

# Toi Te Papa: An interview with Jonathan Mane-Wheoki

## Who was responsible for the concept of *Toi Te Papa*?

'Ultimately I was. I came to Te Papa in February 2004 with that name on my lips. There were two main things that it signified. I came in here thinking about how one might write a history of visual culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. It seems to me that most art history has been framed from the point of view of the coloniser. I appreciate that Pakeha do have to put down their feet and talk about their reasons for being here, but there was a part of the story that was not being told. So the *Toi Te Papa* concept is also about us, about Maori. It is about the possibility of discussing the visual arts in Aotearoa across a 1000-year timeframe. That was one thing.

'Secondly, I came to Te Papa with the knowledge that although I was responsible for collections of art in the western traditions, including New Zealand art, a good deal of what I would regard as art lay outside my directorate. That included fantastic collections of *taonga*, wonderful collections of Pacific treasures, and the applied and decorative arts as well. I had a very clear idea that there was an opportunity for Te Papa to do an exhibition that no other institution in New Zealand could possibly do from its own collections. Whatever other misgivings people have about Te Papa, I wanted to demonstrate that our collections encompass an extraordinary range of art traditions that no other institution in the country can cover. Other places have better individual collections than we do, but no one has the span of collections to present something approaching a World Art view of art – as, for example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the National Gallery of Australia do.

'For me the pivotal symbol is *Te Hau ki Turanga*, sitting on the cusp of *Te Ao Tawhito* (the Ancient World) and *Te Ao Hou* (the Modern/or Contemporary World). Sir Apirana Ngata called that whareniui 'the finest flowering of Maori art' and it was more recently described as New Zealand's greatest national treasure. Now we are not going to be able to draw *Te Hau ki Turanga* into *Toi Te Papa*, but I am very clear in my own mind that this whareniui is the pivotal point in what I hope is a new way of thinking about culture in New Zealand.'

## The concept is broader than the two exhibitions that have shared the title of *Toi Te Papa*. How does the broad concept function?

'Think of it in terms of the *waharoa*, the gateway. Te Papa's fourth corporate principle is that the museum is a *waharoa*. I thought, how would it be if *Toi Te Papa* was conceptualised as a *waharoa*, as a gateway to all the art in Te Papa, not just that which will be found on Level 5 when the exhibition opens? There has always been art on show but it hasn't been shown in a way that more traditional art audiences have responded to. But it is there, hundreds of works. Of course, these audiences might not consider *taonga* or Pacific objects to be art, but I would beg to differ. *Toi Te Papa* will function as a pointer to these other artworks all around the museum. I want to try to link all of the spaces where there is art.

'The point is not to banish art to a ghetto on level 5, but to show that it is on levels 2, 3, 4 and 6 as well.

'The exhibition, which will probably be the largest art collection hung in any museum in the country, and contain 306 works when it opens, has changing components, so that 80 works will rotate through that space on level 5 every twelve months. Over 5 years approximately 700 works will have changed giving a total of about 930 works from our collections in that space. Most of these will be drawn from the 12,276 works in our art collections but we are also drawing on our Photography, Maori and Applied and Decorative Arts Collections.'

## What aspects of the *Toi Te Papa* exhibitions make them unique to Te Papa?

'I think the integration of *taonga* with western art traditions is a major one. Another aspect would be the normalising of New Zealand art. I have fought this battle in the museum and academic worlds. Take the notion of an International Art curator in a museum. Their title mentions international art, but what it means is European art. It doesn't include Asian or African art, let alone Maori or Pacific art. It means western. *Toi Te Papa* is about normalising New Zealand, making it the core, the centre. We have drawn in Maori and Pakeha art, and European art as well. European art is a part of our heritage; it is a significant part of our heritage as Maori art is. But European art isn't to our cultural and national identity and heritage what it is to Europe. Maori art plays this role for us in Aotearoa. My big regret is where we have left Pacific art. We haven't integrated Pacific art into the show very well, although there will be works by Pacific artists in *Toi Te Papa*.

'Conceptually I went right back to the world of ancient Greece and back to the ancient world of the Pacific and beyond that to Asia, and thought about what subsequently happened, the convergence of these traditions. Two ancient pathways coming together at the point of European contact with Maori in Aotearoa. Now they are woven around and into each other and flaring out into new pathways. The heritage of China and Asia is now kind of domesticating itself in New Zealand. What will our culture look like in 15 to 20 years? Te Papa (of all museums) should be right on the edge in anticipating these kinds of shifts and changes. A lot of that thinking underpins *Toi Te Papa*. It is not stated in any document, or on the walls, but that is the subtext. Of course, as with Pacific art, you don't always get everything right.'

## How is *Toi Te Papa* organised?

'I often start off thinking about what kind of feeling I want people to experience with an exhibition. I don't want people just to walk up those dreadful stairs. I want some sort of fanfare so people are swept up. When they hit the top of the stairs they will see Colin McCahon's *Northland Panels*, unencumbered by a fridge, at the far end of the vista. The viewer will be drawn towards a kind of forecourt, with all sorts of beginnings, different paths, represented by a range of art works.

'Turning to the left, you will see a selection of *taonga*, mainly from the period before contact with Europeans. That is one kind of tradition, and then I wanted to have something that talked about European traditions. The



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Above: *Hei tiki* (red),  
Rangi Kipa, 2001, Corian and pāua shell,  
Courtesy Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

important date there is 1768. It was the founding of the Royal Academy and Cook set out on the first of his voyages. Those things are linked. What the artists did on board those three voyages ended up being exhibited at the Royal Academy. This world, and that world.

'So then we come around to new worlds, colonial art beyond the Royal Academy. Maori art begins to show an awareness of Pakeha. Then back to Europe, the New Zealanders going to Europe. We are going to put Frances Hodgkins and Len Lye in a grouping with the Seven and Five Society. After all, they were two members of the Seven and Five group, but also this will be an opportunity for us to show one of our strengths, which is modern British art. I know we are going to have people saying 'I thought this was about New Zealand art?'. In a sense it is, considering where New Zealand culture was in the 1920s to 1950s, still thinking very much of Britain as the hub of our culture.

'Next comes New Zealand Art from the 1920s to the

artworks. Well, perhaps we borrow the rest and put our collection into a wider context.

'And then of course audiences will be encouraged to go from the exhibition to the rest of the art in Te Papa. They will be pointed to other places where art resides, and encouraged to see it. *Toi Te Papa* – art in the museum, art at Te Papa. It is as simple as that.'

#### **What related exhibition events will support *Toi Te Papa*?**

'I see it as a platform for a whole range of public events. We have very quietly launched a monthly *Art After Dark* programme on Thursdays. The first three are to do with the Constable exhibition, but then that space will be dedicated to *Toi Te Papa* events – for quite a long time, I imagine. In addition I am hoping that we will be able to draw in various New Zealand specialists to present lectures, to give floor talks, to write articles.



Above: Jonathan Mane-Wheoki. Photo: Lloyd Park

Right: *Indian Summer*,  
Gretchen Albrecht, 1974, acrylic on canvas,  
Courtesy of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa



1960s. That again is one of our strengths, we have fantastic works. Then there is a collection focus area, which will change every year. The first focus will be on Colin McCahon. We have a very large collection of McCahon artworks now, and quite a significant one. I am not sure what will go next. Perhaps Toss Woollaston, or the modern Maori art movement. There will be a series of themed exhibitions.

'The next section is the maturing of New Zealand art – internationalism on one hand, and independence on the other. This will cover the period from the 1960s to the 1980s. Finally there will be a contemporary art section, and another focus area. This will change every six months, and it won't just be items from our collection. We might think of doing a Shane Cotton show but we have only got three Shane Cotton

'There is a little brochure, a colour souvenir that won't carry much more text than what will be found on the walls. We are also working on a book of Te Papa's art collection at the moment, which is shaping up well. I think people will be very surprised at what we have, at the depth of the collections in certain areas. That is due for publication in 2008. In terms of a book that would track the themes of *Toi Te Papa*, we just aren't able to cope with that just yet. Considering my own background, I would have wanted to be involved in leading such a project but I am only a part-time Art Director. A greater part of my time is taken up with collection services. We couldn't contemplate it at present given the relative smallness of our curatorial team.'

**Damian Skinner**