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# HE TATAITANGA AHUA TOI

*the house that Riwai built/a continuum of Maori art*



*Ko Taharoa te tangata*

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

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Robert Hans George Jahnke  
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## *Abstract*

He taitanga ahua toi

Prior to the 1950s, visual culture within tribal environments could be separated into customary and non-customary. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, customary visual culture maintained visual correspondence with prior painted and carved models of the pre-contact period. In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, non-customary painted and carved imagery inspired by European naturalism informed tribal visual culture. This accommodation of European imagery and practice was trans-cultural in its translation to tribal environments.

In the 1960s, an innovative trans-customary art form evolved outside tribal environments, fusing customary visual culture and modernism. This trans-customary art form, which maintained visual empathy with customary form of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was introduced into the tribal environment, initially, in a painted mural in 1973, and subsequently in a multimedia mural in 1975. In 1989 and 1990, this trans-customary Maori art practice informed the art of the Taharora Project at Mihikoinga marae in Ohineakai. In this Project, the 1970s trans-customary Maori art precedents were extended with non-customary form and practice.

The thesis employs *taitanga kaupapa toi* as a paradigm for Maori cultural relativity and relevance en-framing form, content and genealogy. Annexed to this paradigm are a range of methods: a *taitanga reo* method for interpreting Maori language texts; a *taitanga korero* method, conjoining a kaupapa Maori and an iconographic approach, for interpreting meaning in tribal visual culture, and a *taitanga whakairo* method, incorporating stylistic analysis as formal sequence, semiology and intrinsic perception, for analysing a continuum of stylistic development from the Rawheoro School of carving to the Taharora Project. The Taharora Project constitutes the case study where tribal visual culture and contemporary art within tribal environments are contextualised in a trans-cultural continuum.

The critical question that underpins this thesis is how do form, content and genealogy contribute to art that resonates with Maori? The thesis concludes that trans-cultural practice in contemporary art can resonate with Maori if the art maintains visual correspondence or visual empathy with customary tribal form. In their absence, cultural resonance can be achieved through a grounding of the content, informing the art, in a paradigm of Maori cultural relativity and relevance, a *taitanga kaupapa toi*. The genealogy of the artist is a further determinant for resonance.

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Mai i te whare tawhito ki te whare hou

*Kikorangi te rangi, kikorangi te moana, kikorangi te whare  
Horahia te hinapouri i tou wehenga e Riwai  
Penei nga whare onamata kua ngaro  
Nahau i mahue te ira tangata  
Haere atu e Riwia ki te poho o Papatuanuku  
Takahia e koe te ara whanui a Tane  
He oha o tou tipuna a Maui  
Te ara i takahia e te mano  
Ahakoa, wahangu tou reo  
Haruru ana i a matou ngakau  
Pena nga reo i ro tou whare  
He wa tangi he wa maumahara  
Ka wheoro nga ngaru ki Tangitu i tou wehenga  
Papaki tai pena nga kopararua o Pakanui  
Wahangu nga kahawai ki Otekara  
Pukupu nga mara ki Ngararanui  
Koropuku te awa o Taiharakeke i nga roimata  
Kei whea koe e Riwai?  
Ngaro atu koe mai nga paharakeke o Ohineakai  
Maringi nga roimata ki tai i te muriwai ki Waipiro  
Ka rere ki raro te pouhaki ki Te Kiekie  
Wahangu tou reo i a Hinenuitepo  
Wheoro tonu tou reo i tou whare kikorangi  
He taonga tuku iho mo nga hunga ora*

I had always assumed that a Master of Visual Arts was the terminal degree for an artist until I became a staff member in the School of Maori Studies at Massey University under Professor Mason Durie in 1991. In time, I succumbed to his advice that a doctorate in philosophy should be my ultimate goal. Convinced, I enrolled in the doctoral programme in 1998 under the supervision of Professor Mason Durie and Dr Roger Neich. Coincidentally, it was the same year that my wife enrolled, and she, like any good academic citizen, finished before me.

A Fulbright Grant in 1998 allowed me to make a start on the doctorate at the University of Hawaii where I conscientiously completed three chapters and made a start on a number of incomplete chapters. My original aim was to interpret 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century tribal carving. My return from Hawaii in 1999 presaged an imminent completion of the thesis but art and teaching intervened. The thesis floundered, and my supervisors encouraged me to contemplate another plan of attack.

In 2001, I completed the Taharora Project, which I began in 1989. In my desire to provoke the conservative aesthetic sensibilities of Ngati Porou I decided to coat the façade of my ancestral house, commemorating the style of Riwai Pakerau, in blue paint. In 2002, I was requested to attend a Wananga at Mihikoinga marae at Ohineakai to justify my unconventional colour choice. The episode gave rise to the Ngai Taharora proverb '*Kikorangi te rangi, kikorangi te moana, kikorangi te whare*' – blue is the sky, blue is the sea, blue is the house. I was fortunate to win over the majority of the wananga attendees and the house remains blue to

this day. In a twist of fate, this episode provided a new form of attack for the thesis on ‘the house that Riwai built’.

In 2003, a Te Mata o Te Tau Postgraduate Scholarship provided the impetus to realise the new plan of attack, an opportunity to visit marae on the East Coast, respond to a *tono* (invitation) from Dr Pakariki Harrison, and visit a number of national museums. In the process, the original chapters fell by the wayside or were substantially rewritten to align with the new direction and new chapters evolved. While the previous plan focused on tribal carving of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the new plan positions tribal carving within a continuum of stylistic development from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Rawheoro style to the Taharora Project completed in the new millennium. I am indebted to my supervisors for their patience and guidance.

There are many others to whom I owe a debt of gratitude, in the fruition of *Te tataitanga ahua toi: the house that Riwai built*. First and foremost is my tipuna (ancestor) Riwai Pakerau who built the ancestral house Taharora that forms the locus of the Taharora Project, and whose *tataitanga whakairo* (style) forms a critical *tahu* (backbone) for this thesis. I acknowledge the late Waho Tibble as the *mangai korero* (the mouthpiece of kaumatua) from Ngai Taharora whose research informs the art of the Taharora Project. To the late Wiwi Henry and Tame Te Maro, whose ritual stewardship was invaluable for the cultural safety of the Taharora Project, you will always be remembered. I am indebted to Ngai Taharora, Te Whanau a Rakairoa and Te Whanau a Iritekura whose involvement and intervention in the Taharora Project ensured cultural accountability throughout its evolution. I remember my brother William and my grandmother Merekuia McIlroy who passed away during the early phase of the Project. I also pay tribute to my grandmother who planted the seed that led to the enrichment of the house that her tipuna built. I acknowledge the subsequent passing of my grandfather, Jim McIlroy, my granduncle Hiwi Maraki and grandaunt Madeline Maraki whose frequent visits to Mihikoinga marae during the Taharora Project in 1989 and 1990 enriched the art in narratives of residence on the Ohineakai Block. To the *ringa wera* (chefs) whose nourishment of body enriched the mind I salute you.

Waiariki Polytechnic in Rotorua deserves special mention because they allowed me to undertake the Taharora Project with staff and students while teaching at the Polytechnic in 1989 and 1990. To all the staff and students whose contribution was immeasurable I am forever grateful as I am to the staff and students of the School of Maori Studies at Massey University in Palmerston North who contributed to the completion of the Project in 2001.

I honour the conceptual contribution to this thesis of the pioneers of the contemporary Maori art movement, particularly Arnold Wilson, Cliff Whiting, Para Matchitt, and Sandy Adsett whose influence and guidance has shaped my direction as an artist and educator, and whose trans-customary practice is foundational in this thesis. I owe special thanks to Robyn Kahukiwa whose work provides a conceptual *karanga* that allows the thesis to navigate a *kaupapa toi* approach to research. To my mentor, master carver Dr Pakariki Harrison of Ngati

Porou, who invited me to spend time with him at Kennedy's Bay during the evolution of this thesis, I am forever grateful for your knowledge, wisdom and your willingness to act as a reader for my thesis.

At the core of the thesis are the tribal carvings in national and international museums that provide the raw data for stylistic analysis and interpretation, and the matauranga Maori on which this thesis is grounded. I acknowledge the carvers of these *taonga tuku iho* (inherited treasures) and pay special tribute to Hoani Ngatai, Hone Taahu and Hone Ngatoto as carvers of the Iwirakau style who worked with Riwai Pakerau. Of course, I thank the respective institutions for allowing me access to the Maori collections where these significant *taonga* are housed.

Last and by no means least, I acknowledge the support of my wife and friend Dr Huia Tomlins-Jahnke whose academic rigour has been exemplary if not inimitable. And of course, there is my daughter Shelley who I hope will follow in her mother's footsteps rather than those of a procrastinating artist.

To my mother *Harata Takarure McIlroy-Jahnke* – I dedicate this thesis to you.

# Contents

<b>Chapter One</b>	1-11
<i>He tataitanga whakawhiti: a trans-cultural lineage-introduction</i>	
<b>Chapter Two</b>	12-42
<i>Karanga: the first voice heard</i>	12
<i>He tataitanga karanga: the significance of the first voice</i>	13
<i>He tataitanga kaupapa toi: a paradigm of Maori relativity and relevance</i>	17
<i>Te Tataitanga Ahua Toi: setting in order the form of art</i>	26
<i>He tataitanga reo: a Maori linguistic method</i>	28
<i>He tataitanga ahua: Maori form examined</i>	31
<i>He tataitanga whakairo: a method for stylistic analysis</i>	33
<i>He tataitanga korero: towards interpretation</i>	37
<i>He tataitanga whakawhiti: a trans-cultural framework</i>	38
<i>Whakawhiti ahua: negotiating art and visual culture</i>	40
<b>Chapter Three</b>	43-70
<i>Mai i te Kore ki ahua: From the immaterial to form</i>	43
<i>Ko Ruaaumoko e ngunguru nei: the earthquake god rumbles</i>	45
<i>Nga tataitanga rua: a lineage of knowledge</i>	58
<i>Nga Tataitanga Po: the interface of darkness and enlightenment</i>	59
<i>Nga Tataitanga Kore: the interface of potential being and the search for knowledge</i>	53
<i>Whakawhiti korero: a summation</i>	67
<b>Chapter Four</b>	71-91
<i>Ko te ahua toi ko te ahua tiki: the form of art is the form of the tiki</i>	72
<i>Mai te ahua te ata: from shape to form</i>	73
<i>Ata: shape as non-corporeal reality</i>	74
<i>Hanga tangata: the making of humankind</i>	79
<i>Mai te ahua ki Tiki: from material reality to Tiki</i>	80
<i>Te Tatau-o-te-po: the portal to the spiritual dimension</i>	82
<i>Pae kura: the empowerment of humankind</i>	83
<i>Tikiahua: the generative essence of deity</i>	86
<i>Kurawaka: the procreative essence</i>	87
<i>Whakawhiti korero: a summation</i>	89
<b>Chapter Five</b>	92-120
<i>Ko te tataitanga korero o Tiki: interpreting the significance of Tiki</i>	92
<i>He tataitanga tiki: a tiki lineage</i>	95
<i>Te tataitanga o te manaia o te ngarara: the manaia connection</i>	98
<i>Te Tataitanga ira atua: the spiritual interconnection</i>	102
<i>Te Tataitanga wairua: the essence of the spirit</i>	104
<i>Whakaahua tiki: the manifestation of tiki</i>	107
<i>Whakawhiti korero: a summation</i>	117
<b>Chapter Six</b>	121-150
<i>Te tataitanga whare: setting the house in order</i>	121
<i>Te tataitanga o Te Pitau-a-Manaia: the Pitau-a-Manaia interpreted</i>	124
<i>Te tataitanga o te taowaru: the taowaru interpreted</i>	130
<i>Te tataitanga o te taratara a kae: the taratara a kae interpreted</i>	133
<i>Te tataitanga o te Pakake: the pakake interpreted</i>	135
<i>Nga momo whakairo: tribal carving styles revisited</i>	137
<i>Te Tataitanga o Rawheoro: the Rawheoro style re-contextualised</i>	139
<i>Te Tataitanga o Maraenui: the Maraenui carvings re-examined</i>	142
<i>Whakawhiti korero: a summation</i>	148

<b>Chapter Seven</b>	151-184
<i>Te taitanga whare o Riwai Pakerau: the house that Riwai built</i>	151
<i>Te taitanga o Hoani Ngatai: the legacy of Hoani Ngatai</i>	153
<i>Te taitanga o Iwirakau: the legacy of Iwirakau</i>	156
<i>Nga taitanga ahua toi o Pakerau: the form of Riwai Pakerau contextualised</i>	164
<i>Te taitanga o Hone Taahu ma: the legacy of Hone Taahu and Hone Ngatoto</i>	167
<i>Nga haehae o Pakerau: the carved pattern of Riwai Pakerau</i>	172
<i>Nga amo o Pakerau: the carved support posts of Riwai Pakerau</i>	178
<i>Nga raparapa o Pakerau: the carved bargeboard extensions of Riwai Pakerau</i>	179
<i>Nga taitanga whakawahi o Pakerau: the painting legacy of Riwai Pakerau</i>	181
<i>Whakawhiti korero: a summation</i>	182
<b>Chapter Eight</b>	185-214
<i>Te wananga ki ro whare: the house of learning</i>	185
<i>He ahuatanga whakama: a shameful circumstance</i>	188
<i>He taitanga whakawhiti: constructing a trans-cultural framework</i>	191
<i>Nga taitanga ki ro Taharora: genealogy visualised in Taharora whare nui</i>	192
<i>Nga Tataitanga tipuna: the ordering of ancestors</i>	199
<i>Nga Tataitanga o Awapururu ma: the placement of Awapururu and Tuere</i>	203
<i>Nga matauranga ki ro whare: the knowledge inside the house</i>	206
<i>Wahi Maori: the implication of a Maori site</i>	209
<i>Te poho o Taharora: the bosom of Taharora</i>	209
<i>Whakawhiti Korero: a summation</i>	212
<b>Chapter Nine</b>	215-244
<i>Te kai ki ro whare: the food of chiefs is discourse</i>	215
<i>Te taitanga mahi kai: the legacy of food gathers</i>	217
<i>He ahua whakawhiti: towards trans-cultural form</i>	221
<i>Te Tataitanga ahua o Hine Matakaikai: the legacy of form in Hine Matakaikai</i>	225
<i>Te wahanga tuatahi: the first carved relief layer translated</i>	232
<i>Te wahanga tuarua: the second carved relief layer translated</i>	235
<i>Te wahanga tuatoru: the third carved relief layer translated</i>	236
<i>Te wahanga tuawha: the fourth carved relief layer translated</i>	237
<i>Tikanga a tipuna: protocol of an ancestral house</i>	238
<i>Tikanga a mahi: protocol of production</i>	241
<i>Whakawhiti korero: a summation</i>	242
<b>Chapter Ten</b>	245-256
<i>Tuia nga here korero: Linking narratives</i>	245
<i>He taitanga whakairo: style revisited</i>	247
<i>He taitanga ahua: form revisited</i>	250
<i>He ara whakapapa: genealogy as a pathway</i>	251
<i>He taitanga korero: meaning revisited</i>	253
<i>Korero whakamutunga: Conclusion</i>	255
<b>Bibliography</b>	257-264



## *List of tables*

<i>Table 1: Tataitanga kaupapa Toi: Genealogical Table</i>	18
<i>Table 2: Tataitanga kaupapa Toi: Criteria of Maori resonance</i>	25
<i>Table 3: Nga tataitanga ahua toi</i>	31
<i>Table 4: Analytical Framework for Maori art</i>	39
<i>Table 5: Analytical Framework for Cultural Relativity and Relevance [i]</i>	39
<i>Table 6: The Rawheoro poupou style</i>	141-2
<i>Table 7: Mareanui pataka kuwaha</i>	144
<i>Table 8: Hauteananui a Tangaroa poupou style</i>	158-9
<i>Table 9: Karaitiana Takamoana carvings: stylistic variables</i>	162
<i>Table 10: Two-ridged haehae of Hone Taahu, Hone Ngatoto and Riwai Pakerau</i>	174-5
<i>Table 11: Riwai Pakerau style</i>	181
<i>Table 12: Painting practice of Riwai Pakerau</i>	181
<i>Table 13: Analytical Framework for Cultural Relativity and Relevance [ii]</i>	191
<i>Table 14: Whakapapa tipuna o Taharora</i>	201
<i>Table 15: Analytical Framework for Cultural Relativity and Relevance [iii]</i>	213-4
<i>Table 16: Analytical Framework for Cultural Relativity and Relevance [iv]</i>	243

## List of images

<b>Figure 1.</b>	<i>Painting. 'Ko Hikurangi te maunga ko Waiapu te awa ko Ngati Porou te iwi.'</i> Collection Robin Scholes. Poupou. Te Hono ki Rarotonga whare nui, Pakowai marae, Tokomaru Bay	13
<b>Figure 2.</b>	<i>Painting. 'Mo Irihapeti tenei karanga.'</i> Collection of Irihapeti Ramsden Estate	15
<b>Figure 3.</b>	<i>Poupou, Te Tairuku Potaka pataka, Auckland Museum (22063.1).</i>	98
<b>Figure 4.</b>	<i>Poupou, Te Tairuku Potaka pataka, Auckland Museum (22064.5).</i>	102
<b>Figure 5.</b>	<i>Poupou, Te Tairuku Potaka pataka, Auckland Museum (22065).</i>	104
<b>Figure 6.</b>	<i>Pare. Unknown whare nui, National Museum (579).</i>	106
<b>Figure 7.</b>	<i>Waka koiwi, Otago Museum (D.29-1386).</i>	108
<b>Figure 8.</b>	<i>Papahou, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Pitt Rivers (22(H)).</i>	109
<b>Figure 9.</b>	<i>Waka koiwi. Auckland Museum (5660, 2657).</i>	109
<b>Figure 10.</b>	<i>Pare. Unknown whare nui, Wanganui Museum (1933.49.172).</i>	110
<b>Figure 11.</b>	<i>Paepae. Unknown pataka. Auckland Museum (6087).</i>	110
<b>Figure 12.</b>	<i>Pare. Unknown whare nui. Wanganui Museum (1933.49.172).</i>	112
<b>Figure 13.</b>	<i>Pare. Unknown Whare nui, Auckland Museum (6189).</i>	112
<b>Figure 14.</b>	<i>Papahou. Collection of Rev. R. E. Marsden, Pendeen, Cornwall.</i>	114
<b>Figure 15.</b>	<i>Papahou, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Pitt Rivers Museum (22 (H)).</i>	115
<b>Figure 16.</b>	<i>Papahou. The University Museum of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. University Museum of Pennsylvania (P.2241).</i>	116
<b>Figure 17.</b>	<i>Papahou details. Collection of Revd. R. E. Marsden, Pendeen, Cornwall.</i>	116
<b>Figure 18.</b>	<i>Manaia drawing. Rongowhakaata style (i).</i>	125
<b>Figure 19.</b>	<i>Maihi pattern. Natanahira Te Keteiwi for Rev William Williams.</i>	128
<b>Figure 20.</b>	<i>Maihi. Te Hau ki Turanga, National Museum (ME 15746).</i>	128
<b>Figure 21.</b>	<i>Maihi. Te Poho o Rawiri. National Museum (C.69).</i>	128
<b>Figure 22.</b>	<i>Heke. Te Hau ki Turanga, National Museum (ME15746).</i>	128
<b>Figure 23.</b>	<i>Heke. Manutuke Church. National Museum (C.68).</i>	129
<b>Figure 24.</b>	<i>Heke. Manutuke Church. National Museum (C.70).</i>	129
<b>Figure 25.</b>	<i>Kowhaiwhai. Natanahira Te Keteiwi for Rev William Williams.</i>	129
<b>Figure 26.</b>	<i>Manaia drawing. Rongowhakaata style (ii).</i>	129
<b>Figure 27.</b>	<i>Poupou. Te Tairuku Potaka pataka. Auckland Museum (22063.2, 22063.5).</i>	132
<b>Figure 28.</b>	<i>Tauihu drawing. Wakataua at Pourewa Island. British Museum.</i>	134
<b>Figure 29.</b>	<i>Maihi pataka detail. Te Tairuku Potaka pataka. Auckland Museum (22064.3). Pakake motif.</i>	135
<b>Figure 30.</b>	<i>Poupou details. Whare nui for Hinematiaro, Auckland Museum (5017).</i>	136
<b>Figure 31.</b>	<i>Poupou, Whare nui for Hinematiaro, Auckland Museum (5017). Poupou. Whare nui at Pourewa Island, Ethnographic Collection, Tuebingen University, Tuebingen, Germany. Tuebingen University (A 608). Poupou detail. Unknown whare nui. National Museum (ME4833). Tauihu drawing. Wakataua at Pourewa Island. British Museum.</i>	139
<b>Figure 32.</b>	<i>Kuwaha pataka. Te Tairuku Potaka pataka. Auckland Museum (22064.3). Paringamouhoki pataka. Museum fur Volkerkunde. Berlin. (VI 27460 a-k). Kairungo Whakahaehae pataka. Pitt Rivers Museum. Oxford. Pitt Rivers Museum (1884.62.36).</i>	143
<b>Figure 33.</b>	<i>Koruru facial forms, heketipi and poutuarongo. Whare nui for Takamoana</i>	

	<i>Karaitiana, Otago Museum (D88.42, D88.42, D10.1) Amo. Unknown whare nui. Gisborne Museum (58/1823). Mauitikitiki a Taranga, Gisborne Museum (74/5-3). Poupou. Tuwhakairiora whare nui. Hinemaurea marae, Hicks Bay. Iwirakau style koruru.</i>	147
<b>Figure 34.</b>	<i>Heke details. Mauitikitiki a Taranga. Auckland Museum (45994).</i>	151
<b>Figure 35.</b>	<i>Poupou details. Whare nui for Takamoana Karaitiana, Otago Museum (D96.13). Pane detail. Mauitikitiki a Taranga, Gisborne Museum (64-2338-A). Poupou details. Unknown whare nui, Otago Museum (D31.1355). Poupou and poupou details. Ruatēpupuke whare nui, Field Museum. Chicago. Field Museum (967.143961). Carved by Hoani Ngatai.</i>	154
<b>Figure 36.</b>	<i>Poupou facial detail. Unknown whare nui, Otago Museum (D31.1355). Amo and poupou facial details. Whare nui for Takamoana Karaitiana, Otago Museum (D31.1355, D88.40, D88.40). Carved by Hoani Ngatai.</i>	155
<b>Figure 37.</b>	<i>Amo details. Whare nui for Takamoana Karaitiana, Otago Museum (D8840). Carved by Hoani Ngatai.</i>	155
<b>Figure 38.</b>	<i>Poupou, epa, heketipi and poutuarongo tongue details. Whare nui for Takamoana Karaitiana, Otago Museum (D31.1344, D31.1346, E31.304, E31.304, E 31.305, D31.1346, D88.42, D10.1). Poupou tongue details. Hinetapora whare nui, Mangahanea marae, Ruatoria, Carved by Hone Taahu.</i>	157
<b>Figure 39.</b>	<i>Poupou and amo details. Whare nui for Takamoana Karaitiana, Otago Museum (D31.1355, D31.1355, D96.13, D96.13, D96.13, D31.1348, D15.47, D88.40). Not carved by Hone Taahu.</i>	159
<b>Figure 40.</b>	<i>Poupou, poutuarongo and epa lizard details. Whare nui for Takamoana Karaitiana, Otago Museum (D31.1344, D31.1344, D96.14, D10.1, E31.301, D10.1, D8840). Carved by Hone Taahu.</i>	160
<b>Figure 41.</b>	<i>Poupou details. British Museum. London. British Museum (1922.5-12.1.11). Carved by Hone Taahu.</i>	160
<b>Figure 42.</b>	<i>Poupou details. Mauitikitiki a Taranga, Auckland Museum (45992, 45900). Whare nui for Takamoana Karaitiana, Otago Museum (D31.1344, D 31.1346).</i>	167
<b>Figure 43.</b>	<i>Poupou details. Mauitikitiki a Taranga, Auckland Museum (45991).</i>	169
<b>Figure 44.</b>	<i>Poupou details. Mauitikitiki a Taranga, Auckland Museum (45991).</i>	169
<b>Figure 45.</b>	<i>Poupou details. Mauitikitiki a Taranga, Auckland Museum (45900).</i>	169
<b>Figure 46.</b>	<i>Poupou and poutahu details. Hinetapora whare nui, Mangahanea marae, Ruatoria.</i>	170
<b>Figure 47.</b>	<i>Pane. Gisborne Museum (1999.34.1).</i>	170
<b>Figure 48.</b>	<i>Amo. Gisborne Museum (59/1823).</i>	171
<b>Figure 49.</b>	<i>Poupou. Iwirakau whare nui. National Museum (ME954).</i>	171
<b>Figure 50.</b>	<i>Pane details. Iritekura whare nui, Auckland Museum (46442).</i>	171
<b>Figure 51.</b>	<i>Paepae, Hinetapora whare nui, Mangahanea marae, Ruatoria.</i>	172
<b>Figure 52.</b>	<i>Amo details, amo and raparapa detail. Te Poho o Aotawarirangi. Te Aruru marae, Waima.</i>	172
<b>Figure 53.</b>	<i>Papaka, epa. korupe, epa. Hinetapora, Mangahanea marae, Ruatoria.</i>	176
<b>Figure 54.</b>	<i>Poupou. St Mary's Church, Tikitiki.</i>	177
<b>Figure 55.</b>	<i>Poupou, pane details. Mauitikitiki a Taranga whare nui, Auckland Museum (45991). Amo details. Iritekura whare nui. (Mihikoingo marae. Ohineakai), Amo, maihi details. Mauitikitiki a Taranga, Gisborne Museum (74/5-3, 74/52).</i>	177
<b>Figure 56.</b>	<i>Amo. Iritekura whare nui. (Mihikoingo marae. Ohineakai). Mauitikitiki a Taranga whare nui. Auckland Museum (74/5-3).</i>	178
<b>Figure 57.</b>	<i>Raparapa and raparapa detail. Mauitikitiki a Taranga whare nui, Gisborne Museum (74/5-2, 74/5-10). Te Poho o Te Aotawarirangi, Te Ariuru marae, Waima. Kapohanga whare nui, Hiruharama, marae, Hiruharama.</i>	179

<b>Figure 58.</b>	<i>Mahau. Taharora whare nui, Mihikoingo marae. Ohineakai.</i>	195
<b>Figure 59.</b>	<i>Heke. Whakaata whare nui, Okains Bay Museum, Okains Bay.</i>	196
<b>Figure 60.</b>	<i>Heke. Mauitikitiki a Taranga whare nui, Auckland Museum (44994, 44995).</i>	196
<b>Figure 61.</b>	<i>Pane and amo. Taharora whare nui, Mihikoingo marae. Ohineakai.</i>	200
<b>Figure 62.</b>	<i>Amo and maihi intersection. Taharora whare nui, Mihikoingo marae. Ohineakai.</i>	201
<b>Figure 63.</b>	<i>Interior. Taharora whare nui, Mihikoingo marae. Ohineakai (i).</i>	207
<b>Figure 64.</b>	<i>Interior. Taharora whare nui, Mihikoingo marae. Ohineakai (ii).</i>	208
<b>Figure 65.</b>	<i>Interior. Taharora whare nui, Mihikoingo marae. Ohineakai (iii).</i>	209
<b>Figure 66.</b>	<i>Te Whaneketanga o Turongo raua ko Mahinarangi. Kimora whare kai, Turangawaewae marae, Ngaruawahia.</i>	222
<b>Figure 67.</b>	<i>Te Wehenga o Rangi raua ko Papa. National Library, Wellington</i>	223
<b>Figure 68.</b>	<i>Te Hono ki Hawaiki. Rongomaraeroa marae. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington.</i>	224
<b>Figure 69.</b>	<i>South wall. Hine Matakaikai whare kai, Mihikoinga marae, Ohineakai</i>	226
<b>Figure 70.</b>	<i>Bone and ceramic details. North wall. Hine Matakaikai whare kai, Mihikoinga marae, Ohineakai.</i>	228
<b>Figure 71.</b>	<i>Pataka compositions. North and south wall. Hine Matakaikai whare kai, Mihikoinga marae, Ohineakai.</i>	228
<b>Figure 72.</b>	<i>Central wall details. North and south wall. Hine Matakaikai whare kai, Mihikoinga marae, Ohineakai.</i>	232
<b>Figure 73.</b>	<i>First relief layer details. North and south wall, Hine Matakaikai whare kai, Mihikoinga marae, Ohineakai.</i>	232
<b>Figure 74.</b>	<i>Painted text details. North and south wall, Hine Matakaikai whare kai, Mihikoinga marae, Ohineakai.</i>	233
<b>Figure 75.</b>	<i>Second relief layer details. North wall, Hine Matakaikai whare kai, Mihikoinga marae, Ohineakai.</i>	235
<b>Figure 76.</b>	<i>Third relief layer details. North and south wall. Hine Matakaikai whare kai, Mihikoinga marae, Ohineakai.</i>	236
<b>Figure 77.</b>	<i>Fourth relief layer details. North and south wall. Hine Matakaikai whare kai, Mihikoinga marae, Ohineakai.</i>	237

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