

NEW ZEALAND'S OLDEST ART GALLERIES



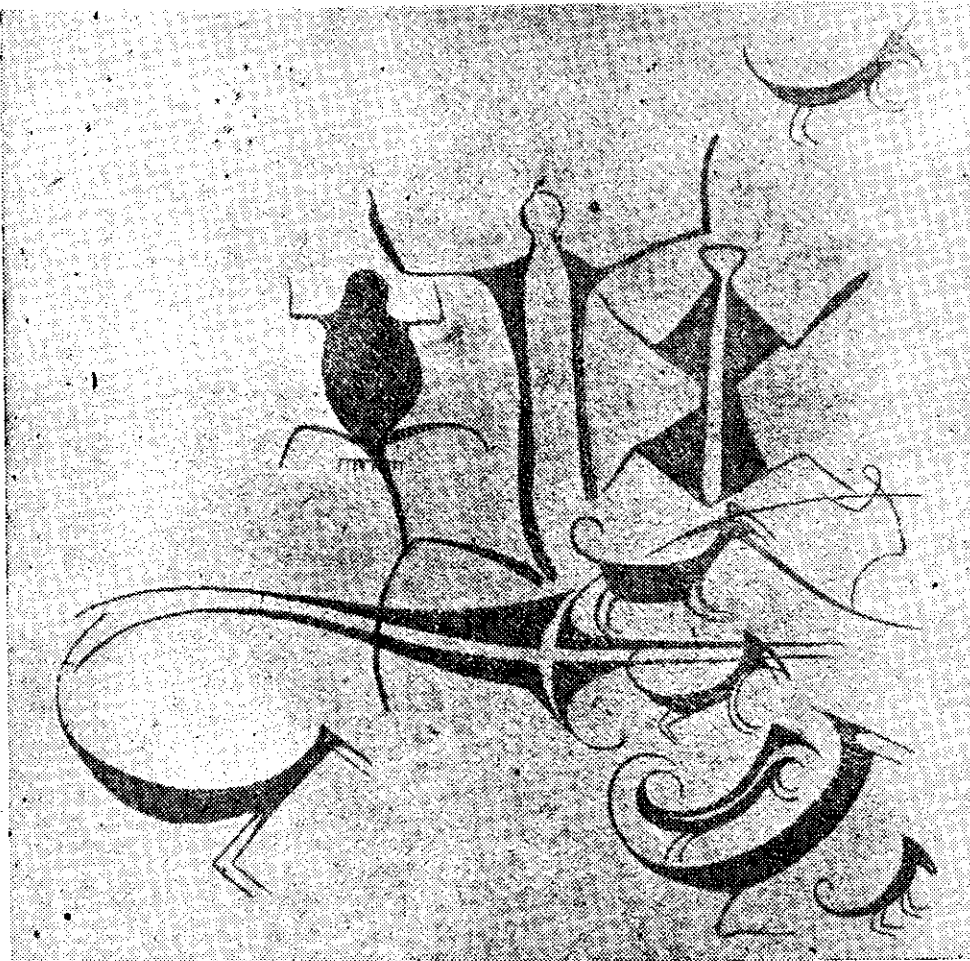
FOR many months now THEO SCHOON, a Dutch artist domiciled in New Zealand, has been employed by the Canterbury Museum copying the prehistoric drawings in the limestone caves of South Canterbury and North Otago. In this article he offers an explanation of these ancient relics.

OF all the conquests of man, someone has said, those only endure that embrace his dreams. That may be a hard saying for some people to understand, but in art every picture, drawn on rock by prehistoric man, drawn by a child or painted by Rembrandt, is alive with a certain definite spirit.

It has been a moving experience to me as an artist to become gradually initiated into the spirit of a new and little known form of art which belongs to the very early history of New Zealand. It has been most absorbing to gain a gradual insight into those essential features which determine a distinct and unique style—unique as all those styles are which have developed independently among isolated communities all over the world.

These rock drawings are notable not only for their art and their antiquity, but also for the fact that they belong to a period prior to the extinction of the moa. The practice which gave rise to these drawings deserves special attention, too, for it represents the very core of an ancient spiritual life which so far has received scant treatment. These products of a dream life, so intimately bound up with the waking life, arise out of a religious concept which centred around a spirit-bearing world, in which every tree, every animal and insect, and even the rocks, sand, and water had their spiritual counterparts. Though lives were spent in placating these spirits, no place would grant safety or hospitality unless favours had been secured from its local spirit with due ceremony.

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Above: A bend in the Waitaki River, where cave drawings were discovered recently. Left: Newly-discovered drawings from the Ahuriri River—four human figures and seven dogs are represented here. Below: Theo Schoon's tent among the limestone rocks at Duntroon.

