

Discover...

MAORI DOOR CARVING

The Museum's staff take justifiable pride in the detailed information about the collections held in the manual and computer databases. Ironically, one collection for which it would be difficult, if not impossible, to argue that the documentation is of high quality is the eponymous founding collection. Most of the objects in General Pitt Rivers' collection were obtained by him at second- or third-hand from travellers, dealers, and auction houses. While he seems to have been careful to record any information provided by the collector, dealer, or sale room, in most cases this was precious little. Rarely did he research any further. He wanted to fill the gaps he perceived in the evolutionary series he constructed, and was not interested in the provenance, original use, or meaning of the actual objects.



▲ Carved door from a raised storehouse, with characteristic Maori designs; from New Zealand. Part of the founding collection; 1884.62.36

A good example is provided by the work of Maori art illustrated here, which is on permanent display in the 'Maori and Melanesian Sculpture' case in the Court. The earliest record for the object held by the Museum is in the 'blue book', in which staff at Bethnal Green Museum recorded each object as it arrived on loan from the General in 1874: 'human figure carved in wood - the hands having three fingers. N. Zealand'. This was not much improved upon in the entry in the 'delivery catalogue' compiled at South Kensington Museum as the collections were packed up for delivery to Oxford in 1884: 'large carved wood figure'; nor in the entry in the Museum's accessions book for the founding collection (compiled in the 1920s): 'large carved figure with protruding tongue: moko [i.e. tattoo-style designs] carved all over. New Zealand'.

Unsurprisingly, visiting experts have improved upon these descriptions. Some years ago the Maori specialist Judith Binney identified the carving as a panel from the doorway to a raised storehouse or pataka. The Museum's records were amended and an illustrated label provided in the case to explain how this type of object would have been seen in its original context.

The label also includes a reference to the classic work on Maori storehouses where interested readers can find out how such structures were used to keep preserved fish, meat, and other foodstuffs and to store mats, weapons, agricultural tools, fishing equipment, and so on. They can also learn how raised storehouses were the most elaborate structures in a chief's village and designed to advertise his status and power: both the forms of the structure and the carvings were deeply symbolic. Even the materials used could themselves have histories and meanings. For example, storehouses were sometimes built with timbers cut from the war canoes of defeated enemies. Thus, thanks to Binney's identification, Museum staff were able to provide much more information and guide interested visitors to the relevant literature.

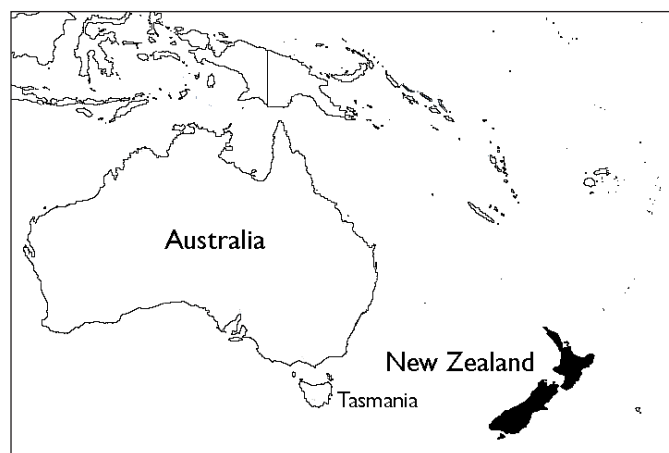
But this was all very general. Museum staff still did not know anything about this particular doorway panel. Until, that is, another Maori specialist, David Simmons, published the results of his researches. To understand how Simmons managed to discover so much, it is important to know that many Maori artefacts, including many in museum collections, are taonga, or treasures, with their own names, histories, and accumulated mana or power. These names and histories have been passed on orally from generation to generation and continue to be preserved today. Drawing on his researches, Simmons has identified: (1) when the panel was made - the late eighteenth century; (2) the name and area of the artist who carved it - Tuuwharenihoheke of Te Aitanga a Mahaki of Poverty Bay; (3) the name of the storehouse from which it comes - Te Kairungo; and (4) its history - 'It was taken back to Nuhaka in Ngaati Kahungunu territory, then in 1820 was gifted to Te Aaitanga a Mahaki hapuu or section, Ngaa Ariki at Mangatuu... About 1860 it was given to Aharore at Nuhaka as a gift for the marriage of Riria Tipuna, his sister. In 1889 on the death of Te Paea Epihaima, a close relative, Te Whaanau a Apanui asked for it to be returned to Maraenui.... It was placed in a covered pit where it remained until about 1910 when it and other treasures with it were found to have gone.'

While I would not claim that this is anything other than a very exceptional example of the sort and amount of information that researchers can discover about dusty objects in old museums, it does show what may be discovered 'in the field' - even about objects that were removed to museums more than a century ago. However, as you may have spotted, there is a problem. The new knowledge Simmons has provided does not fit with the old knowledge held in the Museum's records.

We know the panel came to Oxford in 1884. Moreover, we know that General Pitt Rivers sent it for display at Bethnal Green in 1874. Indeed, the date 'March 15 1867' is inscribed on the back of the panel, suggesting it was in European hands then, 33 years before Simmons says it was buried. Has Simmons simply got it wrong? Or are things more complicated than they appear?

In a recent letter, Simmons suggested two possible explanations. First, that it was the mana, or power, of Te Kairungo that was exchanged between families rather than the storehouse itself. And second, that the panel became separated from the rest of Te Kairungo by 1867 and thus has a different later history. This second explanation appeals to me, for the panel is separated from the rest of the storehouse and must have become so by or in 1867.

There is one further clue that may help to resolve this puzzle. Also inscribed on the back of the panel are the initials 'T.H'. Assuming these refer to a previous owner, I have two likely candidates. The first (suggested by Peter Gathercole) is Dr Thomas Hocken, a Dunedin-based doctor who made a large collection of books, documents, and artefacts. The second (suggested by Judith Binney and currently my favourite) is Colonel Thomas Haultain, who in 1867 was in charge of the military occupation of the Poverty Bay area. It is known that other Maori carvings were confiscated from there at this time. Might Haultain have forcibly removed the panel on March 15 1867?



As things stand, the panel has an uncertain history. It is certainly Maori, certainly a door-panel from a storehouse, and certainly made by 1867. I have no reason to doubt it was carved in the late 18th century by Tuuwharenihoheke for the storehouse Te Kairungo, nor the early part of its history recounted by Simmons. What seems clear, however, is that by 1867 the panel had become separated and acquired (forcibly or otherwise) by a European. Taken together, Simmons's research in New Zealand and collections history research at the Museum have added greatly to our knowledge of this work of Maori art - while, paradoxically, creating a sense of mystery around it.

Further Reading

Simmons' account of the door is to be found in 'The Door into the World', in Baessler Archiv, n.s., Vol. XLV, pp. 145-57.

The classic account of Maori storehouses was provided by Elsdon Best in *Maori Storehouses and Kindred Structures: Houses, Platforms, Racks, and Pits Used for Storing Food, etc.* (Dominion Museum Bulletin No. 5), Wellington: John Mackay, Government Printer (1916).

A more easily accessible, though brief, account is given in D. C. Starzecka (ed.), *Maori Art and Culture*, London: British Museum Press (1996), pp. 102-4.

The objects featured in this Introductory guide can be found at the following locations:

Court (ground floor)

Case 5A - Maori and Melanesia Sculpture

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