

EXHIBITING MAORI:
A HISTORY OF COLONIAL CULTURES OF DISPLAY
by Conal McCarthy

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Reviewed by
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Conal McCarthy introduces this book by inviting the reader to consider four photographs, taken at different times, of a waharoa or carved gateway. The first, a postcard, shows the waharoa, flanked by large carved figures with protruding tongues, at the entrance to a model Maori village built for the 1906–7 New Zealand International Exhibition held in Christchurch. A second image depicts the gateway as an ethnographic specimen in the Dominion Museum of the 1930s. A third shows the same object as a ‘treasure’ or taonga – an imposing, solitary sculpture at the entrance to The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. One narrative in this book tells the story of the shifting meaning of this and other aspects of Maori material culture as they are reconceptualised through display as curio, specimen, artifact, art and taonga. This is a genealogy of taonga and contemporary understandings of Maori art and material culture expressive of changing relations between Maori and the colonial state. But there is also a second, more surprising and more original narrative here: it is introduced by yet another photograph of the waharoa. In this image the carvers, Neke Kapua and his sons, are shown standing beside and in front of their almost completed work. This narrative plots changing forms of Maori involvement in the exhibition and production for exhibition of Maori material culture from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.

McCarthy reveals complex and ambiguous forms of Maori engagement with 19th century international exhibitions and local museums. When leaders from Whanganui sent items to a Philadelphia exhibition in the 1880s, for example, they expected the Americans to reciprocate in kind. When Ngati Awa in the Bay of Plenty agreed to send their new meeting house, Mataatua, to the Sydney

International exhibition held in 1879 they expected to accompany it. Maori 'curio-dealers' sold objects to exhibitors and to the Government in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries. Henry Uru, for example, ran an emporium selling, among a wide range of items, feather cloaks, woven tea-cozies and carved pipes. By the turn of the century, other Maori were donating to museums and leaders were deeply concerned over the potential loss of their material heritage to tourists and overseas buyers. McCarthy argues that the passing of the Maori Antiquity Act (intended to prevent Maori art leaving the country) in 1901 coincided with an increased Maori interest in cultural preservation. James Carroll and other Maori leaders of the time strongly supported the concept of a National Maori Museum.

By the 1930s, Apirana Ngata's carving school had opened in Rotorua and Thomas Heberly had been appointed as the first full-time Maori staff-member at the Dominion Museum. For Ngata and Heberly Maori material culture was a living art form that had meaning in relation to the present and future of Maori society. Museum objects were to become sources of cultural inspiration rather than ethnological specimens. Thus Hau-ki-Turanga – the meeting house being restored by the Dominion Museum – would become a model for many others built throughout New Zealand during the Maori renaissance of the 1930s. McCarthy's account of this period is important because it deepens and complicates earlier analyses of the 'traditionalisation' of Maori meeting houses. More information on the wider context of Ngata's engagement with the Dominion museum would have strengthened the argument, however. McCarthy notes that Ngata was 'too embarrassed' to attend the opening of the new Dominion Museum in 1936 because the restoration of the meeting house was not completed. But this was just one in a string of 'embarrassments' since a 1934 Commission of enquiry into his development programmes had forced him to resign in 1935 as Minister of Maori affairs.

McCarthy's discussion of Maori critiques of the 1940 Centennial Exhibition held in Wellington and of Ngata's involvement in its successful staging furthers our understanding of Ngata's post-assimilationist views and reveals more widespread Maori resistance to assimilation during this period. The large crowds that visited the exhibition included many Maori who enjoyed the entertainment provided by the recently formed Ngati Poneke kapa haka group. Carvers displayed their skills, deliberately emphasising the contemporary nature of their work. When a Pakeha visitor complained to one of the carvers, 'your ancestors didn't do that with a steel adze', the carver is said to have replied, 'no, and you didn't come here in a stage coach' (p.92).

Ngata's most vigorous and inspiring successor was probably Kara Puketapu, Head of Maori Affairs in the 1970s and early 80s. He initiated and led major reforms in the way his department related to Maori centered on the Tu Tangata programmes aimed at increasing Maori self-determination. McCarthy reveals that in 1981 his inter-departmental committee played a significant role in ensuring wide Maori involvement in the planning and staging of Te Maori. This international exhibition redefined Maori artifacts as taonga, a move that was to have far-reaching consequences for the display and public understanding of Maori material culture.

McCarthy's final chapter, 'Mana Taonga', is a careful and insightful examination of changes introduced by Maori at Te Papa aimed at attracting more Maori visitors and creating links with iwi. He describes well the confusion over the definition of taonga and the enormous difficulties associated with iwi-liaison that at times threatened to overwhelm staff.

This story of Maori agency is closely interwoven with a second narrative that traces the shifts in meaning of Maori display objects as they move from curio to taonga. The role of museum directors, especially those at the Dominion Museum, is highlighted here. McCarthy is sensitive to the difficulties of determining the meanings of objects and displays for visitors – Maori and Pakeha – in the absence of good visitor surveys. It is clear from his account, however, that Maori material culture became 'art' in very different ways at different times. The Maori 'art' of Augustus Hamilton at the turn of the century was not that of the ethnologist Terence Barrow in the 1950s or that of the curators of Te Maori. This shifting notion of Maori 'art' disrupts the linear progression of curio to taonga.

This book began life as a Ph.D. thesis but, with the exception of some theoretical formalities near the beginning, it is written in a direct and engaging style. The 76 well-chosen photographs enhance the text considerably. McCarthy notes in his conclusion that his book is intended to reopen debate about post-coloniality and settler societies. It probably won't achieve such a grand aim by itself. But what it will do, or should do, is encourage a reassessment of colonial relations in New Zealand – a more modest, but none-the-less very considerable achievement.