REVIEWS

Roger Neich, ***Painted Histories: Early Maori Figurative Painting.*** Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993. Pp. xii, 330, with foreword by Cliff Whiting, maps, figures, tables, color plates, appendixes, bibliography, indexes. NZ$79.95 cloth.

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THIS BOOK WILL UNDOUBTEDLY become a landmark in the study of Maori art. The New Zealand anthropologist and art curator Roger Neich has documented in great detail the remarkable innovation of figurative painting that emerged in the decoration of Maori ancestral meetinghouses during the second half of the nineteenth century. The importance of this book, however, reaches beyond figurative painting per se, since the author relates in a comparative analysis the forms and semantics of this new Maori art style to other Maori art forms and the changes they were undergoing in colonial circumstances. Furthermore, he situates the development and the demise of figurative painting against the contemporary sociopolitical background. By doing so, Neich provides penetrating insights, not only into figurative painting but also into the art forms from which it emerged and to which it was related, directly or indirectly, in the context of the decoration of Maori ancestral meetinghouses. His analysis of the history and the changing symbolism of Maori meetinghouses, as embodied in their constitution and decoration from approximately 1880 onwards, is no doubt the most comprehensive and most profound study of the subject to date.

Over a period of twenty years Neich documented and meticulously examined eighty-five different meetinghouses that contained figurative paintings;

an overview of his survey is incorporated in appendix 5 (pp. 249-307). He visited all houses that have survived and spoke to descendants of the artists involved in their construction and decoration. In addition, he traveled all over the world to search in museums and archives for detailed information about the history of those meetinghouses and their artistic expressions. His research shows that Maori figurative painting was a much more widespread and popular art form than has hitherto been assumed. It has been ignored in favor of woodcarving since the beginning of this century, when orthodox doctrines regarding Maori traditional arts and crafts were introduced and became the basis on which figurative painting was generally conceived of as tainted with European influences and thus degenerate and decadent. Neich shows, however, that figurative painting not only derived from the naturalistic art introduced by Europeans, but also involved a transformation of traditional Maori art.

Neich distinguishes between three different strands of figurative painting: naturalistic drawing, the painting of figures derived from woodcarving forms and motifs, and ***kowhaiwhai*** painting (abstract curvilinear patterns on canoe paddles and prows as well as on meetinghouse rafters). Of these figurative genres only naturalistic drawing was modeled after the conventions of European painting and drawing; the other two traditions developed as transformations from indigenous Maori art forms. Apart from a few figures in archaic rock art, naturalistic designs were not used in Maori art before the arrival of Europeans. But soon after the beginning of European settlement, Maori people took up this new mode of artistic expression and gradually refined it in the course of the nineteenth century. At the same time, however, a tendency towards a more pictorial representation of figures emerged in woodcarving, which in the second half of the nineteenth century led to the transposition of carving figure forms into painting. Parallel to this development, ***kowhaiwhai*** patterns began diverging from the traditional abstract, symmetrical, repeating, translational designs and developed into figurative, nonsymmetrical, nonrepeating designs.

The analysis of the transformation of abstract ***kowhaiwhai*** patterns into figurative designs is the most extensive in the book, probably because it provides a superb illustration of the strength of Neich's theoretical approach. In his analysis he combines, on the one hand, the contention of F. Allan Hanson that the study of traditional Maori art should move beyond the reconstruction of representational iconography and instead locate the semantics of abstract forms in the formal structure of their design, with, on the other hand, the semiological distinction set out by Roland Barthes between denotational and connotational meaning. In relation to ***kowhaiwhai*** paintings Neich argues, then, that their most basic design element is the ***koru,*** a curv-

ing stalk with a bulb at one end, the meaning of which in a Maori perspective is strongly associated with the growth of a plant, an unfolding fern in particular. At the level of denotation ***kowhaiwhai*** designs might seem far removed from notions of growth or development, but given their position within the total scheme of meetinghouses the main connotations of ***kowhaiwhai*** paintings clearly relate to ideas of genealogy and descent. Following these connotations the later transformation of ***kowhaiwhai*** design elements into actual figurative representations of ancestors might be seen as attempts to achieve a more literal or denotational expression of the traditional connotations. This interpretation is closely related to other changes in Maori artistic expressions, such as the gradual shift from aspective to perspective representation, which in turn parallels the gradual displacement of traditional, mythological concepts of time and space by European notions of history and change.

These transformations and the way in which they are reflected in nineteenth-century Maori art are all dealt with by the author in a theoretically sophisticated manner, inspired not only by the work of the French semiologist Barthes, but also by that of Uspensky, the influential Soviet semiotician of the visual arts. In spite of the high level of abstraction in his theoretical analysis, I do believe that this book is accessible to nonprofessional readers, whereas professional readers will be interested in Neich's fine theoretical synthesis and particularly in its application to the detailed evidence he provides to substantiate his arguments.

Neich's analysis of figurative painting focuses specifically on the changes it symbolizes, both in form and content, in Maori society in the nineteenth century. Maori figurative painting clearly functioned to come to terms with the rapid changes in Maori society that ensued from colonization. It aimed at metaphorically reordering Maori society in the light of the increasing numbers of Europeans settling in New Zealand and taking control of the sociopolitical situation. At the same time, figurative painting accomplished a role in communicating internal identity differences in Maori society. For that reason, too, it gradually disappeared again in the beginning of the twentieth century, when orthodox traditional Maori woodcarving was deliberately revived to express the emerging need for a national Maori identity in relation to the dominant society of European settlers.

Another important reason why woodcarving was favored to the detriment, of figurative painting in the construction of a national symbol for Maori culture and identity was that the most influential school of carving in the beginning of this century was that of the Arawa tribe, which had fought alongside the European government during the New Zealand Wars in the 1860s, whereas figurative painting was closely associated with the millennial move-

ment of the "rebellious" prophet and visionary leader Te Kooti Rikirangi, the founder of the Ringatu Church. Te Kooti was very influential in the development of the contemporary meetinghouse towards the end of the nineteenth century, fusing for the first time the two functions of church and chiefly meetinghouse in one structure serving the needs of the entire community. In order to boost Maori self-esteem and create a sense of pride in Maori cultural tradition, Te Kooti also promoted the arts of the meetinghouse, including representational ***tukutuku*** panels (latticework), naturalistic carvings, innovative ***kowhaiwhai,*** and figurative paintings. The arts in the meetinghouses that were erected in the region in which Te Kooti's influence was most intense covered all aspects of tribal concerns, both regarding the role of ancestors in mythology and in respect of contemporary political interests. The new narrative style expressing the latter, particularly in figurative paintings, was clearly symbolic of the rapid changes sweeping Maori society at the time.

Unfortunately, Neich does not elaborate the far-reaching implications of his analysis for the study of contemporary reifications of Maori culture and tradition and the way in which they are currently represented in the traditional arts, particularly woodcarving. In a seminal paper about the influence of European art patrons on the construction of orthodox doctrines regarding the representation of supposedly "authentic" Maori culture and tradition in woodcarving, he has previously discussed the context in which figurative painting was suppressed as an innovative art form believed to be perverted by European influences (Neich 1983). In his monograph on figurative painting, therefore, I had expected to see a more extensive discussion of why figurative painting was unable to become accepted as a new art form and what the explicit views of the European art patrons, among others, were about figurative painting. Neich's discussion of that topic in this book is restricted to an indirect analysis of the circumstantial evidence that explains the emergence of contemporary forms of woodcarving at the expense of figurative painting. He does not provide data on the discourse of figurative painting in itself, only on the discourse about woodcarving. Neich acknowledges the absence of detailed information on the discourse of figurative painting (p. 197), but in view of his comprehensiveness it is surprising that he does not explain why this is so. Given the popularity of figurative painting in certain regions toward the end of the nineteenth century, it is unlikely that such a discourse never existed. A reconstruction of indigenous as well as European perceptions of figurative painting could have deepened our understanding of the emergence of so-called authentic representations of Maori culture and tradition that are still dominant today.

There are, of course, other criticisms to be made, notwithstanding my

admiration for the interdisciplinary character of this book and the depth of the analysis. The main point I would like to raise in this regard concerns the composition of the book. Although Neich clearly focuses his analysis towards a discussion of figurative painting, this new genre in Maori arts, however, is dealt with directly only in the final three chapters. The first five chapters all contain information that the author provides to analyze figurative painting against a background of changes in other art forms in nineteenth-century Maori society, particularly the role of painting and ***kowhaiwhai*** patterns, their placement in meetinghouses, and the changes they express therein, such as the new role of space and time. As a result of this composition, issues are raised in the first two parts of the book that leave the reader confused until the final chapters, in which they are comprehensively resolved for the first time. It would have been enlightening had Neich begun with a clear documentation of the subject matter, such as the important distinction between the three different strands of figurative painting (now described in chapter 7), which in subsequent parts he could have unpacked. In such a way, the author would have been able to avoid the impression given in the long chapter on ***kowhaiwhai*** (chapter 3), for example, that figurative painting emerged primarily from these abstract curvilinear designs. Furthermore, it would have strengthened the role of history in his analysis of change in Maori society and Maori arts. To situate an analysis in a historical perspective it is, after all, unnecessary to prefix a historical sketch. History may well be postfixed to explain issues that do not by definition demand a chronological order.

In addition, I wonder to what extent Neich's empirical analysis has been directed by his theoretical perspective on history as derived mainly from Sahlins's theory of structural transformation. In some parts, particularly when the evidence is mainly circumstantial, Neich applies a rather mechanical model of change. This problem is particularly acute in his analysis of changing ***kowhaiwhai*** styles, when Neich argues that within the space of a couple of decades the ***kowhaiwhai*** designs were transposed from canoe paddles onto the rafters of meetinghouses, reflecting the diminishing importance of war canoes as cultural emblems and the increasing importance of meetinghouses as symbols of Maori tribal identity. The thrust of this hypothesis cannot be disputed on the basis of the consistent body of evidence presented in the book, but the exceptional order of the transformation as sketched by Neich does not seem entirely plausible either, in my view. The perfect homology between theory and empirical evidence in Neich's analysis may make readers suspicious; a slightly less linear mode of change would seem more obvious.

Notwithstanding these comments, however, the level of empirical detail

in this book at least leaves the reader the possibility to form his or her own opinion on the subject. In combination with the theoretical sophistication of the analysis, this will undoubtedly contribute to making the book a landmark in the study of Maori art and change in Maori colonial history.

REFERENCE

Neich, Roger
1983 The Veil of Orthodoxy: Rotorua Ngati Tarawhai Woodcarving in a Changing Context. In *Art and Artists of Oceania,* ed. Sidney Mead and Bernie Kernot, 244-265. Palmerston North: Dunmore.