

# The Contested Image of Māori Cultural Exhibition in Aotearoa New Zealand

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JAMES HARRISON, FEB 15 2016

The role of the exhibition is now a major cultural consideration when studying peoples of the past, and is rightly considered a form of powerful political communication. Since the 1990s, exhibitions have been valued not only for what is on show, but their interaction with the audience. This complements a postmodernist shift towards the consideration of cultural 'texts' as sources, analysing the interplay of display and viewer. The presentation of Māori people in New Zealand, and internationally, has changed greatly since their first major appearance in 1851. Māori people and objects have progressed from being *curios*, to scientific specimens, to artistic and aesthetic expressions, and finally to *taonga* or treasures. More recently, museums have presented Māori in a way faithful to their own customs, organised with *iwi* tribal consent, and designed with the Māori viewer in mind. This transition occurred through a number of notable events, brought about through a combination of Pākehā and Māori agency, although the influence of the latter has often been ignored in analysis. It is essential to record how Māori have never been passive participants of the British colonising enterprise, and even when they were not directing the form of their own exhibition, they were still instrumental from a position of protest. An active desire to enter modernity through self-determination, when united with sympathetic and influential persons and changes in exhibitional standards, has led to the fundamental rewriting of Māori display in the past 160 years.

### The Great Exhibition

The 1851 Great Exhibition, a fair that was to prompt a fashion for international exhibitions of culture and product across the globe, found New Zealand underprepared. Organisers intended it to be a showcase of 'the base of the pyramid of construction and the source of British power'.<sup>[1]</sup> At this time the Māori Land Wars had entered a brief interlude, but the exhibition reflected confusions surrounding New Zealand identity and the positioning of Māori within it. The otherwise comprehensive guide to the exhibition, the 'Illustrated Exhibitor', mentions New Zealand only in passing to compare its 'uncivilised art' to old pagan works.<sup>[2]</sup> Displays of 'Māori Manufacture' included weapons, chests, and intricate carving. The specific use and significance of these was neither explained nor understood.<sup>[3]</sup> Images of Māori villages presented them in an idyllic and romantic light, and a number of knives were labelled 'formally used for cannibal purposes'.<sup>[4]</sup>

If Māori served any role in the predominately imperial display of 1851, it was to demonstrate the improvement Europeans had brought to the 'natives'. Although shown by a British agent, 'tanning barks', 'flax' and 'the woods of New Zealand' were displayed on behalf of Māori rangatira Aperahama Taonui.<sup>[5]</sup> The vast majority of visitors would likely have thought little of this, but for Māori, direct participation secured them a spot in the Empire. Jeffery Auerbach described this exhibition as a 'historical moment of modernity', whereby people of the past could confirm their place in a new world that was rapidly squeezing them out.<sup>[6]</sup> Ewan Johnston thinks this hasty and disorganised exhibition nonetheless laid the basis for the coming changes. By the International Vienna Exhibition of 1873, greater thought had been given to attract immigration and investment. A Nelson-based newspaper reported 'the Maori is well represented' with 'pigeon robes, kaka dresses and emu cloaks'.<sup>[7]</sup> In this century, Māori were predominately utilised to provide a peculiar shade to New Zealand identity, whilst themselves remaining confined to a timeless past and subordinate political position. Nonetheless, for Māori involved, exhibition was not to serve the imaginings of Pākehā heritage, but to preserve Māori customs as a statement of their commitment to the future.

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## An International Image

This distillation of a distinct New Zealand identity was further realised with the 1906-7 International Exhibition in Christchurch. Despite a union of Pākehā and Māori planning, and some positive reactions from Māori organisers, the Māori aspects of display were primarily there to serve Pākehā purposes and entertain a Pākehā crowd. Essays edited by John Mansfield Thomson, under the collective title 'Farewell Colonialism', discussed this creation of national self. Jock Phillips says exhibitions such as these give both an indication of national feeling, and show how people tried to portray themselves.<sup>[8]</sup> One facet of the New Zealander's identity was 'Maoriland', exemplified by the large model settlement, or *pā*, and received with 'condescending gawping'.<sup>[9]</sup> To Phillips, wherever Māori culture appeared, it was dislocated. The positioning of the *pā* outside the exhibition tent which housed 'Western' products, surrounded by water slides and children's entertainments, suggests its relegation to exotic novelty. However, this *pā* was created with the oversight of Māori James Carroll (of Ngāti Kahungunu), and Sir John Gorst reports that visitors left with a feeling of support for the Māori push for parity with Pākehā.

Taking account of the limited Māori voice circulated at the time, Margaret Orbell considered writings in the Māori language, *te reo Māori*, published in Te Pīpīwharau around the time of the exhibition. In seven letters translated to English, Orbell presents her sources' overwhelmingly positive view of the exhibition, although she admits their common involvement in the proceedings prejudiced them.<sup>[10]</sup> While Pākehā may still have viewed Māori objects as curios, there is no doubt that Māori considered taonga to be on display.<sup>[11]</sup> McCarthy cites Neke Kapua's erudite articulation of Māori aims when he said 'our works from ancient time have been brought here, so that the peoples of the earth may know that the Maori is still living'.<sup>[12]</sup> Despite these positive accounts, and the intentions of men like Carroll and Kapua, Māori success in Christchurch was limited. Ben Dibley divided Māori representation into two narratives: nationalism and modernity.<sup>[13]</sup> He saw Māori worked into a Pākehā vision of the nation, with their practices and distinctness forming a state history. They were simultaneously kept distinct from the second narrative of modernity, which was peculiar to the culture and customs of Western people alone. Despite Māori attempts to be recognised as equal, Dibley's understanding is correct for 1906. Although exhibition of Māori culture had found recognition, it was still done largely under Pākehā terms and design. The critical platform that would grant Māori self-expression was yet to be found.

## Ethnography and Progress

Whilst Māori were being lauded outside for their entertaining idiosyncrasies, the legacy of the 1851 exhibition had taken another turn within the boundaries of the museum. This was the realm of ethnography, a scientific approach to seeing a people's customs through their everyday lives. In the case of Māori, an ethnographic approach served to separate and subordinate them when compared to 'civilised' Pākehā.<sup>[14]</sup> James Cowan's work is an example of this approach, written for the Journal of the Polynesian Society in the 1920s. In these articles, Cowan deals with tales and practices of old Māori, assumed to be a dying race with outmoded customs.<sup>[15]</sup> McCarthy sees early twentieth-century museums as Pākehā memorials to a culture that was being diluted by assimilationist policy.<sup>[16]</sup> The commercialism of exhibitions, and later World Expos, was replaced in museums with an educative and scientific approach. The development of anthropological and archaeological academic fields called for new standards. In some ways, this was positive, with an accurate nomenclature for Māori objects and their separation from other Pacific peoples.<sup>[17]</sup> In 1936, the Dominion Museum's new Māori Ethnographic hall featured almost as an extension of ethnographic research. Understanding of Māori might have been advanced, but they were still represented as a people frozen in time, against their wish to perpetuate a living culture.

The Arts and Crafts movement helped inject a contemporary dynamism to Māori representation. In 1927 a school was established in Rotorua and attached to the Dominion Museum in 1935. New works were created in the customary fashion, and a pamphlet for the 1940 Centennial exhibition recognised these not as relics, but symbols of a persisting way of life.<sup>[18]</sup> Āpirana Ngata (Minister for Native Affairs, 1928-34) was central in creating a meeting house at Waitangi in 1934, and another at the Centennial Exhibition in 1940. The 1934 house was impressive, with carvers made to study and practice for weeks before beginning work, resulting in a quality authentic finish.<sup>[19]</sup> The 1940 house was another matter, with few genuinely Māori elements beyond the façade and porch, regressing once more to merely a veneer of Māori design.<sup>[20]</sup> William Renwick is more positive about the Māori rendition in 1940,

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highlighting the bicultural element and symbolic significance of the *whare rūnanga*.<sup>[21]</sup> Despite the chance for Māori dialogue with government officials, Renwick ultimately supports the narrative of dissonance between Māori and Pākehā. Where Māori speeches emphasised Te Tiriti o Waitangi and called for the recognition of Māori cultural distinctiveness, the New Zealand Herald glossed over the discord. The event as a whole conspicuously ignored the significance of the Treaty.<sup>[22]</sup> National displays of New Zealand now had a living and legitimate Māori element, but they still failed to make the point of cultural respect and distinction which men like Tau Henare and Ngata were so desperate to articulate. In the main, Māori were still forced to fit a Pākehā mode of display, be it their preconceptions of ethnography in museums, or national identity at celebrations.

## Māori Participation

As with so many aspects of civil society and customs, conflict proved to be a catalyst for change. After World War Two, Māori gradually came to dominate both the object and subject of exhibition. From the 1960s, Māori participation in municipal and provincial boards gave them greater sway in the presentation of Māori objects. Crucially, *iwi* were encouraged to donate not just physical objects, but advice on how best to use their contributions.<sup>[23]</sup> These attracted more Māori visitors, who saw not anthropological specimens, but *taonga*.<sup>[24]</sup> McCarthy puts a further dramatic change in the 1970s down to Britain's economic detachment from New Zealand for the European Economic Community, following economic hardship, and the loss of a colonial identity.<sup>[25]</sup> However, the impetus should once more be assigned to Māori social and cultural protest. Controversial works like 'The Life of Te Kooti Rikirangi' (1972), and the large number of contemporary and 'primitive' *taonga* donated for one 1978 display, would not have succeeded without active Māori participation. McCarthy rightfully attaches great significance to the Te Māori exhibition, which toured *taonga* internationally during the 1980s.<sup>[26]</sup> When Te Māori reached the National Museum in 1986, *taonga* were finally presented as a living performance, displayed with reference to objects' spiritual *mana* and with genuine *iwi* association.<sup>[27]</sup>

Approximately half of the first 100,000 visitors were Māori, and the highest ever numbers of Māori staff were employed at the museum.<sup>[28]</sup> It is important to note the limits of such research, and while McCarthy is first to admit that visitor records remained vague, Māori attendance plainly increased.<sup>[29]</sup> Concerns remained, as some doubted the advisability of presenting Māori *taonga* as 'art', and whether the professed biculturalism could really be accomplished when Pākehā institutionalism still governed.<sup>[30]</sup> Nonetheless, we can definitively see that the three aspects of exhibition, the presenter, the presentation and the audience, had all changed greatly since the start of the century. Te Māori has since come to be seen as a watershed moment by many, including a current Māori Curator at Te Papa, Awhina Tamarapa.<sup>[31]</sup> The synchronicity of rapid change and vehement Māori political and social protest in the 1970s and 1980s was not accident. While they required the cooperation of existing museum directors, Māori tenacity served to successfully indigenise the exhibition. The question of how to house such an exhibition was also answered with the opening of Te Papa Tongarewa in 1997. This new national museum was founded on the basis of bicultural cooperation between *tangata whenua*, *iwi* and *hapū*.<sup>[32]</sup>

## Conclusion

Exploring Māori through their presentation in the past is complex, and requires us to question our methodologies, evidence and assumed knowledge. For many New Zealanders and international observers, developments in Māori cultural display have mirrored and supported their changing political position. Māori culture has been defined by several distinct phases: progressing from little-understood rarities to scientific items, contemporary art, and finally *mana taonga*. Despite a clear set of changes, the progressive estimation of Māori and their culture was not linear. The most oppressive atmosphere came with the mid-twentieth-century exhibitions which portrayed Māori either as exotic entertainments or studied them under clinical anthropology as a dying race. Resilience against these pressures, from sending possessions to be shown in 1851, to actively participating in the establishment of Te Papa, has been instrumental. While uncertainties remain as the future of Māori culture in New Zealand society as a whole, they have at least ensured thorough and faithful representation in an inherently bicultural and indigenised institution of exhibition.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>[1]</sup> Jeffery A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*, London, 1999, p.98.

<sup>[2]</sup> J. Cassell, *The Illustrated Exhibitor*, 1851, p.91.

<sup>[3]</sup> Ewan Johnston, "A valuable and tolerably extensive collection of native and other products': New Zealand at the Crystal Palace', in Jeffery A. Auerbach and Peter H. Hoffenberg, eds, *Britain, the Empire, and the World at the Great Exhibition of 1851*, Hampshire, 2008, pp.83-5.

<sup>[4]</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 84-5.

<sup>[5]</sup> *ibid.*, p.85.

<sup>[6]</sup> Jeffery A. Auerbach, 'Introduction', in Jeffery A. Auerbach and Peter H. Hoffenberg, eds, *Britain, the Empire, and the World at the Great Exhibition of 1851*, Hampshire, 2008, p.25.

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<sup>[9]</sup> *ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>[10]</sup> Orbell, Margaret, 'Maori Writing about the exhibition' in John Mansfield Thomson, ed., *Farewell Colonialism: The New Zealand International Exhibition Christchurch, 1906-07*, Palmerston North, 1998, p.143.

<sup>[11]</sup> *ibid.*, p.144.

<sup>[12]</sup> McCarthy, p.5.

<sup>[13]</sup> Ben Dibley, 'Telling Times: narrating nation at the New Zealand International Exhibition 1906-7', *Sites*, 34, 1997, p.1.

<sup>[14]</sup> *ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>[15]</sup> James Cowan, 'Ngau-Taringa', *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 29, 116, 1920, p.204.

<sup>[16]</sup> McCarthy, p.65.

<sup>[17]</sup> *ibid.*, pp.69-70.

<sup>[18]</sup> *ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>[19]</sup> Kernot, Bernard, 'Māori Buildings for the Centennial' in William Renwick, ed., *Creating a National Spirit: Celebrating New Zealand's Centennial*, Wellington, 2009, p.67.

<sup>[20]</sup> *ibid.*, p.72.

<sup>[21]</sup> Renwick, William, 'Reclaiming Waitangi', in William Renwick, ed., *Creating a National Spirit: Celebrating New Zealand's Centennial*, Wellington, 2009, p.105.

<sup>[22]</sup> *ibid.*, pp.107, 109.

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<sup>[23]</sup> McCarthy, p.116.

<sup>[24]</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>[25]</sup> *ibid.*, p.117.

<sup>[26]</sup> *ibid.*, p.138.

<sup>[27]</sup> *ibid.*, p.150.

<sup>[28]</sup> *ibid.*, p,155, 162.

<sup>[29]</sup> Jeffrey Sissons, 'Review: Exhibiting Maori: A History Of Colonial Cultures Of Display', <https://sites.otago.ac.nz/Sites/article/viewFile/34/18>. Accessed 5/4/15, p.192.

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