

Maori art taking the Tasman by storm

Maori Art is taking the world by storm. First the Te Maori Exhibition put Aotearoa and the natives on the map, and now, seven Maori artists have taken their treasures across the Tasman to show them what we're made of.

And in these seven people, most of the tribes of New Zealand are represented. Cliff Whiting, Sandy Adsett, Fred Graham, Rangi Hetet, Darcy Nicholas, Robyn Kahukiwa and Erenora Puketapu-Hetet.

With these seven artists, two Maori drama groups left for Australia. Te Ohu Whakaari and Merupa Maori.

This combination of traditional and contemporary art forms is significant of the Maori society today.

It's the linkage between two eras. Erenora Puketapu Hetet sums it up in her story:

"My aunties, who were weavers, took me under their wings. They allowed me to sit and play with the flax and listen to them even if some of their talk was just idle chat or gossip. They didn't chase me away, they encouraged me instead. They were a different kind of person to what I am today. I have to live in two worlds. They were totally Maori in the things they did. They had a deep understanding and way of caring for natural things."

The art forms are a method of communication. Erenora's husband Rangi says:

"When I walk towards a whare whakairo the first thing I look at is the tekoteko, then the maihi, the amo — from the top downwards. I see how well balanced the house is, what the carver is trying to say, and what areas the carvings relate to. The poupou need to be in proportion to the size of the house. For example, if the house is small, then the carvings are deep and round. I look to see how sharp the cuts are; this gives me some idea of how good the carver is."

Fred Graham: "The things I carve are the things that I missed in my childhood — the stories of Rangi and Papa and the Maori thinking that was just passed over lightly at school. These are the things I want to make people more aware of, especially young people today. We are bombarded with so many other things. It is really only when you get older that you realise our old stories have much greater depth.

I have developed a feeling for certain materials. As a sculptor you tend to look for the best way an idea can be ex-



pressed. If I am looking at perspex and it is suitable to the idea I am communicating, then that is the best medium from my point of view.

Cliff Whiting was brought up in a rural area.

"It was very much in the back blocks; there were the gravel roads, a general store that stocked everything from a needle to perfumes. It was quite isolated. For the majority of us, we couldn't go anywhere, even though bigger places were only fifty or sixty miles away. Our world was our patch.

"Before 1964, I was painting, but not in terms of Maori things. In those days art was all about landscape painting. We didn't really get into painting until after a while when we tried to record family things. I began carving round about the time I started school. I used this penknife to carve a box. I still have it. This old pakeha chap at our school was fitting paua shells into blocks of wood, then getting us to carve them. I think at the same time there were a lot of experimental projects in carving around our local schools.

"Getting involved in marae art didn't really happen for me until 1969. I was living in Nelson and was quite isolated from many things Maori. At one stage there were only two Maoris teaching in that area. Other than the small collection of artefacts in the museum there was nothing else there. Consequently, my works were at an individual level."

Sandy Adsett: "My earliest involvement with kowhaiwhai was about Standard two at Raupunga Native School. We used to do a lot of kowhaiwhai in black and white. This was nice and easy; you could create more successful designs. We used to do egg shapes and make designs fit into them. That's one of my early memories of using koru designs to fit into an outside perimeter. It wasn't something where you just took a shape and built something around it. It was one I remember because I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the design."

Robyn Kahukiwa is deeply interested in symbolism and spiritual qualities in Maori traditional painting, weaving, and carving. She is currently exploring a new dimension and is fascinated by the carved figures developed by the masters of traditional Maori times. Huge rounded ancestral figures have been recaptured by her own canvas. Children feature as well, sitting with or suckling from their mothers. There is a sense of rhythm and order about her new works, and a move away from a controlled, detailed style to a looser more expressive method. "My identity in things Maori is made possible because of my ancestors. It exists because of whakapapa, tribal culture, and tradition. My links with the past are as important to me as the fact of my being, my future, and the future of my children. The artistic and cultural traditions of my ancestors are vital in the maintenance of the threads of the chain of our people — past present and future."

Darcy Nicholas is the twelfth of thirteen children. By the time he was thirteen, most of the family had left home. "These were lonely days for my mother, and she would spend a lot of time speaking to the two or three of us left at home.

"In many ways it was the overall isolation that pushed me into painting seriously at the age of thirteen. I drew with charcoal on tin, timber, concrete, newspapers and any other thing I could find. I had started drawing regularly from about the age of three. My greatest fascination at this young age was the night sky and the bush that I played in. My mother would speak to me on maori meanings for the stars, the trees, and the hills. She told us about our relations who had since passed on, where they were buried, and some of the simple ritual of Maori things. I came to enjoy these stories and learned of the tribal battles in the North Taranaki area."