

MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA TONGAREWA

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A report on a Plaster Cast Bust of the Life Mask of a tupuna named Wiremu Nera Te Kanae, being Repatriated from Grassi Museum, Leipzig, Germany

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Summary

A plaster copy of a tūpuna Māori life cast will be repatriated from the Grassi Museum in Leipzig in June 2023. This paper sets out background information with a view to assisting with provenance. The cast is a male Māori, named Wiremu Nera Te Kanae. The Grassi Museum accession register has New Zealand as provenance.

Life Masks Associated with Otto Finsch (1839 - 1917)

Three life masks were acquired by the Grassi Museum in 1900 through the German collector, explorer and ornithologist Otto Finsch. He travelled to Aotearoa/New Zealand twice between 1879 and 1885 and developed an extensive catalogue of life masks, from which many copies were made. In his 1887 pamphlet where each mask is described, Finsch lists their prices and concludes with a sort of parade of peer reviewers, (including W.H. Flower, Director of the Natural History Museum, London) commenting enthusiastically on the merits of making casts. The pamphlet is more in the form of an advertising brochure and was printed and distributed by Ward's Science Museum as such.

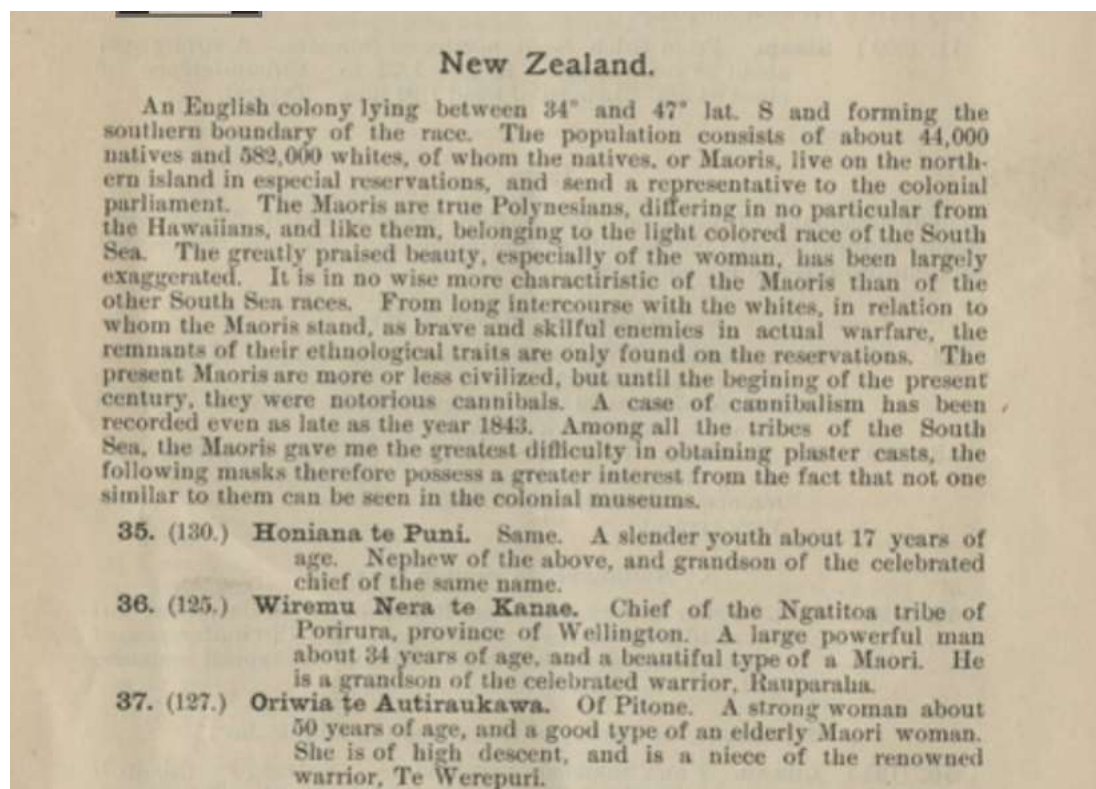


Figure 1 Extract from Finsch pamphlet published by Ward's Science Museum

1864 Finsch was curator (and then Director in 1876) at the Bremen Museum, which holds numerous taonga Māori and miheke Moriori. He later became ornithologist at Leiden Museum in 1894.

In his pamphlet, Finsch describes the difficulties he had making life casts in New Zealand.

None of the peoples of the Pacific presented such difficulties in obtaining plaster casts as the Maori. My eventual success, after many vain and in some cases expensive attempts, is only due to the mediation of my friend Dr W. Buller in Wellington. It was only out of friendship and respect for him that several natives eventually allowed themselves to be persuaded to undergo this not very pleasant procedure.

Finsch's casts were made with white plaster and then tinted using Broca's 1879 chromatic scale. Features such as facial hair and moko were coloured later. The three white plaster casts from Finsch were made at the Königlicher Gipsformerei Berlin (Royal Plaster Molding) and coloured by Louis Castan at the Berlin Panoptikum, a wax works emporium.

Wiremu Nera Te Kanae (Grassi Museum ID – A 01392)



The Finsch catalogue entry reads: *“Wiremu Nera te Kanae chief of the Ngatitooa tribe a of Porirua, province of Wellington. A large powerful man of about 34 years of age, and a beautiful type of Maori. He is the grandson of the celebrated warrior Te Rauparaha”.*

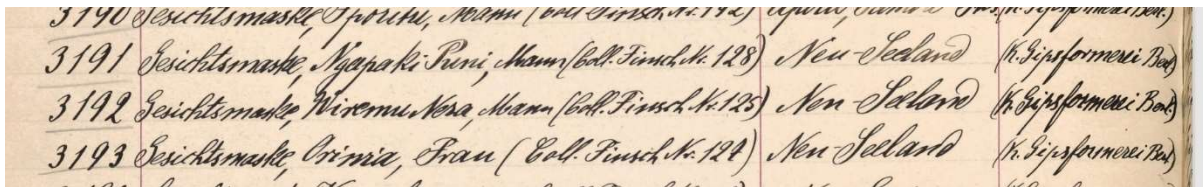


Figure 2 Extract from Grassi Museum accession record. 3192 refers to the mask of Wiremu Nera Te Kanae

Making Life Casts

Physical anthropology and a fascination with phrenology developed in the second part of the nineteenth century. Body measuring and typology gradually gave way to an interest in studying facial expressions in an attempt to categorise humanity. Photography and plaster casts became a new discipline and a highly sought after museum object for exchange and purchase.

In a 2015 paper (Sysling, 2015) notes:

In France the casting of faces was introduced into physical anthropology at about the same time as photography: between 1837 and 1840 the French physician on board of the expeditions of Jules Dumont D'Urville made about fifty casts in the Pacific. Paul Broca recommended the making of casts in his 1879 *Instructions générales* and other anthropologists and manuals followed. In Germany, according to Andrew Zimmermann, it was naturalist traveller Hermann von Schlagintweit who pioneered the technique in the 1870s. Otto Finsch became the most enthusiastic German anthropological plaster caster and sold his casts all over Europe in the 1880s.

In his visits to New Zealand in 1824 and 1840 the botanist and cartographer Jules Dumont D'Urville oversaw the making of life casts by the anatomist and phrenologist Pierre Dumoutier, which are now in collections throughout Europe including the Musée d'homme collection in Paris. Four of the Māori casts featured in the stunning work by Fiona Pardington (*Ahua: a Beautiful Hesitation*) and the book *Fiona Pardington: The Pressure of Sunlight Falling*, 2010.

Sysling explains, in detail, the method of making the casts:

In a manual for scientific travellers, Serrurier (1891) gave detailed instructions. For a face about one and a half kilos of burnt plaster was needed. Before application it was to be mixed with (hot) water and stirred 'like you would an egg' until it was smooth. To prevent a painful burning sensation on the skin when the plaster was taken off, faces, hands and hair were rubbed with oil. Goose quills were to be put in the nose so that the subject could breathe. Then the plaster was applied, set and removed. For the person subjected to the treatment, the plaster sometimes felt hot but not painful, according to Serrurier.

In his academic work on Nias, Kleiweg (1914) described the procedure he followed to make the casts. He and his assistant each first greased hair, eyebrows and beards, but not the face because this would make facial furrows less visible in the plaster. Ideally, Kleiweg wrote, they cut a person's hair short, but in practice only very few allowed them to do that. After cutting the hair, they put the subject on his back on the floor with his head on a pillow and applied plaster to the face. The faster they worked the less plaster dripped into the hair. Kleiweg emphasised that he had been careful to keep the nose holes free from plaster so breathing was possible. Taking off the plaster was the most difficult part of the operation and needed to be done slowly and carefully.

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Information below compiled by Dr Te Herekiele Herewini

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Repatriation of six life casts from Germany in June 2023 and September 2023.

In mid-2019, the State of Saxony in Germany via the Grassi Museum, Leipzig, agreed through a memorandum of understanding to return six life casts of Māori ancestors, alongside Māori and Moriori ancestral remains housed in their ethnographic collections.

Four of these ancestral casts were repatriated in June 2023, namely Ngapaki Te :Puni (Te Ātiawa), Oriwia Ātiraukawa (Te Ātiawa), Wineera Te Kanae (Ngāti Toarangatira) and Taupua Te Whanoa (Ngāti Whakaue, Te Arawa).

In September 2023, the life casts of 'Takatahara' and 'Heroua' were uplifted by representatives of Ngāi Tahu from Germany.

Importantly as part of this repatriation process all the life casts above were returned to the care of their respective uri (descendants).