An Patterned History of Ta Moko
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As we have seen thus far in our course on Art History, there is almost always a deeper meaning behind a culture and its practices. Even the artifacts that were created as functional household items and later categorized as art, hold a story that explains how it came to be perceived as such. The way these histories are presented can often be an issue of great concern, since it is through these histories that we begin to understand other cultures and their art forms. However, when this process is neglected or is presented poorly, we encounter a skewed or misrepresented image.

An example of this process is seen on a website entitled “Ta Moko,” 1 which attempts to introduce the tattoo art form of the Maori culture. The website is divided in several sections, each of which discusses a different aspect of the Maori moko. The website also features photographs but these are small and minimal in quality and quantity. The page on ta moko is a part of a larger travel website called “A Traveling Minstreli.” The author of the website appears to be a man by the name of J.M. Wilson; he describes the website’s function as an informative resource “for those unable to be here with me, or those who just care to take an interest.” 2

Using this website as the basis of my argument, I would like to point out the ways in which the origins of ta moko have been neglected; as well, Wilson, the website’s author, focuses too closely on modern day interpretations without first understanding the historic foundations of this culture. This website glosses over the basics of ta moko without delving into the issues

surrounding the art form, which presents a very narrow view of the Maori culture. After discussing these shortcomings, I will present several suggestions on ways in which the website and its presentation of the subject could be improved.

Upon first encountering the website, we are presented with a single line description of what ta moko is: “Tattooing is an art form extremely common amongst Maori.” From this, Wilson proceeds to tell the story of ta moko’s origins, jumping into a haphazard explanation of “Mataora” and how this Maori figure received the gift of ta moko from his father-in-law. The difficulties with this introduction lies in the author’s lack of explanation and foundation of Maori culture; he does not spend any time explaining to the reader the history of Maori chiefs, traditions, and terminology. For a visitor who may not have a background in Maori studies, history, and geography, the introductory paragraph of the website only serves to confuse the reader. As well, Wilson, when referring to the Maori people, refers to them as “us.” This implies that he, as the author, is a member of the Maori community, which is misleading since it has been established elsewhere on his website that he is simply a traveler residing in New Zealand. By using the term “us,” he denotes a sense of false inclusion and authority on the topic.

There are two possibilities for Wilson’s lack of explanation of Maori culture. The first is that he lacks the knowledge himself. In this case, it would be reasonable to assume that the information presented on his website is simply a tourist’s understanding of ta moko, which may or may not be information that Wilson has gained simply from reading tour books. The other explanation is that he does actually have a firm knowledge of Maori culture, but because it is so familiar to him, he has skimmed over this information and it does not occur to him that other

3 Wilson, “Ta Moko: Tattooing.”
4 Wilson, “Ta Moko: Origins.”
visitors to his website may not come from the same background. Through the selective information in his introductory paragraph, Wilson portrays himself as an authority on Maori culture that lacks the scholastic research to support his little knowledge of ta moko.

Moving on from his lackluster introduction, Wilson presents a guide that briefly illustrates ways to read Maori tattoo designs. He briefly touches on the fact that moko designs have changed throughout the colonial journey but the true influence of colonization on ta moko is not explored in detail; he does not mention the European’s trade of muskets and how this vastly changed the way ta moko was viewed in a political and colonial context. Wilson then continues to mention several different symbols and patterns that are used, but the explanations provided are of his own interpretations of Maori proverbs that supposedly describe the origins of each design. His explanations and descriptions are never credited and the accuracy of his translation of these Maori proverbs is questionable. It is as if the voice of the Maori is muffled by Wilson’s own forced understanding.

In the final paragraphs, in a section entitled, “Mokos Today”, Wilson paints an incredibly conflicted debate about the modern day presence of Maori tattoos in contexts that are not founded upon Maori tradition. On one side, he generously lists examples of mokos being used in popular culture (among them, citing pop singer Robbie Williams’ choice of Maori-influenced tattoo), but on the other, he seems to shun the non-Maori who are curious about ta moko. Wilson is careful to present both sides of the argument surrounding the use of ta moko in popular culture and how it has been lifted from Maori tradition, but he does not attempt to mask his

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5 Wilson, “Ta Moko: How to Read the Markings.”
6 Cohodas, Maori Part 3: 16.
7 Wilson, “Ta Moko: Designs.”
8 Wilson, “Ta Moko: Mokos Today.”
personal voice and influence. The problem with voicing his own opinion is not that it is present, but that his opinion on the use of ta moko also sways from side to side. In this sloppy style of indecisive writing, Wilson leaves his audience confused as to what the original argument proposes. In concluding his argument (if there is one), he presents Dutch photograph Hans Neleman’s *Moko – Maori Tattoo* photo essay as the final word on the use of ta moko. As we have seen in class discussions, even Neleman’s photo essay is embroiled in controversy as to whether his use of ta moko is respectful or exploitive.\(^9\)

Turning from the subject matter to the design and layout of the website, a visitor would see the same sort of uninformed and average quality duplicated in the website’s visual aspects. There is a total of 17 images – none larger than 1.5 x 2” and none were taken by Wilson. Many are lifted from film stills and Neleman’s *Moko – Maori Tattoo* photo essay; there is even an image of designer Thierry Mugler and two of his models, sporting moko designs as a part of a fashion show. For a website that claims to be informative about Maori tattoos, there are no images presented of Maori moko designs in their original and historical contexts, such as those shown in class lectures.\(^10\)

Images aside, the website is also laid out in such a way that the reader is forced to scan a line from one side of the screen to the other. The text on Wilson’s website is arduous and difficult to read simply because of the exhaustion it places on the reader – there are no breaks and no rests. The rest of the website is obviously formatted to a pre-made template layout, which is fine if presented well, but in Wilson’s case, the chosen template is childish and juvenile – completely unfitting for a discussion on ta moko.

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Although there are faults and difficulties with Wilson’s website and presentation on ta moko, these are easily corrected. To begin, a more extensive history regarding ta moko before, after, and during colonization would provide readers with a better understanding of the contexts surrounding ta moko. Another one of Wilson’s faults lies in his lack of accreditation and references. Were he to include the source of his information, readers may be more inclined to trust the information being presented. And finally, because Wilson is a traveler and this website is merely a travel journal of sorts, the information on ta moko may be better received were he to specify that his website is simply that – a travel journal. Because of the way he has presented ta moko, he seems to have claimed himself as an authority on the subject – one who has done a poor job of giving credit to the Maori culture.

And though Wilson has attempted to provide a thorough explanation of the issues surrounding ta moko, his presentation continues to fall short. It is the lack of the original Maori voice that discredits Wilson and his website – were the website to include more information and quotes from trusted Maori sources, readers may be more comfortable discussing these issues. His seemingly authoritative narration on ta moko and other aspects of Maori culture appear to be muffled and the issues at hand are never truly engaged. It is the misleading packaging of his website as an informative website that creates these issues. A simple correction would be to market the website more obviously as a travel journal or log. In this way, Wilson’s writings on ta moko may be viewed more as a traveler’s experience in the Maori culture – instead of claiming to be an ultimate authority.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

