

Dennis Knight Turner

b.1924

Self-taught

Growing up in Wanganui, Dennis Knight Turner was interested in art from an early age. At school, his art education consisted of copying illustrations of English paintings from the conservative Royal Academy publications. But at the same time, he was fascinated by museums. He always headed straight for the treasures of Māori art and copied them in drawings.

Living in Wellington during the early 1940s, Turner studied commercial art, paying his tuition by retouching reproductions of paintings for a manufacturer of jigsaw puzzles. He met other artists who encouraged his interest in Māori art, including Gordon Walters and Theo Schoon.

Through Schoon, he became aware of the Māori rock drawings in the South Island, mainly in the limestone valleys of North Otago and South Canterbury. Schoon had studied these drawings for years and championed them as important works of art: he found them to be most surprising and original creations.

Contact with traditional Māori art played a vital role in the development of modern art in New Zealand. Artists such as Schoon, Walters and Turner felt that much local art of the time was terribly old-fashioned. At the art societies – almost the only place to exhibit – the paintings on offer seemed a tired version of English 19th century art: realistic landscapes, portraits and still life.

By contrast, the simple lines and expressive power of rock drawings seemed to offer an alternative to the naturalistic tradition. They showed how to reduce form, such as that of the human body, into a few essential, dramatic lines. For Turner and his friends this was liberating. But they were not alone in looking to non-Western art for inspiration. They knew about the role that African and Oceanic art had played in galvanising modern painters in Europe in the early 20th century: artists such as Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso and André Derain.

In 1951, Schoon exhibited a series of works inspired, not by Māori art, but that of Oceania. In the following year Turner followed suit. His *Boy No. 5* is a hybrid figure, derived from different cultures. The mask of the eyes and nose suggests an African mask, while the forms of the body evoke Oceanic or Aboriginal rock drawings. The earth-toned colours suggest the natural dyes used by ancient artists.

Turner left New Zealand in 1963 and settled in London, but he maintained his interest in the art of Polynesia and Oceania, researching Oceanic art at the British Museum. Later, he became preoccupied with the tiki – a form that appears across the Pacific, including Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia – and made a series of works based on it.

For thousands of years, artists have studied the art of different cultures and periods and gleaned inspiration from it. The Romans, for example, copied the ancient Greek masters, as did Renaissance artists. Today, the issue of whether an artist should borrow motifs and styles from another culture is one of fierce debate. Artists like Turner and Walters have been criticised for ‘appropriating’ Māori art and other non-Western art forms, that not being Māori, they may have no right to.

Jill Trevelyan

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Articles:

Taylor, R. (1993). 'Tiki: The Return Of Dennis Knight Turner'. *Art New Zealand*, 67, Winter, pp. 58–62.

Web search:

Aboriginal rock drawing

African art

André Derain

Hei tiki

Paul Klee

Māori rock drawing

Oceanic art

Pablo Picasso

Theo Schoon

Gordon Walters

