

# Those who are bent by the wind shall rise again when the wind softens

Te Whiti o Rongomai – Prophet

## An interview with Dr Deidre Brown (Ngati Rehia, Nga Puhi)

Senior Lecturer, School of Architecture, Auckland University;  
Lecturer Maori Art History, Canterbury University from 1998 to 2003

I was involved in te ao Maori when I was growing up in New Lynn but I didn't know I was. All my mother's (Rosine Brown) relatives were Maori who didn't go to marae and I was raised in suburban Auckland. We never had money to travel. I grew up in the 70s and 80s when revival was taking place through te reo. My mother got me to do school projects and she would help me to talk about these things but what she had been talking to me about was different from 'mainstream' Maori thinking. She wouldn't attend

tangi, she didn't drink, didn't identify tribally, and she was very wary of the marae because in her upbringing those things were seen as te ao tawhito (the old world). All the things she taught me were at odds with what was 'authentically Maori'. But I took Maori studies alongside architecture and was encouraged to look at the Prophetic Movement as a means of rediscovering my own Maori background. I felt that it was a significant and important thing to do.

Dr Deidre Brown, 2005.  
Photograph: Grant Bulley.





Ratana church, Raetihi. Converted from an earlier building c. 1957. Photograph: Dr Deidre Brown.

And I had always wanted to be an architect. I had a feeling for three-dimensional space, and I guess once you have that, you think about a career in architecture. From an early age I worked towards that. When I got to architecture school, everything there was about conceptual thinking, and that wasn't particularly formed in me at 17 years of age, but Maori ideas and thinking came from my mother. She had gotten me to think about Ratana because my great-grandfather helped Ratana establish his church just after the flu' epidemic in 1918. He was the Rev. Hapeta Renata, a Methodist home minister in Kaeo. They were Maori ministers who may or may not have been ordained. Anyway, Kaeo was the first Methodist Mission Station in NZ and when Ratana's mission started to develop, Arthur Seamer encouraged home ministers to work with Ratana, as the Anglican Church may have done as well.

At that time after World War 1 and just after the influenza epidemic, people were looking for faith. For mainstream churches in the north, the idea that a Maori was faith-healing just down the line was something they could support. Orthodox ministries had an interest in faith-healing so they were happy to support the Ratana movement as a way of bringing local Maori into their own churches. When Ratana formulated the idea of having a church around 1927, Hapeta helped him do that. Later he helped him write the Blue Book that's still used as a hymnal today. They

were both evangelists and revivalists. When it was time for Ratana to open his church, his helpers had to decide whether they were going to stay Methodist or go with him (Ratana).

The Anglicans dropped away for a number of reasons but the Methodists were more embracing. Hapeta stayed on. He was 90 when he died in 1950. He didn't get involved in the political aspects of the Ratana movement or much of the building of Romanesque-style Ratana churches in the north at Ahipara, Te Kao, Te Hapua and Mangamuka. They were built between 1947 and 1966 by apotoro (apostles).

There are other Ratana churches in the north, west and southern parts of New Zealand but they don't have the twin bell tower design. As an art form they were trying to look like the Ratana temepara (temple), which were built in the materials of the day, and they were quite contemporary for their time. The Ratana arch and the hall at Temuka are southern manifestations. Ratana didn't encourage carving at the beginning of his mission but rather perpetuated the building of plain meeting houses ... Niu Tirini at Arowhenua is an example. They're interesting to study because the story of Maori art and architecture is usually divided into customary and contemporary disciplines. These buildings sit between those. I'm not the only person to study these buildings; it was a new area to look at and they decided to call it 'Morehu Architecture' (morehu - survivor).



## it wasn't that Maori customary art was dying out, it was more that everyone was excited by the new Christianity and Maori wanted to encompass this new world view with the new materials available

We applied the term to everyone who was working in this style of Prophetic art and architecture from 1850 to 1950. Customary (traditional) art practice was changing and in many ways went into a steep decline with the arrival of missionaries. What I argued in my thesis is that it wasn't that Maori customary art was dying out, it was more that everyone was excited by the new Christianity and Maori wanted to encompass this new world view with the new materials available.

For the last 50 plus years, more and more aesthetic views have layered themselves into the landscape. There is a balancing between the Maori spiritual way and the Christian spiritual way. The Old Testament and Maori way of life were very similar. The idea was that a leader was someone who was strong. Maori had issues with Christ being humble and his life being one of sacrifice. Rua Kenana saw himself as an Old Testament leader.

Rua Kenana worked with the Presbyterian mission, and the Reverend J G Laughton. The Church had strengthened their message during Rua's imprisonments on rather shaky charges of sly-grogging and morally resisting arrest. (Rua challenged the idea that Maori were not allowed to sell alcohol and claimed they deserved the same legal rights as Pakeha.) Even Te Kooti's re-development of the meeting house and figurative symbols of playing cards and plants, with the exception of the heart were based on the Old Testament.

What I concluded in that work is that Maori art and architecture was better understood as a process of whakapapa (genealogical/chronological process) rather than as a history.

Customary architecture of meeting houses and pataka<sup>1</sup> was promoted by Sir Apirana Ngata, and his School of Maori Arts and Crafts, as a tribally-based alternative to Ratana, which was non-tribal. Furthermore, the passing of the Tohunga Suppression Act [1908]<sup>2</sup> was indication of how the government felt about the political threat posed by Maori spiritualism. Ngata's type of architecture and social organization was more acceptable to the conservative elements in government and received state funding and historical recognition. As a consequence, we tend to think of Maori art and architecture as being either customary or contemporary, and as such art historians often build walls around them. There is at least one other Maori art history belonging to the Morehu. Revival of Customary Maori art occurred through Ngata and was included in my thesis. He operated at the same time as Ratana and Te Puea Herangi of Tainui. She was Catholic and Paimairire and Ngata was Anglican. The 1950s was the time the Ratana movement stopped constructing those buildings. They told their followers that they had to build for the time. Sir Apirana Ngata told all the people he trained to perpetuate customary art. The Taiapa brothers established the carving institute at Whakarewarewa out of that time.

Local people living in Ratana interpreted things with the skills they had at that time. So that particular type of architecture started to disappear and urbanism started to develop.

The Tovey generation came forward out of Dunedin and around the country, and that supported development of contemporary Maori arts and its artists. Tovey also promoted the idea that to be an

artist you had to go to school. Architecture was one of the few arts that was not part of their programme. This has had a profound effect on its status in this country. Morehu art and architecture went into a further decline.

In the 1970s Margaret Orbell edited the Maori Affairs Department periodical *Te Ao Hou* (A New World) and wrote about Ringatu painted houses. Cliff Whiting worked with the Historic Places Trust and Muldoon started the PEP schemes. One of the goals through that collective body of work was to renovate meeting houses. Ringatu whare had been painted over at the time of Te Kooti's death. Under layers of paint on the walls of Ringatu whare, Cliff Whiting discovered and immersed himself in the symbolism of that earlier time. As a result of that work Roger Neich, who recorded many of the paintings in his capacity as an ethnologist, wrote *Painted Houses*.<sup>3</sup>

Shane Cotton (Nga Puhī), Peter Robinson (Ngai Tahu) and Chris Heaphy (Ngai Tahu) graduated from the University of Canterbury, influenced by the work of that period; particularly the painted symbolism of the Rongopai house. Cotton adopted many of the motifs, such as plants, Heaphy developed an early interest in card symbols, and Robinson adopted the black, red, and white colours of kowhaiwhai (scroll painting). Their recognisable symbols didn't require a background in kawa and tikanga to enter into them.

Shane Cotton further evolved his work from that period. He made a lot more contact with his own people, the Katene whanau who were always heavily involved in the Anglican Church history of the north. Another painter using Ratana symbolism, who also trained at the University of Canterbury, is my cousin Kura Te Waru Rewiri. She has strong connections to the Church in that her late father, Sam Davis, was an apotoro and her mother, Geneva, an awahina. It's astonishing that Kura and I, quite independently, both found ourselves at Canterbury (she as a student, me as a lecturer), both developed an interest in Ratana iconography, and have both written about Northland Maori carving (her thesis, my book). But then again, perhaps it was fate!

### Moana Tipa

This is the Ratana church at Ahipara, Northland opened in 1966. Photograph: Dr Deidre Brown.



1 Neich, R. *Carved Histories: Rotorua Ngati Tarawhai Carving*, 2001, Auckland University Press.

2 Sponsored as a Bill by Maui Pomare. Tohunga Suppression Act [1908]; was repealed 1962.

3 Neich, R. *Painted Houses: Early Maori Figurative Painting*, 1993, Auckland University Press.