

'Fortune' by Bev Moon

Q&A with an Art Curator and an Archivist

Hope Wilson and Jennifer Jeffery

Fortune by Tāmaki Makaurau artist Bev Moon is on display at the Hocken Gallery in Ōtepoti, Dunedin from 12 August to 21 October 2023. *Fortune* is a touring exhibition, which was previously shown at Upper Hutt's Whirinaki Whare Taonga gallery and Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato in Hamilton.



Figure 1. Lions from the Otago Southland Chinese Association Lion Dance Team perform at the opening of *Fortune* by Bev Moon. Photo: Dave Bull.

Moon's work, a meticulously knitted life-sized replica of a yum-cha banquet, reflects on the journey of her mother and grandmother who were two of 500 wives and children permitted into Aotearoa New Zealand -between 1939-1941 during the Sino-Japanese War. *Fortune* is a nod to the women in Bev Moon's family who overcame distinct challenges and isolation as Chinese migrants to Aotearoa New Zealand.



Figure 2. Bev Moon speaking at the opening of her exhibition *Fortune* at Hocken Collections, Friday 11 August 2023. Photo: Dave Bull.

How did you first learn about Bev Moon's 'Fortune' and what perspective did you bring to the exhibition?

Jennifer: I came to know about *Fortune* by Bev Moon when Catherine Hammond (Hocken Librarian) and I were having an introductory meeting at an Ōtepoti Café, quite soon after Catherine joined the Hocken whānau. Bev is a friend and former colleague of Catherine, and when I brought up my interest and engagement with New Zealand Chinese history to Catherine, it seamlessly slipped into conversation. After seeing photographs of Bev's knitted Yum Cha, I was eager to connect with her and seek out the possibilities of bringing *Fortune* to the Hocken Collections.

I had no previous experience working on any aspect of an art exhibition as my training is primarily in Archives and Records Management. I did see this as an extraordinary opportunity for me to explore and engage further with New Zealand Chinese social history, gain an understanding of the curation process for an art exhibition, and help to plant the seed to grow the relationship between the Hocken Collections with the Otago and Southland New Zealand Chinese community.

Hope: When I took up the role of Curator Art at the Hocken in February 2023 planning for Bev's project was already underway. Catherine Hammond, Jen Jeffery, Robyn Notman, and Victoria France brought me up to speed with the planning and Jen and I met Bev via Zoom in early June.

In previous roles, I have worked closely with artists to develop and install exhibitions so I understood the curatorial process and the practicalities of exhibition making but this project gave me a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Hocken's collections. Working with Anna Blackman, Head Curator Archives, Katherine Milburn, Curator Ephemera, Anna Petersen, Curator Photographs, and Kirstie Ross, Curator Published and Special Collections, on selecting, preserving, and presenting items from the Hocken's Collection was a great experience and I appreciated the support and knowledge shared by each person. *Fortune* was also my first full opportunity to work within the Hocken Gallery so there was a lot of anticipation and learning attached to this project for me.

In addition to the Hocken's collection, we also included some items from the New Zealand Chinese Heritage Research Charitable Trust Collection which is cared for by the Presbyterian Research Centre at Knox College in Ōtepoti. The expertise and support provided by the Trust, Jay Robinson, and Rachel Hurd was much appreciated and added a great deal to the exhibition.

What was your biggest hurdle, how was it overcome?

Jennifer: One of the biggest hurdles was trying to decide what complimentary material would be needed to support *Fortune* and to make it 'make sense'. *Fortune* projects strong themes of family, intergenerational knowledge, migration, and survival. Hope Wilson (Curator Art) and I decided that we want to expand on the original themes of *Fortune* and find material within the Hocken Collections as well as obtaining loans from other institutions like the New Zealand Chinese Heritage Research Charitable Trust and the New Zealand Chinese community. The items we selected needed to help contextualise these themes within the New Zealand Chinese experiences in Otago and Southland, both pre-1940s and post-1940s.

With the theme beginning to congeal, it was time to forage! From an archivist perspective, my mind raced with ideas of manuscripts which are rich with historical dialect, brimmed with a discourse of hope, and packed with emotional anguish. Alas, crunchy pieces of water-stained paper, that



Figure 3. Bev Moon feeding the one of the lions during the performance. Photo: Dave Bull.



Figure 4. Bev Moon, *Fortune* (a knitted yum cha for my mother's 90th birthday), 2021-2022, mixed media on a table with central rotating Lazy Susan. Photo: Dave Bull.

have been previously chewed by rodents does not always bewitch the eye. It is with the assistance of Hope and Robyn Notman (Head Curator, Pictorial Collections) that I began to look at archives with a curatorial lens. I began to see the potential of a collection item within an art context, and whether it could be used appropriately within this exhibition.

Navigating the exhibition space proved quite a challenge. Hope and I wanted to combine the collection items and Bev's *Fortune*, but also ensure visitors could distinguish the contextualising materials from the heart of the exhibition. Hope and I decided we would employ the exhibition space, with its centre room and two alcoves, to do this spatial work for us. This structural division assists us to write the contextualising chapters composed of complimentary material that surrounds *Fortune*. *Fortune* is also presented in a backdrop of deep-red walls, which enriches Moon's chapter.

Working on the exhibition provided me with a unique experience to establish foundations in an unfamiliar aspect of the Heritage and Culture Sector. I am incredibly grateful to Bev Moon who was willing of my engagement with this project, and I am also incredibly grateful for Anna Blackman, Catherine Hammond, and the Hocken Pictorial Team for allowing me this opportunity to engage with an unfamiliar aspect of the Hocken Collections.

Hope: Initially, Jen and I wanted to focus on collection material which told the stories of Chinese women in Aotearoa. Bev's work is full of admiration for the skills, passion, determination, and knowledge of her mother and grandmother, and we wanted to explore similar stories through the curated side galleries. As we explored the collection and began to understand the stories held here, we realised the strongest voices in the collection were the voices of Chinese men and this led us to instead focus on specific community groups, like the story of the Hanover Street Baptist Church Chinese Sunday School. Women's voices are still very much present in the exhibition—we see Dr Kathleen Anneui Phi-Chang, the first person of Chinese descent to graduate in medicine in New Zealand, Shirley Sew Hoy's pamphlet which offers a guide to Chinese cooking, and photographs of Mabel (Gee Fung) Chin participating in sports in 1960s Ōtepoti. One thing that emerged through this engagement with the collection was an awareness of the potential to develop future projects which tell local stories in more depth. This exhibition one way of opening a dialogue with the collection and the community.



Figure 5. Visitors examine a banner gifted to the Hanover Street Baptist Church by the Chinese congregation c. 1899. Photo: Dave Bull.

What was a personal highlight?

Jennifer: My interest in New Zealand Chinese history has enabled me the privilege of being a Trustee on the New Zealand Chinese Heritage Research Charitable Trust (NZCHRCT). The Trust helps to support a unique collection of New Zealand Chinese material which includes donations from the Wong family, and the 'Ng New Zealand Chinese Heritage Collection (UNESCO Memory of the World, Aotearoa New Zealand Trust)'. Several items from the Ng Collection feature in this Exhibition.

Hope: Working with private family photo albums and learning the connections and relationships which exist throughout the exhibition have been the biggest privilege of this project. For me, personally, it's been a wonderful experience working with this collection material and helping Bev to install and present her wonderful exhibition at the Hocken. The community response to the project has been fantastic and it is exciting to host the exhibition here in Ōtepoti—a place with so many strong connections and stories of arrival for Bev's family and many other Chinese New Zealanders.



Figure 6. Bev Moon, artist, and Catherine Hammond, Hocken Librarian, pictured with Bev's work, Fortune (a knitted yum cha for my mother's 90th birthday). Photo: Dave Bull.

In Closing

Our work on this project has been supported in so many ways by generous members of the local and national community including The New Zealand Chinese Heritage Research Charitable Trust, Otago Southland Chinese Association, the Presbyterian Research Centre, and the Chinese Poll Tax Heritage Trust. Thank you to Dr James Ng and Eva Wong Ng, Malcolm Wong, Jay Robinson, Rachel Hurd, Teresa Chan, Christine Wong, Erin Broughton, Kenny Yu, and Leo Li. Last but certainly not least, thank you to Bev Moon for sharing your beautiful exhibition with a spirit of enthusiasm and generosity and allowing us to host your work and your family's stories at the Hocken.

This project is an exciting opening of a conversation and we're excited to continue this work and explore more ways we can research and present Chinese stories and histories in the Hocken Gallery.



Figure 7. Opening night visitors in Fortune by Bev Moon, Friday 11 August 2023. Photo: Dave Bull.