. Keri Hulme made international headlines when her novel *The Bone People* won the Booker Prize in 1985. Alan Duff, too, has become an international figure since his novel, *Once Were Warriors* (1990), was published and then turned into a movie by Lee Tamahori. This film made an impact in New Zealand through its portrayal of cultural alienation, detribalisation, urbanisation and domestic violence.

Theatre, film and dance

Contemporary Maori theatre has been growing since the 1960s. Nurtured by organisations such as Toi Whakaari New Zealand Drama School and Playmarket, as well as established practitioners such as Rowley Habib and Don Selwyn, Maori playwrights and actors began working together to present Maori stories and images on stage.

Hone Kouka's play, *Waiora*, premiered at the 1996 New Zealand International Festival of the Arts and earned standing ovations when it toured Britain in 1997. Another playwright, Briar Grace-Smith, is also making a major contribution to theatre with plays such as *Flat Out Brown* and *Purapurawhetu*.

Acclaimed films have been produced by Merata Mita, Barry Barclay, Larry Parr and Lee Tamahori, while a growing number of Maori actors have become household names in television plays and movies.

Contemporary Maori dance is flourishing. Performing to a wide audience, both here and overseas, groups such as Te Whare Ahorangi, Kahurangi Maori Dance Theatre, Black Grace Dance Company (Maori and Pacific Islands) and Whitireia Performing Arts draw on elements of traditional dance to create contemporary works.

From traditional waiata to Polynesian hip-hop

Maori excel at singing, embracing every style from traditional waiata and classical opera to all forms of contemporary music, including Polynesian hip-hop. As well as opera diva Kiri Te Kanawa, there are popular musicians such Moana Maniapoto of Moana and the Moahunters, Herbs, Emma Paki and Maree Sheehan.

These performers and groups, along with many others, have reached the heart of the Maori world and delighted audiences with their performances.

The legacy of the late Dalvanus Prime and his Patea Maori Club are the songs *E Poi E* and *Hei Konei Ra*. His group enjoyed several years of popularity and used modern technology to superb effect. Kara Pewhairangi is noted for her beautiful rendition of *Haere Mai*, which has become a classic in Maori music. Then there is the irreplaceable Tui Teke whose legacy is *E Ipo*.

A number of songs composed in te reo Maori (the Maori language) have become classics, including *E Pari Ra* and *Po Karekare Ana* (by Paraire Tomoana), *He Putipui Koe* (by Sir Apirana Ngata) and *Arohaina Mai* (by Tuini Ngawai). Pita Sharples, Ngapo Wehi, Dovey Katene Howarth and Trevor Maxwell are among the leading figures in composition for kapa haka or Maori culture clubs.

In a class of his own, musician Hirini Melbourne composed many Maori songs, including the popular *Tihore Mai Te Rangī*, and produced more than 20 recordings.

Toi Maori goes global

Never before has there been such a burst of activity from a wide range of Maori artforms.

Maori artists have performed overseas since the late nineteenth century but since World War II there has been a strong renaissance in Toi Maori.

The successful Te Maori exhibition opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1984, then toured several other United States cities. While the taonga (treasures) were created many generations ago, they are regarded as tupuna (ancestors) to whom Maori are personally linked, and so the taonga were appropriately accompanied by traditional rituals. Consequently, each exhibition of the taonga became an expression of te ao Maori (the Maori world) as a vibrant, living culture. Many thousands of Americans responded enthusiastically.

On its return to Aotearoa New Zealand, Te Maori was shown in the main cities where it was again well-received by thousands of people.

Te Maori was a landmark event for Maori art and culture. It sparked a new respect for taonga (treasures) in museums and how they were displayed. It was responsible for popularising the dawn ceremony for opening exhibitions.

Today, Maori art continues to evolve. Toi Maori Aotearoa, a national organisation funded by Te Waka Toi (the Maori arts board of Creative New Zealand), is making its mark in the world of Maori art. It holds arts exhibitions and festivals both in Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas. It also co-ordinates the work of several Maori art groups.

A showcase is the Maori programme in the biennial New Zealand International Festival of the Arts, held in Wellington. In Rotorua, the New Zealand Maori Arts and Crafts Institute celebrates the traditional visual arts and crafts, while the biennial Aotearoa Traditional Maori Performing Arts Festival displays the vibrancy and spirit of Maori through kapa haka (traditional performing arts) and competitions in te reo Maori (the Maori language).

The first Maori Festival of the Arts was held in December 1960 at Turangawaewae, Ngaruawahia, in the North Island. This landmark event featured many artists who were just beginning their careers: for instance, Kiri Te Kanawa and the Howard Morrison Quartet.

Now, there are many festivals of Maori art and many are tribal events. With the flowering of kapa haka (performing arts) groups, Maori art continues to develop and evolve, becoming an increasingly important part of cultural life in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Professor Hirini Moko Mead, who wrote this overview of Maori art, is the author of many books in both te reo Maori and English. He is also a curator and was closely associated with the Te Maori exhibition. Former Professor of Maori at Victoria University, he is now actively involved with Te Whare Wananga o Awanuiarangi in Whakatane.