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REVIEWS

CHITHAM, Karl, Kolokesa U. Māhina-Tuai and Damian Skinner: *Crafting Aotearoa: A Cultural History of Making in New Zealand and the Wider Moana Oceania*. Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2019. 304 pp., biblio., illus., index, notes. NZ\$85.00 (hardcover).

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The introduction to the book under review begins with seven stories of craft. This review begins with one:

In 1923, a Māori medical doctor with a passion for plaiting, basketry and weaving was shown a netmaking technique, altogether new to him, by a proponent of *taonga puoro* ‘Māori musical instrument performance’. Just a year earlier, John Stokes of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Hawai‘i had visited Aotearoa and met with the doctor to discuss his work on Māori weaving. The doctor would later become director of the Bishop Museum; we know him today as Te Rangihīroa/Sir Peter Buck (Ngāti Mutunga). His extensive archives at the Bishop Museum include a card catalogue detailing a life’s work of research into woven and other Pacific objects, in the field, in institutions and via posted letters, along with parcels of photographs and notes. A polymath of sorts, Te Rangihīroa is acknowledged for his roles and contributions as a doctor, military leader, health administrator, politician, anthropologist and museum director. He was also a maker.

Te Rangihīroa’s card catalogue includes detailed sketches and meticulous notes based on his observations, his comparisons with other objects and his particular “maker’s” method of unravelling and reconstructing weaving and lashing to discover connections and disjunctures in techniques. As Ioana Gordon-Smith quotes on page 141 in *Crafting Aotearoa*, Te Rangihīroa proposed that “[t]he question of diffusion [how cultures spread and change] has been confused by comparing end products which have been arrived at by different technical processes. Unless the technical details are similar, the end products cannot well be regarded as identical” (from *Samoa Material Culture*, 1930). By the 1930s, he had sorted close to 2,500 objects into categories of his own devising, weaving a new (old) system of classification spanning the makers—named and “unknown”, alive and long since passed—of the great Moana Nui a Kiwa (Pacific Ocean). The catalogue remains useful and in use today, an analogue database of which questions may be asked and from which connections can be deduced, suggested, tested and rejected. Te Rangihīroa was a maker and unmaker of not only plaited, woven and lashed objects but also sketches, connections and knowledge systems.

Nearly 100 years later, *Crafting Aotearoa: A Cultural History of Making in New Zealand and the Wider Moana Oceania* is similarly ambitious: a 460-page volume

comprising 13 chapters co-authored by the editors, along with shorter features by 67 guest writers. Reviewing the volume for *Art New Zealand* (Autumn 2020), David Eggleton described it not as a “comprehensive craft history” but rather “an editorial digest which captures a cultural moment: the iteration of a radiant iconography aggressively asserting the robustness of the applied and decorative arts in ‘Aotearoa’.”

It is, indeed, an assertive tome, masterminded by three of the country’s foremost formal experts in the history and present practice of craft/making/applied and decorative arts: Karl Chitham (Ngā Puhī), Kolokesa U. Māhina-Tuai and Damian Skinner, with prominent credit given to researcher Rigel Sorzano. The editorial triumvirate brings *mātauranga Māori* ‘Māori knowledge, world view’ into conversation with Tongan and Pākehā knowledge systems and practices, extrapolated out to the wider expanse of “Moana Oceania” and indeed the world, establishing an expansive remit reiterated in the book’s contributors and contributions. A reader expecting a history of “craft” in Aotearoa must immediately confront their own expectations of these categories and all that they connote, stretching to consider what’s at stake in trying to define or contain either the practice of making or the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. As the editors neatly summarise on page 16 in the final sentences of their introduction, “The many interactions and intersections between Māori, Pākehā and wider Moana Oceania [are] central to what this book sets out to achieve. Making—whatever term you use to describe it—has been crucial in establishing the conditions that have helped build the multicultural nation of Aotearoa. Craft is at the heart of this story.”

The publication is complemented by a series of 50 essays described as a “sister project” to the Te Papa Press book, hosted online by the Auckland War Memorial Museum, with some crossover of authors between the two collections. This arrangement demonstrates the support for the *Crafting Aotearoa* project of Aotearoa’s two largest museums along with the Blumhardt Foundation, the Kelliher Charitable Trust and Creative New Zealand, though the object catalogues reveal participation from many smaller institutions as well as private collections.

The book itself is a fine object, debossed with an *aute* ‘barkcloth’ work by Nikau Gabrielle Hindin (Te Rarawa, Ngā Puhī) depicting star navigation. It’s a bold choice for the cover, this recently revitalised Māori art of barkcloth making, and one which underpins the many stated goals of the volume, including to empower and privilege indigenous perspectives. Hindin is one of a tight group of makers who bring their own voices to their work. In a self-authored feature that was a highlight for me (pp. 64–65), Hindin discusses her research and making processes, and the cover artwork *Kuaka* (2019) is illustrated in its entirety.

Elsewhere, stalwarts of the GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) and education sectors write impressively and at times lyrically in a volume predicated on a deliberate circularity, spiralling in and out of the past and present. The chapters are thematically driven, and their refusal to adhere to a linear chronology brings a currency to older works and practices, placing recent works and makers in a vast and impressive continuum. Collaborations between today’s makers, institutions and the “unknown makers” of objects in museums are brought to the fore; ancestors and descendants are on the same page.

It is this approach that reminds me so much of Te Rangihīroa's praxis. In a letter written from Hawai'i in 1928 to his *hoa aroha* 'beloved friend' Sir Apirana Ngata, published in the collection of their correspondence, *Na To Hoa Aroha* (vol. 1, p. 122), he described the approach he was taking to his own research, rejecting what he called the sorting of material culture and knowledge systems into "bottle[s] that have been labelled in the university class room and not in the field that the labeller never saw" and proposing to weave new baskets. By then he also knew that he might learn about netmaking from a musician.

In offering "A Cultural History of Making in New Zealand and the Wider Moana Oceania", *Crafting Aotearoa* also weaves a new basket, with enough gaps to breathe and enough tension to generate further discussion. While its expertise is indubitable it is also a treasure for the non-expert, who may yet find within its pages room for their own contribution.