# More than Skin Deep: *Ta Moko* Today

Ngahuia Te Awekotuku

> *Taia o moko, hai hoa matenga mou.* You may lose your most valuable property through misfortune in various ways. You may lose your house, your *patupounamu*, your wife, and other treasures—you may be robbed of all your most prized possessions, but of your moko you cannot be deprived. Except by death. It will be your ornament and your companion until your last day.
>
> —Netana Rakuraku[1]

## Te Ao Tawhito: *Ancient Times*

*Ta Moko,* an ancient Pacific art form in which the Maori excelled, involves tattooing patterns on much of the body. Men were tattooed from the waist to the knees; occasionally on the shoulders, neck, and throat; and most emphatically across the entire face. Women were typically adorned on the chin, abdomen, thighs, calves, and back. Density of application varied from tribe to tribe; some women, usually war leaders, had tattoos covering their faces, similar to men's. Unlike other Pacific tattooing cultures, the Maori tradition had one unique feature: the engraved face, in which the skin was cicatriced and colored, chiseled into a boldly textured relief.

According to British ethnohistorian Peter Gatherole, "*Moko* was remarkable because the designs were normally cut into the skin of the face with chisels, not punctured with needle-combs as was the usual case with Maori body tattoo—and indeed with tattooing elsewhere in Oceania. This carving technique obviously links *moko* with wood and other forms of Maori carving."[2] This was first commented on by Joseph Banks, like the artist Sydney Parkinson (fig. 1) a member of the *Endeavour* crew, who recorded in March 1770 that "their faces are the most remarkable, on them they by some art unknown to me dig furrows in their faces a line deep at least and as broad, the edges of which are often indented and most perfectly black."[3]

According to the early-nineteenth-century visitor Augustus Earle, *Ta Moko* was recognized for its artistry and grace:

> The art of tattooing has been brought to such perfection here, that whenever we have seen a New Zealander whose skin is thus ornamented, we have admired him. It is looked upon as answering the same purposes as clothes. When a chief throws off his mats, he seems as proud of displaying the beautiful ornaments figured on his skin as a first rate exquisite is in exhibiting himself in his last fashionable attire.[4]

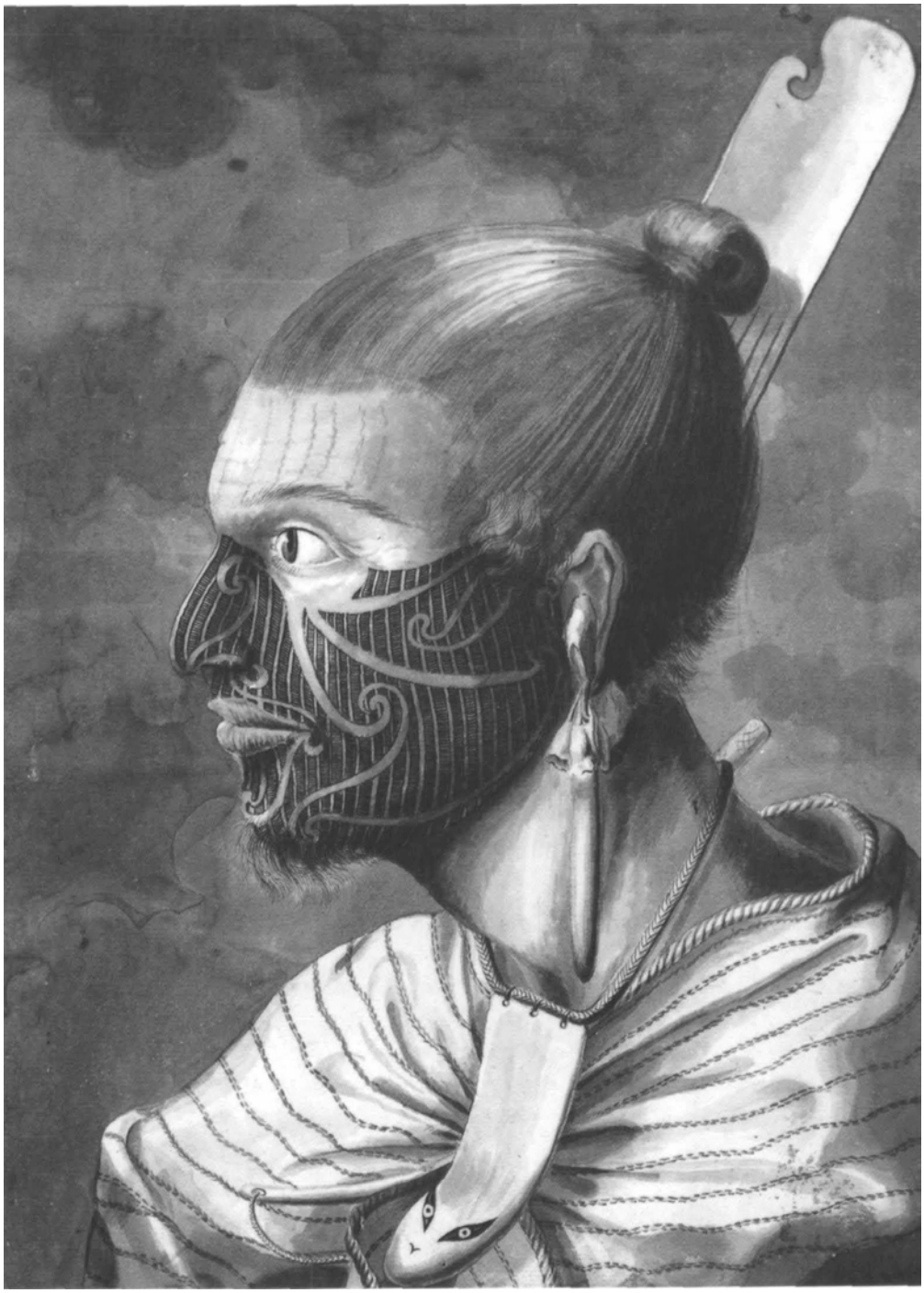

**Fig. 1. Sydney Parkinson (Scottish, 1745–71)**
*Portrait of a New Zeland Man*
New Zealand (Bay of Islands), 1769, pen and wash, 39.4 × 29.8 cm (15½ × 11¾ in.)
London, British Library

The tattooed face most of all fascinated the newcomers to the islands of Aotearoa (New Zealand). As distinctive and unforgettable personal emblems, they were inscribed on deeds of sale and other official documents, including Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), which was signed in February 1840 at Waitangi by a convocation of Maori chiefs and Governor Hobson, who represented Queen Victoria. This treaty is recognized as the constitutional basis of the New Zealand state.

Oftentimes, the tattooed face survived long after death through the artistry of preservation and the genius of Maori mortuary practice. In an issue of the *Victorian Naturalist* published in 1891, T. Steel wrote that "occasionally, in the case of individuals who had distinguished themselves as warriors or wise leaders of their people, the heads were preserved intact with the flesh, and were regarded with great veneration and respect."[5] This is endorsed by another commentator, Robert McNab, who wrote in 1907 that "they were kept with the peaceful and domestic purpose in providing mementoes to keep green the memories of warriors passed away."[6]

While *upoko tuhi* (preserved heads) are not the focus of this paper, it is interesting to note that the heads of enemy chiefs were reviled, collected, abused, and—according to Banks's journal for March 1770—actually purchased. An old man approached the *Endeavour* with "six or seven heads," very lifelike, in his canoe. Banks recorded,

> He was very jealous of shewing them. One I bought tho much against the inclinations of its owner, for tho he likd the price I offerd he hestitated much to send it up, yet having taken the price I insisted either to have that returnd or the head given, but could not prevail until I enforc'd my threats by shewing Him a musquet on which he chose to part with the head rather than the price he had got, which was pair of old Drawers of very white linnen.[7]

From this grisly beginning, the trade escalated. Soon used clothing was abandoned as currency and was replaced by firearms. A government order issued by Governor Darling of New South Wales in 1831 put a halt to "this disgusting traffic.... the scandal and prejudice which it cannot fail to raise against the name and character of British traders in a country with which it has become highly important to cultivate feelings of natural good will" of the natives.[8] This was shortly followed by an act that imposed a £40 fine and ordered the publication of the names of those concerned.

About two hundred *upoko tuhi* are known to have been exported at this time—about half that number have been repatriated back to Aotearoa and the stewardship of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. The dialogue about bringing the rest of them home continues.

### Te Ao Hurihuri: *The Nineteenth Century*

With traders of flax and firearms, Christian missionaries were welcomed into Maori communities by entrepreneurial leaders who valued the new weaponry,

the prospect of literacy, and the opportunity for military expansion. According to John Liddiard Nicholas, a missionary who visited New Zealand in 1814 and 1815, these self-righteous newcomers perceived the art of *Ta Moko* as ungodly, pagan, and demonic, as a "heathenish badge of their forefathers," and its demise was eagerly encouraged. Nicholas continues, "It is hoped that this barbarous practice will be abolished in time among the New Zealanders, and that the missionaries will exert all the influence they are possessed of to dissuade them from it."[9] At the same time, it was being recorded for the voyeuristic sensibilities of European readers.

One notable example is found in the writings of the nineteenth-century explorer, botanist, and cartographer Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville:

> The chief Tuao showed me his wife while she was in the act of receiving the completion of her moko on the shoulders. Half her back was already incised with deeply cut designs, similar to those which adorned the faces of Coro-Coro's relatives, and a female slave was engaged in decorating the other side of the back with designs of like taste. The unfortunate woman was lying on her chest, and seemed to be suffering greatly, while the blood gushed forth abundantly from her shoulders. Still she did not even utter a sigh, and looked at me merrily with the greatest composure, as did the woman who was operating upon her. Tuao himself seemed to glory in the new honour his wife was receiving by these decorations.[10]

Another writer comments further in 1859 that "tattooing is going out of fashion, partly from the influence of the missionaries, who described it as the Devil's Art, but chiefly from the example of the settlers."[11]

By the 1860s, the art itself was in decline; few *tohunga* (highly trained practitioners) of *Ta Moko* remained, and they worked only in regions of active antisettler resistance, where warriors sustained the rituals and aesthetics of Tu Matauenga, the Maori god of war. Women, however, continued to endure the chisels of albatross bone—and later metal, and then bound needle clusters—until the 1950s.

In July 1774 Omai, a Tahitian nobleman from the Society Islands, arrived in Portsmouth, England, with the English explorer Tobias Furneaux, on the *Adventure*. Omai was regarded as a unique trophy, a noble savage incarnate. A charming young man familiar with the courtly rituals of another culture, which prepared him well for his coming encounters, he was introduced to King George III and Queen Charlotte at Kew Gardens near London. From there, he made a sensational tour of the best drawing rooms of London. His tattooed body and gracefully decorated hands caused a brief flurry of indelible fashion on bourgeois and aristocratic skin.[12] Ironically, for some Europeans, and many of them gentry as well as scoundrels (and probably both), their own ornamented skin became an immediate, collectible, and erotic curiosity. From the fashionable lady with a flower blossom drawn discreetly on her breast to the heavily tattooed sailor home from the sea, the most remarkable body marking was that of John Rutherford.

Originally from Bristol, England, Rutherford went to sea as a youth and came to New Zealand on the brig *Agnes*. This ship was attacked in the Poverty Bay area in March 1818, and Rutherford was captured and marked during his first few weeks of bondage. He remained with his captors until his escape in January 1826 and worked as a tattooed man in various circuses when he returned to England. Rutherford's portrait reveals extensive Maori facial and hip adornment as well as a range of Malay and Hawaiian body work. One wonders when and how he acquired these markings. Did he collect some designs in the Malay Archipelago and even more in Hawaii, before he met the *tohunga Ta Moko* of the Maori? If so, could this explain why he was spared the fate of many of his crewmates, and also why he was later subjected to *Ta Moko* himself?[13] Rutherford was probably one of the first fully tattooed white males to be seen in the British Isles for many centuries; he may indeed have been the first modern primitive.

### *The Emergence of the Modern Primitive*

From Polynesian and Japanese pricking and puncturing techniques, a new technology developed with the patenting of New York City tattooist Samuel Reilly's first electric machine in 1891. Western tattoo with its anchors, pierced hearts, daggers, sailing ships, eagles, crucifixes, stars, patriotic flags, bluebirds, snakes, and naked ladies found its niche and flourished. The popularity of tattooing was fanned by successive wars, and in the last thirty years it has been utilized by a massive traveling public. Many went forth in search of the "primitive," and their journeys often led to finding the primitive within themselves, and their subsequent compulsion to "change the world" often prompted them to set about changing what they did have the power to change: their own bodies. They found another frontier to explore—that of the Western human body. As two apostles of this movement, Vivian Vale and Andrea Juno, observe:

> In this postmodern epoch in which all the art of the past has been assimilated, consumerized, advertised and replicated, the last artistic territory resisting cooptation remains the Human Body. For a tattoo is more than a painting on skin . . . it is a true poetic creation, and always more than meets the eye. As a tattoo is grounded on living skin, so its essence emotes a poignancy unique to the mortal human condition.[14]

*Ta Moko* is thus perceived as part of "the art of the past"—a commodity assimilated, consumerized, advertised, and replicated.

Is it really? And by whom?

Leo Zulueta, of Los Angeles, is celebrated internationally as a great tattoo artist. He discovered the beauty of ancient tribal forms, particularly those of Sarawak in Borneo. According to Zulueta, he is "really . . . carrying a torch for those ancient designs. But I'm afraid that those traditions are dying out where they originated; the original peoples have no interest in preserving them. They'd rather have a ghetto blaster and a jeep and a pack of Marlboro ciga-

rettes. The western encroachment has triumphed—all the old men having primitive style tattoos are dead... this is why I really feel strongly about preserving these ancient designs."[15]

Having condemned American consumerism, Zulueta then "saves" the art form by consuming it himself and offering it—with an appropriately lofty remittance—for actual consumption. Nevertheless, he remains conscious "that there's quite a bit of spirituality behind a lot of these tribal designs... they might contain talismans for the future or perhaps encode some cryptic knowledge... but if they're not preserved, we'll never know!"[16] For a native such as myself, perhaps the "we" to whom Zulueta refers is someone that was never meant to know. Some meanings should remain secret, even at the risk of their loss. But does he know that? Possibly.

Some years ago, a popular tattoo magazine presented an image of a unique white American male. He had a beautifully cut *kauae moko*, a Maori woman's chin design, as well as complex rafter patterning on his body.[17] I vowed that one day I would meet and challenge him. While I was in London in 1996 I met Ron Athey, a performance artist, choreographer, and dancer engaged in stretching the limits of the human body. Athey was performing at the Institute for Contemporary Art, where I approached him, introduced myself as Maori, and courteously asked him if he was aware of what he had on his skin (fig. 2). His reaction both intrigued and insulted me. He inquired how much Maori blood I had and claimed he did not know that there were any of us still around. I was astonished at this and instantly regretted the absence of a video or audio recorder to record such odd assumptions. He then exclaimed, with real warmth and sincerity, that his body work paid homage to the artistic genius of the Maori people, who had one of the "greatest design traditions in the world." I could hardly disagree, and I found myself enjoying his company but also wondering whether we needed or even appreciated his affirmation. More to the point, I wondered what my proudly ornamented grandaunts (fig. 3) would have to say about—and to—Athey with regard to their art.

Much of the body markings covering Athey were created by London-based tattoo artist Alex Binney. As an artist, Binney claims the right to take forms from wherever he looks, for art surrounds us and is universal. For many indigenous peoples in the Fourth World, however, this is just another form of pillaging, of extracting the spirit of a tribal people to sate the culturally malnourished appetites of the decadent and industrial West, whose people believe they are justified to do so.

Conversely, in the Pacific, practitioners of the enduring magnificence of the Samoan *tatau* (tattoo) offer a gracious yet different perspective. At a lecture held at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, in August 1998, the late Su'a Paulo Sulu'ape reflected, "I think that the time is right that we should share—so the art can be appreciated, because it's not something that we can put on the wall for the rest of the world to see and enjoy. It has to be there, to be seen."[18]

A small number of Maori artists concur with this—some advise makeup

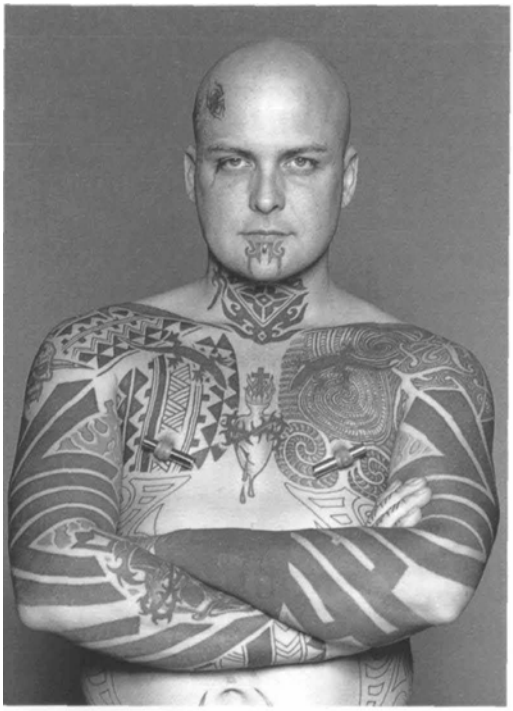


**Fig. 2. American performance artist Ron Athey at Torture Garden, London, 1995**
Chin tattoo by Jill Jordan, Los Angeles; photograph by jeremychaplin@netscapeonline.co.uk

**Fig. 3. Georgina and Eileen, the Maori "twin guides" of Whakarewarewa Thermal Reserve, Rotorua region, New Zealand, ca. 1930**

artists in the film industry and create designs such as those appearing in *The Piano* (1993), *Once Were Warriors* (1995), and other New Zealand films. Others inscribe their work on celebrity wearers such as British pop star Robbie Williams, whose *moko* tells the story of his life, using Maori myth and symbolism inked on by a Maori artist. Many Maori artists deplore such practice, however, condemning it as a betrayal of the art itself, no different from the cultural exploitation and mimicry of French clothing designer Paco Rabanne's 1998 early spring collection, which featured a "Maori Wedding Costume" (in metal and leather); Thierry Muegler's eccentric sartorial borrowings; and soccer star Eric Cantona's painted warrior sneer on the cover of *GQ*.[19]

The reality nevertheless remains; whether we, the Maori, favor that reality, the images are there to be seen, interpreted, and consumed by everyone. Furthermore, these images will not disappear, although a leading contemporary *tohunga Ta Moko* of the Tai Rawhiti region observes "What they do is tattoo. And what we do is *Ta Moko*. And they are not the same."[20] One wonders why not? What is the distinction?

## Te Ao Whakahirahira: *Times of Pride*

> It's a powerful statement, because it's there forever. Once you've done it, you've made the commitment. What more appropriate way to commit yourself to *tikanga* Maori than to get a *moko?*
>
> —Amster Reedy[21]

In the first decades of the twentieth century, for various reasons only Maori women wore *Ta Moko,* including the marking of a significant event in tribal history, the death of a leading chief, and the birth of a first grandchild. Often women were inscribed in groups, as the *tohunga Ta Moko* were itinerant specialists who traveled from place to place, invited and eagerly anticipated. Tawera of the Tuhoe people and Tama Poata from Tai Rawhiti were the most celebrated specialists but also working were a few notable women, including Kuhukuhu of Waikato and Hikapuhi of Te Arawa. They used self-fashioned metal chisels and needle clusters and concocted their pigments from soot and Indian ink, occasionally mixing both. In some instances, women returned to have their chin adornment revitalized or completely recut if it had faded over time. The last few were done in the 1950s, by the enduring practitioners of that transitional period. Like many of their clients, the artists were dying; it seemed as though the art might die out as well. The social landscape of Aotearoa was changing, too. The Maori people shifted from a struggling rural village environment into the booming post-war opportunities in the city. Thousands migrated to the large metropolitan centers for work and education; and fitting in, or at least appearing to do so, became important.

As that generation of practitioners and proud bearers of *Ta Moko,* a few brave and determined souls—all elderly women and one man in his thirties—approached European-style tattoo artists for traditional body markings,

including, in the late 1970s, New Zealand artists such as Roger Ingerton of Wellington, a designer of consummate artistry and style, and Merv O'Connor of Auckland, a canny technician whose work covers three or even four generations. The Maori world, therefore, has never been bereft of the tattooed face. There has always been at least one such face at *marae* (ceremonial sites) in the country.

There has always been the compulsion to imprint the skin—Maori youth just do it, methodically slicing themselves with slivers of razor blade, poking themselves with sewing needles, or jabbing their skin in precise designs with a sharpened compass point. This is not considered self-mutilation or defiant posturing but a compulsion that comes from a place deep within. Schoolteachers or others may not understand the compulsion, but the children's parents usually do, fingering their own faded tracings of half a lifetime ago.

For years, body markings have been an emblem of gang membership and an expression of urbanized, or criminal, Maori identity. Much gang or prison work is covered by clothing—long sleeves, gloves, and scarves; now, however, for a variety of reasons, *Ta Moko* is highly visible and applauded once again. Members of the international and national tattoo fraternities, including O'Connor and Ingerton, have also contributed to the skill base and technology of this revival. Their decision to undertake facial marking was courageous and, for Maori, very meaningful. Through their work, the tattooed face (*te mata ora*) remained in view.

By 1990, European practitioners were increasingly involved in body markings. For example, Jan and Birthe Christiansen of Denmark and Henk Schiffmacher of the Netherlands visited aspiring Maori artists, contributed to workshops on *marae*, and stayed in the Maori community for many months.[22] Some outreach has also occurred with Paulo and Petelo Sulu'ape, Samoan brothers who are the premier traditional artists of the Pacific and heirs to an unbroken family practice that has existed for one thousand years. Paulo was based in New Zealand and gave workshops in the Maori community and demonstrations at public events until his sudden death in 1999. In the late 1990s, there were still about twenty Maori practitioners engaged in commercial *Ta Moko*, working from shops or their own home studios; a comparable number of practitioners work in the tribal environment. Considerable movement takes place between the commercially and tribally based groups, and most artists undertake some ritual observation during the actual process of *Ta Moko*, commencing either with prayer or chant. Music, usually chosen by the client and often performed by his or her supporters, is played throughout the operation.

There are many practitioners working on a casual basis, such as in prisons and gangs, who may go on to become employed as commercial tattooists. Contemporary artists recognize the prison and gang legacy, which has helped to continue the practice to this day, not unlike the rare individuals who sought out facial adornment in the 1970s and 1980s despite public reaction and distaste. *Ta Moko* has become a significant and potent symbol within contemporary Maori life; it challenges the non-Maori observer and celebrates the survival of

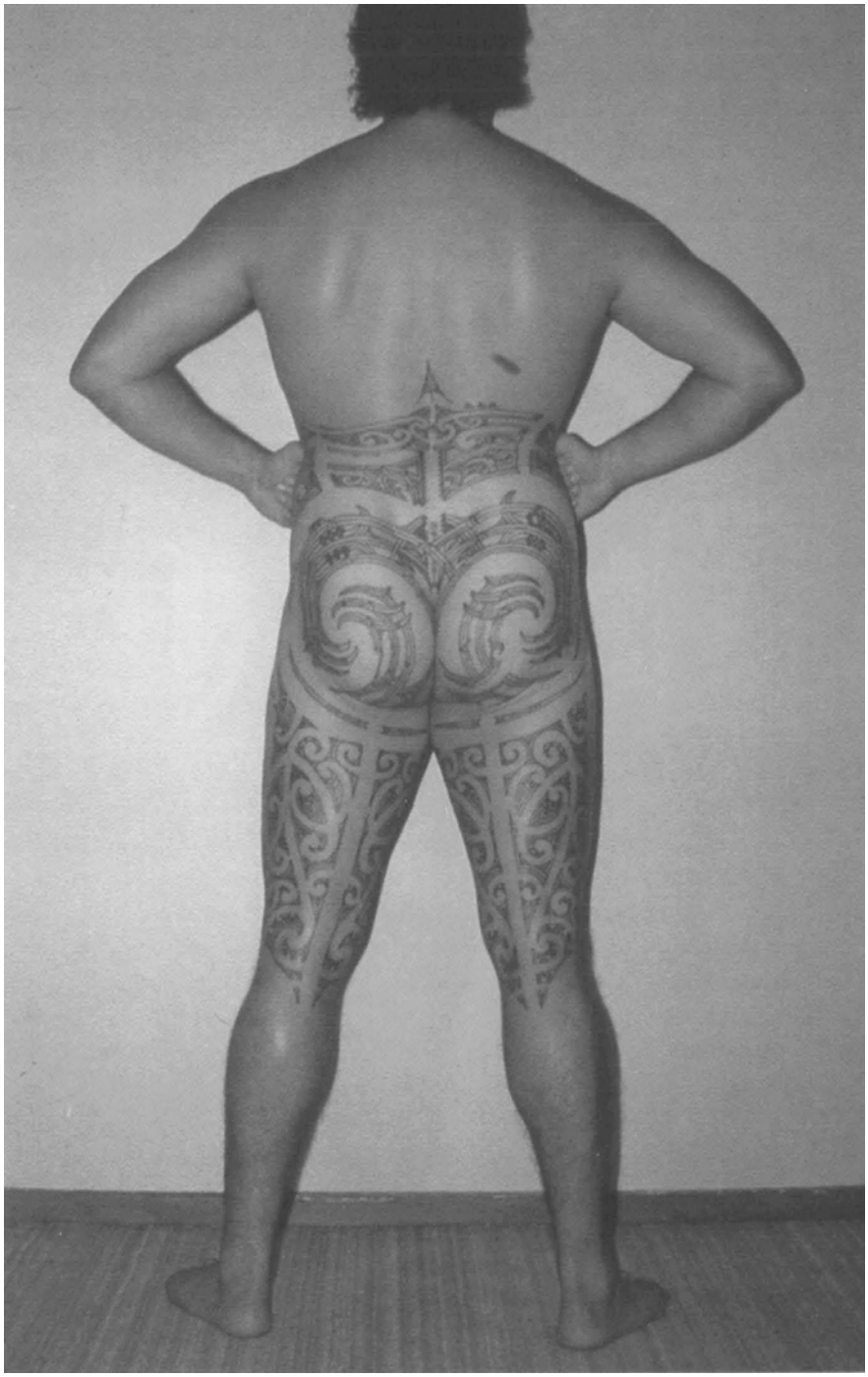

**Fig. 4. Rikirangi Moeau (Maori, Rongowhakaata Tribe), Turanga nui a Kiwa, Gisborne district, New Zealand, 1999**
*Puhoro* and *raperape* designed and inscribed by Derek Lardelli (Maori, Te Aitanga a Hauiti Tribe) of the Te Toi Houkura (Maori Arts Program), Tai Rawhiti Polytechnic, Gisborne, New Zealand

an art form that was supposedly extinct, or near to it. It is literally "in your face." The Maori consider *Ta Moko* as a treasure to be respected, conserved, and celebrated as a visible assertion of tribal heritage, political activism, and kinship networks; as a pictorial remembrance of important events like birth, death, partnership, triumph, and recovery; and as a commitment to our warrior culture. Derek Lardelli, an artist of Te Aitanga (a Hauiti people), reflects, "It is ours. It is the living face. It is about life."[23] This is endorsed by his colleague Te Rangkaihoro, who says, "The more people see it and get it, the better, for it must come alive again among all Maori, for our children, for all of us."[24] The patterns that are made on skin today, based on centuries-old images (fig. 4), will carry and protect the people into the future.

Deirdre Nehua, the granddaughter of Ina Te Papatahi who was one of the favorite portrait models of artist Charles F. Goldie (New Zealand, 1870–1947), writes of her experience, "And now it is over, and I have the *moko kauae*. And the *moko*, I know, is a symbol not of an ending, but a beginning. The *tohunga Ta Moko* says, 'Kua mutu.' It is done.... I return from Motu Kowhai. My journey into a new world is about to begin."[25] For Maori, *Ta Moko* is much more than an art form. It is an ancestral legacy, a statement of resilience and survival. It is a gift from the ancestors and should be treated carefully, respectfully, and gratefully. It should not be abused, exploited, or commodified. It is about pride, about potential. It is about the people. Moana Maniapoto, a Maori lyricist and lawyer, sings

I wear my pride upon my skin
My pride is been here within
I wear my strength upon my face
Comes from another time and place
Bet you didn't know that every line
Has a message for me?
Did you know that?[26]

Notes

1. Netana Rakuraku of Tuhoe, as told to James Cowan, in James Cowan, "Maori Tattooing Survivals—Some Notes on Moko," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 30 (1921): 241–45.

2. Peter Gatherole, "Contexts of Maori *Moko*," in Arnold Rubin, ed., *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988), 171–78.

3. Joseph Banks, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks, 1768–1771*, ed. J. C. Beaglehole (Sydney: Public Library of New South Wales, 1962; 2d ed., 1963), 2:13.

4. Augustus Earle, *A Narrative of a Nine Months' Residence in New Zealand in 1827* (London: Longman, 1832), 113.

5. T. Steel, "Maori Preserved Heads of New Zealand," *Victorian Naturalist* 8 (1891): 105.

6. Robert McNab, *Murihiku and the Southern Islands* (Invercargill, New Zealand: Wilson Smith, 1907), 158.

7. Banks, *The Endeavour Journal* (note 3), 2:31.

8. Cited in Horatio G. Robley, *Moko; or, Maori Tattooing* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1896; reprinted 1969, 1987), 180.

9. John Liddiard Nicholas, *Narrative of a Voyage to New Zealand, Performed in the Years 1814 and 1815, in Company with the Rev. Samuel Marsden* (London: James Black, 1817), 1:360–61.

10. Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville, in Horatio G. Robley, *Moko; or, Maori Tattooing* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1896; reprint, Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1969; reprint, [Auckland]: Southern Reprints, 1987), 39–41.

11. Arthur S. Thomson, *The Story of New Zealand: Past and Present, Savage and Civilized.* (London: John Murray, 1859), 1:77–78.

12. E. H. McCormick, *Omai: Pacific Envoy* (Auckland: Auckland Univ. Press, 1977).

13. James Drummond, ed., *John Rutherford: The White Chief, A Story of Adventure in New Zealand* (Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1908).

14. Vivian Vale and Andrea Juno, *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1989), 5.

15. Leo Zulueta, as quoted in Vale and Juno, *Modern Primitives* (note 14), 99.

16. Leo Zulueta, as quoted in Vale and Juno, *Modern Primitives* (note 14), 99.

17. Conversation with Ron Athey at the Institute for Contemporary Art, London, 26 November 1995.

18. Su'a Paulo Sulu'ape, Samoan Studies, Lecture Series, Victoria University of Wellington, "O le Tatau: Tattoo of Samoa," 26 August 1998.

19. For *moko* in the movie *The Piano*, see Annie Goldson, "Piano Lessons," in Jonathan Dennis and Jan Bierenga, eds., *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: Victoria Univ. Press, 1996); and in the movie *Once Were Warriors*, see "Movie Tattoos Spark Race Office Probe," *Sunday Star-Times* (Auckland), 29 May 1994, A3. For Robbie Williams's *moko*, see Robbie Williams and Mark McCrum, *Somebody Someday* (London: Ebury, 2001), 247. For its use by Thierry Mugler, see "Fashion Designer's Moko Trick Angers Maori," *Wanganui Chronicle*, 25 January 1999, 9; and for its use by Paco Rabanne, see "Moko Use Rude," *Evening Post* (Wellington), 23 January 1999, 5. Eric Cantona appeared on the cover of the January 1998 issue of *GQ*.

20. Derek Lardelli, *Ta Moko* demonstration at the International Festival of the Arts, Wellington, 14 March 1998.

21. Amster Reedy, "Tattoos are Back!" *Mana: Maori News Magazine for All New Zealanders* 2 (April–May 1993): 6.

22. Henk Schiffmacher, *1000 Tattoos* (Cologne: Taschen, 1996).

23. See Lardelli, *Ta Moko* demonstration (note 20).

24. Conversation with Te Rangkaihoro at Oparure Marae, Te Kuiti, April 1996.

25. Deirdre Nehua, "Three Women," in Witi Ihimaera, ed., *Growing up Maori* (Auckland: Tandem, 1998), 97.

26. From Moana Maniapoto, "Moko," available on Moana and the Moa Hunters' CD *Rua*, Tangata Records TANGD532. Quoted by permission.