

Worshipping Beauty in the South Seas

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This article analyses the wave of *avant garde* art movements that arrived on our shores in the late nineteenth century and its impact on applied art and the general lifestyles of artists and patrons in New Zealand. With particular reference to Kennett Watkins' speech given at a meeting of the New Zealand Art Students' Association' in 1883, this account looks at the display of Māori objects in both public settings and in the privacy of the artist's studio. It also acknowledges the role of illustrated magazines in promoting the public profile of professional artists working in Auckland at the turn of the twentieth century. Many patrons in the elite social circles of Auckland admired artists such as Charles F. Goldie for being arbiters of taste and his beautifully decorated studio both linked him to the ways European academic artists presented themselves, while using local artifacts to connect his practice to New Zealand. The dispersal of illustrated art magazines in New Zealand became a marketing tool for artists to promote their art practice but, most of all, elevate their status as members of the social elite in urban centres.

... we hope to ... observe and record what yet remains of their ancient manners and customs, and if there be any trait, whether of the poetical, of the pathetic, or of the emotional, in their lines (which are not without sentiment), herein lies our duty and the true direction for our study ... We have made a place at least for our flower, let exotics be ever so beautiful.¹

In his inaugural speech as President of the New Zealand Art Students' Association (founded in December 1883), Kennett Watkins shared with his colleagues what he regarded to be 'the true direction for our study'. That direction involved the incorporation of aspects of New Zealand's indigenous art forms within the colonial artist's own work.

The relationships between Māori and Pākehā cultural traditions, and indeed the relationships between local and international art more generally, continue to be a pressing issue for artists working in New Zealand. With that issue in mind, this article will acknowledge the intersection of local and international impulses that manifested in New Zealand. Provincial histories are often complicated, as art movements invariably arrived in the provinces late and, in some cases, all in one moment. In reality here in New Zealand, the Academic, Aesthetic, Impressionist, Symbolist, Arts and Crafts, and Art Nouveau movements are all interconnected and enmeshed. This points to a complex integration of the establishment of *avant-garde* practices in the antipodes. The simultaneity of both local and international influences in our art acknowledges the achronological confluence of local and European art trends that is unique to provincial cultures such as New Zealand.

In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, there was a reconsideration of non-Western art traditions in Britain and the rest of Europe, which ultimately stemmed from mass colonisation in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The desire to collect 'exotic' artefacts from remote parts of the world had an enormous impact on Western art movements in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In an age of consumer capitalism, advances in manufacturing and technology, and trade expansion into new territories such as Japan and the Pacific, meant that there was heightened interest among wealthy patrons and artists to obtain 'exotic' artefacts. At the turn of the century in New Zealand, there was a new-found desire to not only display art from the Far East but also integrate Māori and Pacific art into both public and private Aesthetic spaces. Māori taonga and Pacific objects were integrated into Aesthetic designs within the home. An extravagant

example of this can be found in Alexander Horsburgh Turnbull's private residence, 'Elibank', in Wellington. Turnbull, photographed in the 1890s with his brother Robert and friend E. F. Hadfield, is seated in his living room surrounded by his collection of artefacts from ancient cultures. On the wall there are fine examples of medieval European, Chinese, Japanese, Middle Eastern, and Pacific forms of weaponry, set against a decorative wallpaper design. Turnbull's home is one of luxury in excess. Anna Petersen's research on the interiors of nineteenth-century New Zealand homes during this period confirms that Māori art featured in domestic spaces, but could also be found in public art galleries and artists' studios in New Zealand.² As early as the late 1880s, while Goldie exhibited his student works at the New Zealand Art Students' Association, Kennett Watkins decorated the gallery space with flags, nikau palms and Māori curios.³

WATKINS' NATIONAL ART SCHOOL

When analysing the patriotic fervour in Watkins's speech made in 1883, it is clear that this artist was seeking the formation of a national art school. At this time Watkins was tutor at the Campbell Free School of Art, which operated from 1878 to 1889 and was based in the Auckland Institute and Museum building (then located in Princes Street). His teaching and own practice was heavily influenced by his familiarity with the institution's extensive Māori collection. This collection comprised of artefacts collected by Gilbert Mair and the Governor of New Zealand, Sir George Grey. Grey's collection of Māori artefacts was once housed in his mansion on Kawau Island. According to Watkins, art in this country should reflect scenes and motifs specific to the region and thereby found 'nowhere else but here in New Zealand'. In his mind, elements necessary to New Zealand art were picturesque views of landscape, accurate figure drawings and the representation of indigenous Māori artefacts. Watkins suggested to his students that the depiction of historical scenes could be realised through the 'faithful portrayal of our scenery and incidents, by directing the attention of artists to the more careful and exact representation of New Zealand landscape and foliage, flowers, Maori carving.'⁴ What is most ambitious about this speech is Watkins's call for the incorporation of indigenous designs into New Zealand's art. This idea is both nationalist and informed by wider global movements, where 'exotic' or 'indigenous' objects were seen to be

sources of beauty. Instead of looking elsewhere for objects that would instil this sense of beauty in art and life, Watkins admired the simplicity of line in ancient artefacts closer to home, specifically Māori art.

Watkins expressed concern about the relentless flow of indigenous Māori artefacts exiting New Zealand for the collections of European museums in London, Berlin, Vienna, and Paris. This was a significant observation for a Pākehā artist to be communicating in the early 1880s in New Zealand. In response to this flow, Watkins suggested that the 'true direction' of art studies in New Zealand could not lead to the 'resuscitation' of Māori carving, but would aim at least to document these objects as ancient 'relics' once belonging to this locality. Watkins went on to profess: 'We appeal to you, is not our own [Māori art] worthy of a place? Have we a nationality in an art sense, or have we none? As artists or as people of taste, as New Zealanders, have we ever felt for its beauty?'⁵ By referring to the harmony of line in Māori objects, he effectively labels Māori carvings as 'art' and places their indigenous makers in the same league as artisans found elsewhere. Art historian Rebecca Rice refers to other reports made during this period suggesting it was common practice to "consider Māori products as 'art' as opposed to mere 'curiosities', conferring status upon the objects and suggesting they are a valid source for inspiration and appropriation by European artists and designers."⁶

As it happened, Watkins was not the only advocate for the establishment of a national art school and for appropriating Māori 'curios' into an artist's own work. Alfred Sharpe, a pre-eminent watercolourist and member of the Association, made a remarkable statement in response to negative criticisms of the placement of Māori carvings alongside fine art paintings at the New Zealand Art Students' Association exhibition of 1885. Writing in the *New Zealand Herald*, Sharpe argued as follows:

You remark that the exhibition has to lower itself into a sort of Maori curiosity shop and botanical garden. I would ask what decorations could be more appropriate to take off the bareness of a building never designed for an art gallery than our beautiful palms and ferns. And with regard to the Maori curios; we call them Maori works of art; and they are so in every sense of the word, and as worthy of exhibition as our own, if not more so.⁷

Obviously, both Sharpe and Watkins supported the appropriation of Māori 'art' and believed it should feature prominently in exhibition displays and in the artist's studio. Their propositions represent a confluence of European and provincial ideas, creating a quite particular context for the progress of New Zealand art at this time. Watkins, in pressing for a national art, claims that we have to call on our distinctive indigenous heritage.

Watkins art classes were conducted in amongst the collections of Māori taonga housed at Auckland Museum. Artefacts from those collections appear in historical scenes of his students, such as Samuel Stuart's *The Interior of a Maori Pa in the Olden Time*, 1885 (Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki).⁸ His influence is also prevalent in watercolour studies by his contemporary Charles Frederick Goldie. As a young fifteen-year-old art student at the time, Goldie created a series of watercolour studies incorporating Māori artefacts, one of which is *Still Life with Maori Artefacts and Dead Tui*, 1886 (private collection) [Figure 1]. These watercolours reveal early signs of promise from this young Auckland art student and Goldie was awarded a Bronze medal for his efforts at the Art Students' 1886 exhibition. At this exhibition, held at the Milne and Choyce store on Queen Street, Goldie's watercolours featured alongside works by his teacher Kennett Watkins and also Alfred Sharpe.⁹ Both Watkins and Sharpe entered history paintings that included Māori elements in their landscapes. Watkins continued to follow his own advice and produced many other history paintings incorporating Māori art. Three such examples, all of which are held in the collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, are: *The Phantom Canoe: a legend of Tarawera* (1888), *Departure of the six canoes from Rarotonga for New Zealand* (1906), and *The Legend of the Voyage to New Zealand* (1912).



Figure 1: Charles Frederick Goldie, *Still Life with Maori Artefacts and Dead Tui*, 1886 (private collection, photo courtesy of International Art Centre, Auckland).

ÉMIGRÉ ARTISTS FINDING BEAUTY IN THE SOUTH SEAS

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century a wave of international artists such as Girolamo Pieri Nerli, James McLauchlan Nairn and Petrus van der Velden, all departed Europe for the South Pacific. These professional artists would play a significant role in the progress of Australian and New Zealand art.¹⁰ In particular, a Melbourne newspaper reported its delight in discovering that two Florentine artists, Ugo Catani and Girolamo Nerli, had established a contemporary Italianate-styled studio environment at No. 5 Collins Street, Melbourne.¹¹ Setting sail from Marseilles, the two artists brought a vast collection of oil sketches by their Italianate artist-friends and continued to accumulate artefacts on their travels through Madagascar, Mauritius and the Bourbon (Réunion) Islands. The exotic artefacts collected by these artists are present within Nerli's *The Sitting*, 1889 (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery). The female subject is surrounded by 'decorative' objects specific to the Asia-Pacific region and Europe. A juxtaposition of paintings, wall hangings, a lion-skin rug, intricately patterned fabrics draped over the screen, and decorative fans from the Pacific Islands and Japan rest side-by-side on the walls of the studio. These objects, sourced from local and international cultures, are arranged in bric-à-brac fashion to create a 'harmonious' space of 'ordered disorder' that only an artist familiar with the latest Aesthetic fashions could envision. Nerli is by no means the only artist at this time interested in the islands of the South Pacific and collecting objects created by indigenous peoples that could be found there.

It is only a decade later that another émigré artist from Europe visited the South Pacific. French painter Paul Gauguin's arrival in Auckland was brief but nevertheless, much longer than he had anticipated. The artist was on his second voyage, and what was ultimately to be his final trip to Tahiti. When analysing his now controversial paintings of Polynesian life, it is clear that his depiction of an ideal 'primitive' beauty is very much influenced by his ten days spent in Auckland. Gauguin arrived onboard the *Tarawera* and was expecting to depart for his final destination on the *Richmond* only a few days later. This was not to be the case. Unfortunately his plans were delayed due to an engineering fault on the vessel's return journey from Tahiti to Auckland. Gauguin expressed his frustrations in a letter to his dear friends the Molards, in France.

... I embrace you all and am writing to you from here, that is to say Auckland, New Zealand, where I have already been for eight days and for eight days the steamer for Tahiti has been supposed to arrive but has not. And it is cold, and I am bored, and I am spending money stupidly, to no purpose.¹²

Apart from the 'cold' and miserable Auckland weather, these personal letters do not divulge any of his thoughts of what he had experienced in Auckland. However, it is known through a visitor register of Auckland Art Gallery and Free Public Library that 'Paul Gauguin, Paris' visited on 26 August 1895.¹³ This encounter with Māori art would influence his paintings for many years to come. Gauguin's *Still Life with Sunflowers and Mangoes*, 1901 (private collection) is a subject commonly associated with one of his fellow French post-impressionist painters, Vincent van Gogh, who like Gauguin was inspired by the light and colours produced by the rural landscapes of Brittany in France. What is most striking about this painting is the so-called vase holding the sunflowers. It is in fact a Kumete¹⁴, a round bowl with two supporting figures, which resided in the collections of Auckland Museum on the day of Gauguin's visit. He analysed Māori carvings and appropriated their designs in many other paintings depicting Tahitian life, such as *The Great Buddha (Le grand Bouddha)* c. 1899 (Pushkin Museum of Art, Moscow). The idol figure cradling the two young ones is reminiscent of *Pukaki, Kuwaha* (Auckland War Memorial Museum, Auckland), which Gauguin would have observed and sketched that same day in Auckland Museum.

These visits to the Auckland Art Gallery and Auckland Museum were not Gauguin's first encounter with Māori art. At the Universal Exposition, 1878 in Paris, Gauguin was entranced by a section on 'primitive art.' It consisted of a number of objects, including Pre-Colombian art as well as objects from the South Pacific. There were Tahitian tiki, clubs from the Cook Islands and a Māori waka that featured quite prominently in this international exhibition of world cultures. This ten-day stopover in Auckland is significant when looking at the work of Paul Gauguin but his appropriation of Māori art was by no means revolutionary. As discussed previously, in the 1880s Kennett Watkins had advised his students at the New Zealand Art Students' Association to carefully study the beautiful lines found in Māori art. A further irony is raised by Roger Blackley in several of his publications on Goldie—namely, that 'as Gauguin peered into museum display cases in search of an authentic tradition of Maori art, young Goldie was hard at work at the Académie Julian in Paris, preparing for his triumphant

career as New Zealand's premier painter of Māori subjects'.¹⁵ After all, it is only a few years later that Goldie would return to Auckland, bringing with him a wealth of knowledge and treasures, and ultimately beginning his career as a painter of Māori.

THE 'MAORILAND PAINTER' AND HIS TREASURE HOUSE OF ART

At the turn of the twentieth century there were remarkable advancements made in the mass production of illustrated magazines. New techniques were devised enabling photographers to take never-before-seen images of people, places and objects and make them more accessible to a wider audience. According to Roger Blackley, in his 2018 publication *Galleries of Maoriland*,

... colour printing and photomechanical reproductive techniques transformed the nature of pictorial material in circulation. The reproducibility of photographs in the mass media undoubtedly heightened Māori concerns over images and their uses, while it brought Maoriland into national and international focus.¹⁶

Charles F. Goldie was well aware of this new technology surfacing in the 1890s. As a young bohemian art student in Paris he was familiar with the power of propaganda. His *pompier* masters William-Adolphe Bouguereau and Jean-Léon Gérôme were often posing for promotional imagery in their beautifully decorated Parisian *ateliers*. These artists would publish their images in Paris and London illustrated magazines. Years before Goldie's return to Auckland in 1901 the young artist had already started to build his profile back home with the help of his father. During his time training in Paris, Goldie's father, David Goldie was Mayor of Auckland (1898-1901) and was a part of the elite social circles of Auckland. With his influential role in society, he helped his son's reputation and promoted Charles as a true academic painter. In fact, any letters sent from Paris to the Goldie family were subsequently published in the local press. One of these letters, sent from Paris to Auckland in December 1893, was published in the *New Zealand Herald*.

The young artist confessed his thoughts about his studies and settling into Parisian life.

I like the school very much, also the students who represent almost every nationality. We have only about forty students in our section of the academy at present, viz., that under Professors Bouguereau and Ferrier, but I understand in winter there will be from 100 to 150. Before commencing work direct from the model, I thought it better to make one or two drawings from the antique first. The studies made were from the 'Venus of Milo' and 'The Slave', after Michael Angelo [sic], the originals of which are in the Louvre. The professor for this month (Ferrier) complimented me on both studies.

In 1901, after returning from his studies in Paris, he began to promote his artistic practice by posing for commissioned photographs in his Auckland studio. On 24 May 1902 the *New Zealand Graphic* published a photograph of Goldie sitting in his studio, looking every inch the successful antipodean painter [Figure 2].



Figure 2: Newspaper clipping of Goldie posing in his studio with *Sorrowful Moments* resting near the artist's feet in the *New Zealand Graphic*, 24 May 1902, 1018. Cited: Goldie's scrapbook, 11, 95 (Auckland War Memorial Museum Library: MS-438).

The photograph of Goldie's studio in *New Zealand Graphic* is centred on the page with four examples of his early portraits of Māori. His slicked back hair and semi-formal attire—a bow tie, white shirt and trousers—is hardly the most appropriate set of clothes for an artist to paint in. Goldie's urbane appearance, while posing with his palette and brush, echoed the 'celebrity' images commonly found in European art magazines. Goldie's abilities as a portrait painter were recognised by high-ranking public officials and he undertook commissions from local wealthy businessmen. Goldie also found time to paint members of his family, for example the large portrait of his mother Maria Goldie (née Partington) and also one of his brothers Frank Percy Goldie. Resting at his feet in the photograph is a portrait of the artist's sister, Violet Elsie Goldie (known as Elsie), entitled *Sorrowful Moments*, c. 1900 (private collection).

The Otago Witness replicated images of Goldie's studio used in *The Graphic* (London) and beautifully describes the significance of the artist's achievements in their full-page feature article published in December 1902:

Mr C. F. Goldie in his Studio—Here we have the artist at home, surrounded by his Lares and Penates—the triumphs of his own pencil, and the free-will offerings of his friends. The artist seems to be sacrificing to the goddess Nicotine, even while he works or pretends to work, and from the glimpse thus afforded of his comfortable, even luxurious quarters, adorned with palms and ferns, and furnished with easy-chairs and rugs, we can well credit the statement which says that this is the most artistic studio south of the line.¹⁸

A series of carefully orchestrated scenes of Goldie's studio were published in periodicals. In November 1901, the *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine* published H. P. Sealy's article 'In the Studio' along with photographs of the artist sitting in profile amongst his treasures of art. One of these photographs was referred to as 'a cosy corner in the studio' [Figure 3]. Positioned at the top of the photograph, partly cropped in the upper centre, is *Divan Japonais*, a famous colour lithographic poster designed by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec [Figure 4]. During the 1890s, Lautrec was commissioned to portray café-concert scenes in Haussmann's urbanised Paris. He chose to base his designs on the simplicity of line and block colour found in Japanese ukiyo-e prints.



Figure 3: Unidentified photographer, *Charles F. Goldie in his Studio, Hobson's Buildings, 1900* (courtesy Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Goldie Family).

While studying at the Académie Julian, Goldie witnessed these kinds of café-concert scenes devised in Lautrec's *Divan Japonais* and participated in the fashionable activity of collecting the racy lithographic posters, especially those by Lautrec, as they were a new form of inexpensive art. Goldie's lithographic impression hung on the wall of his studio to remind him of the atmosphere or certain events experienced in Paris.



Figure 4: Henry Toulouse-Lautrec, *Divan Japonais*, 1892-93 (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery).

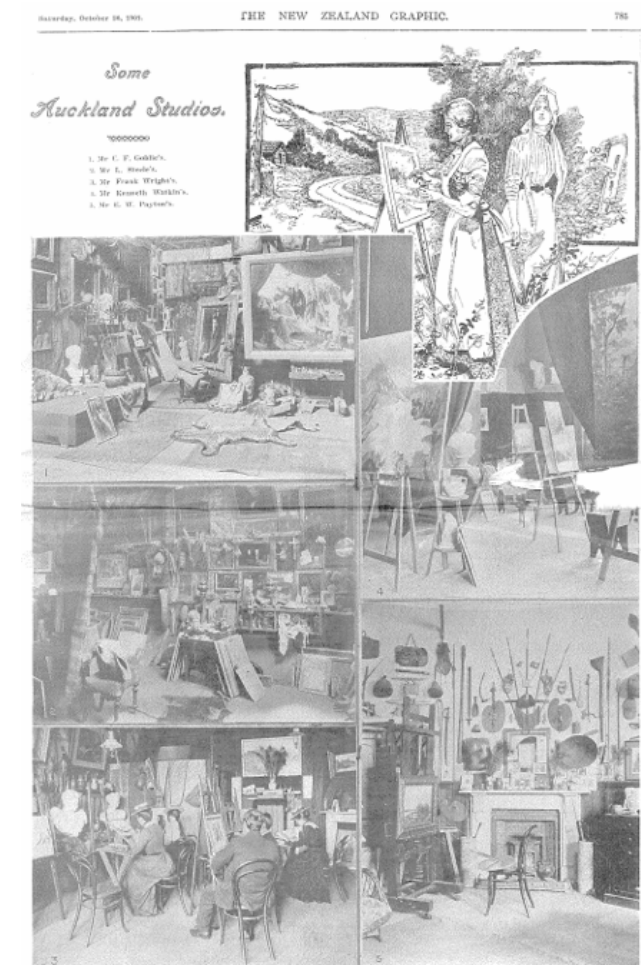
The decorative arrangement of an artist's studio was an extension of the individual and contributed to the public's perception of his moral, spiritual and creative worth. Goldie orchestrated the compositional layout of the photographs taken in his studio. It is noticeable that the artist has positioned himself in the centre with his brush and palette in front of his latest painting. His possessions include *esquisses* (sketches) on the wall (by himself and other artists of multiple nationalities), miscellaneous knick knacks, Māori curios, plaster casts, and an assortment of used and unused frames provided by local art dealer and framer, John Leech Ltd.¹⁹ The artist's involvement in crafting his public image is noticeable when analysing a chronology of his photographs in New Zealand periodicals. His strategic placement of plaster casts, fabrics, curios, and paintings is obvious through his constant alterations to details in the studio. Goldie's marketing strategy was to declare himself a true bohemian painter living in the antipodes. In the nineteenth century, the term 'bohemian' conjured a specific look to an individual—the eccentric longhaired fashionable dandy. However, over time the characteristics associated with a bohemian artist were revised. Art magazines published photographs of the esteemed painters of Europe showing them to be well-dressed, sophisticated gentlemen posing in their luxurious studios [Figure 5]. Goldie's studio atmosphere was more attuned to those of his Parisian teachers, such as Bouguereau, but with the inclusion of Māori artefacts this artist, perhaps unknowingly at times, took ideas from artistic philosophies current in Paris and London and adapted it successfully to local conditions.

There was growing curiosity from the public about what objects could be found in the private studios of those painting in Auckland at the turn of the century. This fascination with 'Old World' artists and their bohemian lifestyle is confirmed in the October 1901 issue of the *New Zealand Graphic*, where a feature article entitled 'Some Auckland Studios' published images of artists' studios [Figure 6]. Each section has a view of an artist's studio: Charles F. Goldie, Louis J. Steele, Frank Wright, Kennett Watkins and Edward W. Payton. All of these artists were collectors of an array of artefacts from the Pacific, transforming their drab brick interiors into exotic treasure houses to be revered by visitors. In illustrated periodicals such as *The Graphic* and *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine*, images of opulent studios were circulated around the world, enticing the general public and aspiring young artists to decorate the interiors of their homes, public buildings and workrooms in an Aesthetic or Orientalist fashion.



Figure 5: 'Mr Goldie at Work on The Child Christ Before the Elders, c. 1901', *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine*, 1 November 1901, 148.

Figure 6: 'Some Auckland Studios', *New Zealand Graphic*, 26 October 1901, 785.



Although these locally produced magazines were not printed in large quantities, the presence of Goldie in his studio would have caught the attention of their loyal subscribers, many of whom were the social elite. These photographs published in illustrated magazines were also replicated and distributed in the local press. By using the media to promote their reputation, artists in Auckland and elsewhere in New Zealand (predominantly urban centres such as Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin) were demonstrating their knowledge of this international phenomenon and the need to replicate the fashions of Europe in the South Seas.

By filling their studios with items specific to this region, these artists were following Kennett Watkins's desire for individuals of this country to realise the beauty of Māori and Pacific objects. These and other objects cover the studio walls from floor to ceiling. They do not normally belong together but with the 'true artist's touch' a sense of harmony is created in these opulent interiors.²⁰ Art magazines gave artists, such as Goldie, the exposure he needed to sell artworks to wealthy patrons and elevate his status as a leading professional artist in this country. By promoting the 'wilful borrowings' of artistic traditions, such as the call to worship everything beautiful from our European counterparts and decorating their studios with items of indigenous peoples to the Pacific region, this ultimately translated into something original and specific to New Zealand.

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