# Maori Moko

The intricacy of Maori tattoo is such that in facepainting like it, each line you paint may represent two or three fine tattoo lines. This is especially remarkable because their method was more akin to scarification than other tattoo techniques. The lines were incised into the skin with a chisel-like implement before the dye was applied. In photographs from the 1800s, the faces of fully tattooed men have the appearance of carvings.

This is a reproduction of H. G. Robley's sketch from life of a moko "showing good nose-marking" and the face it inspired as painted on Miguel.

Master tattoo artists would also carve the moko patterns into wooden sculptures as representations of ancestors and important personages. These carvings survive as authentic examples of moko which has not been reinterpreted by European artists in their sketches. Examples also survive on preserved heads. Some of these are on the heads of fallen warriors, for it was an act of respect to take the head of the vanquished, but many surviving designs were inscribed on heads after death and sold as objects to the tourist trade.

On a trip to England in 1826, a Maori named Te Pehi Kupe re-created his moko in pen and ink on paper, explaining the significance of each part of the patterns: "Every line, both on his face and on other parts of his body, was firmly registered on his memory. The portrait of his moko was drawn by him without the aid of a mirror."

The extensive and fascinating story of Te Pehi Kupe is included among the researched accounts, direct observations, personal recollections and sketches from life published in the book *Maori Tattooing* in 1896 by H. G. Robley as his attempt to establish a record of an art that was "fast vanishing." It is a sentiment behind many of the books, photographs and art that I learn from today.

*Above is a sketch of the moko in a wood carving from 1842 that is a self-portrait of master carver Raharuhi Rukopo. The moko patterns in such carvings from the 1800s exhibit a complexity that must be greatly simplified for painting a face at an event.*

# The Universal Spiral

The signature spiral of the Maori moko is found throughout world art. It is one of many design patterns that appear to be universal motifs. In the 1960s, Andreas Lommel, Director of the Munich Museum of Ethnology, put together a survey of prehistoric and primitive art to explain that the prevalence of the "spiral motif" in world art is evidence of the spread of cultural ideas through ancient trade. He presents a chain of objects moving across time and cultural regions that use the spiral, including this bronze tiger head from the Chou Dynasty of ancient China with a pattern much like moko.

I love a good story. However, explanations like this which so neatly connect the few ancient dots we have make me wonder what other views we'd get from all the dots that are missing.

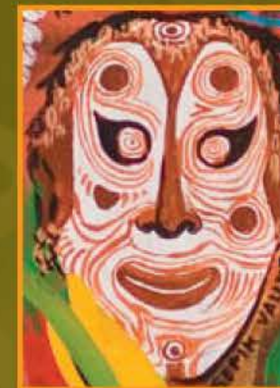
It's possible that the prevalence of certain symbolic images throughout the world is because we all share an underlying human culture from a very early time. Some symbolic art can be traced back as far as 30,000 years and modern genetic research suggests that there was once a single human tribe from which we are all descendants. Although it is impossible to make accurate historical determinations for the meaning of symbols from thousands of years ago, or the interconnections of the cultures that used them, some researchers search for ancient meanings by talking to the modern tribal people who produce similar artifacts. At the least it does seem that there are some concerns and beliefs that are a universal part of the human experience.

As an explanation for the development in different areas of similar design styles, Franz Boas makes a great argument in his classic book *Primitive Art* that many motifs arise as a by-product of the techniques of production. Two cultures, for example, that use a similar tool for wood carving will develop similar designs utilizing the patterns that tool makes. Along with ancient origins and cultural exchange, this may help explain the universal spiral.

The Maori provide some evidence for the role of tools in determining designs. The fine line spiral tattooing that is emblematic of moko only became prevalent after 1835 when the introduction of iron implements from Europe allowed for such detailed designs (and moko was dying out as an institution by the turn of the century). Early examples as recorded by artists such as Sydney Parkinson, who sailed with Captain Cook in 1769, may include spirals in coarser designs or within patterns that appear to be fields of solid color instead of fine lines. One of the earliest examples appears more similar to African scarification in a crosshatch pattern—another universal motif.

As a corollary to this theory that designs derive from techniques, Franz Boas goes on to say that "the same form may be given different meanings—form is constant, the interpretation is variable." We apply meaning to the designs we create, the designs that appeal to us. This, he states, is true both from tribe to tribe, and from individual to individual who use or view the same design. (So if you find a good design, turn it into different faces).

Whereas the primary function of tribal art is to carry meaning, to represent specific ideas symbolically, he also notes that as images are repeated on different objects the symbolic forms are altered to fit the object —"the attempt at decoration was much more important than the attempt at interpretation." In other words, whatever the cultural significance of their creations, artists want their work to look good. Signs and symbols become decorative motifs, and the good looking ones become universal.



*In the Sepik area cultures of Papua New Guinea, spiral patterns on masks and facepainting are also marks of an individual's identity in much the same way as among the Maori. In life an individual has the exclusive right to the facepainting pattern they wear. Masks of clan forefathers and ancestors must exactly re-create the patterns they wore in life. "It is believed that only when the painting is finished will the carving be filled with the power of the cultural heroes or ancestors."*
*—Karl Gröning*

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