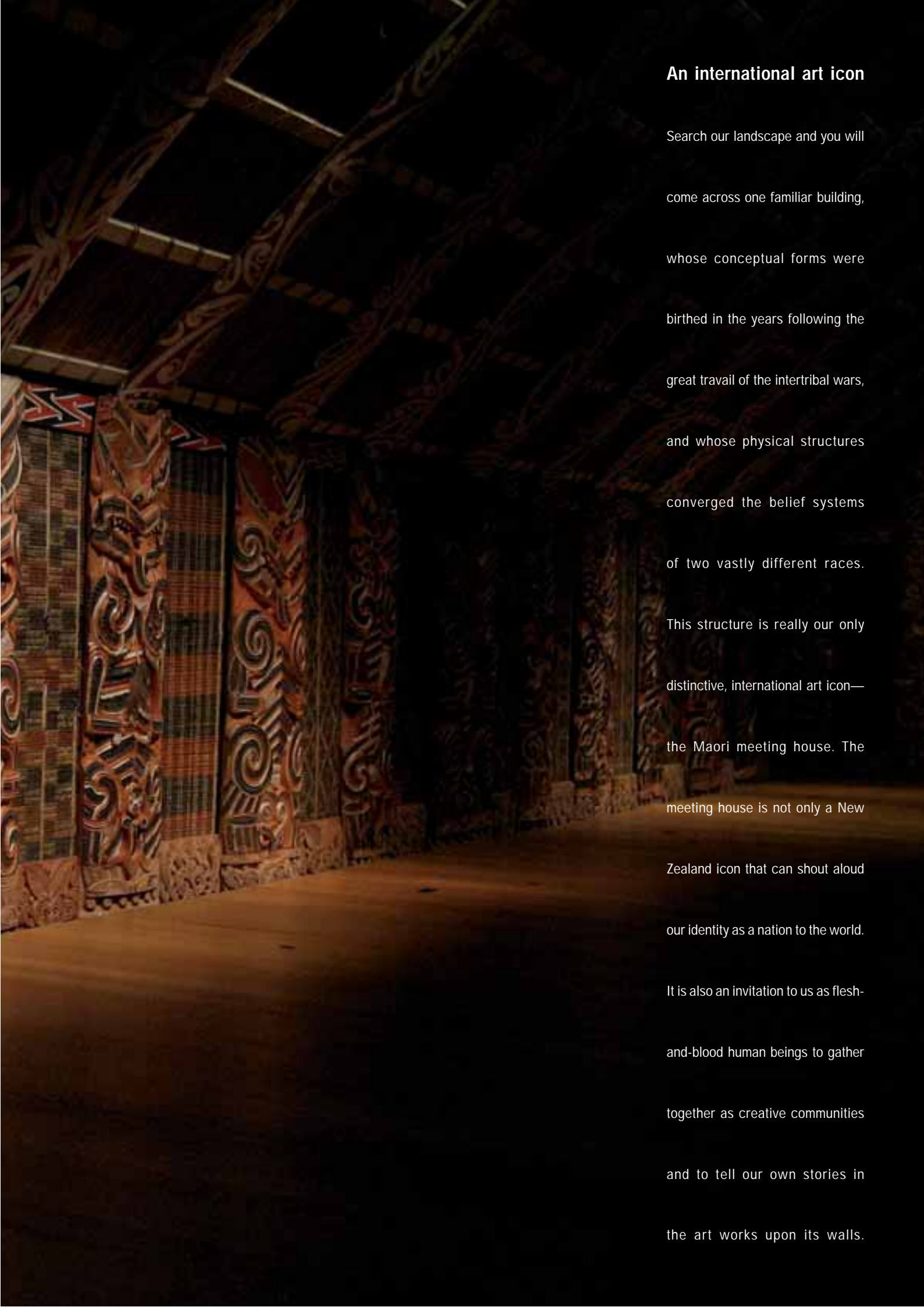




Reinventing a New Zealand icon



An international art icon

Search our landscape and you will

come across one familiar building,

whose conceptual forms were

birthed in the years following the

great travail of the intertribal wars,

and whose physical structures

converged the belief systems

of two vastly different races.

This structure is really our only

distinctive, international art icon—

the Maori meeting house. The

meeting house is not only a New

Zealand icon that can shout aloud

our identity as a nation to the world.

It is also an invitation to us as flesh-

and-blood human beings to gather

together as creative communities

and to tell our own stories in

the art works upon its walls.

Historic origins

Like a monument to suffering, the meeting house emerged in the 1830s. For fifteen years previously Maori had endured the worst excesses of their own worldview. Out of a population of seventy thousand, at least twenty thousand had been killed by warring *iwi*. And now, unable to find hope beyond their own reciprocating laws of *utu* (payment), Maori became open to other beliefs.

Into this vulnerable setting came the missionary. Like a harvester amongst fields of ripe wheat, the missionary reaped the hopes of a spiritually broken people. Released war slaves returned as Christian evangelists, going before the missionary, sowing the seeds of the gospel message. In a wave of spiritual fervour, over fifty percent of this nation turned to the God of the bible.

In many ways, the belief system of Christianity has played an indirect yet inseparable role inspiring the development of the Maori meeting house. The early missionary crusades provided the impetus to build larger accommodation to minister to Maori congregations. Te Kooti's Ringatu improvisations helped define a 'biblical' Maori identity. Wiremu Raatana's use of teaching symbols helped to convey the gospel message. The concept of the meeting house, then, is a post-European invention by Maori. It was created as a statement of identity to meet the needs of communities in their rapidly changing world. With its creative arts and associated cultural patterns, it evolved from a combination of sources: the chief's house, the communal guesthouse and the European church.

Institutional Christianity's response

On the other hand, the institutional church has had an on/off love affair with the Maori arts. Early missionaries feared its symbolic language, something that they never learnt to read. As cultural illiterates, they didn't understand how to separate the iconographic forms of *whakairo* (carving), *tukutuku* (latticework) and *kowhaiwhai* (rafter painting) from the content that those forms represented. Such

shallow discernment shipwrecked their possibility of navigating the traditional use of iconographic forms in communicating Christ's work at the cross.

The missionary-encouraged arts became increasingly decorative and devoid of thematic content. For example, in the church that the Reverend William Williams oversaw in Manutuke in 1849, carvers under Raharuhi Rukupo were halted from their work because Williams objected to the content of ancestral figures in the carvings. Instead of providing alternative themes associated with a Christian house of worship, he opted for a decorative format of non-figurative *manaia*, thus missing out on the opportunity of spiritual and cultural integration.

Divergence of traditional art and Christian faith

It was at this point that Maori continued using traditional art themes in their meeting house designs and did not investigate the new belief system of Christianity in them. For Maori Christians, a dichotomy of thought began and remains to this day, where their beliefs as Christians are separated from their traditional use of the arts of the meeting house.

It is no wonder that, after two hundred years of Christianity in Maoridom, there is presently a reversion back to an anti-Christian spirituality rather than their own Christian/Maori integration. As a postgraduate student reading this history, I remember asking myself, 'How could the church in New Zealand have better managed its stewardship of Maori creativity?' and 'What themes could now be used to better articulate the Christian faith?'

Interpreting the meeting house

Meeting houses can be 'interpreted' at several different levels. The first level is genealogical—linking the present community to the ancestor of the tribe. The second is mythical or cosmological—linking the community to the greater cosmos around it. A third, 'modern' level introduces the Western concept of linear time. This modern invention breaks away from 'the eternal now' Polynesian understanding of time, and anchors people into specific events, spaces and times as measurable history.

Previous spread:

Interior view (looking towards the rear) of Hotunui, a carved meeting house built in 1878 for the Ngati Maru people, Thames, New Zealand, by carvers from the Ngati Awa tribe of Whakatane, as a wedding present when Mereana Mokomoko, a Ngati Awa woman, married Wirope Hoterene Taipari, a Ngati Maru leader. The house has been in the Auckland War Memorial Museum since about 1920.

The walls are decorated by poupou (wall posts) depicting ancestors. The carvings are flanked by decorative tukutuku panels. The rafters are decorated in swirling white, red, and black kowhaiwhai designs.

This page:

View of Maori women and children seated outside the Owata meeting house, Rotorua. Photographer: James Cowan. Courtesy of the Cowan Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: PAColl-3033-1-21.

Opposite page from top to bottom:

A group standing outside the meeting house at Maketu Pa, Bay of Plenty. Maori carvings and rafter patterns can be seen on the front of the house. Photographer: H W Scheltus. Courtesy Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: 1/2-139855-F.

The Rev Thomas Kendall and the Maori chiefs Hongi and Waikato, 1820, James Barry, oil on canvas, 720 x 920mm. Courtesy Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: G-618.

Tane nui a rangi *kuaha* (doorway). Auckland University Wharehau designed by Master carver Paki Harrison. Photographer: Anaru/Andrew Panoho.



Anthropomorphism and the body of Christ

To quote master carver Paki Harrison's thoughts regarding the anthropomorphic symbolism of the Maori meeting house:

'The meeting house (*whare whakairo*) is conceptualised metaphorically as a human body representing the founding ancestor of a tribe at the apex of the gable; attached to the *tahuu* or ridgepole is the *koruru* (head). The *maihi* (barge boards) are the arms, outstretched to welcome guests. The *tahuu* is the backbone and the *heke* (rafters) are the ribs. People in the house are protected in the bosom of their ancestors: thus we have names like *Te Poho o Rawhiri* (The Bosom of David) and *Te Poho o Hinepare* (The Bosom of Hinepare.) The porch is termed the *roro* (brain.) The *kuwaha* (mouth) or door is the symbolic entry where the physical and the spiritual realms come together. The window becomes the eye (*matapihi*) and the interior the womb (*koopu*).

'The *poupou* (carved posts), which depict notable descendants from the founding ancestor ... reinforce the spiritual unity with human forbears right back to the beginning ... this visualisation of the house as the body of an ancestor (male or female) brings together its individual members into a united organism sharing a life and heritage.'¹

In my dissertation *Te Poho o Ihu Karaiti—A Thematic Alternative*, the 'thematic alternative' that I suggested was to transpose the body of Jesus Christ onto the anthropomorphic forms of the meeting house. Christ now became the ancestor of the gathered community. This single concept held so many implications. It not only embraced Maori *iwi* from diverse genealogical and dislocated geographical backgrounds, but it also embraced other races, cultures and creeds. In our modern complex and dysfunctional urban communities, Christ's disarming love, as the uniting head of mankind, has the power to remove barriers and unite communities all over this country.

Cosmology

Adding to Paki's thoughts, there are other direct and indirect insights that can be gleaned from the meeting house. At a cosmological level, the entry wall is seen as the wall of creation and birth. Christ becomes the first wall of creation, through whom the gathered are given life. The end wall is seen as the wall of death. Christ becomes the wall of death, for he is the 'resurrection and life' through whom the gathered will one day pass.

Transitory states occur when moving between different positions in the meeting house. The doorway for example, is a *tapu* threshold where the *pare* (carved lintel) removes harmful *tapu* from those entering the meeting house. Christ becomes the doorway to God the Father, removing our offences and allowing the gathered community unimpeded access into His presence.

Linear and cyclic time

The side walls discuss the journeys of the ancestors who have already walked the path of life. On the linear time level as well as the genealogical one, Christ becomes incarnate man intermingling his work with the gathered saints as their lives become meaningful

stories of his resurrected power.

Continuing on: The *tahuu* (ridgepole) *kowhaiwhai* pattern repetitions link the present generation to that of the ancestor, and the *heke* (rafter) *kowhaiwhai* repetitions indicate the number of generations linking the *pou* ancestors to the founding *tahuu* ancestor. Christ becomes the first and the last, the beginning and the end. He transcends and telescopes linear time into the cyclic, eternal now. The past and the future are brought into the present reality—Christ embodied in the gathered community.

Uniting worldviews

Because of the intermingling concepts of time, the meeting house can be viewed as a symbolic meeting place of differing worldviews united into one. The concepts of cyclic and linear time, though they come from opposing cultural polarities, are each found in both the Hebrew and Greek scriptures. Maori read their bibles perceiving its cyclic qualities, whilst Europeans read theirs emphasising its linear qualities.

Like a two-way street, symbols from these two different cultures can convey parallel meanings. For example: Europeans, in their journey with Christianity, have used the concept of an upside-down ship to describe the interior of their Cathedral buildings (European church bodies are called the *nave*, meaning 'ship' in Latin). The same metaphor is also used for the meeting house, which has been referred to as the *waka*, or the canoe. Both speak of communal rowers/paddlers whose united energies propel their vessel forwards. Both speak of a challenging journey across turbulent waves in the seas of life.

A teaching tool

Like the medieval cathedrals of Europe, the meeting house has been an illustrative teaching tool. A modern-day spectator can be guided step by step through its art forms and educated regarding the tales of heroes from the past. As our society fragments further and further into a confusing fantasy world of disconnected cyberspace, we need tangible guides to tell their stories. We need flesh and blood people, who can physically walk with us demonstrating the realities of Christ's kingdom around us.

As far as I am aware, the concept of the meeting house as the metaphorical embodiment of Christ had never been proposed before. Yet the logic of it seemed sublime. It was almost as if the meeting house had been sitting like a blank canvas beneath a tarpaulin, awaiting its day. When its time had come, the tarpaulin would be removed and a generation of modern artists would start painting its surfaces with their own incredible tales of life and faith.

The theme of Christ as the ancestor is just one example of how the modern New Zealand community can respond to the incredible cultural resources that are available in this country. With creative integrity and intelligence, let us investigate, celebrate and express our identities as a 'gathered' community drawn from different races to this land. And as we do, may we use these resources wisely.

Anaru/Andrew Panoho

1 Harrison, Paki, *Tane-Nui-A-Rangi*, (1988) Auckland: Auckland University Press

