

## Review (History in Other Media)

*Encounter: New Zealand Design and Decorative Arts*. Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira, The Auckland Domain, Auckland. Reviewed on 3 February and 3, 4 June 2008 [<http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/?t=287>].

AUCKLAND WAR MEMORIAL MUSEUM'S NEW GALLERY of New Zealand Design and Decorative Arts is the first permanent survey exhibition of its kind in New Zealand and marks a shift from collecting items from the classical European and Oriental traditions to procuring and displaying New Zealand objects. *Encounter's* theme is a simple, celebratory one: in the curators' words the gallery announces, 'Wow, look what we have made here! We're okay!' The selection of objects on display offers an alternative story to New Zealand's conventional narrative of rugby, racing and beer, and provides a fine balance to the wartime experiences portrayed in *Scars on the Heart*, one of three other permanent Pakeha history exhibitions along with *Wild Child* and *Auckland 1866*, the colonial streetscape.

*Encounter* avoids the nostalgia trap of concentrating on the nineteenth century by displaying a good spread of objects from 1800 to the present day. These are sourced from loans, gifts and recent acquisitions, and reflect a traditional decorative arts emphasis on the best examples of fine workmanship along with a sprinkling of curiosities. Although objects have been collected from all over New Zealand, many of the works are shaped from the forests and clay of the Auckland region.

Ferns are a recurrent motif and a reminder that Brand New Zealand goes back a long way. There are silver ponga fronds on top of the memorial lamp presented to Colonel Wynyard in 1858 and ferns ornamenting desks and wardrobes throughout the nineteenth century. Skill at incorporating local material is also visible in the use of feathers and birds, from a fine huia brooch from the late nineteenth century, to the brilliantly dyed feathers on the Francis Hooper-designed dress that has a whole pheasant stuck bizarrely to the side (1997), and a sculpted pavlova with nightmarish red, dead birds heaped on top of white meringue.



The exhibition is organized chronologically, although two entrances, a zig-zag route through the middle, and a few cabinets of special collections interrupt the flow. One entrance leads into 'Sailors and Settlers' and the early nineteenth century's blend of making-do and delicate craftsmanship. Highlights are the rough sailor's chair carved out of a whale's vertebra and the pipe organ built from 1845 to 1850 by Hokianga resident William Webster using Australian and New Zealand timbers. This elegant, formal instrument is the first of several objects that challenge pre-existing ideas of bush-life and masculinity. The next section, 'Presenting Ourselves', holds another show-piece, the desk that Anton Seuffert made to be shipped to England in 1869 to honour Bishop Selwyn's time in New Zealand. This is a marvellous work with 16 New Zealand timbers inlaid in the marquetry of the desk-top and drawers. Sections on 'A Well Furnished Room' and 'Of Charm and Resource' display more predictable examples of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century furniture and clothing.

Pottery begins to take over with the Arts and Crafts Movement in the early twentieth century. The collection documents the work of important leaders in studio pottery, women like Elizabeth Lissaman in the 1920s and Briar Gardner a decade later. Other works in this period, such as a modernist coffee service and Eileen Rose's stylish wallpaper, suggest that the interwar years were a heyday for women designers. Common pieces from Crown Lynn Potteries in the 1940s–1970s are among the few samples of industrial design for the mass market to be represented in the gallery, and offer most New Zealand visitors a nice sense of 'This is Your Life'.

The text accompanying the pottery highlights the to-and-fro of travel and overseas influences, from Olive Jones studying in London in the 1930s, Robert Field returning in 1945 with the first copy of Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book*, Frank Carpay from Holland transforming design ideas at Crown Lynn in the 1950s, and Len Castle's visit to Japan in 1966. However, the dominance of pottery needs clearer justification and a less cluttered presentation; muted colours disappear into black cabinets, and there is little 'grab factor' here for casual visitors. Visitors need to understand how important to New Zealand Crown Lynn industry was, and to learn more about the leading role of studio potters in West Auckland and on the North Shore. The videos of the potters at work are very watchable, with Gardner, Castle, Barry Brickell and Mirek Smisek in action, and a beautiful young Queen Elizabeth touring Crown Lynn, although a voice-over would make the process of the craft clearer.

The mid-century section includes 'Sophisticated Style', with El Jay contracted to make Dior dresses, 'Designer Freedom' and Laloli's baby high chair. The best and worst of the 1950s are on display, from a tacky tapestry to commemorate the Queen's visit, to Garth Chester's beautiful bent plywood chairs. The following decades reflect the ongoing contribution of post-war immigrants to New Zealand design, with artists from France, England, Croatia, the United States, Sweden, Holland and elsewhere. Two films convey important turning-points when New Zealand design went off-shore to Expo at Osaka in 1969–1970 and Australian Fashion Week in 1998. The fluidity of Western and Asian influences, however, seems at odds with the few cross-currents between Maori and Pakeha: with the exception of one fabric and a couple of rugs there is a long gap between Maori motifs on nineteenth-century furniture and recent jewellery by Maori artists.

The best sections from the 1980s, 'Pacific Wave' and 'Bone, Stone, Shell', show the growing confidence and playfulness of glass-makers and jewellers, a feeling for Pacific connections and an exciting blend of traditions and materials. Objects range from a bracelet of layered paua, to Humphrey Ikin's slender table that captures the style of canoes and racing yachts. The story continues into the twenty-first century with the iconic iron-man ironing board (and new roles for men), new fabrics (Orca Design Group's wet-suit), a recyclable chair and David Trubridge's delicate wood and aluminium light-shade.

*Encounter's* elegant catalogue is worth finding; its sampling of 33 of the 1100 objects in the exhibition gives individual works more 'presence' and shows how striking they are. The fuller exhibition helps us imagine a sophisticated range of New Zealand experiences and a wide interplay of influences, while the inclusion of works made as recently as 2005 stimulates the question of what is coming next. These latest acquisitions are also a reminder that the collection is a work in process.

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