



## Common bond needed to rejuvenate carving

**Traditional carving has been deprived of its audience and meaning and apart from some marae maintenance there's been little significant development in the art.**

It could be argued that there has been a partial return to the traditional sphere with the restoration of meeting houses, the erection of new ones and some migration back to rural areas. But is that sufficient to revive opportunity?

Outside of this return, what real possibility is there for the development of Maori woodcarving? Without the home base the art is a refugee. It has lost its special audience and much of the language and also its supervision and recognition.

Despite this, the art of Maori woodcarving should have a distinguishing role to play in our modern society.

Comparisons could be drawn with the growth and development of pottery in New Zealand. New Zealand potters established their craft despite little indigenous precedent for it. Various potters are recognised for their excellence and the craft now supports numerous workers.

### Guiding philosophy

But just how can Maori woodcarving develop in harmony with its tradition.

To be in the same mould as the traditional art, we need to first establish something about the guiding philosophy behind carving. Working backwards from its symbolism we may guess at the broad principles of that philosophy.

The fact that carving was symbolic representation suggests that externalities had given way to a vision of content. A photographic portrayal was not sufficient to express the true nature of things.

The pou pou panels demonstrate that the Maori artist was seeking to explain something about his ancestors that required symbolic language. This might be viewed at two levels. Firstly the distortion itself is a clue to some belief in the inexpressable, unknowable nature of mankind, *te wairua*. How else can that be expressed except symbolically?

Secondly the symbolism can be seen at the level of what is mistakenly called 'surface decoration'. For example, the double spiral 'life' symbol was used to indicate symbolically perhaps the agricultural ability of the ancestor, or some other attribute.

### To instruct

It is a debatable but important principle that Maori woodcarving should continue to have as its primary objective, the function of instruction, and because of the nature of that pursuit, continued symbolic representation.

This is not to say that the modern woodcarver must operate from the same spiritual and mental concepts as his ancestor. Given the impact of changes since then that would be practically impossible both for the artist and his audience.

The point is that if we are to continue in the tradition of Maori woodcarving then we need to be in a frame of mind something similar to those early artists.

We must make the best use of the heritage and adapt the known symbolism flexibly and widely. For example the *takarangi* spirit spiral still beautifully expresses impending confusion and can easily be used in a wide range of circumstances to carry that message.

The difficulty is not in developing a sign language that would have common acceptance. That would result from communication. Even internationally and especially in the Pacific Basin that could eventuate.

### Create a truth

The real difficulty is in establishing a set of philosophical appreciations which criss cross each other sufficiently to create a Maoriness while at the same time establishing a Truth.

If we were to have a group of artists in New Zealand who could view a certain situation with some communality, and then having gone beyond appearances in pursuit of some notion of Truth, were able to express themselves in a recognisably Maori idiom, we would have again a school of carving. Again communication is essential.

In practical terms, the writer would see the following steps as useful in fostering the development of Maori woodcarving.

- (a) The Department of Maori Affairs should invite discussion papers on the philosophy of Maori woodcarving and should convene a Conference
- (b) An Association of Maori woodcarvers should be formed. One of its functions should be to devise a system of recognition and awards. A register of carvers should be compiled.
- (c) Competitions around a variety of themes should be arranged. International displays should be undertaken.

