

## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE EUROPEAN KIND: CAPTAIN JAMES COOK AND NEW ZEALAND DESIGN HISTORY

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### INTRODUCTION

European colonisation of New Zealand began when Captain James Cook claimed the country for the British Crown in November 1769. Subsequent accounts of New Zealand's history have consistently favoured an approach that seeks to establish "national identity," an approach refuted by more contemporary historians as "a colonizing tool."<sup>1</sup> This essay takes a close look at Cook's arrival in New Zealand as a defining moment in New Zealand's colonisation, one of particular significance to the history of New Zealand design. Much of its content is based on an oral history account of Cook's arrival provided by Te Horetā Te Taniwha (more commonly referred to as Te Horetā) who, as a young boy, was an eye-witness to it. Te Horetā's account was transcribed in 1852, by which time he had become an old man and a leader of his people.

I suggest that this account has much wider relevance to design history than simply to the history of New Zealand design. While its intrinsic significance to British design history seems obvious, so too is its relevance to "global design histories," a relatively new (and welcome) approach to design history championed by Sarah Teasley and others.<sup>2</sup> For as Teasley and her cohorts have persuasively argued, "Global history is emphatically not an attempt to write a new master narrative;" in fact, quite the opposite is true; thus "to be concerned with the global is in some ways to think independently of geography."<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, some particularly vexing questions remain to be addressed, not least the slippery task of establishing some common understandings (or otherwise) of the nature of *design* itself. A well-grounded understanding of this term is of particular significance to any account of New Zealand design history, as the historian must resolve the dilemma that is presented in the case of the indigenous people of New Zealand, the Māori – a culture that, prior to colonisation, had neither any written language nor any equivalent understanding of *design* in the European sense of the term. While it may be tempting to regard this situation as an issue of little more significance than some form of linguistic aberration, to do so is to entirely miss the point.

There is no equivalent word in the Māori language for design, because there is no equivalent concept for it in Māori visual culture. In acknowledging this cultural divide, Māori scholar Julia Paama-Pengelly notes that "while such terms are useful for comparative purposes, it is important to remember that foreign conventions are being applied to Māori visual culture."<sup>4</sup>

An additional conundrum is presented by the term 'postcolonial,' which resists any attempt at a singular or definitive identity. In the New Zealand context, it would be woefully simplistic to account for postcolonialism by considering only events of the period postdating the country's change in status from a colony to a dominion in 1907. In a seemingly paradoxical take on the subject, Giselle Byrnes convincingly negates such a literal understanding: "postcolonialism does not simply signal an end to colonialism, but rather, it suggests a critical engagement with colonisation ... and seeks to undermine the structures, ideologies and institutions that gave colonisation meaning. Postcolonialism thus engages with ideas of plurality and the co-existence of multiple discourses."<sup>5</sup>

Extrapolating on this thinking, Byrnes also questions popular understandings of New Zealand's history that are based around the quest for national identity, an approach which she describes as "not only an artificial construct, but in fact, a colonising tool."<sup>6</sup> This approach has been reflected in a marked tendency to characterise (or rather caricature) New Zealand's identity through notions of what makes us unique, distinct or exceptional. As a consequence, it has produced a rather inward-looking and insular view of New Zealand's history, a construction that is predominantly the work of white, middle-class males.

This (annoyingly), is particularly true of much of the popular discourse around New Zealand design history, which uncritically celebrates a perceived trait of inventiveness that is believed to characterise what it is to be a New Zealander. In countering this kind of narrative, Byrnes suggests that a more productive discourse is to be found by reconsidering "the world in New Zealand rather than New Zealand in the world;" and she calls for "a transnational approach to history which focuses on the shared ties and common features across, above and beyond national boundaries."<sup>7</sup>

### CAPTAIN COOK MEETS TE HORETĀ TE TANIWHA

That said, I now want to discuss several excerpts from the central text that provides the design history focus of this paper:<sup>8</sup> This text is a transcript of an oral account of the arrival of Captain James Cook in Mercury Bay on New Zealand's north-east coast in early November 1769. It is a compelling record of the initial impact of European culture on Māori society, the more so as it is told from a first-hand Māori perspective. Apart from a very brief (and bloody) encounter with Dutch navigator Abel Tasman in December 1642, Cook's encounter with the Māori of Mercury Bay was the earliest encounter between Māori and European colonisers, preceded only by his landing in Poverty Bay on 8 October, when he became the first European to set foot in New Zealand.

Te Horetā's narrative is particularly significant from a postcolonial design history perspective, not only because it is the earliest recorded account to give voice to the Māori experience of design, but also because it illustrates the primacy of oral history in Māori culture, a methodology that only gained academic respectability in European historiography in the second half of the twentieth century – although, as Paul Thompson reminds us, "It was the *first* kind of history" [*italics original*].<sup>9</sup>

Aside from this methodological significance, Te Horetā's account provides a compelling insight into some of the very earliest recorded experiences of Māori with European design, experiences occasioned by Cook's rediscovery and colonisation of New Zealand.



Figure 1. Louis John Steele, Kennett Watkins, *Arrival of Captain Cook; An incident in the Bay of Islands*, 29 November 1769 1890, oil on cardboard, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, gifted in memory of Frank Anthony Eden, 1988.

The effects of Cook's incursion on the Māori population were immediate and profound; Te Horetā's account makes this abundantly clear. For this reason, it serves as a highly revealing case study of the interaction between the two cultures, and provides some particularly telling insights with respect to the twin themes of connectivity and exchange that are central to the focus of this paper. These themes are graphically depicted in a late-twentieth-century painting, co-authored by John Louis Steele and Kennett Watkins, of the meeting witnessed by Te Horetā (Fig. 1). The painting is titled *Arrival of Captain Cook; an Incident at the Bay of Islands* and serves to depict and extrapolate on much of Te Horetā's account.

In the painting, Cook is seen explaining to a Māori chief something of the nature of gunfire. This meeting took place following an incident where the chief's brother was injured by small shot when one of Cook's men discharged a firearm, albeit with the intention of intimidation rather than any attempt at mortal injury. In Cook's hand is a sample of the small shot fired at the chief's brother, and he also holds a bullet that is capable of killing a human. Cook is presumed to be explaining the difference between the two. He is depicted in full-dress uniform, as it was his custom to dress formally on going ashore in order to impress the natives, a behaviour mirrored in the dress of the chief with whom he is engaged.

A group of Māori, including some children and a seated woman, are depicted to the left of the view, their weapons on the ground beside them, symbolising that this was a peaceful (although puzzling) encounter. The rowboat that waits close by the shore was the source of much consternation and bewilderment. Cook's ship, the *Endeavour*, is pictured in the background.<sup>10</sup>

Te Horetā recalls the occasion:

We lived at Whitianga, and a vessel came there, and when our old men saw the ship they said it was a *tupua*, a god (some unknown thing), and the people on board were strange beings. The ship came to anchor, and the boats pulled on shore. As our old men looked at the manner in which they came on shore, the rowers pulling with their backs to the bows of the boat, the old people said, "Yes, it is so: these people are goblins; their eyes are at the back of their heads; they pull on shore with their backs to the land to which they are going!"<sup>11</sup>

Te Horetā continues his account by describing how some who were witnessing the event ran off and hid in the bush, leaving only the bravest to face the arrival of the blue-eyed, white-skinned strangers. However, it is the conceptual norms with respect to the design of the different kinds of boat described to which I wish to draw particular attention.

A Māori waka (or canoe) is paddled with the occupants facing the direction in which they are moving, and the more elaborate waka such as the waka taua (war canoe) feature a carved stern that is the highest element of the craft. By comparison, in European boats, the stern is the lowest part of the boat – hence the bewilderment among Māori regarding the about-face approach of the European rowboats.

Conversely, although Cook and his crew were well familiar with the form of the waka and other Polynesian canoes from their prior experiences in the Pacific, European misunderstanding of the nature of the waka is evidenced as late as the end of the nineteenth century. This is clearly illustrated in a painting by Australian artist Eugene von Guérard, produced between 1877 and 1879 (Fig. 2), where a waka is depicted on Lake Wakatipu with Mount Earnslaw in the background. If you can permit yourself to ignore the rather sublime and romanticised landscape in which it is pictured, you may notice that the waka is, in fact, painted in reverse – hence the stern has been incorrectly depicted as the prow.

Returning to Te Horetā's account, we find further instances of his wonderment in the face of the incomprehensible events that were unfolding before his eyes and the eyes of his fellow Māori, especially in regard to the introduction of European weaponry. Nonetheless, Te Horetā and his friends were curious to discover more:



Figure 2. Eugene von Guérard, *Lake Wakatipu with Mount Earnslaw, Middle Island, New Zealand, 1877-1879* oil on canvas, Mackelvie Trust Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, purchased 1971.

Now, some of the goblins had walking-sticks which they carried about with them, and when we arrived at the bare dead trees where the shags roost at night and have their nests, the goblins lifted the walking-sticks up and pointed them at the birds, and in a short time thunder was heard to crash and a flash of lightning was seen, and a shag fell from the trees; and we children were terrified, and fled, and rushed into the forest, and left the goblins all alone. They laughed, and waved their hands to us, and in a short time the bravest of us went back to where the goblins were, and handled the bird, and saw that it was dead. But what had killed it?<sup>12</sup>

Despite their fear of the goblins' powers, Te Horetā and friends subsequently visited the strange-looking ship, where he received a gift from "the chief goblin" (Captain Cook), whom he greatly respected. This precious gift became a personal treasure (taonga) of his encounter and connectivity with "the chief goblin,"<sup>13</sup> and empowered him in many ways.

I and my two boy-companions did not walk about on board of the ship – we were afraid lest we should be bewitched by the goblins; and we sat still and looked at everything we saw at the home of these goblins.

When the chief goblin had been away in that part of their ship which he occupied, he came up on deck again and came to where I and my two boy-companions were, and patted our heads with his hand, and he put his hand out towards me and spoke to us at the same time, holding a nail out towards us. My companions were afraid, and sat in silence; but I laughed, and he gave the nail to me. I took it into my hand and said "*Ka pai*" ["very good"], and he repeated my words, and again patted our heads with his hand, and went away. My companions said, "This is the leader of the ship, which is proved by his kindness to us; and also he is so very fond of children. A noble man – one of noble birth – cannot be lost in a crowd."<sup>14</sup>

Te Horetā valued his nail, not just as his personal taonga, a gift from the "chief goblin," but also for its utility value as a multi-purpose tool which he carried about with him constantly:

I took my nail, and kept it with great care, and carried it with me wherever I went, and made it fit to the point of my spear, and also used it to make holes in the side-boards of canoes, to bind them on to the canoe. I kept this nail till one day I was in a canoe and she capsized in the sea, and my god was lost to me.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, iron – a cornerstone material of the world's most powerful industrialised culture, which had ventured to New Zealand from the opposite side of the globe, yet as unknown to Māori as New Zealand was to the British – was introduced, and momentarily lost, to Māori.

But Te Horetā's taonga was a portent of much to come.

I suggest that Cook's arrival in New Zealand marked the advent of the world's most powerful economic and colonial power into an unknown society of oral historians, and that this defining moment in the colonisation of New Zealand was thoroughly enabled by European *design* – through a number of manifestations such as Cook's ship, his uniform, the ship's rowboats, firearms, and Cook's gift to Te Horetā.

Thus design is seen as a powerful, indeed pivotal agent of colonisation, while inferences as to *the design of history* tacitly underpin writers' understanding of the cultures they discuss.

Has not design history, too, been substantially colonised by the world's most powerful industrialised economies?

So, where to from here?

When American designer Charles Eames was asked to name the three most important things about design, he replied, "The connections, the connections, and the connections."<sup>16</sup>

His thoughts are elegantly paralleled in a widely cited Māori proverb:

"He aha te mea nui o te ao. He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata!"

What is the most important thing in the world? It is people! It is people! It is people!

**Gavin O'Brien's** work is primarily focussed on design history, specialising in New Zealand design history, in particular oral history and the history of technology. He is a graduate in Fine Arts and Architecture and has principally worked in architecture, screen printing and plastics fabrication. Until recently, he worked as a Senior Teaching Fellow, Design Studies, University of Otago. Gavin is now a Senior Lecturer in the School of Design at Otago Polytechnic.

1 Giselle Byrnes, "Rethinking National Identity in New Zealand's History," paper presented at the Dominion Status Symposium, Legislative Council Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Wellington, 26 September 2007, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/files/documents/giselle-byrnes-national-identity.pdf>.

2 *Global Design History*, eds Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello and Sarah Teasley (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2011), 3.

3 Julie Paama-Pengelly, *Māori Art and Design: Weaving, Painting, Carving and Architecture* (Auckland: New Holland, 2010), 18.

4 Byrnes, "Rethinking National Identity," 11, 12.

5 Ibid., 2.

- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., 6
- 8 John White, *The Ancient History of the Māori, His Mythology and Traditions: Vol. V. Tāi-Nui* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1961), 88-93.
- 9 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 19.
- 10 White, *The Ancient History of the Māori*, 89
- 11 Ibid., 89.
- 12 Ibid., 90.
- 13 Ibid., 91.
- 14 Ibid., 91-2.
- 15 Ibid., 92.
- 16 Attributed to Eames in Georgia Bizios, *Architecture Reading Lists and Course Outlines* (Durham, NC: Eno River Press, 1998), 494.