

# A Lesson in Object-based Teaching: Colonial History, Museum Practice and Ethics seen through a Māori Portrait

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We see an elderly tattooed Māori woman seated in front of a house, fondling a greenstone pendant, lost in sad thought.<sup>57</sup> The furnishings are dilapidated, her clothes are worn, traditional artifacts are scattered about in a scene of nostalgia and melancholy: This is an image of a once proud race now seemingly on the verge of extinction. In an art history classroom, or in museum labels and exhibition catalogues, the subject of the artwork is described but attention is focused on the artist, the style and technique, the production and reception of the object as a work of art. In my Master's class in Museum and heritage studies, I take a quite different approach, using a reproduction of the painting as a prop in a role play which engages students in debates about the museum's entangled past, and its contested present.

At the same time, this essay offers an example of object-based teaching which reflects the "material turn". The essays in this volume are inspired by object histories like Neil McGregor's popular *History of the World in 100 Objects*. The study of objects as an integral part of cultural history enriches our understanding of the past, and can fruitfully be integrated into our university teaching. However academic studies of art and visual culture are often preoccupied with 'representation,' with showing, which tends to reduce objects to illustrations of events, processes, and people. The *material* merely pictures the *social*, so that the object is overwhelmed by empirical detail (usually drawn from textual sources). On the other hand, art teachers in the classroom tend to focus on the *object*, at the expense of its social context, so that the wider social arena fades from view. Art History, Design and Fine Arts naturally celebrate the aesthetic beauty/form of material things and can at times neglect the darker aspects of their histories, such as the violence of colonial conflict.

In my teaching I attempt to counter this with micro histories, material histories and history from below, that is, working up from the objects rather than down from the theory.<sup>58</sup> The literature of 'new' material culture studies with its object-centred approach to a broad range of 'stuff,' allows for an understanding of things as well as words, the materialist as well as the discursive.<sup>59</sup> A fruitful confluence of material culture studies and history can be found in the work of scholars like Thomas Schlereth, who see objects as concrete survivors of the past, which can be

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<sup>57</sup> *The widow* (Harata Rewiri Tarapata, Ngā Puhī) by Charles Frederick Goldie, oil on canvas, 1051mm (width), 1320mm (height), 1903, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand. <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/43708>; Roger Blackley, *Goldie* (Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, David Bateman, 1997). See also Roger Blackley, *Galleries of Maoriland: Artists, Collectors and the Maori World, 1880-1910* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> Bronwyn Labrum, "Material Histories in Australia and New Zealand: Interweaving Distinct Material and Social Domains." *History Compass* Vol. 8, no. 8 (2010): 805-16; Sarah Longair, and John McAleer, eds. *Curating Empire: Museums and the British Imperial Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1994).

<sup>59</sup> Chris Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Küchler, Mike Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer, eds. *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: Sage publications, 2006).

experienced affectively through the senses.<sup>60</sup> Other useful texts demonstrate how historians can unlock the past lives of people by using objects as well as written sources.<sup>61</sup>

New thinking about indigenous and other non-Western perspectives on material culture provide different methods for dealing with objects and subjects, self and other.<sup>62</sup> Tribal and native people often view objects as sacred object-beings not inert artifacts. In Aotearoa New Zealand the carvings that Māori people call *taonga tuku iho* (treasures handed down) are living ancestral entities that move across time and space connecting descendants to their ancestral landscapes and life-worlds.<sup>63</sup> At the Auckland Art Gallery, portraits like the one referred to here by C.F. Goldie and Gottfried Lindauer have been reconnected with living descendants through digital media, enabling viewers to see them not just as art works but as living cultural heritage which have to be managed, interpreted and displayed in accordance with tribal beliefs and wishes.<sup>64</sup> In my courses, these ambiguous objects become a means to debate these complex issues, and prepare students for working in a ‘bicultural’ museum sector, in which collections and exhibitions have to be managed in partnership with Māori people, as demanded by the Treaty of Waitangi (1840).

This portrait of Harata Rewiri Tarapata of the Ngā Puhi tribe, painted by C.F. Goldie in 1903, originally titled *The Widow*, came up for sale in 1991. It was controversially purchased by the National Art Gallery in the face of strong criticism from art critics, artists, historians and the media: it was felt the gallery should be buying contemporary art by New Zealand artists, not old-fashioned historical paintings this, whereas the general public loved the painting because it *was* realistic (unlike much contemporary art they could not understand). Meanwhile the iwi (tribe) were delighted about the purchase, despite historians complaining about what Edward Said would call ‘Orientalism’, an academic realist artist picturing the Other, taking advantage of his subjects and depicting racist attitudes of the day.<sup>65</sup> Like most controversial public issues, this was a tricky dilemma which was far more complicated than academic theory allowed, a situation in which many graduates would find themselves, but for which they were largely unprepared.

In the midst of a class on museum ethics and mission, without any warning, students are shown the image of the portrait on the screen. The scenario is then explained: this work has come up for sale and the gallery has to decide whether to buy it or not. The focus immediately is shifted away from what the work says, to what it does, to how it is acted upon in a network of social relationships. Roles are assigned to students with suggestive scripts but otherwise no direction at all: the gallery director who has to negotiate an outcome, the curator of historical art who wants to acquire the work, the curator of contemporary art who hates it, the education team who have to devise a public programme, the marketing department who have to deal with the controversy. Other students play the part of external stakeholders: the chair of the trust board who pressures the gallery to buy, wealthy collectors who want to make a buck, shady dealers, anxious politicians, concerned ‘pe’ historians, members of the public and, of course, Māori descendants of the sitter who want to be involved in the decision and in the ongoing care of the painting which is, to them, not just a painting but their ancestor.

After researching the work and the background context, and guided by a code of ethics and other examples of current professional practice, the students return to class the following week. The session is effectively a public meeting hosted by the gallery and chaired by the director. I take no part, stepping back and giving students free rein.

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas J. Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990).

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Barber, *History Beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London: Routledge, 2009); Karen Harvey, *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>62</sup> Rodney Harrison, Sarah Byrne, and Anne Clarke, eds. *Reassembling the Collection: Ethnographic Museums and Indigenous Agency* (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2013).

<sup>63</sup> Amiria Henare, "Taonga Maori: Encompassing Rights and Property in New Zealand," in *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts in Ethnographic Perspective* eds. Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 47-67.

<sup>64</sup> Conal McCarthy, *Museums and Maori: Heritage Professionals, Indigenous Collections, Current Practice* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2011); Conal McCarthy, "Theorising Lindauer's Māori portraits: Rethinking Images of Māori in Museums, Exhibitions, Ethnography and Art," *Journal of the International Association of Research Institutes in the History of Art* Special issue: Gottfried Lindauer's New Zealand paintings, (June 2018), eds. Alexandra Karentzos, Miriam Oesterreich and Britta Schmitz, <http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2018>.

<sup>65</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Vintage, 1995).

The result is always a revelation. Students generally play their roles with gusto and have fun arguing with their classmates about the picture and what should happen to it. Everyone gets to put their views, and usually a vigorous debate ensues: about the different and changing meanings of the painting, the identity and tribal connections of the sitter, the context of New Zealand's 'dark' colonial history and the challenges of the postcolonial present, the value of art and the nature of interpretation.

But ultimately the discussion ends up focusing on the professional setting of this drama, not the academic analysis of the object at its centre. The students naturally step back from their roles and the circumstances of a particular historical moment, and consider what *they* would do today in this situation: the do's and don'ts of collecting, ethical behaviour in a museum spending public money, managing conflicts amongst staff, dealing with pressure from governance and political masters, the differences between policy and practice. At the end of this debrief, we bring in the former director of the National Gallery who was at the centre of this controversy. She relates what actually happened in 1991, her reflections on the experience. I prompt her for advice for graduates and emerging professionals having to work in this environment. Students are able to ask her questions directly about what she did and how she handled the issue and reached a solution, as a case study of museum leadership.

Finally then, the pedagogical value of the exercise in terms of museum practice goes far beyond what students learn about colonial art, museum history or Māori culture. The object is a means to an end, providing a lesson not just in art and material culture but how to behave in a 21<sup>st</sup> century museum in a postcolonial nation coming to terms with its difficult past. Real world case studies like this effectively inoculate students against the kind of over-theorised critical analysis favoured by the academy. The theatrical element frees them up to express themselves, talk openly, play a part, and think critically. They unlearn their art/history/anthropology, grapple with indigenous ways of looking at things, and appreciate public opinion and political/funding realities. They apply theory to practice and work out how it is mediated in complex professional settings. As Ruth B. Phillips argues, this is the ideal formula which readies graduates for the industry they have to work in: theory + practice = critical museum studies.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Towards the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011).