



Maori Wood Carving – Living or Dying

It is with hesitancy that I put forward the following comments on Maori wood carving. There is nothing so arrogant as a little knowledge and perhaps nothing so intrusive as another Pakeha theory. But here I am on the marae as it were, perhaps improperly but here all the same, and so I make bold to say:

There is a part of Maori wood carving that is as personal and as private as the family album. I refer, of course, to the meeting house, its poupou panels and pou tokomanawa. It is that domain of carving which embodies the memories of the hapu and to a large extent therefore its identity. Quite properly that is a preserve.

To the outsider viewing yet another meeting house it can be as boring as flicking through someone else's photograph album. Quite properly the Maori should not be concerned about that. Nothing should be done to project the meeting house to the public.

In this private domain of carving what matters is that the past is preserved. It is important that with it is preserved all that is traditional in carving. It should be there as a constant reminder of the excellence that has been achieved.

INHIBIT GROWTH

But as a preserve it is unlikely to be a growth point for Maori wood carving. Its function is not to stimulate new growth. In fact it might be that the influence of this part of Maori culture is so strong that it inhibits development. The tiki forms, the manaia figures and the surface decoration have so captured the Maori character that little else might remain to be said.

And yet the writings of Gilbert Archey as the Director of the Auckland Museum suggest that Maori

D.G. PRYOR

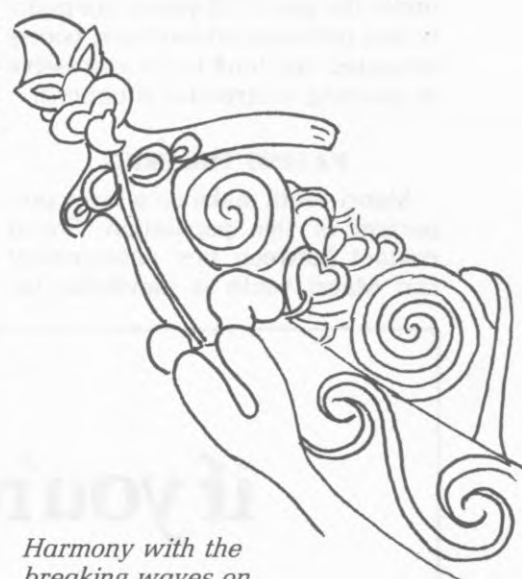
wood carving at some point in time was fluid and developing. Even if his assumptions about the development of the double spiral for instance, are debatable, it is highly probable that there has been movement in design and form.

Today, however, for the most part Maori wood carving to many appears to be dead and no longer relevant. As an art form it has ceased to speak to people. Many see it as a heavily stylised, repetitious form of carving. In vain they look for some meaning in the relationship of the manaia figures to the tiki figure. Like reading morse code they search the surface decorations for some message.

There is some relief it is true in looking at the waka huia, the taiaha, the bailers and so on but that does not form a coherent art form. It tends to be this and that.

REAL CLOUT

Could it be that Maori wood carving really is dead or have we been looking at the feathers on the taiaha rather than the end with the real clout in it? That is, have we paid more attention to the superficial in Maori wood carving, beautiful though it is, than we have to the human emotion behind the carving.



Harmony with the breaking waves on the prow

Let us put ourselves in the place of those early Maori wood carvers. There was little or nothing to copy. they were faced as every artist is with depicting emotion. Look at some of the human emotion invested in those early carvings. (see illustrations) You can feel the sense of adventure the carver experi-

