

WAHINE MAU WHAO: A WOMAN'S HAND TO THE CHISEL

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Detail, Rangikurukuru Whareniui. Taken in May 2003 by Jane Johnson Matua, descendant of carver Jane Topia. This image signified the start Matua's research into the whareniui and restoration project currently underway. Courtesy of Jane Johnson Matua

He toi whakairo, he mana wāhine ¹

Where there is artistic integrity, there is women's strength and dignity

"I asked him, 'Is it true that women can't carve?' to which he simply replied, 'Women carved.'"

This conversation between artist Kura Te Waru Rewiri and master carver Pakaariki (Paki) Harrison² states the resounding truth of wāhine mau whao. That women took up the chisel and carved.

This paper will present stories about Māori women who were carvers during the last century. Documentation of the practice of wāhine mau whao is limited to brief references in theses, or minor mention in books about Māori carving and architecture. While this paper does not presume to be a comprehensive survey, it clearly identifies a gap in the scholarship covering this area. As such, research has focused on primary sources and first-hand discussions with contemporary wāhine mau whao about their practice and experience in the art of carving. I am grateful for the generosity with which these stories have been shared with me.

Writers like Ripeka Evans,³ Ani Mikaere⁴ and Leonie Hayden⁵ have critiqued and revised the imposed gender divisions of the colonial landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand. We are beginning to understand more clearly that while these divisions did exist, they were much more fluid than current accepted gender roles dictate. As Mikaere⁶ notes, these gender relationships were not hierarchical within our oral traditions and historical narratives: there were women who led their people, and this is particularly true within matrilineal hapū and iwi.

A 1966 article in the journal *Te Ao Hou: The New World* reported on the launch of the first Māori arts course to be offered in the National Arts Council's annual School of Music. Eighteen students were enrolled, learning about the history of carving, and the application of practical techniques. Widely renowned master carver and teacher Pineāmine Taiapa stated, "The most outstanding pupil was a Māori girl from Tuakau, who became the first Māori woman to attempt the carving course. Although it was often assumed that women were not permitted to undertake carving, this was not so. Māori tradition clearly indicated that where women were responsible for an outstanding achievement generally attributed to men, they were permitted to undertake such men's work as carving."⁷ Paki Harrison, who was a student of Taiapa, is also known to have taught wāhine in his carving classes.⁸

A story told by Apirana Ngata in his Rauru-nui-a-Toi Lectures in Wellington, 1972,⁹ demonstrates the waka-building knowledge of Iranui, sister of Kahungunu and wife of carver Hingangaroa, and focuses in particular on her demonstration of haumi waka, showing the dovetailing technique to her brother.

"Iranui, then in child, saw Kahungunu and his people finishing the body of a canoe and fixing the prow and stern pieces by tying them on by straight joints, tuporo haumi. A canoe built in this way depended largely on the rauawa or side boards for strength and rigidity. She told of her husband, who was an expert in such matters and showed her brother the new way of dovetailing the pieces in. She effectually if not modestly illustrated what she meant by lying down and placing her brother's legs each side of her own."¹⁰

Writer and researcher Ngarino Ellis uses this story to demonstrate Iranui's knowledge of waka building, and suggests that this is at odds with claims that women did not have anything to do with building waka, noting too that she was pregnant with her second son at that time.

Rangikurukuru to Tūrangawaewae

One of the most widely documented histories of a wahine mau whao is that of Jane Topia (also known as Janie or Heni). Academic, curator and writer Ngahuia Te Awekotuku recorded Topia's story in her doctoral thesis,¹¹ and this was further investigated by writer Rangihiroa Panoho.¹² Topia also received some support from Pineāmine Taiapa, although the detail and extent of this is unknown.

Whakatōhea woman Mereana Black married Heremia Topia and settled with him at Bradley's Landing, Dargaville. Mereana dreamed that her sister charged her with building a whare whakairo. With no carvers available, Mereana's daughter Jane took up the challenge.

The whare whakairo she carved is named Rangikurukuru. It was constructed with customary materials; toetoe and raupō were used to form a roof and line the interior, which displayed painted kōwhaiwhai patterns. Former New Zealand Prime Minister The Right Honourable Joseph Gordon Coates was in attendance at the opening of the whare, on 13 April 1936, along with a 600-strong crowd.

In later years Topia worked as a teacher, incorporating her knowledge of carving into her teaching.¹³ For almost 80 years, Rangikurukuru was left to face the elements. Jane Johnson Matua, a descendant of Jane Topia, has been researching the whare since 2003 and is involved in a whānau restoration project that is currently underway. Rangikurukuru has been shifted closer to the Topia whānau property – a new chapter for this unique house.¹⁴

Women leaders have always been involved in commissioning whare whakairo and gifting land for them to be built. An exceptional example is that of Tainui leader and Princess, Te Kirihaehae Te Puea Herangi, who commissioned many whare and also waka carved during her leadership, including the most famous, Māhinārangi, at Tūrangawaewae.¹⁵ According to an article in *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, this wahine toa also knew how to wield a chisel. Author Eric Ramsden reported that Te Puea "...restored carving in Waikato. In the early period at Tūrangawaewae, though the art is a male one, she took chisel in hand and carved certain work – just as, later, she learnt to drive a tractor with the idea of encouraging her people."¹⁶

Another female leader who is known to have taken up the whao is Whina Cooper (née Gilbert). Architectural historian Deidre Brown wrote about Whina Cooper as a "driving female force in the construction of whare whakairo and recovery of local whakairo rākau (wood carving)" in Northland in the early 1930s. She discussed Whina's commissioning of Rotorua carver Eramiha Kapua to work on a whare whakairo planned for the Catholic parish hall marae at Panguru. Brown notes that Whina herself worked on two taniwha carvings for this project.¹⁷

Also in Northland stands Motatau Marae, with a whare tīpuna – ancestral carved house – that was carved in the late 1980s. With the blessing of Sir James Henare, local women of Ngāti Hine carved as part of the whakairo team for the wharekai. These wāhine mau whao included Anita Jones, Ketī Tipene and Georgina Tipene.¹⁸

Further south, in Ngāti Tunohopu, Ngāti Whakaue, Te Arawa country, Te Wharetoroa Tiniraupeka was a talented weaver and carver. Curator and writer Awhina Tamarapa described a particular kahu waero that Te Wharetoroa wove, and also her carving work, making items for the tourist trade in the early 1900s, which were sold at Ōhinemutu in Rotorua.¹⁹ Several decades later, Ngahuia Te Awekotuku can remember Te Wharetoroa sitting on the pae carving wakahuia and



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Detail, Rangikurukuru Whareniui, 2003
Courtesy of Jane Johnson Matua

papahou, concentrating on smaller, ornamental objects.²⁰ She refers also to other wāhine mau whao who carved taonga such as tokotoko, along with taiaha, patu and other weaponry. For Te Awekotuku, these stories negate the widely accepted external perception of Te Arawa rohe maintaining rigidly gendered Māori arts practices.

Te Roopu o Ngā Wāhine Kai Whakairo

In the early 1990s the Te Kanawa family, Aroha, Ata and Kahutoi (Kahu), with Te Rangi Kaihoru Laurie Nicholas facilitated a wāhine mau whao workshop at Waipatoto, the whānau marae of the Te Kanawa family in Te Kūiti. At the first hui, as Kahu Te Kanawa recalls (personal communication, January 2019), there were about 15 wāhine, who had responded to the call put out by her sister Ata, through her networks, “We didn’t realise until whakawhanaungatanga that all of the iwi of Aotearoa were represented within the group, which was pretty amazing.” The workshops were led by master carver and tohunga moko, Te Rangi Kaihoru Laurie Nicholas. Participants included Ruiha Stirling, Mamae Takerei, Paerau Corneal, Chrissie Paul, Hinewirangi Kohu (now Kohu-Morgan), Christine Harvey, Grace Voller and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, who remembers, “We had a fantastic time and learned heaps, laughed a lot.” Kahu also recalls that her mother, Diggeress Rangituatahi Te Kanawa,²¹ who was a remarkable and highly respected weaver, kaiako and artist, had no qualms about wāhine carving and brought out a log she had been saving, for the women to carve. Kahu and Ata’s dad brought out his chainsaw and chisels to help out. From this, a national Māori women’s carving group, Te Roopu o Ngā Wāhine Kai Whakairo was formed. The group met again in Tauranga and in Blenheim soon after this first hui.

In 1998-99, members of the group were involved in a project envisioned and led by fellow artist and carver Chrissie Paul, in which wāhine mau whao carved a chapel for the Hamilton YWCA. The chapel had originally been built in 1926 by the first Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Waikato in memory of his wife and mother. It was later deconsecrated.²²

The team was led by Hinewirangi Kohu-Morgan in the creation of six carved female ātua. The project was underpinned by a vision to create a space where Māori women at the YWCA could feel at home, to rebuild a sense of mana wāhine and to encourage an ability in those entering the chapel to start on a journey beyond violence. The chapel, renamed Te Whare Wāhine still stands today, proud testament to the skills of Te Roopu o Ngā Wāhine Kai Whakairo.



— Members of Te Roopu o Ngā Wāhine Kai Whakairo carving for the Hamilton YWCA chapel 1998-1999
Courtesy of Hamilton YWCA



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Hinewirangi carving, 2019
Courtesy of Hinewirangi Kohu-Morgan

Below are Kohu-Morgan's words about her journey to becoming a wahine mau whao.²³

*Ko Hinewirangi taku ingoa,
Ki te taha o tōku whare tangata
Ko Moumoukai tōku maunga tapu
Ko Nuhaka te awa
Ko Rongomaiwahine tōku tupuna kuia
Ko Rakaipaka tōku iwi.
Ki te taha o tōku Uretu
Ko Mauao tōku maunga tapu
Ko Tauranga tōku moana
Ko Tamateapokaiwhenua tōku tupuna koroua
Ko Ngāi Tamarawaho tōku hapū
Ko Ngāti Ranginui tōku iwi.*

I grew up with a father, Anaru Kohu, who was a master carver. He helped carve the marae in Huria under the direction of many tohunga whakairo. He was a carver at Church College under the tohunga Piri Poutapu, and John Taiapa, carving the house that travelled to Hawai'i. In Kahungunu he carved the Pou Ranginui, who was the elder brother of Kahungunu. My mother Helen, Hineatarau Mataira, was a tukutuku weaver and as children we helped her, sitting behind the panel, passing her kiekie or pīngao backwards and forwards.

We lived close to the whare where Tuti Tukaokao carved and I sat often as a child watching him carve pou, bringing alive the wood, pulling the eyes out, and I swear those great eyes would wink at me.

I was raised on the papa kāinga, so all of us as children walked into the whare where they were carving. I stopped going into the whare when my e kura/moon time began flowing. I learnt well from my kuia Hinewirangi Whakaware Brown no Mohaka, that I was sacred in that time and that I was treated special by her. But I had developed a love of design, I am the most crooked liner in the world. No kidding. My sisters also learned to carve, as our father would bring home a pou and put it in the shed and tell us to go and hew it out where he had left the lines with a toki. I always remember hating that part of the process, as I developed breasts and they often got in the way of holding the toki.

But I loved using the whao to carve – only the parts that papa wanted us to do.

My love of carving came to me when I was only 6 years old, and I watched my uncle Teddy Wananga who grew hue/gourds next door to our place in Nuhaka. From that day forth, I had a love of carving hue and still do.

I have just recently finished a final coating of liquid glass on my waka tūpāpaku and ipu pungarehu. I am still carving, mostly tokotoko, because I am teaching men in prison whaikōrero, but young people don't know what to do with their bodies, so I put a tokotoko in their hands. Part of their learning is to carve a tokotoko.

I am currently working on four wāhine atua carved hue, talking their stories for an exhibition in the Waikato Museum with Doctor Aroha Yates Smith and Nalani Hokowhitu later this year.

Carving as an Aspect of Arts Practice

Senior Māori artist Robyn Kahukiwa, who has affiliations with Ngāti Porou, Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, Ngāti Hau, Ngāti Konohi and Te Whānau-a-Ruataupare, is best known for her bold colourful paintings, which are always conscious of social injustice, especially racism, responding to cultural identity and political themes and drawing strongly on themes like loss of culture and land, racism, Māori histories and cosmology. Her work projects feminine energy and strength, for example her 1980s *Wahine Toa* series (Strong Women) which celebrates eight atua wāhine from the Māori pantheon. Throughout Kahukiwa's oeuvre, she has made powerful references to carving and where whakairo, portraying carved poupou and tekoteko in her painted works. She has also incorporated carving into her arts practice, and *Tangata Whenua* (mixed media on wood, 2001) is an example of this aspect of her work.²⁴

Kahukiwa's *Te Whare Ūkaipō* sits within Tapu Te Ranga Marae, established by the visionary Bruce Stewart, in Wellington's Island Bay. This whare, which opened in 1998,²⁴ was created to honour female energy and empowerment, and the tapu of wāhine. Funded by Te Waka Toi, Creative New Zealand, the interior work was carried out by Kahukiwa, who created painted pou using flat custom-board, richly textured with copper to represent atua wāhine. Sculptural fibre works by artist Diane Prince, suspended from the ceiling, add further stories of wāhine toa.

Kahukiwa has said of this project, "For me, a woman artist of Māori descent, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. To be involved with the making of artworks for a whare was an honour and a privilege. It was doubly significant for the degree of involvement in creation of a house that is limited to men in many iwi."²⁶

Paerau Corneal, Ngāti Tūwharetoa and Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi, and member of Te Roopu o Ngā Wāhine Kai Whakairo is most well known for her uku ceramic work, but is also a wahine mau whao. She has always maintained that women carve, just as men weave, and is pithily quoted in a newspaper article as saying that the idea that women didn't carve was "codswallop".²⁷

Held in the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Corneal's series, *In the beginning were the Waka* (1991),²⁸ uses raku-fired Nelson clay together with muka, carved tōtara and maire. The figures visually reinforce the fluid relationship between carved uku and rākau. In the series, the waka also symbolically acknowledges the vulva, representing feminine strength, exploration and migration, repositories of knowledge and taonga. *In the beginning were the Waka* was commissioned in partnership with Expo NZ 1992 Ltd and the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand.

Multimedia installation artist Ngahina Hohaia, from Taranaki iwi, is another who works across diverse media, with a strong grounding in fibre; tāniko and raranga. She has also incorporated carving into her practice. This is exemplified in her installation work, *De-fence*, which was exhibited in her solo show, *Tools of Oppression and Liberation*, at Pātaka Art + Museum, Porirua, in 2016. For the installation, Hohaia carved 156 pine fence battens.²⁹ The exhibition text outlines that "In working with this material, Hohaia reflects on the use of the term 'post' as a marker of time, space and context."³⁰

The battens, such a familiar part of the landscape, are used on many different levels: to allude to land confiscations, especially significant for the Taranaki area; as symbols of the wholesale destruction of the unruly natural landscape and consequent packaging into neatly fenced



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 Ngahina Hohaia
De-fence, 2016, installed at Pātaka Art Museum
 Photograph: Mark Tantrum, 2016

farmland; as pou whenua – used by Māori to mark sites of significance and boundaries of mana whenua; to draw on whakapapa and connections between tāngata and whenua by referencing rākau whakapapa notching. To further strengthen this relationship, the posts were sourced from confiscated Māori lands.

Pania Waaka learned to carve with the authorisation of her kaumatua. In the early 2000s, Waaka completed an advanced diploma in toi whakairo, the art of carving, from Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi in Whakatāne. She was the first woman to successfully complete this course, but many others have since followed in her footsteps. According to one of her tutors, James Stewart, Ngāti Awa kaumatua were in full support of opening the carving programme to women. As well as carving in rākau, Waaka has carved in bone and stone, and also works on skin as a tā moko artist. She has talked about the learning experience as being challenging, particularly physically, as well as pushing her creatively.

Waaka has carved large-scale and architectural pieces, including a tekoteko carved for Iramoko Marae at Matatā. With the continued support of local kaumatua and wānanga staff, she continued to carve this whakairo while carrying her fifth child and completed the tekoteko a week before giving birth. Her baby Iramoko was named in tribute to this tekoteko and project.³¹

Wāhine o Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa

Sculptor and carver Tui Hobson, of Rarotongan descent, is largely self taught. Hobson was inspired to start carving when she inherited chisels and a pile of wood from her father, who had been a sculptor and cabinetmaker. Her mother was Rarotongan, and the inspiration from this heritage is clearly reflected in her work. Hobson acknowledges Rarotongan traditions, saying, “A lot of my influence comes from my grandmother, who was a designer and sewer of tivaevae, so when I started carving, I began with flowers and natural forms.”³²

In 2004 Hobson won The Martin Hughes Contemporary Pacific Art Award and travelled to Rarotonga, Aitutaki and Atiu. This allowed her to meet with local artists and connect with family. While there she was further inspired by the traditional costume designs and Pacific tattoos and designs. Her Auntyn Lynnsay Rongokea, who lives in Rarotonga, was also an influence, with her book *The Art of Tivaevae: Traditional Cook Islands Quilting*.

In 2008 she went to Taiwan as Artist in Residence at Kaohsiung Fine Arts; her work *Vaka to the Stars* now stands in the coastal city of Kaohsiung. Hobson carves in both small scale and large but it is her large-scale public works that tend to be best documented – such as her Talking Pole *Pacific Memories* (2004) in Tokoroa, *Kava Chair* in Kells Park Albany (2005), *Reclining Form* (2007), which sits near the Akoranga bus station on Auckland's North Shore, and carved poles for a fale at Mangere Bridge Primary School (2008).

In 2011 she was commissioned to design and oversee construction of the exterior panels for a large Herne Bay house. This was an exciting project, in which repeated Pacific motifs were laser cut into 66 panels, which extended around the house. In 2018 she designed and carved four seats for New Zealand's commemorative garden at Le Quesnoy, the garden that celebrates the heroism of New Zealand soldiers in World War 1.³³

Another carver who shares Hobson's Rarotongan heritage, as well as having Dutch ancestry, is Hawke's Bay-based Francisca Moeroa Obers. Obers studied visual arts through Toimairangi, at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, and initially began painting, later expanding her practice to include carving, both in wood and also exotic stone. The ancestress Hinetemoa, carved by Obers in tōtara, stands proud as one of Ngā Pou o Heretaunga in Hastings' Civic Square, representing the local Houngarea Marae.

She writes:

My first inspirations for creativity came from my mother, Kimiora Obers (née Ngaeruaiti), of the Ngāti Tane tribe in Mangaia, Cook Islands. My father, Theodorus Obers, of the Netherlands, died young, in 1966, and left behind a widow with three young ones under five years old. This loving mother was mum and dad, growing our food, preserving, knitting our jerseys, sewing our clothes, sewing tivaevae, embroidery, crochet, and in a roundabout way, it was from her I learnt that wāhine could do everything. I entered Toimairangi, based in Hastings, under Sandy Adsett in 2003 as a self-taught painter, and that's the year I introduced myself to 'the way of the wood', when I refused the MDF board proposed for a brief, and went with native wood instead. There were chisels there, and one of my projects attracted the attention of a new student, Boydie Rakei, a talented carver, who had just come off a carving diploma. He offered to show me the technique I was missing and when he left for Australia not long after, he left me his chisels and mallet. Give a girl resources and she will use them.

In about 2005, when I was researching Cook Island woodcarving, I came across the name of the last recorded master to'unga whakairo of Mangaia, named Tangitoru, who in 1906 led the contingent of South Pacific Artists to the Christchurch South Pacific Arts Festival. Many pieces of Pacific art held in New Zealand museums and collections came from this exhibition. When I asked my mum if she knew of Tangitoru, she informed me that it was Papa Tangitoru, my great-grand-uncle.

2007 found me carving in a tent with some seriously talented master carvers from around the Pacific Rim at Piko, a gathering of 100 indigenous artists in Hawai'i. It was most heartening

to hear stories from Dempsey Bob, Joe David and Ed Archie Noisecat, all British Columbian tohunga whakairo, about their whine mau whao.

The 2013 Ngā Pou o Heretaunga Project was huge for me. Required was the mandate, from one's marae committee, for permission to carve their pou, which I got, finally, but not an easy task when one is female and a non-New Zealand Māori. But I got one, and that's another book to be written.

I am forever grateful to the wāhine on the Houngarea Marae Committee of Paki Paki, who granted me permission to carve their tipuna, Hinetemoa.

I continue with my wood practice, alongside working pounamu and other semi-precious stones. Headstones I have been doing also, and recently took a position one day per week, learning the other side of monumental masonry, sandblasting, installation etc.³⁴

Conclusion

For some, these stories may be extraordinary, while, for many, women carving is simply a fact. Women have carved, women carve. This is not to argue that there was not customarily a gender division in the world of carving, but instead to revise the rigidity of the gender balance. This did exist, but was likely to have been much more fluid than post-colonial male-dominated social acknowledgement dictated. It is demonstrated in the instances of wāhine trained in the art of the taiaha, or whaikōrero, or the wāhine toa who wield a chisel with artistic talent and confidence.

There were some women who shared their stories with me but asked for these not be published, an indication that wāhine mau whao are not widely accepted and, in some instances, have not been treated with the respect their talent and dedication to carving deserves. It is hoped that, in the same way that carving practices have adapted and grown to encompass contemporary techniques and innovations, women who carve will become more generally esteemed. A simple truth is also that few of our people are interested in carving, or in a position to act on a desire to carve.

A further chapter in the story about wāhine mau whao relates to Pākehā women who carved in New Zealand in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of these were referencing Māori carving vernacular, for example Hawke's Bay woman Ruth Nelson's carved fire surround at Puketiti Homestead and Stable,³⁵ and Auckland women Edith Fenton and Martha Buchanan's carved chair, in the collection of Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira.³⁶ In 1904, Wairarapa woman Thyra Beetham's 'Māori Carved Mantelpiece' was exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts. There was speculation that some of these women, including Beetham, had learned from Māori carvers in the Wairarapa.³⁷

Speaking of another example of indigenous women's cultural reclamation of their carving artforms, Lou-ann Neel, daughter of a carver and connected to Kwakwaka'wakw tribes in Northwest Canada, says,

It's really a colonial idea that our women didn't carve. Our women have always carved. I've already heard a few people say, 'Well, you know, our grandmother was also a carver.' Good, I want to hear about her. Let's talk about her, too. Because all of our communities need these role models to come from the last couple of generations and encourage our young girls and women to pursue the arts, too.³⁸

This whakaaro underpins the kaupapa of this article, drawing together the many threads of kōrero of the handful of women who are wāhine mau whao. This is a story about mana wāhine. It is a celebration of the work of women who have put chisel to wood, and shares stories about their practice. These women deserve better recognition in the annals of Māori art, and sit within a larger story of how and why women are generally disregarded in the art-historical pantheon, absent from exhibitions, books and public collections. Also surfacing are common threads; women teaching others the skills and art of carving; being motivated to carve by knowledge of tīpuna who practiced the art, or drawing inspiration from the work of other women working in other media such as weaving or tīvaevae.³⁹

Within whānau, there may remain anecdotal evidence of grandmothers or great-grandmothers who carved, and even written and photographic material tucked away in the nation's archives. This is a body of research that deserves attention and is likely to be the subject of future investigations, as will other emerging questions, such as carving stories from the wider Moana-nui-a-Kiwa.

I am indebted to the generosity of carvers and researchers who have shared their kōrero and experiences with me. There are still many stories out there. Hopefully, by reading these stories, women who carve, and descendants of women who carve, will be encouraged to share these kōrero, so that we can build on our knowledge of wāhine mau whao and smooth the way for wāhine who are drawn to the chisel.



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Paerau Corneal

In the beginning were the Waka, 1991

Ceramic, muka, tōtara, maire, 1000 x 3200mm

Courtesy of Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand (1996-0033-10/1-33)