



NEW ZEALAND  
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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## REVIEWS

**Roger Neich, *Painted Histories: Early Maori Figurative Painting*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1994. 330pp. \$79.95**

For those interested in the visual arts of the Maori, numerous publications and articles dealing with woodcarving, rock art, weaving and moko can be readily found in any library or bookshop. The one major exception to this has been on Maori figurative painting. This particularly visual art form, which can be seen predominantly on many marae along the eastern side of the North Island, was largely dismissed by such scholars as Te Rangi Hiroa, Apirana Ngata and Augustus Hamilton. The one exception was James Cowan who did write about figurative painting although he did not appear to have talked to any of the actual artists.

One possible reason for this apparent dismissal of figurative art is that it was thought to be tainted with European ideas, which in turn meant that it was somehow degenerate. Due to Roger Neich's thorough twenty years of research it has become obvious that this art form was much more widespread and popular than previously realised.

Figurative painting arose at a time when Maori society was undergoing enormous change and having to deal with a raft of new issues. Its development can be seen to derive from the earlier practice of kowhaiwhai which was practised on house timbers and canoe paddles. However, the depiction of animate objects and scenes was most closely associated with the charismatic leader Te Kooti Rikirangi and his Ringatu Church.

The use of figurative painting had many advantages over the more traditional art forms such as wood carving. For example the ritual observances of tapu did not appear to be as rigid and the paintings could be quickly installed and, at some later date, just as quickly changed.

Neich begins by reviewing painting in traditional Maori culture such as rock painting, body and face painting, and painting on wood. This sets the framework for the later discussion on figurative painting.

For me one of the most interesting sections was the review of the painted canoe paddles. These paddles are a particularly rare form of artefact with only twenty-one known from a global survey of museums and another seven known only from illustrations by early European explorers. These artefacts provide a wonderful snapshot on the placement and use of kowhaiwhai as it occurred during the eighteenth century, although the example from Monck's Cave would indicate that such artforms have a much earlier origin.

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In Chapters 4 and 5 the reader is taken on a journey through the development of the meeting house as we know it today and the symbolism of such structures and the artworks contained within. This is followed by a chapter which examines early figurative drawings which on paper, as Neich points out, are relatively rare. The earliest of these drawings depict moko, reflecting its importance as a mark of identity and status. These were followed by naturalistic drawings and then later, in the 1860s, narrative type drawings. These were the forerunner for the naturalistic paintings which were to appear in houses such as Te Tokanganui-a-Noho at Te Kuiti in the early 1870s.

Neich has been able to identify three phases of figurative painting. The first covers the 1870-80 period, beginning with Te Tokanganui-a-Noho, and is characterised by 'mainly naturalistic and some carving-derived paintings'. The second phase, 1885-93, is kowhaiwhai-dominant while the third phase, 1890-1930, is naturalistic painting dominant. Each of these phases along with their 'type' designs are analyzed in detail.

A particularly useful section of the book will be found in Appendix V. Here, houses with figurative painting, are listed along with a brief history (where known) and descriptions of the paintings associated with each. This will provide ready access for students and tribal experts alike.

The casual reader may find some parts of the text a little heavy going but my advice would be to persevere. The thorough nature of this book makes it an ideal, if not an essential, text for a course dealing with Maori visual arts.

The book is copiously illustrated with both colour and black and white illustrations, many of which appear for the first time in published form. These all supplement the text and illustrate the range and vigour of the art works. Neich states in his preface that at the very least the book "will help to make people aware of the huge diversity and complexity of these Maori painting traditions." To my mind he has succeeded admirably in this respect. It is indeed a scholarly publication.

For anyone with an interest in Maori visual arts I would strongly urge them to purchase a copy of this landmark publication.

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Taranaki Museum

**Sites and Monuments: National Archaeological Records.** Edited by C.U. Larsen. National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen, 1992. 250 pages.

Papers on archaeological record systems usually do not make very engrossing reading, even for people with a direct interest in the subject. This collection is an exception. It had its origins in the first National Archaeological Records Conference at Copenhagen in May 1991. Information about 'what is where' is vital for heritage management, particularly in areas experiencing rapid development. Judging from the contributions to this volume, many countries have completed, or are just now completing, programmes to get some or all the information that they had previously stored on paper into electronic form. Most are now actively looking to develop their systems to cater to growing demands for more detailed information.

The book has chapters on record systems in Denmark, Norway, Poland, Germany, Netherlands, France, England, Scotland, Ireland, and the USA. Denmark has a long tradition of making surveys of prehistoric sites and finds. A nationwide survey (not the first) was initiated in 1873 and took 60 years to complete. Much of the information is only now being made available in electronic form. The Danish experience is clearly that these things are not done overnight. After low levels of recording in Denmark in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a big increase in the 1980s when nearly 20,000 sites were located. Over 130,000 sites have been recorded to date, to at least a preliminary level. Few survey and record systems have a history as complex as this, but an understanding of the history is crucial to a proper interpretation of the records. This is true of the Danish system, and of all the others described here.

The New Zealand archaeological record system (NZAA Site Recording Scheme) would not look out of place amongst the record systems described in this book, for all the institutional and legal differences between countries. My distinct impression is, however, that New Zealand is lagging well behind developments elsewhere. Since 1982, when development of the electronic database (Central Index of New Zealand Archaeological Sites or CINZAS) was completed and was up and running routinely, there has been little effort to develop our system further. There is still a heavy reliance on the paper records, and the system depends on the detailed knowledge of a small group of people to interpret data and identify other relevant material for the user. That can be seen either as a strength or as a weakness. The trend now, however, is very definitely towards direct access to, and interpretation of, information by the users themselves. This trend exposes some inadequacies in the existing New Zealand system.

The demand for better information, and, in particular, for better definition of the nature and extent of sites, is not being matched in New Zealand with the resources needed to produce the level of detail required. The Auckland

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Regional Council is developing a more detailed heritage information system but resources for the further development of the national system are hard to obtain in an era when shrinking budgets are the norm. Making do with what already exists, and even getting by with less, is the commonplace situation in most institutions.

Some countries are still struggling with the difficulties of integrating information held by different heritage organisations and are already facing the prospect of a further proliferation of a myriad of independent special-purpose databases. New Zealand has avoided the former, and is doing its best to cope with the latter by encouraging use of the NZAA Site Recording Scheme as the umbrella system. Organisationally, the national record system here is unique in the way it has been run as a co-operative venture. If there is a disadvantage, it is that its success has caused it to be taken for granted and it has not had the resources it needs to develop further. In many countries, the development of national archaeological record systems has been linked to programmes of fieldwork to add and upgrade information. This is another area where the effort has faltered badly in New Zealand over recent years.

The authors present a range of information about the record systems they are writing about. Some comparisons will illustrate this. The ORACLE relational database is used to support a number of record systems, as it is also in New Zealand. The National Archaeological Record system (Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England) contains nearly 150,000 records, over 3 times more than the New Zealand figure. Some 53% of the 20,000 sites in the Central Archaeological Archive in the Netherlands are findspots and this category also figures prominently in the County Sites and Monuments Records in England: the New Zealand figure is just 3%. For all the differences in emphasis and detail, it is the similarities which are most striking. Each country has different legislation and organisational structures, but inventory is a basic need, and heritage programmes ultimately stand or fall on the adequacy of this work.

Many papers discuss the new technologies, including Global Positioning Systems, graphical user interfaces, and GIS. Harris and Lock, in particular, lay out the dilemma for systems like the New Zealand one in relation to GIS. They point out that GIS has no advantages over traditional digital mapping systems "if sites continue to be recorded solely by single point centroids". This does not mean that existing information cannot be used by a GIS. The information is, however, not in a form which allows use of the main feature of GIS: the ability to show the topology of features. It is not a simple or inexpensive task to convert an existing database to a GIS format. Many overseas organisations apparently plan to use their existing relational databases alongside a GIS, at least in the short term, rather than develop a proper GIS capacity immediately. Harris and Lock suggest that this compromise will have its costs.

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Whatever the advantages of GIS, there is little prospect of converting the existing New Zealand database to a full GIS format. The cost, and organisational and political circumstances, are not propitious.

This book provides a standard against which to set the New Zealand experience. So much of the overseas experience is germane to our situation: the contexts are so different, but the responses have been all so remarkably similar.

Tony Walton