

Feathers and flax

A *kahu kiwi* on exhibition

Jay Miller, Meredith Blake and Xanthe Jujnovich

From November 2012 to February 2013 an exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne featured artefacts from the Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture.¹ Ninety pieces from the Leonhard Adam Collection were complemented by a small display of works by contemporary Samoan artist Michel Tuffery.

A highlight of the exhibition was an important finger-woven *kahu kiwi* or feather cloak, which has three hand-woven *tāniko* border panels.² The exhibition gave visitors a rare opportunity to see this fragile and remarkable cloak. In this article we report on research to date regarding the acquisition of the cloak for the university's collection, briefly describe the characteristics

of the cloak and discuss some of the issues in displaying such a garment. In our research we focused on four questions: how had the cloak arrived in the Leonhard Adam Collection, how had it survived in relatively good condition, what is its significance, and what more could we learn about the craft techniques used?



Artist unknown (Māori people, New Zealand),
Kahu kiwi (cloak) with *tāniko* borders,
c. 1910–50, kiwi feathers, woven plant fibre
(*Phormium tenax*), natural or commercial
dye, 121 × 156 cm. Accession no. 1960.1318,
acquired 1954, the Leonhard Adam Collection
of International Indigenous Culture,
University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Dr Adam buys a cloak

Many museums around the world hold ethnographic collections that were acquired with little accompanying documentation or information on provenance. This is a source of frustration to researchers, collection managers and curators.³ Fortunately, Leonhard Adam made some effort to document his acquisitions and we know when he acquired the kahu kiwi. Adam's diary reveals that on 26 August 1954 he 'Bought from Mrs A.C. Dawson, 235 Lonsdale Street ... (1) A maori feather cloak, from Kiwi feathers, with woven border in the taniko technique. In cedar wood glass case'. Adam also notes some other purchases made on the same day from Mrs Dawson: a Māori weapon, called a *taiaha* and made of wood, and several other Māori items. He reports that the whole lot, including a cedar and glass case, cost £25.⁴

Discovery of the diary entry eliminates the possibility that Adam might have acquired the cloak from a public institution, or directly from a Māori family or community. The mention of a glass case partly explains the relatively stable condition of the cloak, in particular the *tāniko* woven borders. If a private collector or owner had displayed the cloak in such a glass case, this implies some care and protection over the years. Cedar wood

also has natural insect-repellent properties. Sadly, at this late date and without access to Mrs Dawson's records, we may never know exactly how the cloak got to Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, Australia. One possibility is that the cloak and other objects had arrived in Australia as a gift. Such significant garments, normally worn by chiefs and other people of high status, were sometimes presented either singly or in a group to dignitaries such as visiting royalty, a governor or an ambassador.⁵

The diary entry prompted us to check whether the other artefacts that Dr Adam bought from Mrs Dawson are still present in the collection. We are pleased to report that all were successfully matched up. Indeed the *taiaha* was exhibited at the Potter alongside the kahu kiwi.

Dr Adam the collector

Dr Leonhard Adam was a research scholar (1943–47), lecturer (1947–56) and part-time curator of the ethnological collection (1958–60) at the University of Melbourne.⁶ He developed the collection primarily as a teaching and research resource encompassing a variety of different types of objects from many different cultures. At the same time he amassed a collection of works to offer to international institutions and local

collectors willing to exchange. Adam collected objects for their physical characteristics and artistic skill, and as anthropological evidence, but this approach to acquisition did not always include recording the associated stories or meanings of objects.

In his seminal work *Primitive art*,⁷ Adam argued for so-called 'primitive art' to be discussed in the same terms as 'European art'. He challenged the distinction between 'fine' art and what was then defined as 'minor' art: applied, decorative, industrial or commercial art. He studied closely the forms, decorative designs and skill levels displayed in art from indigenous cultures in order to challenge the prevailing Eurocentric approach to art theory.

The design, meaning and cosmology of kahu kiwi

We were fortunate to be able to call on the experience and skills of Dr Maureen Lander, weaver, contemporary artist and former academic based in Auckland, who provided us with help and advice and visited the Potter to view the cloak before it went on display. We also consulted archival material, catalogues from other museums and academic theses to help us contextualise the kahu kiwi and to find some clues to the origins of the makers of such

cloaks. From the British Museum we learnt that at the time of Captain Cook's voyages (1768–70, 1773 and 1777) about 40 cloaks were collected from New Zealand. Few of these have any trace of feathers.⁸ Archaeological remains of feather cloaks from parts of the South Island such as Lake Houroko and Strath Taieri show early 17th-century use of *kaka*, *kakapo* (night parrot) and *moa* feathers.⁹ It is therefore possible that people wore kiwi and other feather cloaks in the colder, mountainous or more remote parts of New Zealand, which were not visited by early coastal explorers such as Cook.

By the late 19th century, kahu kiwi had replaced cloaks made from the skin of the New Zealand native dog (known as a *kuri* and now extinct) as the most prestigious garment worn by chiefs. The five types of kiwi bird in New Zealand differ in rarity, size, colour and origins (from either the North or South Island).¹⁰ We studied images of the birds and their feathers and believe the Leonhard Adam cloak contains feathers from the Southern Brown Kiwi or the Okarito Kiwi, but this is yet to be confirmed. Even DNA testing does not provide an answer on provenance, as feathers were widely traded and presented as gifts.¹¹

Some kiwi cloaks are constructed by sewing together whole kiwi skins, but the more common method is to weave a *muka* (flax fibre) cloak and securely attach the feathers to the *whenu* (warp strands) in bunches of between three and five feathers, using a weft-twining technique.¹² This is the method used for the university's kahu kiwi. This particular cloak could perhaps have belonged to a woman, as the weaver has cleverly built in darts so that the cloak could drape closely around a body (or two if the wearer were holding a child in her arms). Māori women guides in Rotorua often wore such cloaks, but we cannot be absolutely certain about the gender of the wearer of the university's kahu kiwi.¹³

Using kiwi feathers for cloaks is not an ancient tradition in Māori culture.¹⁴ The Māori people originated in eastern Polynesia, arriving in New Zealand in several waves of canoe voyages some time before 1300 CE. As mentioned above, red feathers from the underwing of the *kaka* were traditionally used to adorn the cloaks of chiefs. Kiwi feather cloaks began to appear as high-status items in the mid- to late 19th century, gaining prominence in the early to mid-20th century.

The meanings of feathers have an ancient tradition in Māori cosmology.





Jay Miller, Meredith Blake and Xanthe Jujnovich, 'Feathers and flax'

Birds are associated with ancestors and death. Physically, birds inhabit the world between earth and the heavens, where the spirit goes after death. Feather cloaks carry *wairua* or the spirit of the birds. If Māori people want to bring to life an object such as a carving, *waka* (war canoe) or item of personal adornment, one way to do this is to attach feathers, because when the wind stirs the feathers they evoke breathing and life.¹⁵ The Māori word for feather is *hau* or *hou*, which can be interpreted as wind, breath, the vitality of man and the vital essence of the land.¹⁶ Weavers and communities often stored the feathers they had gathered or traded in treasure boxes or feather boxes known as *papahou*; the word includes the term *hou*. Typically these were tail feathers used for head adornment, taken from birds such as the gannet (the *huia*, now extinct).

People also wore cloaks at significant events such as deaths and marriages. Another prestigious form of Māori cloak is the *kaitaka*, finely woven using superior varieties of muka with tāniko borders and a plain surface with no feather or tag attachments. They were among the cloaks collected during Cook's three voyages. Perhaps most widely known is a *kaitaka* from the first voyage, featured in the 1773 portrait



of Joseph Banks by the American painter Benjamin West.¹⁷ Banks is wearing the *kaitaka* and pointing to its tāniko border. People seldom make such large, finely woven *kaitaka* today, although modern variations of traditional *kakahu* (cloaks), *korowai* (tagged cloaks) and *kahu huruhuru* (feather cloaks) are still made and worn for important events.

Māori anthropologist Dr Sidney Moko Mead notes that people sometimes used cloaks to blanket a coffin during the period between death and burial.¹⁸ The feathers on the cloak symbolised the space between earthly life and the spirit

realm. Some *kahu kiwi* were also buried with chiefs or their family members. Nowadays however cloaks are considered too rare and valuable for this and instead are passed on through the generations. The cloaks are used at important ceremonies, such as university graduations.

High-status cloaks were usually named and were worn over or across one or both shoulders by chiefs or people of high birth. During her visit to New Zealand in 1953–54, Queen Elizabeth II was presented with a small but very important *kahu kiwi* which, although somewhat patched and old, conveyed a great deal of

mana (a term for power used in many Pacific countries). We can see by this gift just how significant kahu kiwi are.

The difficulties of dating

By searching in New Zealand collections for photographs and other images of cloaks, we found that examples similar to the university's kahu kiwi were mostly produced around 1935. But without more detailed information about the cloak's provenance, we cannot date the cloak exactly. Dr Lander advised that commercial dye may have been used on the *tāniko* borders of our cloak. The relatively good condition of the border panels and the even coverage of the black dye (illustrated opposite) support this theory and are consistent with a 20th-century origin. Older, similar cloaks in other collections have not stood the test of time, the traditional black *paru* (mud dye) tending to fade or flake away.

Preparation for exhibition

Challenges to address when planning the exhibition and display of a garment like the kahu kiwi include the overall physical nature of the cloak, the stability of the hand-woven flax, the attachment of the hundreds of kiwi feathers and the nature of the dyes used. We also needed to devise

and construct a suitable hanging system that would protect a cloak of these dimensions. Dr Lander was very helpful in answering questions about exhibiting the cloak and confirmed that the planned form of display, against a wall in an acrylic case, would be respectful.

The University of Melbourne has expended much care on the cloak over the last decade. As a result it is in a good, stable condition. The garment had not been exposed for any length of time previously and it was successfully stabilised and treated in 2004 by conservator Holly Jones-Amin of the university's Centre for Cultural Material Conservation (CCMC), with assistance from students.¹⁹ That treatment included removing carpet beetle larvae, skin and eggs; re-attaching loose feathers; brush-vacuuming the back of the cloak and rehousing it in a customised box for storage and transport. This last step ensured that another challenge, that of transporting the cloak, ideally carried flat, could be managed without too much difficulty. The cloak is normally stored at an offsite, climate-controlled facility, as it is not easily accommodated in the Potter store on the Parkville campus.

In preparation for the 2012 exhibition we moved the cloak to

the CCMC, where conservators sewed a removable calico pocket along the top inner edge of the weaving, so that we could hang the cloak from a batten secured to the wall. We commissioned a customised acrylic cover to fit over the cloak once it was in place.

Conclusion

Originally our collection catalogue had recorded the cloak as dating from any time between the late 19th century and 1950. We were able to narrow this down slightly: indications are that this cloak was designed and created between 1910 and 1950. But our research revealed that even specialists are unable to say definitively when the university's kahu kiwi was made.

Ideally in future exhibitions we will be able to reveal both sides of the garment by displaying it on a freestanding support. Modern weavers greatly appreciate being able to see how weavers of the past have constructed their textiles.

This cloak, through its design, materials and the way it has been made, serves to communicate the status and importance of the wearer. The University of Melbourne is fortunate to hold such an excellent example of a kahu kiwi in its collections.

Jay Miller is assistant collections manager at the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne. Xanthe Jujnovich is curator of academic programs at the Potter and Meredith Blake is manager of the Victorian Collections Digitisation Project at Museums Australia (Victoria).

Acknowledgements

All information and understandings have been handed down and learnt from *tangata whenua o Aotearoa*, makers and keepers of this knowledge, and are provided here for the benefit of research into the precious kahu kiwi held in the Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture at the University of Melbourne.

Dr Maureen Lander, a Māori artist, retired academic, and highly regarded weaver of flax and other materials, provided invaluable assistance in examining and discussing the possible origins of the university's kahu kiwi. Dr Lander also liaised with and referred us to other experts: Hokimate Harwood (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa), Toi te Rito Maihi and Margery Blackman. We also thank the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation for its assistance.

acquisitions in the chronological order. Also process & invoices. Vol. II, commencing 1 May 1953. The Leonard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

- 5 Such gifts were not always in pristine condition.
- 6 Greg Dening, 'Adam, Leonhard (1891–1960)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 13, Melbourne University Press, 1993.
- 7 First published 1940; revised and republished several times until 1963.
- 8 British Museum, *Explore highlights: Cloak of kiwi feathers* (kahu kiwi), www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/c/cloak_of_kiwi_feathers_kahu_k.aspx, accessed 19 September 2013.
- 9 D.R. Simmons, 'A note on the Lake Hauroko burial', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, vol. 76, no. 3, 1967, pp. 367–8.
- 10 New Zealand Department of Conservation, *Native animals: Kiwi*, www.doc.govt.nz/kiwi, accessed 30 May 2013.
- 11 K. Hartnup, L. Huynen, R. Te Kanawa, et al., 'Ancient DNA recovers the origins of Māori feather cloaks', *Molecular Biology and Evolution*, vol. 28, issue 10, 2011, pp. 2741–50.
- 12 The New Zealand 'flax' plant *harakeke* (*Phormium tenax*) was the Māori people's main material for making textiles. Its fibre, *muka*, was extracted from the leaves. Makers use the same methods today, although garments are for prestige or ceremonial use. Makers harvest the outer leaves, preferably in the morning, and cut them at an angle so that water cannot run into the stems and rot the centre. Unused material is returned to mulch the plants. Flax planting, gathering, treatment and crafting are guided by long-held protocols. As the growing plant represents genealogy and family, these life forces continue in the woven cloak. People recite a *karakia* (prayer) when harvesting *harakeke*, acknowledging the preservation of nature, ancestry and the life force in the plant, all of which are embodied in the woven garment:

*Hutia te rito o te barakeke,
Kei wbea te korimako e koo?
Ka rere ki uta, ka rere ki tai.
Kii mai koe ki au,
he aba te mea nui i te ao?
Maaku e kii atu,
He tangata, he tangata, he tangata!*
If you pluck out the centre shoot of the flax,
Where will the bellbird sing?
It will fly inland, it will fly seawards.
If you ask me, What is the most important thing in the world?
I will reply,
People, people, people!
(J. Metge, 'Te rito o te barakeke: Conceptions of the *wbaanau*', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, vol. 99, no. 1, 1990, pp. 55–92.)

- 13 Dr Maureen Lander, conversation at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, 19 October 2012.
- 14 In the early 20th century kiwi feathers came to predominate cloak weaving. Māori guides such as Makareti (known as Maggie Papakura) made kiwi feather cloaks and wore them while showing tour groups around Rotorua. Kahu kiwi were also presented to British royalty and other dignitaries and gained popularity as high-status cloaks during the 20th century.
- 15 Dr Maureen Lander.
- 16 *Tē aka Māori-English, English-Māori dictionary and index*, Longman/Pearson Education New Zealand, 2005, online version, www.maoridictionary.co.nz/maori-dictionary.cfm.
- 17 Now in the collection of the Lincolnshire County Council, Usher Gallery, Lincoln, UK.
- 18 Sydney Moko Mead, *Traditional Maori clothing: A study of technological and functional change*, Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1969, pp. 208–11.
- 19 Holly Jones-Amin (Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne), Treatment report on the kahu kiwi (accession no. 1960.1318, 2004–05) held at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.

1 The exhibition was curated by Joanna Bosse (exhibitions curator at the Ian Potter Museum of Art), with additional research carried out by Potter colleagues Jay Miller, Xanthe Jujnovich and Meredith Blake.

2 *Tāniko* (or *taaniko*) describes a form of hand weaving resulting in complex geometric patterns. Weavers sometimes used tāniko to identify themselves to their contemporaries, or to identify the tribal or regional origins of a cloak.

3 Museum professionals acquiring such works for collections today gather as much information as possible on the maker, provenance, materials, symbolism and meanings of the artefact.

4 Leonhard Adam, *Diary: Entry of all*