

‘DEAR MR FAIRBURN’

Rex Fairburn, Theo Schoon and Maori rock art: ‘New Zealand’s oldest art galleries’

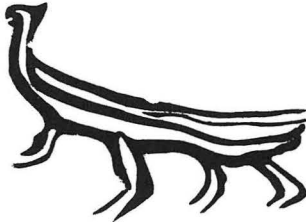
FRANK ROGERS

In his seminar ‘Cultural Spirals’ at the Stout Research Centre on 24 September 1997, Peter Cleave described the use of Maori images by Gordon Walters and other pakeha artists and mentioned in passing the activities of Theo Schoon and Rex Fairburn. Frank Rogers here gives more detail of the involvement of these two men in recording and using the Maori rock drawings. These works do not appear to have been claimed by iwi as taonga so that they have not been subject to the kind of restraints upon pakeha use as Peter Cleave has described in other cases.

IN 1983 I WAS WORKING in retirement as an honorary researcher for the University of Auckland Library Manuscripts and Archives on arranging private papers. Peter Hughes, the Senior Librarian in charge, allotted me the task of arranging the Fairburn Papers.¹ This I found most congenial as in my palmy days I had

met Rex on a number of occasions and enjoyed his conversation as well as his lively contributions to contemporary life, both literary and otherwise. Work on the papers was a nostalgia trip. I found that they included letters from a large

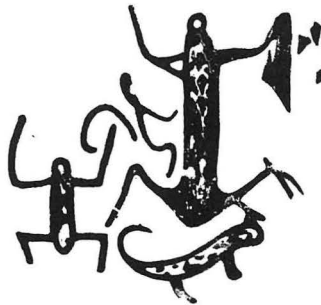
number of notable people, including Denis Glover, Geoffrey de Montalk, Leo Bensemann, Bob Lowry, Rex Mason, and Theo Schoon.



In 1946 Schoon had decided to make a record of Maori rock art – what he described as ‘New Zealand’s oldest art galleries’. With the aid of Roger Duff, the ethnologist at Canterbury Museum, he persuaded the Department of Internal Affairs to give him

a small grant to fund the making of copies of the drawings.² He was engaged in this work when Gordon Walters visited him near Pleasant Point. On a second visit Walters took photographs of the rock drawings and started a file about them.³ Around this time Schoon wrote to Rex Fairburn to enlist his support.

In the Fairburn Papers there are about twenty letters from Theo to Rex.⁴ The first begins ‘Dear Mr Fairburn’ but soon it is ‘Dear Rex’. Unfortunately, Rex did not keep copies of his replies, but they may have survived in the Schoon Papers held in other institutions. In addition to Schoon’s letter to Rex to enlist his interest in the rock art project, there is also material



documenting Rex’s fabric printing project.⁵ This includes a notebook containing details of receipts and

expenditure for fabric printing and journalism. Under 'Artifacts' in the Appendix to the Inventory of the Papers are listed 'six lino blocks and a piece of block-printed curtain material saved by Olive Johnson from the Old University Senior Common Room'.⁶

Rex had expressed interest in the rock drawings and Theo lent him these and photographs which Gordon

Walters also supplied. This material Rex used to design motifs for his work including the well-known dancing figures, the three-claw figure, and the taniwha. This involved modifying the

sometimes wispy images to produce rather bolder shapes suitable for block printing.

It is interesting to recall the circumstances of the project. In 1947 Rex had become disenchanted with his New Zealand Broadcasting Service job. Vernon Brown, his architect friend, suggested that Rex should take up commercial fabric printing.⁷ One may ask 'Why fabric printing?'. The answer lies in the fact that he had some pretensions to being an artist, he would be his own boss, and the family had recently shifted to a large house in Devonport where there was room to have a studio. Also there was a market for new fabrics with hand-crafted designs as distinct from the

somewhat dated commercial pre-war stock. My recollection of furnishing a flat about that time, is that the shortage of new fabrics persisted for some years after World War Two. I recall running into an art teacher friend, the late Phil Barclay, who had been awarded a Rehab. Bursary to study art in the UK at the end of the war. He told me that Courtaulds were producing

interesting new materials, but they didn't send their latest lines to New Zealand – our importers were too stuffy in their tastes. This meant that the big stores were

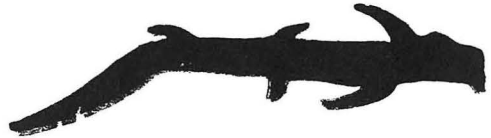


still stocking autumn-tinted florals as if the Impressionists had never existed. There was a dearth of more lively fabrics.

Rex built a market with his own designs before he had the idea of using Schoon's rock drawings as a remarkable source of motifs.⁸ At the time of his death in 1957, Sarah Campion quoted Rex's description of his use of the drawings 'as ordinary fabric patterns, and as the elements of "arbitrary colour arrangements" on rectangular panels'.⁹ This hints at his familiarity with the work of Miro and other painters of the Paris school; he

wrote a favourable review of the work of John Weeks, and was instrumental in getting the Lucy Wertheim Collection for the Auckland City Art Gallery.

The family assisted in the project, as well as Theo at some stage. Daughter Janis Fairburn says 'About 75 per cent of Rex's work involved the rock drawings and these were popular on table mats, dresses, scarves, and mainly pieces which were framed. His other work was also popular but did not comprise the quantity of articles he produced with the rock drawings. These were also most unusual and striking'. Lady Freyberg ordered curtains for Government House, 'which Rex blocked himself'.¹⁰ My own recollection is that examples of Fairburn designs were to be found in the homes of the Innes family and other of the Fairburn circle, as well as being in the University Senior



Common Room in Auckland.

The Fairburn Papers provide some documentation of this activity but at first I thought that Olive Johnson's sample and the six blocks preserved in the Papers were the only tangible evidence. However there was more to come. The largest group of the Fairburn Papers had been photocopied from originals in the possession of his widow Mrs Jocelyn Young (now Fairburn-Young)¹¹. In 1983, after I had completed the inventory of the

University Library's Fairburn Papers, Mrs Young accepted my offer to arrange her originals in the same manner as the University set. While working on the papers at her home in Titirangi, I saw on a shelf in the laundry a pile of lino blocks. As a one-time lino-block maker, I was excited to discover that they were the originals of the block-printing enterprise at Devonport. I learned from Mrs Young that a variety of articles were produced: curtains, cushion covers, dress materials etc. and that some were sent to the United Nations Co-operative shop in New York through a friend, New Zealander John Male, a UN employee.¹² At the launching function at Devonport for the Trussell biography in 1984 it was a pleasure to see the Fairburn daughters strikingly clad in taniwha-print summer dresses.

As the original lino blocks still existed, I thought it desirable to record the work of Fairburn and Schoon before the blocks deteriorated further. With Mrs Young's permission I took them away, and enlisted the aid of Ron Holloway, the well-known craft printer, to make a number of sets of prints with printer's ink on acid free paper. These were offered to major

institutions at cost. Purchasers included Alexander Turnbull Library Prints and Drawings,¹³ and University of Auckland Fine Arts Library. More recently, in preparing for this paper I found that the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Prints and Drawings



Collection includes a framed piece of Fairburn fabric-printed material with twelve rock motifs; they are soon to have my set of the prints. The Fairburn family still have samples of the prints, both fabric and paper, and the original blocks.

On a recent visit to Tauranga I was surprised to find in my friend's home a set of antimacassars with

three rock-drawing motifs. I learned that they were bought some years ago from a craft shop at Waihau Bay. This is rather meagre evidence, but perhaps rock-drawing motifs, including those on fabrics, are more common than we think. Purists may argue that it is demeaning our most ancient art to reduce it to domestic ornaments, but who is to quibble? Few New Zealanders will have the chance to see the Schoon and Fairburn drawings, fabrics, or the prints unless they are on show in an exhibition. We should be grateful that Rex and Theo have preserved for us the 'first fine careless raptures' of a number of long-gone Maori wayfarers. ∞

Notes

- 1 University of Auckland Library Manuscripts and Archives A11, A123, A125, A167.
- 2 Trotter, M. and McCulloch, B. *Prehistoric Rock Art of New Zealand* Wellington, A H & A W Reed, 1971, pp13-14
- 3 Dunn, Michael. *Gordon Walters* Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983 pp 10-11 (catalogue of an exhibition)
- 4 Fairburn Papers A125
- 5 FP A11.23
- 6 Inventory Appendix 4, p14
- 7 Trussell, Denys *Fairburn* Auckland AUP, OUP, 1984, p202
- 8 Trussell, pp 206-7
- 9 Campion, Sarah. 'Memories of Rex'. *Home and Building*, 1 April 1957, pp 41-3 and 75-9
- 10 Janis Fairburn to Frank Rogers 23 April 1998
- 11 FP A125
- 12 FP A125, 17 letters UN Co-operative 2 letters
- 13 National Library of New Zealand, Alexander Turnbull Library Drawings and Prints C027 - 011/048

Previous page:

Human figures with dog. Stylised dog.

Opposite:

*Three dancing figures and a bird (?),
Hazelburn, South Canterbury.
Thresher shark.*

This page:

*The 'Opihi taniwha', original size: 4.87m.
Rex Fairburn's signature block.*

Fairburn