

Feather Box, John Collins

University Art Museum, CSU, collection of Mark and Polly Addison, 2005.127



...About the artist

John Collins was born in Waitākere, New Zealand where he began carving at the age of ten. He is Te Kawerau a Maki carver who is primarily self-taught but has spent some time learning from older, more experienced carvers. Collins draws on the natural landscape of New Zealand and its people for inspiration in creating his art work. He is keenly interested in capturing the moods, contrasts, and interactions of his family and friends.

Lesson Overview

Students will explore the John Collins' wakahuia, or treasure box, and how traditional arts make connections to the environment and contemporary life. Students will create a treasure box of their own after exploring its possible uses and other examples of containers that hold sacred items.

Objectives

1. Students will be able to identify and define: wakahuia, uhi, manaia, huia and tapu.
2. Students will be able to describe how culture can influence the type of art it creates; using Maori culture as an exemplar.
3. Students will be able to compare and contrast the use of symbols across cultures; explaining the role of symbol in each example provided.
4. Students will be able to debate the role of modernization on artists and art making processes.
5. Students able to develop a series of plans for their treasure box demonstrating critical thinking in designing meaningful symbols.
6. Students will be able to create a "treasure box" using a faux repoussé technique.

Vocabulary

- Hei-tiki
- Huia
- Kauri wood
- Manaia
- Maori
- Puhoro
- Tapu
- Uhi
- Wakahuia

Artists

- Jo Ogier
- Sunnah Thompson

Procedures: Part I - Comprehend and Reflect

1. Show students John Collins carved treasure box called a Wakahuia (Slide 1). Ask them to carefully describe what they see. Ask the students to be very specific in their descriptions. What do the students think the art work was used for? What kind of items may have been stored in the treasure box? What do they like about the art work? What would they change about the art work? What do they think the figures on either end are for? Handles? Or are they guardians?

The avian figures are called manaia who may represent a particular class of inferior god or bird-men. The purpose of the manaia in Maori art is speculative but it may represent the presence of sacred ancestral forces. The long rolling spirals covering the exterior of the box are known as puhoro patterns which represent strength and agility. What sorts of symbols do we use that have special meaning?

2. In this work, Collins is continuing the Maori tradition of creating treasure boxes in which people would store their valuable items. These objects were often sacred, or tapu. This could include jade ornaments (Hei-Tiki) (Slide 2) (http://www.maori.info/maori_tiki.htm; <http://www.chrislee.org.uk/inspiringcreativity/unit%209.htm>), combs (Slide 3) (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/syntheticadventures/3440693566/in/photostream>), small chisels used in tattooing (uhi) (Slide 4) (http://larskrutak.com/articles/south_seas/), and other tapu possessions. The Maori people are natives of New Zealand which is an island country in the South Pacific. Traditionally, treasure boxes were hung from the rafters of homes. The name wakahuia may imply a specific kind of valuable item, the black and white tail feathers of the *huia* bird which is now extinct (Slide 5) (<http://terranature.org/huia.htm>). Huia feathers were a symbol of prestige that was often worn by chiefs (Slide 6) (<http://lnhstest.brinkster.net/Level2/Collections2/Photos-images/Photographs.html>). Here is another example of how feathers are worn by the Maori for special occasions (Slide 7) (<http://olympic-spirit.blogspot.com/2009/06/traditional-maori-group-perform-at.html>). The word *huia* may mean “anything much prized.” What types of sacred or valuable items would people store today in a wakahuia? Have students create a list of items they would store inside a wakahuia (Slide 8).

3. Have students share their lists. Discuss the differences between sacred objects versus items of monetary value. Ask the students to first define the difference.

4. What are the effects of New Zealand’s changing landscape on traditional art forms? For example the Maori name for the treasure box, wakahuia, incorporates the word *huia*, a large bird of New Zealand that went extinct in the early 20th century. Some artists directly address the environmental issues raised by extinction such as Jo Ogier’s *The Huia’s Lament* (woodcut) (Slide 9) (<http://salamandergallery.vc.net.nz/gallery/salamand/Artwork/johuialam>). She raises “issues of conservation, ecology and the role each of us can have in nurturing, protecting and preserving our fragile world. It seeks to promote public awareness of the unique beauty of the many endemic species of flora and fauna, plus the fragility of the ecological systems within it.” In the art work the huia is perched on the tool that was used to overhunt it. How does the natural world influence art? Is this effect reciprocal? Can art influence our interactions with the natural world?

As a traditional wood carver John Collins continues to produce significant work for the Maori people. This pou whenua, was carved by John Collins and Sunnah Thompson to mark the tribe’s traditional ownership of the land although the tribe no longer occupy their ancestral domain (Slides 10, 11) (http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM9DCK_Te_Kawerau_A_Maki_New_Lynn_Auckland_New_Zealand). What similarities are there between this sculpture and the treasure box? (puhoro; avian features).

Here is another example by John Collins and Sunnah Thompson who headed a team of carvers to create this pou from fallen kauri wood of the Waitākere Ranges. The pou represents the ancestry of Te Kawerau a Maki (their tribe) who had traditional ownership of the Waitakere Ranges. It replaces the original pou that was removed in 2009 due to irreparable damage.” (Slides 12, 13) (<http://www.milestonetours.co.nz/blog/2011/07/the-burj-al-waitakere/>). Do some of the ancestor figures have bird-like features like the manaia on the treasure box?

Other art forms such as music and dance are influenced by modernization of New Zealand. A traditional dance of the Maori people, the haka, was performed by men, women and children to commemorate important events. The dance has been adapted to more contemporary purposes such as its performance by the rugby team the All Blacks (Slide 14) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ofj3dCKyI38>). How did the rugby players appear? How did their performance make you feel?

Is preserving cultural traditions as important as protecting physical objects? In the case of items kept in a treasure box, is it the object that is valuable or what that thing represents?

Procedures: Part II – Create and Transfer

5. Show pictures of other containers that hold sacred objects. This box from Italy holds the relic of a saint and is called a reliquary (Slides 15, 16) (<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/53.19.2>); Reliquary of Pepin from Conques Abbey, France (Slide 17) (<http://www.art-history-images.com/photo?id=080707163631>). These are Haida bentwood chests from the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. which would have held important items belonging to the chief or upper-class (Slides 18, 19) (<http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/emuseum/code/emuseum.asp?style=browse¤trecord=1&page=search&profile=objects&searchdesc=chest&quicksearch=chest&newvalues=1&newstyle=single&newcurrentrecord=5>; <http://pennycollection.tumblr.com/post/6062773546/haida-bentwood-chest-museum-of-anthropology>). Here are some more examples of Maori treasure boxes (Slides 20, 21, 22) (http://educators.mfa.org/galleries/slide_create/2267?page=4; <http://www.slam.org/emuseum/code/emuseum.asp?style=browse¤trecord=1&page=search&profile=objects&searchdesc=feather...&quicksearch=feather&newvalues=1&newstyle=single&newcurrentrecord=5>; <http://www.thecityreview.com/s02srib.html>). How do the designs of the boxes communicate the importance or sacredness of the objects within? Do you think the symbols are protective?
6. Brainstorm ideas for symbols the students could use on their own treasure boxes. Discuss both abstract and figurative designs which could include animals, faces, bugs, organic designs and geometric patterns. Have the students sketch some ideas for their personal symbol layout. Have students share their ideas with each other midway into the brainstorming process.
7. Students will create their own treasure boxes using their personal designs using a faux repoussé process incorporating ink and tin foil. Repoussé is a metalworking technique in which a malleable metal is ornamented or shaped by hammering from the reverse side to create a design in low relief.
 - Distribute cardboard boxes.
 - Have students transfer their drawn symbols to cardboard and cut out.
 - Attach these symbols to the cardboard box with hot glue. Encourage students to consider the arrangement and design of the symbols. The hot glue can also be used to create intentional or random patterns by “drawing” with it on the box.
 - Cover the box with tin foil. Be “generous” around the raised sections to avoid the foil tearing.
 - Cover the foil with a generous amount in ink and let dry.
 - Burnish the inked plate to reveal as much of the foil as desired.
 - An alternative to ink is hand coloring with sharpie markers.
 - Students can continue to elaborate on their designs with pens, different colors of paper, ornaments such as beads or sequins, markers, colored pencils, acrylic paint, magazine clippings, or found objects (such as leaves).

Discussing Student Work / Assessment

1. Have the students display their completed treasure boxes and then group in pairs. Groups should discuss what symbols they chose for their box and why.
2. Students should answer orally or in written form some questions about the form, content and purpose of their treasure box design.
 - Choose 2 or 3 symbols used on the box and explain specifically what they mean to you.
 - Is there an overall theme or is each symbol independent of the others?
 - If they used color what does it mean?
 - Are the symbols protective? Do they represent what will be stored in the box? Do they have special meaning to the creator/owner?
 - What will the student store in their treasure box?

Students should also discuss their partners work. What does the design tell us about the artist/owner? How do they know this? What do they like about the treasure box? Why?

Standards and 21st Century Skills

All lessons created using the University Art Museum's Permanent Collection align with the four Colorado Model Content Standards for Visual Art:

1. Observe and Learn to **Comprehend**
2. Envision and Critique to **Reflect**
3. Invent and Discover to **Create**
4. Relate and Connect to **Transfer**

Since lessons are written so that teachers can modify them for a variety of grade levels and learning objectives they are not aligned to grade level expectations. Lessons are aligned to Prepared Graduate Competencies. PGCs addressed in this lesson include:

--Analyze, interpret, and make meaning of art and design critically using oral and written discourse

--Explain, demonstrate, and interpret a range of purposes of art and design, recognizing that the making and study of art and design can be approached from a variety of viewpoints, intelligences, and perspectives

--Recognize, interpret, and validate that the creative process builds on the development of ideas through a process of inquiry, discovery, and research

--Create works of art that articulate more sophisticated ideas, feelings, emotions, and points of view about art and design through an expanded use of media and technologies

--Recognize, compare, and affirm that the making and study of art and design can be approached from a variety of viewpoints, intelligences, and perspectives

--Critique personal work and the work of others with informed criteria

--Identify, compare, and interpret works of art derived from historical and cultural settings, time periods, and cultural contexts

Extensions

1. Students can create attachments to hang their treasure boxes for safe-keeping. They should also create latches so the boxes don't fall open.

2. Research about the process of wood carving. Advanced students could attempt to create a small wood carving.

3. **Repoussé** is a metalworking technique in which a malleable metal is ornamented or shaped by hammering from the reverse side to create a design in low relief. **Chasing** is the opposite technique to repoussé, and the two are used in conjunction to create a finished piece. It is also known as **embossing**. Research these processes and have students create art employing them.

4. Talk about the similarity between Maori woodcarving and the process of Maori tattooing (moko). Like the wood, tattoos are created by gouging the flesh.

Relevance and Application:

--Rituals in creating cultural art solidify the foundational understanding of the identity and purpose of various cultures within society.

--Critique fluency encourages and develops higher-order thinking that builds a deeper awareness of details in the surrounding environment.

--Works of art reflect the artist's ideas, interests, and background.

--Characteristics and expressive features of art and design provide comparisons and correlations to other global societies and their views of characteristics, expressions, and features of art and design.

--A work of art allows the artist to communicate intended meaning to the viewer and evokes new meaning through the viewer's perspective.

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