

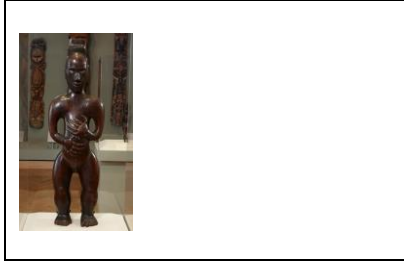
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## Title of Object

Post Figure (poutokomanawa)

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Country:** Aotearoa (New Zealand)

**Date of Object:** c. 1840

**File Created:** 10/1/2016

**Accession Number:** 2001.65a,b

**Author of File:** Kathryn Schwyzer

**Material/Medium:** Wood, paua shell

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Department:** Arts of Africa

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 8/28/2017

**Culture:** Ngāti Kahungunu Māori

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## Tour Topics

Symbolism-art, symbolism-in-art, Highlights 1600 to 1850, Group 6 tour, moko, identity, leader, power/status, architecture, spirituality/sacred, ancestors, family, tattoo, body art, stories/storytelling

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

How would you describe the proportions of the statue? What parts of the body did the artist emphasize?

Take a moment and look at the face. Describe some of the shapes you see in the tattoo or moko.

Where might you see a structure devoted to ancestors in modern day life?

What are some of the reasons people get tattoos today?

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

This post figure welcomed guests to a Maori communal house. It was used as a bottom of a central support column in a Maori meeting house. It is made of wood, with paua shell accents for the eyes. The shell eyes would glint in the dark interiors of the communal house, making the figure seem lifelike.

The figure's proportions represent the Maori belief about the different types of energy residing in the human body; the head is scaled larger than life as it is considered the center of personal power, and the hands rest on the stomach to emphasize the life force that links spirits to humans. (Mia label)

About the moko (facial tattoo): On a real man or woman, "The facial moko was applied using a process unique in the world. The design was actually incised into the face. The uhi (tattoo chisel), often cut into the skin one-eighth of an inch, but on occasion went even deeper. There are some instances where the uhi actually punctured through the cheek or nostril. After the initial incision for the facial moko ink was added to the skin by rubbing in the pigment over the open incisions or going over the original incisions with a serrated uhi, which had been dipped in the pigment. The final healing stage of facial moko also held its own mysteries. The designs healed with the grooves intact rather than keloiding or healing smooth as the skin usually does when cut this way. This unique healing phenomenon may have been possible due to the inks used, which were made through a special process using a particular species of caterpillar...The overall style of moko was curvilinear and flowed with the natural curves of the human body. Among the Maori, the spiral (generically called a koru) was very common in tattooing, carving and other arts. The two most common meanings of the spiral were as a pitau (unfurling fern frond), or as a pito (navel or bellybutton). The former use implied a new beginning or the future, and the latter a representation of a solid foundation or past....Just as in the past, the tattoo is an inalienable heirloom that cannot be taken or diminished whether one is poor, incarcerated or otherwise oppressed. Thus, while moko are no longer fully understood in their original capacities by the general population, they still hold much meaning for the individuals and contribute to the construction of identity and self-image." (Skin stories, PBS)

Looking closely at the surface, you see the figure has developed a patina. "A post figure is eagerly caressed and embraced by the Maori, who press their noses against its nose, showing deep respect and affection. It is given a protective coat of varnish that produces its high gloss finish, and is further polished by generations of affectionate touching." (artsmia.org, World Myths)

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### **Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)**

"The ancestors of the Maori immigrated to New Zealand over 1000 years ago, when Polynesian sailors sailed southward from the Island of Hawaii. The Maori are divided into about 50 tribes who trace their descent to individuals who arrived in the first canoes (called the "founding canoes"). Over the generations these tribes developed into complex social groups known as waka, which in many instances were named for the founding canoes. Tribal affiliation is more important than a sense of national identity. In fact, Maori is not an ancient name, but came about as a result of their encounters with voyagers from the northern hemisphere from the 18th century onwards. The word Maori means clear, fresh or natural; it also means usual or ordinary. The original inhabitants described themselves as ordinary (maori), as belonging to a collective group clearly different from the new (and extraordinary) arrivals....This stately figure was the principal carving in a meeting house of the Hawkes Bay region on the eastern coast of New Zealand's North Island. (This building no longer exists and was probably destroyed by fire.)" (artsmia.org, World Myths)

The Maori meeting houses are in a sacred meeting ground area known as Marae. "The Maori built meeting houses before the period of contact with Europeans. The early structures appear to have been used as the homes of chiefs, though they were also used for accommodating guests. They did not exist in every community. From the middle of the nineteenth century, however, they started to develop into

an important focal point of local society. Larger meeting houses were built, and they ceased to be used as homes. The open space in front of the house, known as a marae, is used as an assembly ground. They were, and still are, used for entertaining, for funerals, religious and political meetings. It is a focus of tribal pride and is treated with great respect.”...This figure was “an internal central post which supports the ridge-pole of a Maori meeting house. It represents an important ancestor of the tribal group which owned that house. The figure has fairly naturalistic features. It is clearly male, and has the typical Maori male hair topknot and a fully tattooed face. The eyes are inlaid with [paua] shell.”... “The meeting house is regarded as sacred....Outside the meeting house is often referred to as the domain of Tumatauenga, the god of war, and thus of hostility and conflict. The calm and peaceful interior is the domain of Rongo, the god of agriculture and other peaceful pursuits. (Khan Academy, with information taken from the British Museum)

“Because all humans are descendants of the original divine pair, the Maori believe that it is important to maintain the spiritual power in themselves, and to remain in contact with the various deities of the forest, the weather, the ocean and agriculture. It is also essential to revere and communicate with one's ancestors, who remain present in the community as spiritual protectors of the living. Knowledge of one's ancestry, or whakapapa, is crucial, because lines of descent determine the Maori social order, as well as the institutions of leadership and aristocracy. A person reinforces his whakapapa by recitations of the layers of descent back to the original voyagers from Eastern Polynesia, and beyond to the gods and goddesses themselves.” (artsmia.org, World Myths)

“The structure of the meeting house itself represents the body of a primordial ancestor — the ridge pole of the roof is the spine, the rafters the ribs, the gable boards on the exterior the outstretched arms, and the gable ornament at the peak of the roof the face. The interior is extensively decorated with carved panels and other architectural members depicting powerful ancestors, both male and female. These ancestor images constitute a visual history of the group, simultaneously representing and embodying the spirits of its illustrious forbearers. Many represent prominent warriors who, in the past, fought to protect the community.” (Metmuseum) This post figure portrays an ancestor whose spiritual power infused the building.

Adorning the body with tattoos is an important art throughout Polynesia and Micronesia. In Aotearoa, the facial markings are known as moko. “Due to the highly tribalized and stratified nature of ancient Maori society, moko had great status within Maori society, and moko was used to differentiate between and within social classes. There was enough variation in Maori tribal styles that it was possible to determine regional or tribal affiliation based on the patterns and placement of the moko. For some tribes, the moko also indicated the rank, genealogy and even the occupation of the wearer. Underlying it all was the great prestige that came from showing others that you had endured and survived the ordeal. During the years just after the European arrival in Aotearoa/Te Waipounamu, many Maori were signing various legal documents, e.g. land titles, using their facial moko patterns, such was the individuality of the designs. Perhaps the most well-known image of Polynesian tattooing is the facial moko of the Maori. However, for men, the most prominent areas were the face and the thighs and buttocks...” (Skin Stories, PBS)

“This poutokomanawa was carved in the 1840s, and was later given to Archbishop William Williams (1800-1878) about the time he retired to Hawkes Bay in the 1880s, as a tribute to the love and friendship he showed his parishioners.<sup>3</sup> It is one of the few post figures that remained privately owned until it was acquired by a museum. (artsmia.org, World Myths)

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## Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This post figure, called poutokomanawa, welcomed guests to a Maori communal house. It portrays an ancestor whose spiritual power infused the building. The unique tattoo pattern carved on his face identified him.

Adorning the body with tattoos is an important art throughout Polynesia and Micronesia. Although its cultural significance and aesthetic qualities vary greatly, many groups value tattooing as a sign of personal and social identity.

The figure's proportions represent Maori beliefs about the different types of energy residing in the human body: the head is scaled larger than life as it is considered the center of personal power, and the hands rest on the stomach to emphasize the life force that links spirits to humans.

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## Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Maori Post Figure, World Myths and Legends in Art: [https://www.artsmia.org/world-myths/viewallart/maori\\_background.html](https://www.artsmia.org/world-myths/viewallart/maori_background.html)

Skin Stories: The Art and Culture of Polynesian Tattoos, PBS: <http://www.pbs.org/skinstories/culture/role2.html#moko>

Maori meeting house, Khan Academy: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-oceania/polynesia/a/maori-meeting-house>

A welcome to a Maori meeting house, video from the British Museum, shows a powerful blessing by the Maori community: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHBaf7PfvAY>

House Post Figure (Amo), Metropolitan Museum of Art: <http://metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/313697>

Field Museum, Chicago. Photo of interior of their meeting house (<https://www.fieldmuseum.org/node/4941>):

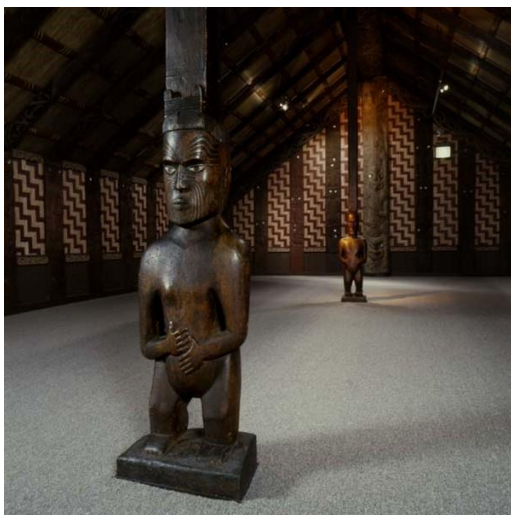


Photo from Heritage New Zealand/Pouhere Taongō, of meeting house in New Zealand on Waitangi Treaty Grounds: <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/6>

