

The Contemporary Maori Art Movement:

During the first 100 years of colonialism in New Zealand traditional Maori art was largely unacknowledged as having any of the properties of European fine art and was neglected as such. The traditional arts became colonised with event of early consumerism and the old traditions become infused with European additives, 'text and the written language found it's way into carving, tukukuku, kete and whariki designs ...(and later) kowhaiwhai designs become multicoloured, carvings were simplified and paints were applied to carvings.'¹

It was not until the 1940's that traditional Maori art was viewed from a fine art perspective. Theo Schoon (1915 -1985), noted as the first European *Pakeha* artist to study Maori art, drew attention to the artistic quality of Maori rock drawings pointing out the parallels with the formal principles underlying the work of European Modernist masters such as Joan Miro and Paul Klee.

Schoon produced several paintings based on the Maori *Koru* design which in turn influenced the work of one of New Zealand's first formalist abstract artists, Gordon Walters (1919-1995).² In the late 1940's Walters developed the genre of his oeuvre based on a synthesis of traditional Maori patterns, especially the Koru design, and the principles of European modern art, bringing New Zealand artistic 'backgrounds – Polynesian and European together'.³

But it was not until the 1950's that the artist and educator Gordon Tovey (1901-1974), as supervisor of Arts and Crafts for the Department of Education, sowed the seeds for a contemporary Maori arts movement in New Zealand. Tovey 'embraced a holistic cosmology of earth, people, mythology and the spiritual (believing) ...in the natural ability of people ...to give expression and meaning to everyday life through song, dance, music, craft and art'.⁴

Tovey's concepts were to form the foundation of the Northern Maori Project which Tovey initiated as an experimental education programme in Northland, which eventually led to Maori arts and craft being given a place of importance in the development of the New Zealand Arts Curriculum.

During this time Tovey employed young Maori artists as Arts and Craft Specialists; including Ralph Hotere, Para Matchitt, Muru Walters(both artist and former All Black), Cliff Whiting and Fred Graham. He encouraged these future master artists to draw on their Maori heritage to develop a personal contemporary genre. To this end, and 'to find appropriate ways to teach sufficient skills to allow New Zealand children to experience for themselves various types of Maori Arts and Crafts'⁵, Tovey set up a Maori arts and crafts course in Ruatoria in March 1960. Pine Taiapa, New Zealand master carver was one of the guest instructors covering the historical and local

¹ Quote: Ngahiraka Mason cited in N. Mason & M. Kisler (Cat.Ed's) (2001) *Purangaiaho-Seeing Clearly* Auckland; and: Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki Catalogue. Pg . 22.

²Reference: Dunn. M. (2003) *New Zealand Painting*. Auckland: Auckland University Press. Pg.190.

³ Quote: M.Dunn, cited in Bell. L. (1980) . *The Maori in European Art*. Auckland: A.H. & A.W. reed Ltd. Pg. 132.

⁴ Quote: Henderson. C. (1998) *A Blaze of Colour*. Christchurch: Hazard Press. Pg.139.

⁵ Quote; C. Henderson. (1998) *A Blaze of Colour*. Christchurch: Hazard Press Ltd.

aspects of Maori craft and the emergence of a contemporary Maori art movement began.

The influence of the Northern Maori project and the young Maori Arts and Craft specialists was soon felt in the classrooms and a new generation of young Maori artists slowly appeared on the New Zealand Contemporary art scene. These young artists used their newly acquired knowledge to explore the many dimensions of customary art. As mediators of two worlds, both European and Maori, they experimented and set new standards articulating modernist concerns alongside cultural inspirations.⁶

In 1987 the Maori language was declared an official language of New Zealand. Also at this time, in 1986/7 *Te Maori: Maori Art from New Zealand Collection* went on tour internationally and a new generation of Maori artists both confronted and engaged in the production of contemporary fine art, often standing alongside the political activists championing Maori rights. Two such artists of that generation whose work engaged the political were Robert Jahnke (B.1951) Ngati Porou and Emily Karaka (b.1952) Ngai Tai, Waiohau.

The drift of Maori to the cities of New Zealand in the mid-twentieth century had produced a generation of Maori that was dislocated from their whakapapa and traditional heritage creating a new urbanised Maori youth culture. Fortunately the official recognition of the Maori language and its renewed use created a path of access to past traditions. A new generation of urban Maori artists began to experiment with a wide range of Maori art forms. Through the use of new media and a post-modern visual art language, they have delivered to New Zealand's multicultural society, of this the third millennium, the rich multimedia art forms that the exhibition *Tau ana!* celebrates. Cool aye!

Today many contemporary Maori artists are recognised both nationally and internationally. There are too many to list here and their numbers continue to grow as many talented young Maori artists continue to emerge from our art schools.

Maree Saunders

⁶ Reference: N.Mason- Purangiiaho_ Seeing Clearly. Pg.25