

Hamish Foote

b.1964

Doctorate of Fine Arts: Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

Renaissance thought forms the foundation of Western art and science, shaping how we conceptualise and portray the world. During the 15th century, artists of the European Renaissance such as Piero della Francesca and Masaccio painted grand frescoes in the cathedrals of Italy. It's strange to think that on the other side of the world, in New Zealand, moa roamed but would soon be extinct.

Hamish Foote follows the style and technique of Renaissance painting to establish a connection with history, and to mark a contrast between his subject matter and methods we use to define it.

Foote's *Moa 2*, depicting a thigh bone from a giant moa, is part of a series of paintings about New Zealand's altered landscapes' and extinct bird life. The precise realist style employed by Foote refers to earlier times when the goal of painting was the exact replication of reality. Renaissance painters developed rules of perspective and spatial modelling to create an illusion of depth and solidity. Foote uses the technique of egg tempera painting which was practised widely prior to the introduction of oil paint. Ground pigments are mixed in a binder of egg yolk forming a bright, hard-wearing paint. As the yolk dries very quickly and is irreversible once hardened, brushstrokes are required to be exact and fine to create a sharp image.

This precise painting technique lent itself to the fine detail of zoological illustration. Before the advent of photography, zoological artists were relied on to represent weird and wonderful beasts from newly explored lands. Foote depicts a single moa bone, a tibiotarsus, that has been discovered, classified, measured and numbered, and is now housed in a museum collection as a specimen and an instrument of science. Although isolated from its skeleton, the bone is representative of the entire species, and it was from a single leg bone that the moa was first identified and described. The bones are all that remain and form the basis for a scientific hypothesis of how this gigantic bird appeared. From the inscription on this thigh bone, "353 cm", it has been extrapolated that the bird stood at over three-and-a half metres tall!

Foote has chosen totara as a support for this painting, a reference to the towering and dense forests which once covered the South Island. Using another Renaissance technique, he has coated the timber with gesso – a mixture of plaster and glue which, when hardened and sanded, forms the ideal support for tempera painting. Foote pointedly conceals the native timber and paints the support to resemble oak, a tree introduced to New Zealand by early English settlers who planted English species to make their new surroundings appear more familiar.

Foote laments the effect of colonisation on New Zealand's flora and fauna, but his painterly illusions encourage the viewer to question what we see and what we know. Extinct long before the arrival of Europeans to New Zealand, the moa is here revealed to us only through the mechanisms of art.

Christine Whybrew

¹ Alfred Sharpe (1836–1908) – 19th century New Zealand watercolorist; influenced Foote with his portrayal of New Zealand landscape.

Galleries and museums:

www.artisgallery.biz

Articles:

Worthy, T.H. (2007). 'Moa', *Te Ara – The Encyclopedia Of New Zealand* <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/TheBush/NativeBirdsAndBats/Moa/en>

Hartt, F. (1994). *A History Of Italian Renaissance Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Foote, H. (2004). *Exotica Indigenis Immixta*. Auckland: Hamish Foote.

Web search:

Piero della Francesca

Masaccio

Renaissance Art

Alfred Sharpe

