

# Background Te Maori — the exhibition

na Michael Romanos

**T**e Maori, the exhibition of 174 pieces of intricate, sacred Maori artifacts, revered by generations of Maori people, has been acclaimed by hundreds of thousands of people in the United States.

In New York, Te Maori was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from September 1984 till January 1985. Te Maori was described by the metropolitan art chairman, Douglas Newman as "one of the great art styles in the world, yet nothing like it has ever been shown outside of New Zealand before."

The exhibition shifted to the St Louis Art Museum until May 1985, then to the Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco for seven months and finally winding up in Chicago before returning in June this year to its homeland.

But before the artifacts are dispersed to the 13 museums where they are housed, Te Maori will tour New Zealand with sites at Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch and spanning 12 months.

The opening of Te Maori at New York's art metro was considered the most unusual in the 115 year history of the museum. Similar to those performed later at St Louis and San Francisco, the ceremony started at dawn.

Ninety Maori dignitaries and a group

Maori tribesman gathered, chanting. In procession they made their way up the vast expanse of steps at New York's most venerable art institution. A haka was performed. Maori elders addressed their ancestors in low, soothing chants and each artifact was given due recognition by the procession as it moved past the exhibits.

The ritual was required not for any "grand parade" but in order to lift the tapu from the taonga. Maori culture believes taonga are imbued with the living spirits of their ancestors.

It took almost 10 years of negotiations with the elders of nearly three dozen tribes before agreement was reached to allow the museum-held objects to form Te Maori and be exhibited overseas. It is an extremely sensitive area in allowing any taonga out of the country.

Various royals and past governors let alone art buyers and collectors have taken maori artifacts out of the country, and so far most of their inheritors or possessors have resisted returning thousands of artifacts to their rightful home.

Maui Pomare, a New Zealand museum director has personally catalogued over 10,000 Maori artifact pieces held outside of New Zealand. The maori form of gifting of treasures is really one

of a loan – to be returned from whence they originated. Certainly not to be passed on as heirlooms by the recipients or sold for profit. Pakehas and pakeha institutions have failed to understand these cultural requirements.

The Te Maori exhibits range from small ornaments to entire carved house-fronts and date from 900 AD. Material includes sculptures and carvings in wood, jade, bone and shell. There is a 9cm greenstone amulet called a tiki with bulbous head and staring eyes and there is an awesome 6 metre carved wooden gateway of Pukeroa Pa, a fortified village which went out of existence in 1845.

What the objects have in common is intricate spiral carvings and often sinuous shapes. The art form is considered splendid. It is indeed thoroughly compelling in its visual manifestation of life and death, complex illustrations of Maori myths of creation, ancient heroic legends and history. Certainly there is beauty in the style, shape and pounamu of such artifacts as the toki tool, the heimatau and the kotaite, a fiddle shaped hand to hand weapon.

One of the oldest pieces on tour is the imposingly simple 3 metre curved wooden post that looks rather like the top scroll of a cello. It is the symbol of



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