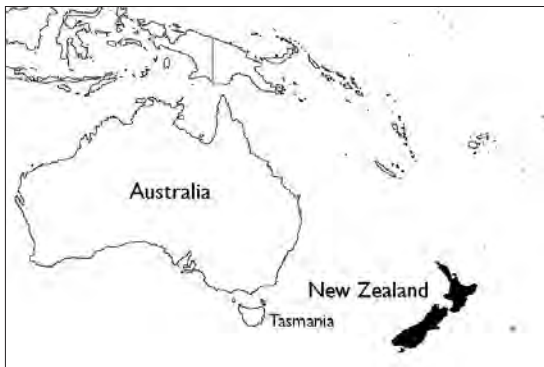


Body Arts

Ta Moko

The man pictured here is a Maori from Aotearoa (the Maori word for New Zealand). The marks on his face are called *ta moko*. Each individual's ta moko is unique and sacred. The traditional way of applying ta moko to the face was



to dip a narrow blade in black pigment and then tap the blade with a mallet to chisel deep incisions into the skin. This process left permanent grooves in the skin.

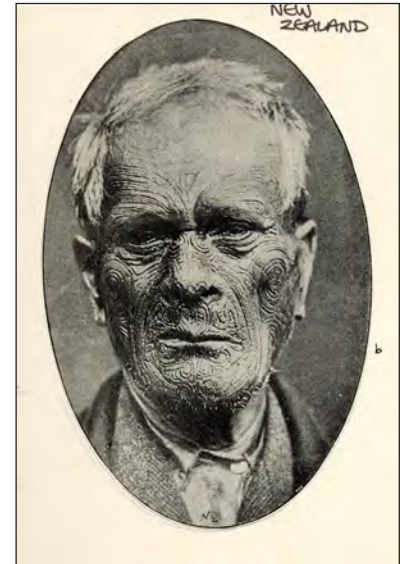


Photo of Maori man
1998.243.10.2

Caterpillars were used to make the pigment for ta moko. They were killed by a fungal parasite that grew inside them. The dead caterpillars were dried, burnt, and made into a powder. Pigment could also be made from tree resin. The tree resin was burnt to soot, mixed with plant sap or animal fat and shaped into balls. The pigment was then stored in containers made from wood or pumice stone. These were highly prized heirlooms that were kept by families for generations.

The traditional form of ta moko was practised by men who were both skilled artists and religious ritual experts called *tohunga*. A woman's moko, which covered the chin and lips, could take one or two days to complete. A man's moko, which covered the whole face, was done in stages over several years.

Having the moko done was painful. It often released large quantities of blood that the *tohunga* had to wipe away in order to see what he was doing. Some women who had the chisel moko in the early twentieth century told how the operation hurt so much they struggled and had to be held down.

During the operation and afterwards, while the scars were healing, the person being tattooed was in a state of *tapu* (taboo). This meant that they were prohibited from looking in the mirror, from sexual activity, and from washing the affected area. They were told that their moko would fade away if they did these things. They were also forbidden to touch their own food. This was to prevent infection, as it was

understood that greasy food carried disease. In order to eat, food was mashed up or liquidized and fed through a special feeding-funnel.

The practices described above no longer take place. Men stopped having ta moko applied with the traditional chisel method around the middle of the nineteenth century. Women continued to have it done into the twentieth century. Since the late twentieth century, some Maori have begun wearing ta moko again as an assertion of their cultural identity. A few Maori tattoo artists are reviving traditional methods of applying ta moko, but most use electric machines. The woman in this photograph has been tattooed with an electric machine. Although the designs are the same, the surface of the skin remains smooth.



Photo of Vicki Te Amo, NZ, by Margaret Kawharu 1993

Who wore moko and why?

Until the early twentieth century when it was still widely practised, there were many customs associated with moko. Records of these customs have been lost as older generations of Maori people have died. This means there are some things about early ta moko that are not known. For example, some people argue that moko was only worn by people of high status, whilst others say most Maori men and women wore it.

People have described wearing moko as like having your name written on your face in beautiful writing. At one time, each person's moko was different. In the nineteenth century some chiefs drew their moko on official documents in place of a signature. Some say that even a man's tribal affiliations, status, job, accomplishments, whether he was married, and information about his parents were all recorded in his moko.

In the 1970s, Maori women who had had moko applied in the early twentieth century told of their reasons for having it. Some said that they wanted to show their mothers that the Maori tradition would not die. One woman said, 'a Maori lady was not a lady unless she had a moko' and that she 'felt bare walking around without one'. Another woman said, 'this was my powder and lipstick'.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century Maori people who wear moko say they are asserting their identity as Maori in a world that is rapidly changing. Others say that without moko they do not feel complete.

Further Reading

Further information can be found in the Body Arts Gallery and on our Body Arts website: <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/bodyarts>

FRIEDLANDER, MARTI, and MICHAEL KING, *Moko: Maori tattooing in the twentieth century*, Auckland: David Bateman (1999).

Objects featured in this fact sheet can be found in the following cases:

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L34A-L34B

Fact Sheet compiled by:
Jennifer Peck, Project Assistant
DCF Redisplay Project
2002

Revised by:
Bryony Reid, Senior Project Assistant (Interpretation)
DCF What's Upstairs?
October 2005

Edited 2010