



2.3 Introduction to Pacific Collections: Material Culture of New Zealand



The following summary provides an overview of material you are likely to come across in Scottish collections. These are written according to island region.

New Zealand/Aotearoa

New Zealand has two main islands: the North Island and the South Island. In Māori these are named *Te ika a Māui* (the fish of Māui) and *Te waka Māui* (the canoe of Māui) respectively. There are a number of smaller islands off the coast and politically New Zealand encompasses the dependent territory of Tokelau, the self-governing states of Cook Islands and Niue, and the Ross Dependency in Antarctica.

New Zealand was settled by Polynesians around 750 years ago from which a distinct Māori culture and identity developed. During the 19th century Aotearoa was used in reference to the North Island but today it is the name given to the whole of the country, usually translated as 'land of the long white cloud'.

The first European to visit New Zealand was Dutch explorer Abel Tasman in 1642. In 1769 Captain Cook mapped the New Zealand coastline. European settlement grew immensely with the establishment of the New Zealand Association (later the New Zealand Company) in 1837, which aimed to create a British colony in the Pacific. A series of events ultimately led to the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 proclaiming New Zealand as a British sovereignty. This contentious document was written in both English and Māori but there were significant differences between the two, misleading the 45 Māori chiefs and subsequent others who signed it. By 1900 the majority of the population were of European descent and the Māori community had been very badly affected by the introduction of disease. In 1907 New Zealand became a self-governing dominion of the British Empire, and in 1947 the country adopted the Statute of Westminster, confirming that the British parliament could no longer legislate for New Zealand without consent. The Waitangi Tribunal was established in 1975 to investigate any breaches of the Treaty and it was enabled to investigate historic grievances in 1985.

The history of Scots in New Zealand has led to Scottish museums caring for a number of important Māori cultural artefacts, or *taonga* (treasures). There are some rare items: Perth Museum and Art Gallery care for the only known surviving cloak of *kākāpō* (night parrot) feathers; and both the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow and Glasgow Museums have examples of freestanding Māori figure carving. Other artefacts more likely to be seen in collections can be identified by some striking characteristics.

Wood Carving

Māori wood carving displays diverse designs and styles depending on the individual carver, however there are certain details to look out for that make carving recognisable as Māori more generally. Carvings often include one of two main types of figure representing ancestors. The first is a stylised image sometimes depicted with a protruding pointed tongue. The other figure is more human in form and will usually have designs on the face and body representing *moko* (tattooing). The spiral, usually formed with double lines, is a common motif, as is a design in the form of small repeating notches called *pakati* (a dog tooth pattern). Carving may be highlighted by red pigment which is associated with Māori mythology and has sacred significance.

You will find Māori carving on the following types of artefact:

Treasure Boxes (*waka huia* or *papa hou*)

Personal ornaments associated with individuals of status absorb the supernatural power (*mana*) of their wearers and must be carefully handled. This particularly applies to those worn on the head, the most sacred part of the body for Māori. To contain ornaments and other valuable objects, carvers made treasure boxes to hang from the rafters of houses to keep their powerful contents out of reach. As the boxes were more often seen from below, their undersides are extensively carved. A rectangular form of box called *papa hou* is a northern variation of the more widespread canoe shaped *waka huia*.



Māori treasure box (*papa hou*) of carved wood, New Zealand, collected pre 1820. *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 4148)*



Underside of a Māori treasure box (*waka huia*) of carved wood, New Zealand, collected pre 1820. *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 4026)*



waka huia treasure box, New Zealand, late 19th or early 20th century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1948.265)*

House panels

These are associated with the architecture of a Māori meeting house (*marae*) and vary in size depending on which part of the *marae* they come from. Carved panels are also used for the exterior of store houses.

Carved panel from a Māori *marae* with haliotis shell (*paua*) inlay, New Zealand, National Museums Scotland (A.1939.164)



Canoes (*waka*)

Canoes (*waka*) occupy an important place in Māori material culture. Some *waka* have chiefly symbolism. War canoes (*waka taua*) can reach up to 30m in length and exhibit elaborately carved prow and stern posts as well as carved wash strakes on either side. Feathers are also used to adorn these large and impressive vessels. Creating a *waka taua* is an involved and particular process involving many men. Fishing canoes are much less elaborate but built to the same design. The size of canoes meant that acquisition of a complete full size canoe was unlikely but *waka* models of varying scale and parts of *waka* such as the prow or stern posts were popular with collectors in the 19th century. Carved wooden canoe bailers and carved and/or decorated paddles associated with *waka taua* also appear in museum collections.



Pre-1827 model, part *waka taua* and part fishing canoe, which was restored and modified by contemporary Māori artist George Nuku using acrylic, National Museums Scotland (A.UC.767)

Weapons

Māori clubs exhibit similar carving styles to those described above, particularly *taiaha* clubs which take the form of long shafts with a carved figure at the top terminating in a point. The carving can be seen with haliotis shell inlay in the eyes and the top of the weapon is sometimes adorned with feathers or dog hair.



Detail of head of a *taiaha* staff club, New Zealand, 18th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery* (1978.74)

A *tewhatewha* is a wooden club with a long narrow shaft and head, resembling that of an axe, with a curved lower edge.



Tewhatewha with feathers and carved sections on shaft, New Zealand, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland* (A.993.2)

Short weapons used in hand-to-hand combat composed of stone (either grey or green), whale bone or wood were popularly collected in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The broad term for a hand weapon is *patu* and is used interchangeably in museum documentation to describe any short hand club. A *mere* is the most commonly seen type of Māori hand weapon in collections. It has a smooth, broad, flattened blade tapering to a handle with pierced hole for a strap and generally several carved ridges.



Mere of stone, New Zealand, 18th or early 19th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery* (1978.535)

A *Kotiate* type of hand club has a wide flat blade with carved notches in the centre of either edge so that it appears to have a waist. They were historically held by chiefs while making speeches. Another form of hand weapon is a *wahaika*, the blade of which curves to one side with a carved figure within the curve.

Textiles

Cloaks, capes and mats take different forms but all are woven of the inner fibre of New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*) with a twining technique originally used for fishing nets and traps. Māori weavers have long incorporated feathers, particularly those of the kiwi, into their work and later began to use brightly coloured wool. Weaving is a highly developed artistic practice that received a revival in the mid-20th century and continues today. Cloaks and capes would have been worn by high status individuals and therefore would absorb powerful *mana*.



Māori cloak of *Phormium tenax* fully covered with kākāpō feathers, New Zealand, collected pre 1845, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery* (1978.73)



Detail of Māori cloak of *Phormium tenax* with inclusions of red wool, New Zealand, collected pre 1845, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery*

Fish hooks

A distinctive type of Māori fish hook is a composite type with a bone barb lashed onto a wooden back which is lined on the inside with haliotis (*paua*) shell. The iridescent blue colour of the *paua* shell makes these very recognisable as Māori. Fish hooks can also be found that incorporate carving in the distinctive styles described above.



Composite fish hook, New Zealand, *National Museums Scotland* (V.2007.300)

Further reading:

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Hakiwai, A (2008), *Toi ora: ancestral Māori treasures*. New Zealand: Te Papa Press

Henare, A (2005), *Museums, Anthropology and Imperial Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Museum of New Zealand (2004), *Icons ngā taonga: from the collections of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa*. Wellington: Te papa press

Sanborn, G (2011), *Whipscars and tattoos: The last of the Mohicans, Moby-Dick, and the Māori*. Oxford: Oxford University Press