

Alois Riegl and the Maori

Karl Johns

It has recently been suggested that at one of the most salient spots of his entire professional career, Alois Riegl was intentionally obscure. In addition to his idiosyncratic sentences and neologisms, more than a century after he was writing, the customary changes of style certainly continue to inhibit many readers. There is no evidence however that he intended to appear ambivalent before his audience. Quite the contrary.

His *Stilfragen Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*,¹ was consistently praised as his finest work by such an insightful and critical associate as Julius Schlosser. In fact, Riegl's argument that artistic creation is a primal human quality without the material prerequisites proposed as necessary by Gottfried Semper is not terribly simple to follow on the basis of the palmettes, rosettes and colloquially named patterns which provide the subject of his book. Yet even in his own time, Riegl's thoughts reached a wider audience than much else in the field, and were taken as seriously as he hoped. This can be seen in the notices and reviews which appeared when his books were first published.²

Aside from writing many scores of book reviews in a variety of places, Riegl was an inveterate lecturer before audiences from backgrounds quite different than his later university students who ultimately brought about the revival of his ideas in the interwar period. The present lecture was held before the local anthropological-ethnological society, for whom he also reviewed books. He summarizes his arguments against what he called the materialist theory associated with Gottfried Semper as well as providing an introduction to some of the topics of the *Stilfragen*.

He once described the analysis of stylistic development as the 'backbone' of the history of art, and such examples as his essay about the Ruthenian carpets or the *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* show how he came to terms with the unavoidable abstraction and teleological conundrum this sometime involves. His interest in the spiral motif among the Maori should make it clear how he felt such analysis might explain gaps in the historical chronology but is necessarily based in empirical reality.

His observations about the spiral-motif were not without effect. One of his most perspicacious admirers, Guido Kaschnitz studied the derivation of the spiral in the Aegean region.³

¹ Berlin: Georg Siemens, 1893, English translation by Evelyn Kain, *Problems of Style. Foundations for a History of Ornament*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

² A selection of reviews was compiled by Otto Pächt in his edition of the *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie*, Vienna: Staatsdruckerei, 1927, 407, note 1.

³ Guido Kaschnitz, *Zur Herkunft der Spirale in der Ägäis*, *Festschrift für Gero von Merhart Prähistorische Zeitschrift*, vol. 34-35, 1949-1950, 193- 215, reprinted in Kaschnitz, *Kleine Schriften zur Struktur, Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. Helga von Heintze, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965, 175-197.

Alois Riegl, 'Ornament from New Zealand'⁴

It is no longer possible today to find the so-called primitive cultures in their original state. This is also true of the ornament they use to decorate their objects and weapons. Great care is therefore necessary in studying it, and this is also the reason that so many diverse opinions persist about the origins of decoration and there is so little clarity. If we could only find a cohesive uninterrupted development in an isolated spot! A methodical study might succeed in using the existing monuments incrementally to retrospectively reconstruct and better determine the logical unbroken development with the assistance of the rudimentary elements as they survive. Yet even the condition of a completely isolated chain of development does not seem to exist anywhere on earth. We must make due with cultures relatively uninfluenced and unaffected from the outside. Where such cultures do still exist, the origins of the art of decoration must then be approached in a scholarly way.

From what we know, the Maori in New Zealand are such a group whose cultural development has been relatively little influenced by intrusive outside elements. This assumption seems borne out by the fact that they did not use metals at the time they first met with Europeans. In the chronology of human culture, this could lead us to say the Maori had never developed beyond what we use the vague and very relative term to call the 'Stone Age'. Since metals had been in use in other parts of the world for many millennia, we might assume that the Maori had not had contact with the developing cultures during that entire time and that their own culture and art was in no way influenced, prodded or constrained by the others.

We might object to the idea that a culture in New Zealand could have developed autonomously for thousands of years. Is it not possible that the Maori knew of the use of metals before arriving on the islands where they were not present and then lost that knowledge? It is conceivable. It is important to consider though that these New Zealanders were on their own for a very long time, and not in touch with the cultures of eastern Asia where metals were used very heavily – to judge from the unique character of their ornament, they must have been isolated for thousands of years. Chinese culture has had a confusing effect on that of the Pacific islands much as ancient Egyptian and Assyrian culture did on early Greece and that of the Mediterranean area. This is an unfortunate factor and makes it difficult to appraise the ornament of the Sunda Islands for instance, but happily it does not enter into the study of art from New Zealand.

We were happy for these reasons that a young Austrian traveller and scholar, Andreas Reischek, has brought a collection of primarily older work by

⁴Originally published as 'Neuseeländische Ornamentik', *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien*, vol. 20, new ser, vol, 10, 1890, 84-87.

natives of New Zealand and made them accessible in the k. k. Naturhistorisches Hofmuseum. When I was able to study it with the guidance of the amiable and helpful collector himself, previous experiences had led me to be naturally sceptical so that I by no means expected that it might 'resolve any riddles'. While the Reischek collection might not be said to have led to resolving any fundamental stylistic questions of ornament, it was a pleasant surprise to find that it might contribute to such a thing in the future and deserves to be published for specialists –although none will have the same interest as those concerned with ornamental style.

Because of its very particular and contained quality, the ornament from New Zealand is immediately striking and tempts us to study it more closely. It is not a hodgepodge of indefinable marks concealing some motif borrowed from elsewhere. Maori decoration is based on a very small number of distinct motifs and an equally distinct decorative system. Both are the sign that it is an old and refined form of art.

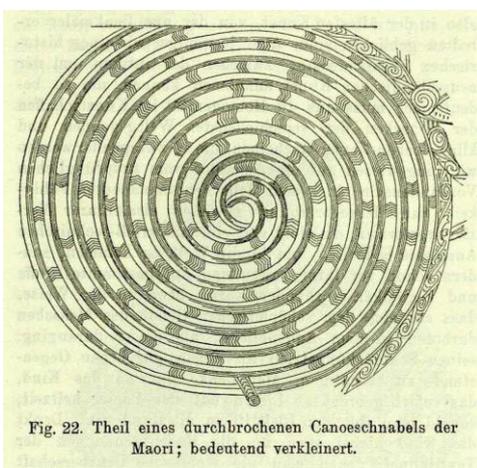


Fig. 22 Part of the perforated point of a Maori canoe, significantly reduced.



Fig. 23 Engraving from a Maori fruit bowl.

The motif which strikes us above all others is the spiral. Here the spiral is the primary motif of an art not even using metal! It appears in a great variety of ways. It can be quite variously carved with a wedge into wood or perforated in wood so as to appear like metal lattice work (Fig. 22). It might also be engraved into nut-like fruit shells (Fig. 23) so that the spiral forms a smooth band distinguishing itself from a hatched ground darkened with dirt, or else it can also be done in stone with a series of driven holes.⁵ (Fig. 24) On the other hand, the wooden ornament from New Zealand is also not lacking in certain remarkable motifs cut with a wedge – such as star-shaped configurations composed of triangular indentations.

How do these two motifs sit with the predominant opinion according to which primitive decorative forms are simple mechanical products resulting from

⁵ This is exactly the same technique which our southern Slavic peasants use to decorate their gourd-bottles and were used across the Mediterranean from Monaco in the Riviera to Cyprus.



Fig. 24 Engraving from a weight on a Maori fishing net.

Fig. 24. Gravirung an einem Netzenker der Maori.

the interaction of material and technique? Nobody can seriously believe that the wedge cut in wood (with obsidian knives!) could automatically have led to the spiral. A friend with a sense of humour thought that this theory could be salvaged by a reference to the annual rings of trees. If we accept the prevailing opinion that the spiral is the primal product of metalworking technique then how can it have such overwhelming significance and be used so widely on an island devoid of metalwork? If the Maori on New Zealand are considered autochthonous, how could they then have invented the spiral without ever having developed metalwork if this were the only way of doing so?

Yet wait a moment! Metalwork is not the only technique to have been enlisted by art theorists in explaining the purely technical origin of the spiral motif. Gottfried Semper, the author of the technical and material theory for the development of primitive decorations was far more circumspect on this point and expressed himself much more carefully than most of his followers. He considered the spiral to be far too widespread and basic a motif to have arisen so relatively late as at the time when the wire drawing process first emerged. He therefore explained it as the artistic result of the twisting of textile thread (Semper, *Der Stil*, vol. 1, 167). Yet such an explanation will not apply to the Maori. They do not use twisted threads. Their textile arts are essentially limited to straw and bast weaving.

We must for the moment be content with these two examples in demonstrating the deficiency in explaining the origins of primitive decorative forms on the basis of technical and material processes. Of course, this is not the place to explain my own views of what should be done to replace this untenable theory. Instead, we shall further pursue the particular qualities of the ornament from New Zealand and continue with the spiral since it yields many more highly interesting details.

What we see as the main motif of the wood carvings from New Zealand is a very particular system of spirals. It is a spiral that swings inward and then again outward from the innermost centre at the middle. This is the Egyptian spiral from the grave lids of the New Empire as we also know it from

Mycenaean art.⁶ In the perforated wood carvings, the spirals do not merge directly, but perhaps because of the technical difficulty involved, push off from one another. When this technical difficulty was not present, such as with the notched carving and the engraved shells, the transition occurs without any emphasis on the point of contact, and the outward and inward rolling spirals appear as one and the same rolling band. In the large fillers from the sides of canoes every single spiral includes a large number of whorls. There are less individual whorls in the border ornaments, indeed they only wind inward and are tangentially attached to one another something like the scheme of the Dipylon spirals. There are also double spirals. Spirals further occur in the stylized beard hair and naturalistic rendition of tattoos on the carved human figurines.

The spiral is a regular type of convolution in band ornament, but there are also others which are irregular and at first glance recall 'nordic' ornamentation. What further strengthens the comparison to the convoluted band decorations of early medieval European art is the fact that they are generally divided into three parts along the length. Bands divided into three parts are the most common element in late antique and early medieval band ornament. Nobody can possibly believe that there could be any historical connections of this to Mediterranean antiquity. The artistic potential of the number three has led to the tripartite division of the bands along their axis. We already find a division into a central strip with two borders in the Old Kingdom of Egypt, the earliest surviving monumental art. While we cannot assume historical connections between antiquity and the art of New Zealand, we can only be all the more impressed by the homogeneity of human artistic creation in areas of the world and climatic zones as remote from one another as possible. It is all the more compelling for us to posit a primeval capacity to produce certain types of decorative forms congenital to humanity, and that it was not required to wait for a material and technical impulse to be realized, but that the capacity existed before being applied to given materials or technologies, and presented itself when humanity pursued its urge to decorate and chose given objects. We have but to consider children who immediately begin to sketch lines when they are given paper and pencil. Could the child possibly be thinking of the woven threads of textiles which are considered to be the necessary technical prerequisite before linear ornament could be invented?

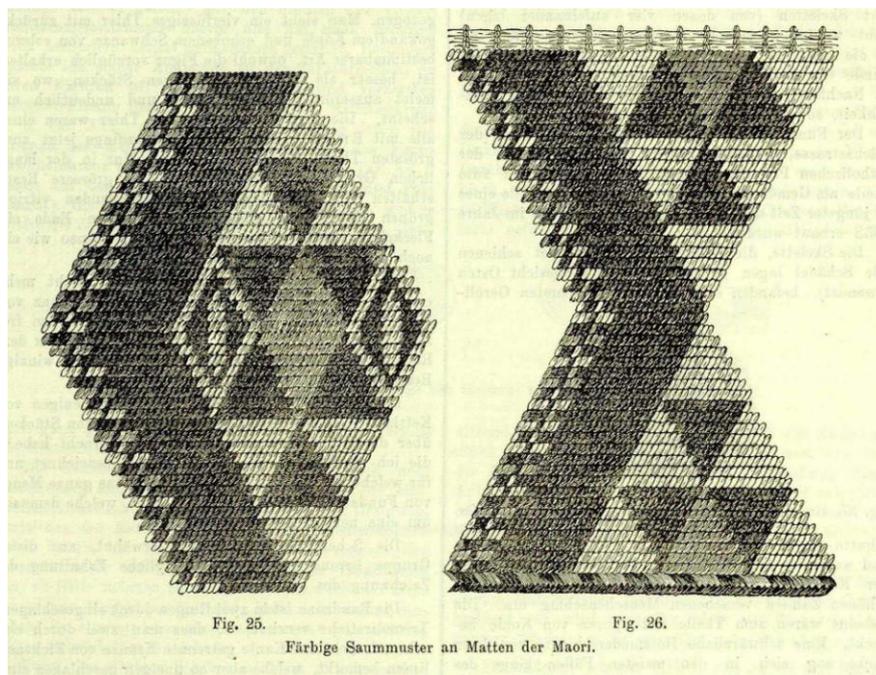
In this connection, it is also worth considering the circumstance that the spiral is the most common motif in tattoos in New Zealand. There is much to suggest that the urge to decorate was awakened and provided satisfaction to humanity far earlier than that to create spatial enclosures such as fences or to protect the naked body. For reasons of philosophy of culture, Semper himself describes the need to decorate as the most primal of all. If this is true, then

⁶The hook shaped motifs from New Zealand with hatched ground also have the same spirit as the Mycenaean examples, Heinrich Schliemann, Felix Adler and Wilhelm Dörpfeld, *Tiryns Der prähistorische Palast der Könige von Tiryns*, Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1886, plate VIe [English translation as Schliemann, *Tiryns. The Prehistoric Palace of the Kings of Tiryns. The Results of the Latest Excavations*, London: Murray, 1886].

primitive cultures could not possibly have derived their forms of decoration from technological models since the technology did not yet exist when they made their first forays into decorations. All of these difficulties disappear if we abandon the prevailing theory of the technological and material origin of ornament. There is nothing to prevent us from assuming that the Maori scored the spiral motif into their skin, possibly using a thorn from their surroundings, became fond of it, and then with indescribable difficulty used their obsidian knives to later cut it into wood.

It will probably be impossible to clarify the psychological reasons beyond any doubt why the Maori who never developed metallurgy should have chosen the spiral of all possible geometrical motifs as their favourite and most common element.

Since the techniques of braiding and weaving are generally considered to be so important for the origins of primitive ornament, it is interesting to see the role that these techniques have in the ornament of New Zealand. We have already mentioned that the Maori did not use the technique of spun thread and therefore did not have weaving. On their own they only reached the stage of braided baskets and mats. Their work includes decorated hems or fringes with triangular and lozenge patterns along the basic serrated lines universal in primitive art. (Figs 25 and 26)



Figs 25 & 26 Coloured fringe patterns from Maori mats.

The ornament of New Zealand also includes the human form. We have already referred to finding it as a seated round figure at the point of a canoe. It is noteworthy that the joint where the thigh begins is emphatically indicated by a spiral line exactly as ancient near-eastern art includes it in its depictions of animals. This seems quite remarkable to me since the stress on the joints in

ancient near-eastern animal imagery has recently been attributed to influences from textiles – since the same stylization of animals also appears in medieval Saracen silk weaving where it derived from the ancient east and technology did not play the slightest part. The art of New Zealand teaches us the same thing since the Maori never used the technique of weaving and certainly never to depict the human form. Primitive art is likely to have found that joint to seem particularly remarkable in the way it always stands out as we walk. It must have been noticeable in New Zealand when there was no clothing. To judge from their art, the Assyrians who themselves wore clothing only observed it in their depictions of animals.

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