

EDUCATION RESOURCE



Sandy Adsett, *Kahurangi*, 1988

Toi Koru: Sandy Adsett

31 July – 7 November 2021

Toi Koru presents the first major survey exhibition of paintings by Dr Sandy Adsett, the Māori master of colour and kōwhaiwhai. The exhibition tracks the trajectory of Adsett's painting practice from the late 1960s to today and features sixty paintings created over six decades. *Toi Koru* includes artworks from major public collections, including the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, as well as work commissioned especially for the exhibition. There are no white 'gallery' walls in this exhibition – Sandy Adsett envisioned the space as a wharenui (meeting house)- full of colour, form and korero (stories to tell).

Toi Koru – Sandy Adsett

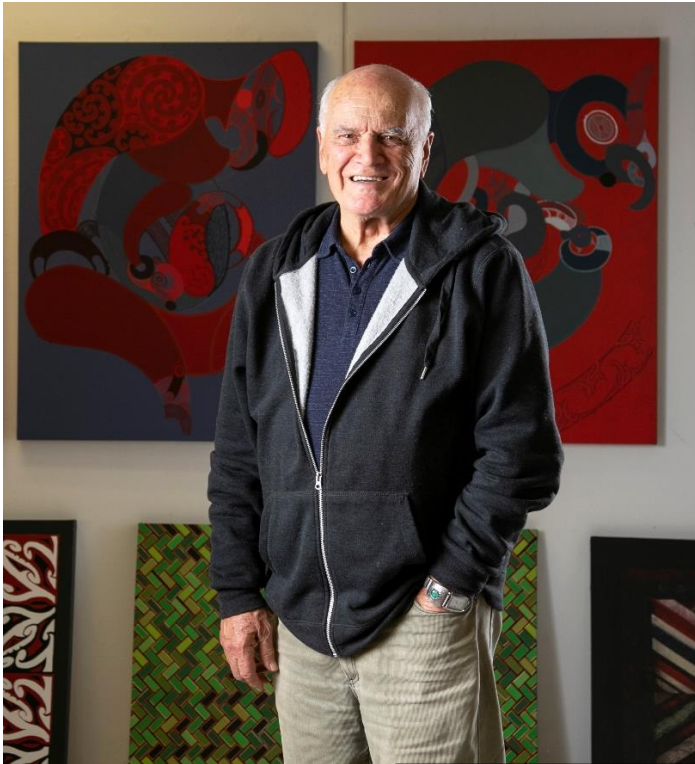


Photo by Norm Heke, 2021

“My earliest memory of ‘doing’ kōwhaiwhai was in standard three at Raupunga Native School in my tribal area of Ngāti Pāhauwera. It was a black crayon oval-shaped design. I remember feeling really good about that swirling koru design. I can still smell the crayon as it heated up in my hand. I became hooked on Māori design and did repeat and half-drop mesh patterns for the rest of my primary school years.”

Sandy Adsett

CONTENTS

1. Artist Biography – about Dr Sandy Adsett
2. Artist Interviews
3. Study Focus of selected works
4. About kōwhaiwhai and koru
5. Art Response Activities
6. Publication – The art of Kōwhaiwhai
7. Curriculum Links
8. Glossary

Photographs of the artwork by Sandy Adsett were taken by Mark Tantrum Photography.

About Dr Sandy Adsett

Born in 1939 on the family farm in Raupunga, a small Kahungunu (Ngāti Pahauwera) Māori community just north of Wairoa on the East Coast of the North Island, Adsett has had a hugely successful international career as an artist, but surprisingly he has only ever had two solo exhibitions of his own. *Toi Koru* is his third solo exhibition, and his first major retrospective survey. Part of the rationale for this is, as artist and friend Elizabeth Ellis notes in her introduction to the exhibition publication:

“Adsett is one of the most significant and respected Māori artists of his generation. His mahi toi [art] is revered as taonga [treasure] of great significance by Māori across the motu [island], admired also by Indigenous artists internationally who seek him out for advice and camaraderie. Although his mana [reputation] precedes him within te ao Māori [the Māori world] and with iwi taketake [Indigenous peoples] across the world, he is nevertheless our best-kept secret, having never sought the spotlight for his own self-aggrandisement. His work as a Māori artist and educator has always been concerned with lifting the mana and wellbeing of his community. Now is our turn to acknowledge his mana and his accomplishments with this exhibition and publication of his artwork.”

Sandy Adsett received his formal art training from the renowned Ngāti Porou master carver Pine Taiapa [1901-1972] as part of the Education Department’s Art in Schools itinerant teachers training programme of the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the fantastic insights offered by the old master are shared by Adsett in *Toi Koru*, such as ‘Pine’s twinkle’, the secret ingredient needed to make the perfect koru.

The influence of Western abstraction painters, such as Mondrian and Kandinsky, is equally apparent in many of Adsett’s early paintings, with the artist often choosing to work from a limited palette, or challenging himself to deconstruct the rigid structure of forms derived from the marae to create compositions concerned with line, shape, movement, colour and balance, but doing so without losing the cultural resonance and meaning behind the symbols, colours and patterns.

Many of Adsett’s peer group went on to become important figures in Aotearoa New Zealand art, such as Cath Brown, John Bevan Ford, Fred Graham, Ralph Hotere, Kāterina Mataira, Paratene Matchitt, Marilyn Webb, Cliff Whiting and Selwyn Wilson. From this group of artist-educators came a new generation of Māori painters that included Selwyn Muru, Buck Nin, Kura Te Waru Rewiri, Robert Jahnke, June Grant and many others. Adsett went on to become one of the co-founders of Te Toi Houkura School of Māori Art and Design in Gisborne in the mid-1990s and has been the principal tutor at Toimairangi School of Māori Art in Hawkes Bay since 2003.

Toi Koru is significant for Sandy Adsett as an artist, and to recognise his influence as an educator. Adsett and his peers laid the foundation for subsequent generations of Māori artists, curators, educators, and museum professionals to pursue a career in the arts industry.

Artist Interviews Links

'A whare takes a number of years to build, my work is like that, it's taken time', says Dr Sandy Adsett (Ngāti Kahungunu ki te Wairoa/Ngāti Kahungunu/Ngāti Pāhauwera) of his survey *Toi Koru* at Pātaka Art + Museum.

Two of the interviews (below) were recorded at Pātaka Art + Museum 2021 at the *Toi Koru* exhibition opening and symposium. These are available on our website if you are unable to use the links below.

- (1) **Toi Koru, Sandy Adsett artist talk** in conversation with Reuben Friend.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=rZodOr9klzw&t=1s>

Dr Sandy Adsett speaks with Pātaka Art+Museum Director Reuben David Friend. He reflects on his painting practice, motivations as an artist and key bodies of works that he has created over six decades of art and painting practice.



- (2) **Māori curatorial frameworks** panel discussion. (Talk begins at 3mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=tkraTK10cuk&t=1s>

Sandy Adsett is joined by Dr David Butts, a museum professional who worked with Adsett on the 1986 exhibition 'Nga Tukumata o Kahungunu' at the MTG Museum in Napier. The exhibition was the first iwi-led exhibition in the country is an important record of a pivotal moment in Aotearoa NZ professional museum practice.



Sandy Adsett – Māori Visual Artist and educator. Kapua Artist Profile. Filmed and directed by Caleb Kingi, 2021, Arts Council/Creative NZ

This video interview is available on our website ([Pataka.org.nz/Learn](https://pataka.org.nz/Learn))

Study Focus

Take a closer look at selected works and information from the *Toi Koru* exhibition. Arranged chronologically, each respective decade examines a different focus of the artist's practice.



1960s - Exploring form

Adsett's paintings from the early 1960s began with a directive from tohunga whakairo (master carver) Pine Taiapa to be *in control* of the form, and not to be *controlled by* the form. Paintings from this era, such as *Tutu Tahi* (1966) and *Tutu Rua* (1966), are an exploration of interlocking fluid shapes, deconstructing the S-shaped movement of the manawa line (the central line of a kōwhaiwhai pattern), and magnifying the C-shape of the individual koru. The shapes were also reversed to explore the interplay of positive and negative space, with the areas in-between becoming forms of their own. There is an amoebic feeling with these paintings reminiscent of the hei tiki form that represents the developing foetus within the womb. Adsett refers to these paintings as the Form series.



Tutu Tahi, 1969. Collection of the



Tutu Rua, 1969. Collection of the artist

Focus Questions:

What do the forms remind you of?

Is the structure simple or complex? Figurative or abstract?

Are the colours used warm (reds, yellows), cool (blues, greens) or a combination?

1960s and 70s - Visual language of kōwhaiwhai

From the amoeboid shapes of Adsett's earliest series of *Form* paintings from the 1960s, in the 1970s we see an intensified deconstruction and reconstruction of kōwhaiwhai, with paintings such as *Riri* (1977) from the *Square on Square* series. Adsett pushes kōwhaiwhai through a gauntlet of possibilities, with concentrated focus at the centre of each composition. He balances this intensity with a wide single-coloured square-shaped painted frame. He follows a similar format with the *Circular Series* from the same period, with elaborate arrangements of kōwhaiwhai swirling through a central circular form, balanced out with a broad monotone-painted border as seen in *Nikau* (1977). The titles of the works make reference to land, sea and skylscapes, evoking a feeling of the dense woodland realm of Tāne-Mahuta, the swirling seas of Tangaroa, and turbulent winds Tāwhirimātea, and the realms of celestial Ranginui through the visual language of kōwhaiwhai.



Riri, 1977. Collection of the Dowse Art Museum.



Nikau, 1977. Collection of the artist



Rakau, 1980. Collection of the artist.

Focus Questions:

Koru have been used to create a visual 'energy' – what energy/mauri can you feel in these images?
Do any of the colours used have Māori cultural significance?
What are the 'customary' colours of kōwhaiwhai?
Does the title of the work add to the meaning?

1970s - Positive and negative space

As a design principle, Adsett uses the border as an important compositional aid, forming the negative space that he understands to be an intrinsic element of kōwhaiwhai. In many of the paintings from this era of the 1970s, the intense central koru imagery spills over the border onto the painted frame, creating compositions that please Adsett's need to occupy the space while also maintaining balance between planes of positive and negative.

Three anomalous paintings from the 1970s are *Marama Kare* (1977), *Ao Marama* (1978) and *Blood Quantum* (1978), paintings inspired by the curved lines of kōwhaiwhai and the straight lines of raranga weaving. In *Blood Quantum*, a painting made in response to prejudicial race-based laws of the time, we see the curved kōwhaiwhai forms dissected and obscured by sharpened points, as if being subsumed by an invading force.



Ao Marama, 1978. Collection of the artist.



Blood Quantum, 1978. Collection of Mia Skipper.

1980s - Figurative Forms

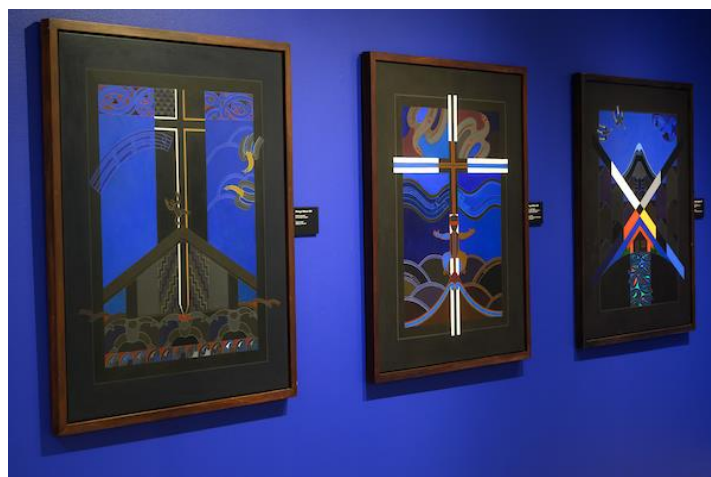
Figurative forms appear in Adsett's paintings in the early 1980s. The paintings are dark and sombre, with occasional moments of light, and are the closest that Adsett ever comes to making statements about God. However, despite the McCahon-like references to the white crucifix cast over the land, these are not religious paintings. They are expressions of concern.

In *Whare Tapu/Noa* (1986) and *Patunga Wairua* (1987) we see a black upside-down crucifix casting long ominous shadows across the land. The figure of a person or tekoteko is depicted blindfolded or crucified upside down, a martyrdom or sacrificial death where the iwi and hapū are to pay the price for the sins of the church.

Adsett uses the poutama pattern in the background of these images, making reference to the appropriation of Māori imagery and symbolism by the church. The poutama is often described as the 'stairway to heaven', but Adsett is resolute in reminding people that this is a colonial construct that has been overlaid on a customary form that predates the arrival of Christianity.



Whare Tapu/Noa, 1986. Collection of Helen Kedgley and Chris Laidlaw.



Mark Tantrum Photography

1990s

Hineringa

In the late 1800s, a kilometre or so from the mouth of the Mōhaka River, there was small but ornate whare named Hineringa that belonged to the people of Ngāti Pāhauwera. Adsett oversaw the refurbishment of Hineringa in 1993, restoring it back to its grand original colour scheme. Chromatically, Hineringa was stunning, boasting a bold arrangement of alternating curvilinear and rectilinear geometric forms, painted in complementary hues of blue with brilliant contrasting reds and yellows. Echoes of this colour palette and complex design aesthetic seem to flow through into many of Adsett's gallery-based artworks from this same period of the 1990s, as seen in the tightly arranged niho taniwha tāniko designs painted in hues of blue and red in *Tuhi* (1990). This treatment of vibrant colour balanced upon a backdrop of subdued tones can also be seen in the various series of *Heke*, *Koiri* and *Taniko* paintings. Perhaps the most elaborate and nationally significant representation of this style is the immense multimedia wall panels that line the interior walls of Rongomaraeroa Marae at the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa that Adsett designed in 1998.



Tuhi, 1990. Collection of Te Papa Tongarewa.



Koiri, 1990. Parliament Collection



The vibrant Mōhaka -style wall panels of Rongomaraeroa Marae at Te Papa Tongarewa. Designed by Sandy Adsett in a marae-based collaboration with his students from Te Toihoukura School of Māori Visual Arts (EIT).

Breaking the frame

The figurative images in Adsett's paintings from the 1980s become a great source of content for the paintings of the 1990s, as Adsett continued to challenge himself to develop new compositions. In the *Whare Ngaro* series from the late 1980s and early 1990s we see these figurative motifs scattered across the canvas in seemingly random arrangements. The sword, the tekoteko, tukutuku panels, and human figures became painted motifs to be arranged in space. Even the frame itself is broken, shattered into pieces, and recast into the compositions to resemble the apex of a meeting house. These are not purposeless configurations; they are an expansion of the principles of kōwhaiwhai. Adsett has used motifs to divide up planes of space within the composition, creating negative areas for each motif to sit within, moving the viewers eye across the surface of the artwork. The title *Whare Ngaro* relates to a lost or broken house, suggesting there is a deeper concern beyond mere compositional investigations.



Whare Ngaro, 1996. Collection of the artist.

On the Edge

In *On the Edge* (1998) and *Made to Jump Rope* (2001), we see the sword motif re-envisioned as a simple line of colour, piercing the bodies of figures or becoming an obstacle to negotiate. The paintings are specific to people in Adsett's life, dealing with moral and emotional responses to death and suicide. The paintings are black, with stepped poutama, kaokao chevrons, and triangular niho taniwha designs guiding the spirits on their journey beyond the veil of light, te ao mārama, to the world of darkness, te pō.



On the Edge, 1998. Collection of Tairāwhiti Museum.



Made to Jump Rope, 2001. Collection of the artist.

Pakipaki

From the complex compositions and vibrant chromatics of the 1990s, we see a shift in Adsett's paintings in the decade following, a move that aligns with his relocation from Gisborne back to his Kahungunu roots in Hastings in 2003. Here Adsett moves to minimalist compositions of positive and negative kōwhaiwhai forms, predominantly painted in black and white with occasional moments of red and blue sparingly inserted into negative areas of the composition.

It is interesting to note that the subdued colour palette and increased focus on emboldened central motifs aligns with marae restoration programmes in 2003 at Houngarea Marae and the nearby Mihiroa Marae at Pakipaki, south of Hastings. Many of Adsett's students from the Toimairangi School of Māori Art at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa were mana whenua to these marae, creating space for a meaningful relationship between the school and the people of the haukāinga.

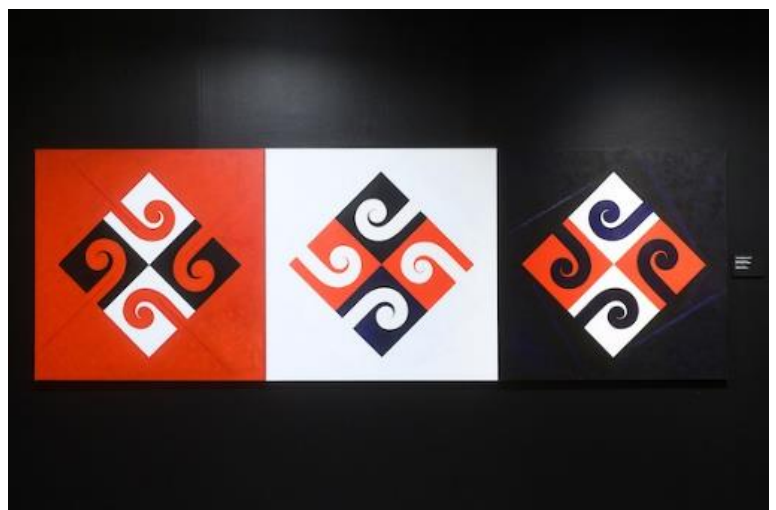
2011- 2021

The decade from 2011 to 2021 has seen Adsett consolidate six decades of intense investigation down to two base forms: the pātiki diamond, and the single koru bulb as seen in *Te Template* (2011). The paintings demonstrate a refined understanding of the core design elements of kōwhaiwhai: symbols and narrative, colour and contrast, positive and negative space, voids occupied by motif, combined curved and rectilinear forms framed within a given space.

We see this consolidation of form, colour and space in *Pare Marua* (2014) and *Mango Koru* (2019). These works contain the mango koru design, a popular Ngāti Kahungunu design that represents the two fins of the shark. With sharpened bends and pointed koru heads, the design formula for this pattern harks back to 'Pine's twinkle', the little-known design formula to create the perfect koru. Adsett learned the technique from his mentor Pine Taiapa and has developed a similar design formula for the mango koru design which has been dubbed 'Sandy's twinkle'.



Mango Koru, 2019. Collection of the artist.



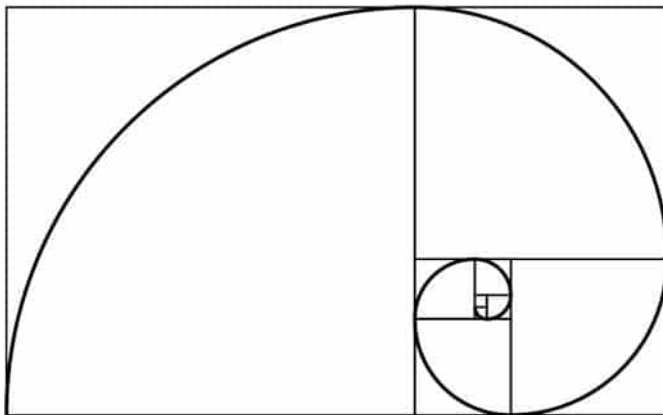
Te Template, 2011. Collection of the artist.

BACKGROUND INFO:

About kōwhaiwhai – koru, kape, rauru

The customary art of kōwhaiwhai is traditionally associated with whare whaikairo (ornate ancestral meeting house), painted on the heke (rafters) that descend from the tāhuhu (ridge pole of the building). Abstract and symbolic painted kōwhaiwhai relate to the local narratives of the people and places they represent. Design elements such as koru, kape (curved eyebrow-like shape) or rauru (spiral shape) motifs follow a manawa line, an unbroken continuous line from which the base elements are repeated, reflected, or rotated.

FYI - The koru figure, predominant in the kōwhaiwhai, is universally known as the golden ration or golden section or the divine proportion. It can be described as a numeric ratio (1.618) that produces shapes of constant proportions, that can be found in nature, in architecture and in famous works of art by artists such as Leonardo DaVinci. The golden ratio is universally used by artists both purposefully and intuitively to visually enhance of subject matter.



The golden ratio

Art Response Activities

- **Discuss** – what is a koru? What shape does it represent? Compare the koru to pictures of the bud of a fern frond (before it opens). Does this help to give the koru meaning?
- **Think** – of all the places you see koru and kōwhaiwhai in everyday life in Aotearoa.
- **Collect** – together examples of spiral objects and pictures of spirals (man-made and natural).
- **Set Up** – a classroom display of how kōwhaiwhai panels have been customarily used inside the whare whaikairo (carved meeting house) or wharenui. What colours have been used the most?
- **Find out** – how and where tukutuku panels are used to decorate a wharenui and then look to see how Adsett has also incorporated them into some of his artwork.
- **Search** – on a map of Aotearoa for these places of significance for Sandy Adsett: Gisborne/ Tūrangānui-a-Kiwa, Hawkes Bay/Te Matau-a-Māui, Pakipaki, Raupunga.

- **Discover** – how kōwhaiwhai shapes and forms connect to Geometry and Mathematics – using symmetry, rotation, repetition and translation.
- **Research** – the meanings and significance of some of the main koru and kōwhaiwhai patterns:



Koiri

Puhoro



Mangopare



Kape



Rauru



Ngutukākā



Check out a video from The Dowse on some of these: - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64gw_aWApO4

- **Create** - a collaborative kōwhaiwhai collage, using cut-out koru shapes and motifs.
- **Look closely** – at the paintings 'Rakau' and 'Nikau' and how Adsett has used koru to depict the natural world. Create your own koru landscapes.
- **Explore** – artists of influence in Sandy Adsett's art practice including his mentor - Pine Taiapa and European artists Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky (see below).

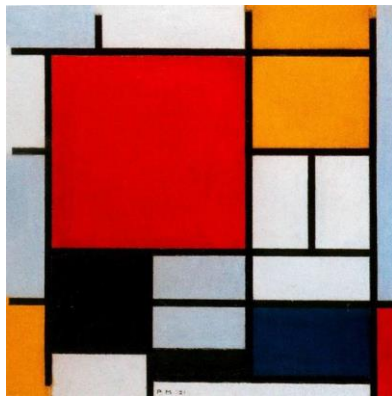
Pine Taiapa, Ruakapanga Whare Whakairo, Uawa - Tolaga Bay.

Above: Containing some of the best in rich carving, Ruakapanga is one of the foremost meeting houses of its kind on the East Coast.
Left: The Poutaahu or rear main pillar.
Below: Pine Taiapa describing one of the tukutuku or wall panels in the meeting house.



https://photonews.org.nz/gisborne/issue/GPN157_196

Piet Mondrian



Composition with Large Red Plane, Yellow, Black, Gray and Blue, Piet Mondrian, 1921

Wassily Wassilyevich Kandinsky



On White II, 1923, Centre Pompidou, Paris

Recommended Reading:

Toi Koru – Sandy Adsett, edited by Reuben Friend. (Pataka Museum/Porirua City 2021)

This book has been published to accompany the *Toi Koru* exhibition. The publication is a collection of essays about the career, work and influence of Dr Sandy Adsett (Tohunga Kōwhaiwhai) and includes over one hundred full colour illustrations. Essay writers pay tribute to Adsett's sixty years of art practice, giving him the recognition he deserves for his huge contribution in the emergence and elevation of contemporary Māori Art by Māori artists as a sophisticated globally-recognised art form. Contributors include Elizabeth Ellis, Robert Jahnke, David Butts, Nigel Borrell, Tina Kuckkahn and Reuben Friend. The book is currently available for purchase (\$60) at the Pātaka Museum Toi Store and at Te Papa Tongarewa.

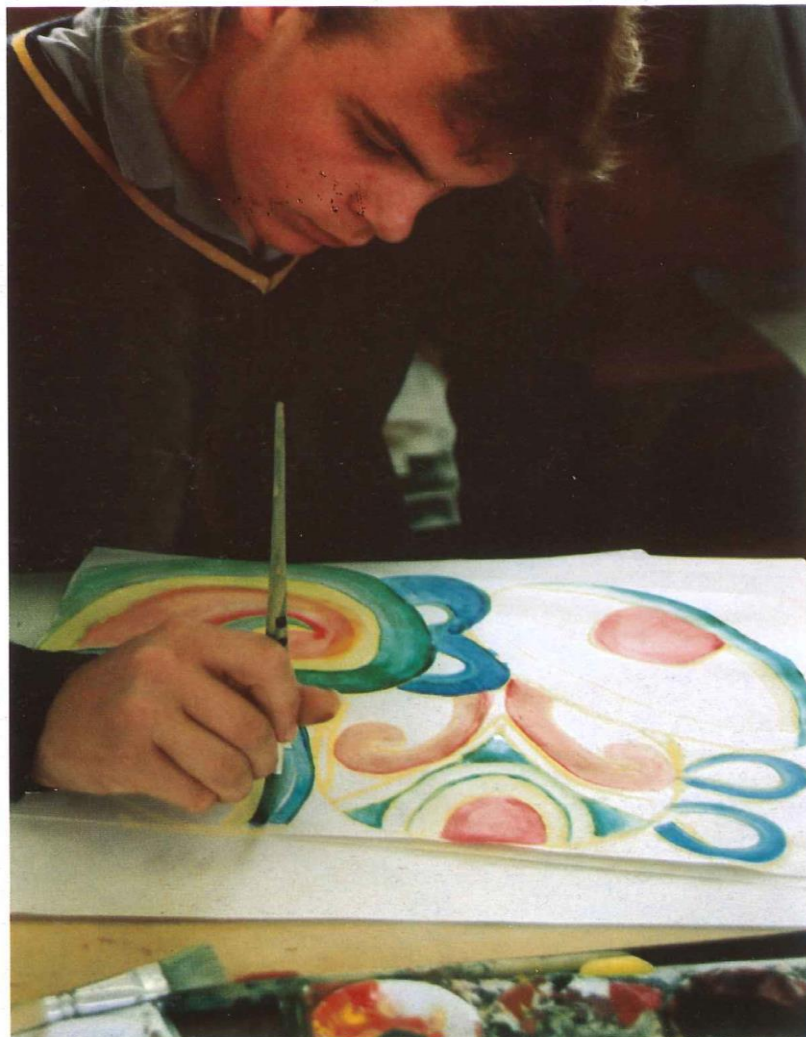
Kowhaiwhai Arts, Sandy Adsett, Chris Graham, Rob McGregor. (Education Advisory Service, 1992)

This book was published primarily for teachers and students. One of the pages has been reproduced below but more pages are available on the website (Pataka.org.nz/Learn)

KORU should be studied in relationship to its emergence from the **SPIRAL**.



Koru Koiri Mangapare



Art Focus Questions

What would you ask the artist about the work?

Do any of the colours used have Māori cultural significance?

Have contrasting colours been used?

Are the colours used, warm (reds, yellows), cool (blues, greens) or a combination?

Does your cultural background affect the way you 'read' or understand the painting?

Does the work have a political, social, economic, or environmental role, function, or message? If so, what is it?

Has the artist been inspired by their experiences of particular social, cultural, historical, political, or environmental events?

Do you feel a personal connection to this work?

How does your own viewpoint, and your cultural, social, and political context, affect the way you interpret the work?

Is the structure simple or complex?

Has composition been used symbolically or to create narrative?

Is the composition symmetrical or asymmetrical?

Describe the tonal range of the work, is the work mostly light or dark?

Is the work figurative or abstract?

Can you see recognisable objects in the work?

Does the title of the work add to the meaning?

Does the work have a kōrero/story?

What materials have been used to create the work?

How would you describe the paint application? Thick or thin? Translucent or opaque?

How would you describe the style of the painting?

Does it look like the artist planned the work, or painted intuitively?

Look closely to see how the paint was applied. Has the artist used a brush to apply the paint? Has the artist used any other tools other than brushes (masking tape, stencils etc) to apply paint or construct the image?

How long would it take you to make a similar painting?

Curriculum Links

Social Sciences

Achievement Objectives

Students will gain knowledge, skills, and experience to:

- Level 1 Understand how people make significant contributions to New Zealand's society.
- Level 2 Understand how cultural practices reflect and express people's customs, traditions, and values.
- Level 3 Understand how cultural practices vary but reflect similar purposes.
- Level 4 Understand how exploration and innovation create opportunities and challenges for people, places, and environments.

The Arts. Visual Arts: Achievement Objectives

Students will:

- Level 1 Understanding the visual arts in context. Share ideas about how and why their own and others' works are made and their purpose, value, and context.
- Level 2 Developing practical knowledge. Explore a variety of materials and tools and discover elements and selected principles.
- Level 3 Understanding the visual arts in context. Develop and revisit visual ideas, in response to a variety of motivations, observation, and imagination, supported by the study of artists' works.
- Level 4 Developing ideas. Develop and revisit visual ideas, in response to a variety of motivations, observation, and imagination, supported by the study of artists' works.
- Level 5 Developing ideas. Generate, develop, and refine ideas in response to a variety of motivations, including the study of established practice.
- Level 6 Communicating and interpreting. Investigate, analyse, and evaluate ideas and interpret artists' intentions in art works.
- Level 7 Communicating and interpreting. Use critical analysis to interpret and respond to art works.
- Level 8 Developing practical knowledge. Apply understanding from broad and deep research into the characteristics and constraints of materials, techniques, technologies, and established conventions in a selected field.

GLOSSARY

Haukāinga - home, local people of a marae.

Koru – spiral pattern.

Kōwhaiwhai – painted scroll pattern.

Pātiki –diamond shape, flounder fish.

Poutama – steps to heaven

kaokao - chevrons

Mango Koru – hammerhead shark pattern

Iwi taketake - Indigenous peoples – like tangata whenua

Mana - Reputation

Marae – the communal meeting place and focal point of iwi and Māori communities

Motu - Island

Tukutuku – woven wall panels between the carved wooden posts inside a whareniui.

Ngāti Kahungunu

Taonga – valued treasure

Te Ao Māori - The Māori world

Heke – painted rafters inside the whareniui

Taniko – woven geometric designs, usually used as borders on Māori cloaks (korowai and kaitaka)

Te Toi Houkura School of Māori Visual Arts at Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT)

Toimairangi School of Māori Art at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa

Marae – a designated gathering place, usually in front of a Māori ancestral meeting house (whareniui).



22.



23.



24.



25.



26.

MAORI RAFTER PATTERNS.

