



Part of the Te Tuhi display.

Pearl and pounamu, feather and fibre

14.01.2004 - LINDA HERRICK talks to the curator of a touring collection of jewellery and body adornment from the Pacific region, which arrives in Auckland this week

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A delicate shell necklace picked up in Tonga by a member of Captain Cook's crew lives on as a long-distance traveller. Cook's man took the necklace home to England more than 200 years ago, but now it has come back to this side of the world, as part of the Pacific collection at Te Papa in Wellington.

Its travelling days are not over yet. The necklace is part of a touring collection of jewellery and body adornment from the Pacific region which started out at Te Papa in 2001 and arrives at Te Tuhi in Pakuranga this week.

Jewelled, put together by then-Te Papa Curator Pacific Janet Davidson, is a survey of the region's traditions of body adornment and a contemporary homage to those styles by some leading New Zealand artists, including Alan Preston, Chris Charteris, Niki Hastings-McFall and Sofia Tekela-Smith.

The show started as a low-key affair but became so popular during its five-month run at Te Papa that the decision was made to share it. It has been a fitting sign-off for Davidson, whose career includes a post as the E. Earle Vaile Archaeologist at Auckland Museum and honorary lecturer at Otago University and who has been involved in digs across the Pacific. Now retired, she lives in the Marlborough Sounds.

"Jewelled was my swansong at Te Papa," she says. "It was something I had wanted to do for a long time because jewellery, or parts of jewellery, are things that archaeologists always find at sites."

Davidson saw the exhibition as a chance to show off some of Te Papa's fine collection of fibre and feather artefacts, items which often don't survive in archaeological sites because they are subject to decay.

For that reason, some pieces from Te Papa are not suitable for travel and won't come to Te Tuhi, while other items won't travel "for cultural reasons".

Nonetheless, Jewelled at Te Tuhi will display more than 50 examples of decoration for many parts of the body, with materials including pearl, shell, greenstone, feathers, fibres, bone and teeth.

"There are strong regional differences but also some underlying similarities,"

Davidson explains. "Everybody loves pearl as a material for adornment - you find it right through Polynesia. The Maori responded by using some kind of iridescent shell and of course they moved into pounamu.

"There is a very similar greenstone in New Caledonia, and we have a 19th-century necklace of greenstone beads from there, which is rather different from the Maori use of pounamu."

While Davidson agrees that man has created forms of adornment since time began, wearing jewellery goes beyond a desire to beautify. "Wearing the best and the most ornaments showed how important you were, what your status was."

* Sofia Tekela-Smith will tutor a jewellery-making workshop at Te Tuhi on February 14. Ph (09) 577-0138 to book.

*What: Jewelled: Adornments from across the Pacific

*Where and when: Te Tuhi, Pakuranga; January 17-February 22