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Book Review: *Toi Te Mana: An Indigenous History of Māori Art*, by Deirdre Brown and Ngarino Ellis with Jonathan Mane-Wheoki

Abstract

Book review: Deirdre Brown and Ngarino Ellis, with Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, Toi Te Mana: An Indigenous History of Māori Art. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2025. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-83962-2, ISBN-10: 0-226-83962-1, xii+604 pages, 584 color illustrations, notes, references, index. Cloth US\$55.

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When I was asked to write a book review of *Toi Te Mana*, I awaited the arrival of the publication with great expectation. That anticipation proved fully justified, for the book rewards both the eye and the intellect. As an object, it is imposing: more than six centimeters thick, bound in deep red cloth with beautiful white embossed lettering. Its material presence alone signals ambition. Inside, over 500 full-color images have been reproduced with the utmost care, providing a lavish visual survey of Māori arts. Just flipping through the pages is a feast for the eyes.

Co-authored by Deirdre Brown and Ngarino Ellis, with the late Jonathan Mane-Wheoki having been integral to the project from its inception, *Toi Te Mana* sets out to offer the first Indigenous art history of Māori art. This ambition is not merely stated but enacted throughout the volume. The authors have placed Māori concepts, values, genealogies, and social worlds at the center of every discussion. In doing so, they decisively challenge entrenched art-historical frameworks that have long privileged Western categories such as form, style, periodization, and individual authorship. Rather than rejecting these categories outright, *Toi Te Mana* adds Māori intellectual traditions that emphasize community context, the land, spiritual relationships, and complementary gendered roles. Concepts such as *whakapapa* (genealogy and interconnectedness), *whenua* (land,

origin, place), *tikanga* (custom and ethical practice), *mauri* (life force), *mana* (authority and power), *wairua* (spirit), *tapu* (sacredness), and *koha* (gift and reciprocity) shape the structure and interpretive framework of the book. Māori art is thus presented as a constellation of relationships between people, ancestors, land, cosmology, and historical circumstance. All those relationships show that art cannot be separated from social history; it is produced within it, shaped by it, and responsive to it.

The authors have divided the book into three parts, organized and titled around the Māori concept of the “three baskets of knowledge”—a cosmological and philosophical framework describing how Tāne, one of the main characters in the creation of the world, retrieved these treasures. *Te Kete Tuatea* (the basket of light) contains the multitude of Māori art that “is from and within the customary world” (5). *Te Kete Tuauri* (the basket of the unknown) includes “arts developed out of engagement with Pākehā [white settlers], and the consequential changing dynamics of Māori relationships with each other as *hapū* (subtribal), *iwi* (tribal) and pan-*iwi* organisations” (5). Finally, *Te Kete Aronui* (the basket of pursuit) contains the arts that humans seek. The knowledge-basket framework enables the authors to move fluidly across time, resisting rigid Western periodizations such as “pre-contact,” “colonial,” and “modern.” Instead, Māori art is situated within a dynamic continuum of knowledge transmission, adaptation, resilience, and sovereignty. The reader learns that early twentieth-century art movements aimed at reforming social conditions for Māori ultimately led to the emergence of contemporary art forms and schools in the second half of the twentieth century. Throughout the volume, focused text boxes introducing key artists, *taonga* (treasured objects), and critical moments in the development of Māori art allow for depth without interrupting the overall flow.

Providing a summary of such a comprehensive book is hardly possible, but I do want to point out some of its key themes and the way it offers a different and Indigenous perspective on art forms in Aotearoa New Zealand. Part 1—*Te Kete Tuatea* (the first basket), foregrounds ancestral knowledge and its continuation into the present. Art forms such as carving, weaving, canoe-building, architecture, rock art, and body adornment are discussed in relation to *whakapapa* and *whenua*. Importantly, this section addresses the gendered biases that have long shaped Māori art scholarship, in which carving traditions—often associated with men—were elevated above practices such as weaving associated with women. This section also addresses how colonial influence deepened these inequities. As Ellis observes, “The introduction of heteropatriarchy by Europeans, especially by Christian missionaries, diminished these identities by reducing and minimizing

their role, which in turn suppressed the use and acceptance of imagery of women and *takatāpui* (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or part of the rainbow community) in art” (188). This critical intervention offers a necessary redress and reframes gender as integral to understanding Māori visual culture.

Connections to ancestral Pacific homelands recur throughout this section. While such links are well established in discussions of *waka* (canoe), the explicit attention given to the Pacific antecedents of Māori adornment is particularly welcome, as it expands the spatial and intellectual horizons of Māori art history.

The second “basket,” *Te Kete Tuatea*, examines art that was produced in response to contact with Pākehā, beginning with museums and their collections. The authors situate these artistic developments within a broader social history marked by land dispossession, language loss, government policy, and later, the Māori renaissance. Art emerges as both a record of struggle and a site of opportunity, shaped by new technologies and materials while remaining grounded in Māori values. Museums are positioned not as neutral repositories but as witnesses to how customary practices adapted to new materials, markets, and social pressures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This idea is emphasized through the discussion of women’s stories in Māori art that were suppressed with the introduction of Christianity in the nineteenth century.

A particularly compelling chapter in Part 2 is “The art of utu,” in which Deirdre Brown demonstrates how art mediates balance—between life and death, and peace and conflict—through reciprocal exchange. Here, art is inseparable from social organization, land management, and political negotiation.

Part 3—*Te Kete Aronui* addresses contemporary and experimental practices in painting, photography, installation, performance, and multimedia art. The discussed works engage with modernism, urbanization, Indigenous rights, environmental activism, gender critique, and historical redress. Temporal boundaries remain deliberately porous, demonstrating that the book does not follow a linear timeframe. The section opens with a discussion of twentieth-century Māori leaders including Te Paea Hērangi, Apirana Ngata, and Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana, whose reformist visions profoundly shaped artistic production and education. Under the influence of these leaders, newly founded art schools would ultimately take prominent positions where intergenerational teaching was fostered. This section also addresses the fraught relationship Māori communities have with museums worldwide holding their treasures, as well as how contemporary Māori art has moved and flourished beyond the borders of the islands of Aotearoa New Zealand.

One of the book's most compelling strengths is its insistence that art is inseparable from social life. Throughout, artworks are essential to telling complex stories—of kinship, labor, spirituality, politics, colonial violence, resistance, diaspora, and return. Simplified narratives that cast Māori art as static or ahistorical are not featured. Instead, Māori art is shown to be dynamic, intellectually rigorous, politically engaged, and deeply enmeshed in the lived experiences of Māori people. Contemporary art becomes a dialogue between past and present, and between cultural responsibility and personal expression.

Although Jonathan Mane-Wheoki passed away before the book's completion, his influence permeates the book. His lifelong dedication to Indigenous art histories, belief in the centrality of Māori intellectual frameworks, and commitment to gender inclusivity in art-historical narratives are integral to *Toi Te Māori*. His presence in the project is a reminder of the intergenerational nature of knowledge transmission—a theme that the book emphasizes throughout.

Ultimately, *Toi Te Mana* demonstrates what becomes possible when Indigenous epistemologies structure the telling of art (hi)stories. The book is not only a major contribution to Māori art history—it is also a theoretical intervention with wide-reaching implications for Indigenous studies, museum practice, anthropology, and visual culture.

My awaiting this volume with great curiosity and enthusiasm was entirely justified; what *Toi Te Māori* delivers is monumental. It is aesthetically sumptuous, intellectually rigorous, and methodologically innovative. By grounding its narrative in the three baskets of knowledge, it honors Māori ways of knowing while offering readers a coherent and generous guide through centuries of artistic practice. For scholars, artists, curators, students, and all those engaged with Indigenous arts or the rethinking of art history, this book is an essential reading. It is a landmark publication that will continue to shape the field for generations to come.

Fanny Wonu Veys is curator of Oceania at the Wereldmuseum, a Dutch umbrella organization comprising locations in Amsterdam, Leiden, and Rotterdam. She is also a professor by special appointment of arts and material culture of Oceania at Leiden University. Her topics of interest include Pacific textiles, gender and material culture, missionary collections, and the contemporary significance of historical objects. Her fieldwork sites include Aotearoa New Zealand (since 2000), Tonga (since 2003), and Arnhem Land, Australia (since 2014). She is the main editor of the Provenance series, published by the Wereldmuseum, and was the president of the Pacific Arts Association for twelve years.