

The Robley Collection at the American Museum of Natural History

The Robley collection has been housed at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) since 1907. The collection consisting of 35 *Toi moko* (preserved Māori tattooed heads) and two pieces of tattooed thigh skin, as well as other Māori objects, was gifted to the Museum by the former AMNH President Morris K Jesup¹, and was valued at \$6,000 USD. Mr Jesup is said to have paid the sum of £1,500² for the collection, which is the single largest collection of *Toi moko* outside of Aotearoa New Zealand. The fact it is finally being returned home was something Robley had always desired.

H. G. Robley (1840-1930) was born in Madeira and was the son of an officer of the Indian Army. In 1863, at the age of 23 he came to New Zealand during the Māori Land Wars. He served in the campaign at Gate Pā, and recorded his experiences in drawings and watercolours. It was during this time he developed an interest in Māori culture and more specifically moko. He also had a relationship resulting in the birth of a son, with a Māori woman called *Harete Mauao* from *Matapihi*, a village situated around the *Tauranga* Harbour³, where his descendants still live today. In 1887 after long military service he retired to London and in 1896 he published his book *Moko; or Māori Tattooing*.

During his time in London he probably acquired more than 50 *Toi moko*, which he exchanged and swapped, paying any price necessary⁴ in order to obtain the best possible examples outside of Museum collections. His first purchase appears to have been in 1893, from the London Phrenologist, Mr Stackpool O'Dell.

By 1899, he felt that his collection, now at more than 20 items, should be returned to New Zealand so that they could be permanently preserved, however the New Zealand Government at the time did not reply to his offer of £1,100 for his collection. Robley tried again in 1901, and the letter was referred on to James Carroll. After the matter was discussed between the Dominion Museum, Cabinet and Carroll, Robley received a letter in 1906 informing him that the offer was declined. This disappointed Robley.

His collecting continued into the 20th century, as he is said to have “become so obsessively engaged in the collection and study”⁵ of the heads he eventually accumulated a large amount of debt and began to

¹ Wagelie, J. 2007. *Maori art I America: The Display and Collection of Maori Art in the United States, 1802-2006*. PhD Dissertation, Faculty of Art History, The City University of New York.

² Walker, T. 1985. *Robley: Te Ropere, 1840-1930*. MA Thesis, Department of Art History, University of Auckland.

³ Walker, 1985, p41

⁴ Letter from Robley to Hamilton. MA131, 8/10/1-9/10/17. Volume 10, Folder 1, Item 14. AWMM Archives.

⁵ Walker, 1985, p26.

suffer ill health. By 1905 he possessed 38 Toi moko and by the time the collection entered AMNH in 1907 he had 40 in number, five of his best he kept for himself and later sold, after once again offering them to the New Zealand Government.

Robley died in a nursing home in London on 29th October 1930. He was 90 years old.