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Museum perceptions and productions: American migrations of a Maori *hei-tiki*

Sally Gregory Kohlstedt

University of Minnesota, United States

Museum objects have biographies shaped by their material, geographical and cultural origins, their initial intended purpose, and the ways in which they are valued and interpreted by curators and public audiences. Often one object becomes highly symbolic of a particular group even as its presentation over time reflects changing perceptions of the culture as well as the individual object. A Maori *hei-tiki* – a small but distinctive greenstone pendant – collected by Charles Wilkes on his United States Exploring Expedition in 1840 provides insight into changing museum practices, museum networks of exchange, the impact of professionalizing expertise in ethnology and anthropology since the late nineteenth century, shifting public interests and expectations, and, indeed, the unanticipated ways in which museum objects find their way into exhibition, in this case at the Smithsonian Institution. The material resilience and embedded historicity of the *hei-tiki* remain as a counterbalance to its versatility as an object useful in multiple stories over nearly two centuries.

The very materiality of museum objects has made them useful tools to identify current themes in the history of science including cultural perceptions and global mobility. Acquisition patterns and museum networks relocated not only natural specimens but also human productions in increasing numbers through the nineteenth century. Those substantive artifacts transformed in their meaning as they moved through time and space, crossing boundaries and taking on new meanings provided by owners, exhibitors, transient observers, commercial traders and museum curators, among others.¹ The juxtaposition of their material stability alongside interpretative flexibility

and geographical mobility makes them useful in understanding the reformulation of knowledge frameworks and social meanings in ways that inevitably also reflect authority and status.² This essay follows just one such object that came into this historian's scholarly view while doing research in large, handwritten ledger books that included correspondence between James Hector, director of the Colonial Museum (today the Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongawera) in Wellington and Spencer F. Baird, director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum (now the National Museum of Natural History) in Washington, D.C., in the early-1880s.³

Over the course of more than a hundred and fifty years a small greenstone pendant, a *hei-tiki*, made the long passage across the Pacific Ocean three times and moved from one museum setting to another in Washington, D.C. That transit revealed changing ideas about the Maori who shaped it and interpretative contexts in the emerging field of anthropology. Following what some scholars suggest is the life story or biography of an object demonstrates its fundamental integrity even as it absorbs, reflects and occasionally deflects both expert interpretation and audience response.⁴

The Hector-Baird correspondence revealed that a *hei-tiki* and a few other Maori objects owned by the Smithsonian Institution had, by curious chance, been taken back to New

Social Studies of Science, 1989, 19: 387–420. Specimens at the Museum of Comparative Zoology proved adaptable and yet robust enough to translate among viewpoints, becoming border objects that could cross between amateur and professional, paleontologist and biologist, administrators and public visitors; the fruitful observation used here is the emphasis on interpretative flexibility of each particular object.

² Bruno Latour's *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) comments on the transportability and translation of materials and ideas. Current museum studies scholarship also reflects a changing perspective on objects and particularly marks the importance of attending to their specific materiality. See, for example work in Dudley S, ed. *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. London: Routledge, 2012, especially her introduction and chapter 'Encountering a Chinese Horse: Engaging with the Thingness of Things', pp. 1–15.

³ Spencer F. Baird to James Hector, May 26, 1854. An additional note on this letter indicates that the items were returned on January 10, 1882. MU 94, New Zealand Museum/Te Papa Tongarewa Archives (hereafter TPTA).

⁴ The biographical framing of a scientific object suggests it has, in fact, a 'life' as it moves through time and space, framed by changing location and interpretation of those who view and handle it. On these matters see essays in Sandra H. Dudley, et al., *Narrating Objects, Collecting Stories* (London: Routledge, 2012); Lorraine Daston, ed., *The Scientific Life of Objects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and her edited volume *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004); also see Neil MacGregor's *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London: British Museum, 2011; now digitized at http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a_history_of_the_world.aspx).

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Corresponding author: Kohlstedt, S.G. (sgk@umn.edu).

¹ The language distinction between specimens (usually associated with natural history objects) and artifacts (material objects shaped by humans) emerged in the nineteenth century but only became common in the twentieth century; before that both things made by people and elements extant in nature were typically discussed in common as objects or simply specimens. Path breaking work on the multiple meanings of objects as they cross boundaries is in Susan Leigh Starr and James R. Griesemer in "Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–39",

Zealand. Originally acquired from its Maori owners in 1840, the *hei-tiki* had been loaned by the Smithsonian to New Zealand commissioners assigned to build their national display at the international Centennial Exposition held in Philadelphia in 1876. Subsequent research into the provenance of this small but culturally representative object led back to the records of a voluntary organization, the National Institution for the Promotion of Science in Washington, D.C. and from there to United States Exploring Expedition, 1838–1842. The nearly four-year expedition marked the emergence of the young nation's global, political and economic interests. The inclusion of naturalists ready to participate in the international exchange of new knowledge suggested their intellectual aspirations and provided American citizens a perspective on a world that was increasingly accessible. Following just this one object, a small stone figure shaped by a Maori craftsman, over time indicates the collecting incentive in the mid-nineteenth century, the changing role and perspectives of those shaping international world fairs and museum displays, and the layered meanings such an object might acquire, sometimes for a relatively short term, once removed from its initial site.

Historians and museum studies scholars are engaged in active discussions about the contingent meanings of objects over time and through the perceptions of different viewers.⁵ In the mood of the late twentieth century, those who studied museums could be harshly critical and, emphasizing that museums were neither static nor staid, point particularly to the ways that anthropological exhibits had shaped attitudes about culture and race that needed no longer were appropriate. They offered an important reminder that research museums, in particular, use objects to generate explanations, sometimes theories, about an artifact's material origins, the people who produced it, and what curators hoped to demonstrate about current professional knowledge, but too often without making racial, class, gender and other assumptions explicit. This essay acknowledges the importance of those insights even as it remains historical in its orientation by understanding these interpretations in their own contextual frameworks.

This one object, a jade pendant *hei-tiki*, proved to be unusually well-traveled, making three trips across the Pacific Ocean in order to be a representation of New Zealand and its Maori people. It reflects the very active acquisition and displacement of natural history specimens and cultural artifacts around the world, particularly in-

tense during the nineteenth century. But, focusing on how this particular object was placed and displaced also reveals shifting aspirations for objectivity and the essential subjectivity that motivated museum practices and cultural reproduction over time. It shows quite dramatically the shift when museums turned from curiosities to what were deemed representative objects in nature and culture as curators made claims about authenticity and the importance of integrated knowledge.

The *hei-tiki* that found itself in transit was skillfully crafted from jade found exclusively on the South Island of New Zealand. It was already becoming one of the iconic representatives of New Zealand when it was acquired from its owner in 1840. It retained its salience because it could be readily identified by western travelers acquiring distinctive markers of indigenous peoples they encountered. Like others of its type, the *hei-tiki* acquired by Wilkes was a hand carved neck pendant, made of nephrite, a dark greenstone found exclusively on the west coast of New Zealand's South Island. Sometimes called New Zealand jade and identified by Maori as *pounamu*, the stone typically has a wonderfully deep, sometimes translucent and often variegated color. A product of the active volcanos that had shaped the isolated islands, this distinctive greenstone is found concentrated in streams and rivers emptying westward into the Tasman Sea and had by the eighteenth century become a major trade item of considerable value in the barter culture among the Maori throughout the islands before Europeans arrived (Figure 1). Made into tools and various decorative objects, *pounamu* was strong and could be sharpened to become part of an adze cutting tool. To create the pendant, an expert craftsman had incised detailed features into the hard rock, polished the stone to a high sheen, and added distinguishing features. Maori carving found in stone and wood was impressive, distinctive and often commented upon by those exploring the South Seas in the nineteenth century. Visitors to New Zealand commented particularly on the high quality of the ubiquitous carved faces and figures on implements, ornaments and lintels of boats, homes and meeting houses.

The shape and elements of the two *hei-tikis* acquired by Wilkes were characteristic of others produced in the early nineteenth century (Figure 2). They had a human-like face about one-third the size of the entire figure, arms and legs curved out to the sides with incised spaces, an exaggerated mouth and a fierce look (familiar to those who follow rugby because protruding tongues are part of the Haka ritual presented at the start of each game involving the New Zealand All Blacks and other Polynesian teams).⁶ Those acquired by Wilkes had red sealing wax for one or both eyes indicating that there was already considerable exchange between the Pakeha (non-Maori) who lived on or visited the island and the Maori who had shaped and worn these pendants.⁷

⁵ There is a rich literature on museum history and a useful starting point are the historiographical essays in 'Focus: Museums and the History of Science', in *Isis*, 2005, 95: 559–608. Inspired by the evocative, theoretical writings of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, museum studies in the 1990s looked closely at the order imposed on things in the museum and on the regulation of those who visited to suggest that highly visible museums were, in some measure, disciplining both. The analysis was penetrating and observations often cogent as a corrective to simple descriptive historical accounts of museums then in place. Among the most influential were Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995) and, more stridently, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992). The essays in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) suggest some of the range of opinions, particularly in relationship to ethnographic exhibits and the exoticizing of peoples in museum settings; particularly insightful is Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 'Objects of Ethnography', pp. 386–443. An overview is found in Randolph Starn, 'A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies', *American Historical Review*, 2005, 110: 68–98.

⁶ There is considerable discussion of the humanoid representation in the *hei-tiki*. One medical observer going so far as to suggest that the fascination with abnormalities may have inspired the particulars; see Charles O. Bechtol, 'Hei-tiki', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 1967, 76: 445–452.

⁷ The term Pakeha, still prevalent today, is used to note a person of British or European descent as opposed to Maori.

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