



Oceans. Collections. Reflections.

George Nuku

Weltmuseum Wien

23 June 2022 to 31. January 2023

The Weltmuseum Wien presents the most comprehensive exhibition to date of the artist George Nuku, his first show in Austria. The installation project, entitled *Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* extends over seven rooms in the museum's main galleries. Each room deals with different themes, which all revolve around relationships and change. An installation about the Corona pandemic can be seen in the Hall of Columns of the museum. Concurrently, the artist presents the installation *Bottled Ocean 2122* in the Theseus Temple in Vienna's Volksgarten (until October 9, 2022 – see separate press release).

George Nuku is a New Zealand artist with Māori and Scottish roots. He has engaged with Māori art and culture and their presentation in different museum contexts for over thirty years. He uses different materials, mainly plastics, plexiglas and polystyrene to create his spectacular installations.

Nuku's work shows that although for decades, plastic has shaped our daily lives, human beings have not yet embraced a sustainable relationship with these materials. A deliberate and respectful use of plastics can help us see these substances not as garbage, but as a valuable, even sacred material. To emphasize his approach, the artist uses the term *pounamu* for plastic, which is the Māori term for the mineral greenstone that is of particular value in southern New Zealand and Māori culture.

George Nuku's knowledge of Māori art and culture, both from his own artistic work as well as through his many projects in ethnographic museums is a particular boon for the Weltmuseum Wien. By connecting the museum's historical collections with Nuku's contemporary works, a new perspective on the museum's own holdings from Aotearoa / New Zealand emerges.



The exhibition features historical objects from the Weltmuseum Wien with Nuku's own hand-carved artworks, which he created together over the last three months with teams of volunteers from around Vienna. In addition, loans from the Natural History Museum Vienna, the Zoological Collection of the Department of Evolutionary Biology at the University of Vienna and from the Heeresgeschichtliches Museum in Vienna are on display.

Each room presents its own theme, a world of its own. Nuku's ideas and works express the inseparability of nature and culture. The result is a journey through time and space.

The exhibition in the Weltmuseum Wien can be seen as the high point in Nuku's career to date, which now extends to more than 120 projects worldwide. The show is also an expression of his ongoing desire to share his knowledge and experience with all viewers alike.

Oceans. Collections. Reflections. will be on view at the Weltmuseum Wien from June 23, 2022 to January 31, 2023. The exhibition was curated by George Nuku and Reinhard Blumauer, curator for the Oceania and Australia Collection at the Weltmuseum Wien. The exhibition design is by Gerhard Veigel.

The show will be accompanied by an extensive supporting programme, which in the first few weeks will be designed by the artist himself (see below).

Exhibition Themes

'I practice rituals all the time, they are our way of finding our access to another language with nature. Everything is based on circular processes. Imagine you go into a large exhibition room, you first move in a circle and look at everything – we are hard wired to this pattern of movement, it determines us, it's no mystery.'

George Nuku

The exhibition project not only addresses its own place in the museum, but also the museum itself – both the Weltmuseum Wien and museum institutions in general. It deals with issues such as the relationship between museums and indigenous societies, reconciliation between these two actors, with restitution, decolonization, and finally paths into the future.

The relationship between Austria and Māori is closely intertwined with the history of ethnology in Vienna: nineteenth-century expeditions such as the first circumnavigation of the world on the SMS Novara (1857–1859) and explorers such as Ferdinand von Hochstetter and Andreas Reischek shaped the Austrian view of New Zealand. Traces of Austria, in turn, are still found in New Zealand today by way of names in geography, flora, and fauna.

This relationship, albeit in principle good on both sides, had a number of problematic aspects. In particular, Andreas Reischek, who was long considered an expert and friend, also by the Māori themselves, robbed graves on several occasions. Although human remains



that reached the Weltmuseum Wien collections in this manner were returned to New Zealand in 2015, the episode casts a shadow on the shared past.

An extraordinary story from the course of the relationship between Māori and Austria is the visit by Te Hemera Rerehau and Wiremu Toetoe. Both Māori men joined the Novara expedition on its return journey in 1859. In Vienna, they received training at the court and state printing press and were introduced to the imperial couple. Numerous newspaper reports from the time document that they were well-known persons in Vienna. Their leaving present from the emperor was a printing press, which was used back in New Zealand to publish the first Māori language newspaper, *Te Hokioi*. The primary purpose of the publication was to engage in a war of information against the British colonial power.

The exhibition also addresses the alternating relationship between the Polynesian peoples and the Pacific. Maritime travel as an important element of settlement on and cultural exchange between the islands shaped the cultures as much as the dangers emanating from the sea. Like the ocean, the flora and fauna of the island moulded how life was led: as a resource and a spiritual space. In order to illustrate the close connection between nature and culture, the exhibition also presents loans from the Natural History Museum Vienna and the Zoological Collection of the Department of Evolutionary Biology at the University of Vienna.

Genealogy, the relationship to one's ancestors, forms a crucial aspect of Māori culture. Some Māori have facial tattoos as a visible sign of these relationships. In the past, this practice also involved preserving the heads of deceased relatives. The tradition was interrupted when bans were issued during the colonial era. This topic is also treated in one of the exhibition rooms.

An **exhibition booklet** provides a broad insight into the relationship between Aotearoa/New Zealand and Austria as reflected in the Weltmuseum Wien collections.

George Nuku's participative approach

George Nuku uses participation in his method and has worked together with volunteers to develop his artistic position for the current exhibitions in Weltmuseum Wien and Theseus Temple.

His collaboration with volunteers is an integral component of his work. On the one hand, this approach is necessitated by the sheer volume of work, such as carving and painting of objects. On the other hand, it is part of his educational approach. All helpers thereby become experts and educators in the context of the exhibition. It is a joint creative effort.

From March to June 2022, volunteers worked together with the artist on objects in the exhibition. The chosen participants had an interest in crafts and already had some experience in this area, but were not necessarily trained artists or craftspeople. Together with Nuku, they worked on materials such as plexiglas and polystyrene – they cut, glued, carved, and painted.



'The volunteers and I put our heart and soul into revealing the beauty of this apparently banal material [plastic]. I would not be able to do it all by myself. At the same time, I have become addicted to the absolute equality of this method. I have no influence on who comes through the door as a volunteer. Gender, age, socioeconomic background: categories such as these are dissolved.'

George Nuku on collaboration

'I don't speak German, but I speak 'polystyrene' and 'acrylic glass'. It is my job to make the material dance and sing. I am using this material because it told me to, it speaks to me and I see its fragility as a strength rather than a weakness. Just like the strength that lies in the wing of a butterfly. This is the message I want to pass on – especially to the younger generation.'

George Nuku on his materials

About the artist

'The native observing the colonizer observing the native.'
George Nuku

George Nuku (b. 1964) is currently one of the leading contemporary artists in Aotearoa/New Zealand. He is Māori of Scottish and German descent.

George Nuku works with stone, bones, wood, shells, polystyrene, and plexiglas. His works range from delicate, hand-carved amulets made of pearls, jade, bones, and plastic to life-sized sculptures of stone and plexiglas as well as multi-level polystyrene installations representing Polynesian half-gods and heroes from Māori culture. His art form carries forward the tradition of his ancestors that has been passed on for millennia, promising to expand life and improve survival.

Nuku studied art, sociology, geography, and Māori studies at Massey University in New Zealand, deciding that his main interest lay in art, especially sculpture. In the course of his 35-year artistic career, Nuku has created works for museums, art institutions, cultural centres, galleries, traditional Māori cultural spaces, for festivals and for private commissioners. His works have been on show in numerous exhibitions in New Zealand and throughout the world, including, among others, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Taiwan, and New York. The current exhibition at Weltmuseum Wien is George Nuku's first exhibition in Austria.

Press photographs

Press photographs are available in the press section of our website free of charge, for your topical reporting: <https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/presse/>

George Nuku
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George Nuku in front of Theseus Temple
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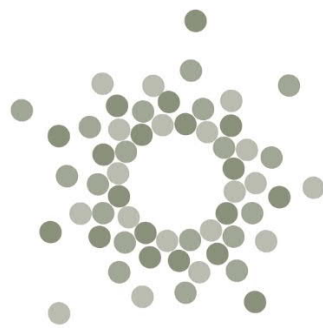


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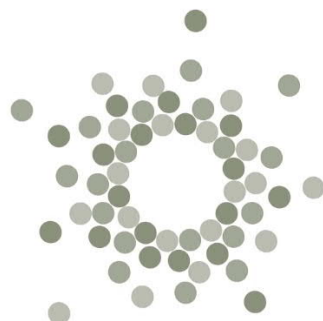


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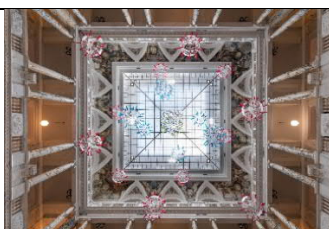
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Exhibition programme

A varied programme provided among others by the artist himself during its first weeks (see below) accompanies the exhibition. For all current details, please visit:

<https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/exhibitions/oceans-collections-reflections/#accompanying-programme>

Social Media

Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [YouTube](#).

#OceansCollectionsReflections
#BottledOcean2122
#GeorgeNuku

Opening hours

Daily except Wednesday
10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Tuesday
10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Tickets

For more information about tickets, please visit
<https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/information/>

Entry to the Galleries of Marvel is free of charge!

Contacts for your visit

Information, questions & suggestions
+43 1 534 30 - 5052, info@weltmuseumwien.at

Cultural education & outreach programme, guided tours, and programme registration
+43 1 534 30-5150, kulturvermittlung@weltmuseumwien.at



Media accreditation

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We request that, in addition to mentioning your medium, you also specify the date of your visit and attach a scan of your valid press pass. Many thanks for your understanding!

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