
http://repository.nms.ac.uk/1154

Deposited on: 20 March 2014
COMMISSIONING ART: 
OBJECTS, ETHNOGRAPHY AND CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING 

Chantal Knowles 
Curator of Ethnography, National Museums of Scotland 

In January 2001 I began working as the Curator of Ethnography at the National Museums of Scotland (NMS) and took over the handling of a commission between a Maori artist, Lyonel Grant, and the museum. As I was unfamiliar with the collecting policy employed by the museum, undertaking the role of commissioning items raised several questions for me in terms of ethics; in particular addressing where power, control and influence lay in the relationship between museum and maker and in what context the resultant object could be placed. This paper is a personal exploration of the questions that arose, the answers I sought and the conclusions I came to while pursuing the commission and considering the results. The examination of these issues also resulted in the theme for the MEG Conference and AGM for 2002. At the conference we were able to bring together my thoughts with those of Grant, who attended the conference and was able to give his perspective on the commissioning process (see Grant this volume).

Commissioning items for collections goes right back to the first collectors: anthropological fieldworkers working within the theory of salvage ethnography, obsessed over collecting ‘complete’ or ‘representative’ collections and frequent commissioners of items. The artefacts they procured may have been made in order to replicate an artefact that was already obsolete, or to acquire a ‘pristine’ or unused version of something they had seen, or even to obtain scale models of large items that they could not hope to ship home (O’Hanlon 2000: 19–20). The construction of these items often occurred under the close supervision of the collector and we know that where collectors were frequent visitors and demand was high, locals quickly adapted their artefacts in response to the requests, though not always in negotiation with the collectors (Torrence 2000).

These early commissions do highlight certain themes which are essential to any consideration of NMS’s more recent collecting history. In this paper I wish to consider several issues that concerned me when I began to participate in the commissioning process. How influential can a museum be on the look and content of a commissioned artefact and does their influence frame the object within the museum’s theoretical approach to objects or its preconceptions about culture and art? Can an artist maintain control or artistic integrity under the terms of the commission? What constraints or authority does the museum place on the piece and the outcome of the commissioning process? And finally, is there a point at which commissioned items gain or lose ‘authenticity’ through the negotiating relationship between the buyer and maker?

On taking over the commissioning process on my arrival at NMS I began to correspond with Grant and discuss the project in detail. While corresponding we
considered the intention of the piece, and the content of the design, with Grant requesting opinions on his ideas and sketches. From the outset I was uncomfortable with this process. It seemed strange that I should be helping to shape an object that was coming to the museum and was intended to represent contemporary art and material culture as executed by an artist from a particular cultural background.

While struggling with the personal dilemmas concerning involvement and influence over the piece I decided to examine more closely the museum’s collecting strategy and how commissioning fitted in with this. The diverse nature of the NMS’s collections, which include Natural History, Science and Technology, as well as the Applied Arts, meant that there was no global collecting policy that gave the detail I needed to explore the motives behind commissioning artwork. However, the ethnographic section in NMS is part of the History and Applied Art Department of the Museum which did have a detailed written policy which included a section on non-western art:

‘[History and Applied Art’s] aims regarding non-western art are to continue representation of those indigenous cultures where NMS already has strong collections of historic material, and to demonstrate the development of their art and material culture in the 20th and 21st centuries ... Wherever possible, NMS acquires fully-documented material directly from native artists themselves or from outlets owned or managed by them, rather than from non-native-operated commercial galleries.’

In addition to looking at the policy documents I also examined the outcomes of previous commissions made for the ethnographic collections and instigated by Dale Idiens while Curator of Ethnography.

In the next section I examine two examples of recent commissions undertaken by the museum, and look at the changing relationships between the museum and maker and how this is expressed in the resultant object. A third example, which was undertaken between the Museum and Lyonel Grant will also be examined in detail.
Thunderbird transformation mask and costume

In 1998 NMS commissioned a four-way Thunderbird transformation mask and costume from Calvin Hunt (Idiens 2000: 110), a carver from the north-west coast of Canada (Plate 1). The commission was completed and sent to the museum in mid-1999 in time for inclusion in its Millennium exhibition Heaven and Hell and other worlds of the dead (Sheridan 2000).

In 1997 the museum had funded a collecting trip to Canada for Dale Idiens. On this trip 31 objects were purchased for the museum, a further five items were gifted to the museum and a list of three possible items to be commissioned was compiled for consideration by the museum on her return. While in the field, Idiens met and discussed work with Hunt, an internationally-renowned Kwakiutl carver. Idiens had seen the potential in Hunt’s work for filling a ‘gap’ in the north-west coast collections of NMS and had discussed with him the possibility of commissioning a four-way transformation mask, an object not represented in the collections. Idiens talked through the possibilities, got an idea of price, and then returned to the museum, to pursue getting a commitment from the museum’s purchase fund.

On her return to Edinburgh, Idiens submitted the following statement in support of the application for funds:

‘A distinguishing feature of the Northwest Coast culture in the past which survives today is dramatic dance performance involving elaborate masks and costumes. The most remarkable masks, involving elaborate decorations and complex articulated and mechanical features, are termed ‘transformation’ masks and generally depict an animal, fish or bird, changing into a human being. NMS lacks such a mask and costume, and this commission will effectively represent in a striking manner this extraordinary and continuing tradition. The commissioned artist is a foremost exponent of transformation masks and will undoubtedly produce a piece of artistic quality.’

As soon as her application was accepted a contract was drawn up between the museum and Hunt and a timetable agreed.

At this point Idiens began a correspondence with Hunt to discuss the proposed mask and costume. Early on in this process Hunt described his vision of the work that they had discussed. He wrote

‘You have not indicated what kind of transformation you would like. If you have a preference please let me know. The costume will be a full sized adult costume, carved of red cedar, canvas, rabbit fur, dyed seagull feathers (we cannot export eagle feathers), and painted in the traditional colours of the Kwakiutl.’

Idiens replied:

‘We agree ... for a 4-way, full-size, adult transformation mask
and costume ... I have no particular preference for the kind of transformation and am happy to leave the choice to you. Perhaps there is a transformation that relates to you and your family? Or maybe there is a kind of transformation that you thought about carving but have never had the opportunity? ... What I am seeking is a dramatic and high quality piece to represent the remarkable nature of this aspect of Kwakiutl culture ..."4

In this instance the design specification for Idiens was limited only by the stipulation that the transformation mask must be a four-way mask. The actual type of transformation, a Thunderbird, was finally decided on due to Hunt’s own kinship ties. Hunt had inherited the rights to the Thunderbird crest, legends and costumes through his mother, Emma Hunt. Within his community and the artistic community Hunt had authority over what costumes he could and could not produce and his ownership of the Thunderbird crest was well-documented in his previous work. Hunt was well versed in commissioned and contracted artwork with museums and had already made by commission three other Thunderbird costumes each with a different design: one for a 1975 potlatch; the second for Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde; and the third for the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology.

On completion of the mask and costume Hunt was under contract to the museum to deliver the piece in time for the Heaven and Hell exhibition. Prior to doing this and without the permission of the museum he exercised his control over the object and danced the costume and mask at Port Hardy, Vancouver Island to welcome the Cadillac 360° Sailboat Race on 17th June 1999. The dance performances of the Kwakiutl people are inherited privileges, passed on within families and they dramatically re-enact incidents from legends. In some cases the dance dramatises stories about the adventures of the ancestor, while in others the performance recreates a dance given to the ancestor by a mythical being. The dance and accompanying songs, masks and regalia are regarded as valuable family property. Only someone within the family would have had the authority to dance the mask and costume.5 After this mask and costume had been danced it left the Port Hardy community and was sent to the NMS.

Hunt did not let the museum know that the artefact was going to be danced, but did document the event and noted in an email after the event

‘I hope I did not step on too many toes dancing in the costume without the museum’s permission. However, it now has a dance background. Dance costumes and masks were made to be worn and this one is happy that it has done so!’6

Hunt added that although these masks are usually difficult to manipulate on their initial outings, becoming better over time, the mask made for NMS worked smoothly and well on its first outing, perhaps demonstrating its desire to be danced.

For the museum this action may have transformed the mask and costume from an artwork, not used in a community but made for sale, into an ethnographic artefact, documented in use and ‘authentic’ as having been good enough for use within the
community. This example raises several themes, those of negotiation, authority to use designs, dance the costume and ultimately sell it to a museum, and the ‘authenticating’ of the object through use.

Dance Apron

The second case study also came out of Idien’s trip to the Northwest coast of Canada. In 1997 NMS agreed to commission a dance apron made by Maxine Matilpi and her husband John Livingston (Plate 2). Before leaving on the trip Idiens had examined the historic collections at NMS from the region and was specifically looking to build on them. In the case of the four-way transformation mask, her aim had been to purchase something ‘missing’ from the collection, in this instance she aimed to commission a contemporary example of an item already represented in the collection.

On her return from Canada, Idiens put forward the following justification for purchase:

‘Dance regalia is still regularly produced for use among Canadian Indians of British Columbia. The designs are generally sketched by male artists and the making and embellishments undertaken by women. Maxine Matilpi, a Kwakiutl craftswoman, is noted for her robes and aprons and has exhibited in Canada, USA and Frankfurt, NMS already has a 19th century woven apron and this contemporary piece updates the collections effectively.’

Again the next step, once permission for the purchase had been obtained from the museum, was to undertake correspondence and agree a contract. Idiens wrote to Maxine:

‘I would like to commission a dance apron from you... when we spoke ... I recall I asked for a butterfly design, and decorations of bells, thimbles and plastic buttons.’

As with the Thunderbird commission the correspondence discussed the artefact in detail, including the design and use of the materials. In this case the butterfly motif
was chosen for the design as it was Matilpi’s totem. In comparison with the negotiations for the Thunderbird mask and costume, much more time was spent discussing raw materials. Idiens listed exactly which raw materials she wanted on the dance apron. While at Matilpi’s workshop Idiens had noted that a lot of blackberry beads were featuring in her work, along with other modern and manufactured materials, in particular plastic buttons. On enquiring on the significance of the blackberry beads she was told they were ‘fashionable’ (Idiens, pers. comm). Idiens was keen to capture the contemporary fashions, not least to contrast against the nineteenth-century apron in the collections, and stipulated that these should be included in the commission for NMS.

With instructions regarding type of object, motif and raw materials, Maxine was able to undertake the commission. Her husband, John Livingston, composed the main design, in line with the traditional division of labour and this conformed with Idien’s desire for a butterfly. On completion of this Matilpi began the secondary design work, which meant positioning the butterfly figures on the object as it was being made and designing the borders. It was also Matilpi who decided how the specified raw materials would be used on the apron.

Like Hunt, Matilpi’s work has been widely exhibited, commissioned and collected by a number of museums and galleries throughout North America and Europe and this had brought her work to the attention of Idiens and also endorsed it. At least one of the exhibitions of Matilpi’s work included a published catalogue, which raised her profile further and perhaps gave her an edge over other makers (Macnair 1997). Along with several other artists listed by Idiens in her report of her study trip to the Northwest coast Matilpi was an artist who worked only to commission or for sale through galleries. This widespread museum endorsement both through exhibitions and purchases may have given Matilpi greater authority and power to negotiate further commissions on her own terms.

Pare/Waharoa (door lintel)

In September 1999 Idiens commissioned a piece of Maori carving from master carver, Lyonel Grant, which was completed in May 2002. Again this commission was the result of a meeting that took place on a collecting trip to New Zealand in March 1994. During this trip 36 items were purchased for the NMS collections and three further items were submitted as possible commissions. All of which were agreed to by the Museum’s purchasing committee.

The three commissions represented three different genres of contemporary Maori art, a pot by Manos Nathan, a feather cloak by Kahutoi Te Kanewa and a work by Lyonel Grant. In particular, Idiens looked to Grant as his work represented a younger generation of carvers who were establishing themselves on the New Zealand art scene. The NMS ethnographic collections already had two pieces of Grant’s work, a very small bronze figure (K.1994.303) bought from a gallery and a bronze casting from the maquette of a very large granite, and a commissioned bronze sculpture representing the anchor stone of Grant’s tribal canoe and made for the New Zealand Electrocorp (K.1994.1340).
The commission for an original piece of work from Lyonel Grant was undertaken in a discursive manner. At the outset the only idea was one that had fermented in both the maker's and commissioner's minds in their initial face-to-face discussions: that they hoped Grant would be able to create something that would combine Celtic and Maori motifs. Like many Maori, Grant has some Scottish ancestry and was keen on this idea as he already had an interest in the similarities between Celtic and Maori designs, had been inspired by the visual links between them, and was interested in doing a piece that explored this.

In the early stages various forms for the piece were discussed, including a *Waharoa* (gateway), but in scaled-down form. In conversation with friends, and reported to Idiens, Grant put forward the idea of an ‘orb’ form comprising bronze and wooden components and featuring a blend of both Maori and Celtic symbols. In Grant’s eyes this concept would have potential as the classic symbolic representation of both Maori world and Celt world so far apart physically, and yet so similar when motif and visual language are compared.¹⁰

However, as the museum already had two bronze works by Grant, there was a move to use another material. Idiens suggested wood and in particular a lintel (a form of artefact not represented in the body of Maori carving held in the NMS collections). In correspondence discussing materials Idiens wrote:

‘Wood appeals as it is so characteristically Maori, but if you have a strong preference for any other material I would be interested to know what your ideas are.’¹¹

In the same letter, although rejecting the ‘orb’ form for the object, Idiens reiterated her support for Grant’s suggestion of combining the two cultures’ visual imagery as this would not only reflect strands in Grant’s genealogy but also signify the link between the Museum, its collections and Grant. Grant’s response to the project would establish a tangible visual link between Scotland and Aotearoa. The final decision was to construct from wood a free standing *Pare/Waharoa* (door lintel or gateway) supported by two *Whakawae* (upright door jambs), measuring approximately one metre high and was to be fashioned out of New Zealand Totara wood (Plate 3). Once the form had been agreed upon Grant requested that Idiens supply images of Celtic design including crests of the Fraser family (to which Grant could trace his Scottish ancestry) as well as Celtic artefacts that came from the region.
of the Frasers (Aberdeenshire) and any other artefacts from which he might draw inspiration. Grant noted:

'At this stage the representation encompasses both Celtic and Maori motif. Initially I had thought to mix both modes of symbolism, but now, perhaps each can be represented on either side accordingly. The door then, implied or actual, would represent the common passage shared between both cultures.'

However, Grant expressed concern about his appropriation of Celtic symbols, particularly as Maori motifs have been appropriated and used out of context by the uninitiated, a scenario Grant wished to avoid. At this point I joined the process and discussed these issues at length with those colleagues at NMS who curate Scottish archaeology, decorative arts and culture. When the first drawings came from Grant to the museum, these were distributed widely and the consensus was that the dynamics of the piece and depictions of Celtic motifs on it would be more likely to be interpreted as flattery by Scots viewing the piece.

Like many artists Grant’s ideas were forming as the commission progressed, rarely is the finished product sketched out to its final form at the first discussion. The discussion between Idiens and Grant, and later myself and Grant, were not actually dictating forms and content but in fact enabling Grant to draw upon a broader body of Celtic motifs and come to terms with the ethics of appropriating cultural motifs.

Conclusions

So where do these three examples take us in terms of power, authority, ethics and authenticity? I am aware that I began this paper posing several questions about negotiating relationships, art, authenticity and power. When I began my research I had major concerns about what exactly particular commissions were representing when the museum undertook their purchase. The example that concerned me was Grant’s as I was directly involved in the process and was asked to comment on the design.

On reflection, this commission was a departure for Idiens as it was by far the most discursive of all those that Dale undertook during her career at NMS. Now that I have read through the files and reconsidered my role in the process I understand more clearly the preceding history of the piece. It was Grant who first suggested the idea of responding to his own Scottish ancestry and the Maori and Scottish collections of the NMS.

At the end of this discussion I have not resolved all the issues that inspired my misgivings—and ultimately this paper and the MEG Conference. However, I have a clearer understanding of the process and believe it is an essential part of the contemporary collecting process. Things have changed, in particular Maori, Australian and North American artefacts produced today are often produced specifically for the art market. They are no longer ‘curios’, but are acknowledged as ‘art’ produced for the gallery and commissioned art market and circulating in the
same way as contemporary European fine and applied art may operate, and a whole
gallery culture and collectors market is embedded in this. This move of certain
objects and makers into an ostensibly art rather than ethnographic market has
changed the dynamics of the commissioning and collecting relationship. Is it less or
more exploitative? The art and gallery market as it exists currently is a western
invention, however, there are indigenous makers who have entered into this and use
it to their own advantage. There are makers who make for the their community and
separately make for sale. The relationships between purchasers and makers is much
more equal than before; the upperhand moves between the client and maker at
different points in the commissioning and making process, suggesting give and take
on both sides and the result is unique and very relevant to documenting culture.

I began this research with the assumption that the process of commissioning
items was perhaps a negative one, which forged an unequal relationship between
museum and maker, with the museum exercising control and authority over the
maker. This relationship is not so simplistic and each object speaks of the changing
relationships between maker and commissioner, which in turn reflects changes in
ethnographic collections, the procurement of objects and the structures of authority
and power between the museum and the maker.

NOTES

1 Unpublished document ‘Collecting policy for the History and Applied Art Department,
National Museums of Scotland’.

2 Purchase Acquisition Form. Supplementary Information File, 1999.590 A–D, National
Museums of Scotland.

A–D, National Museums of Scotland.

A–D, National Museums of Scotland.

5 Leaflet, no date, written and produced by Calvin and Marie Hunt, Kwakiutl Art of the
Copper Maker Gallery. Supplementary Information File, K.1999.590 A–D, National
Museums of Scotland.

6 Email from Hunt to Idiens. 9th July 1999. Supplementary Information File, K.1999.590 A–
D, National Museums of Scotland.

7 Purchase Acquisition Form. 26th March 1998. Supplementary Information File, K.1998.401,
National Museums of Scotland.

8 Letter from Idiens to Matilpi, 8th December 1997. Supplementary Information File,

Fieldwork File, National Museums of Scotland.

10 Email from Grant to Idiens 3rd August 1999. Supplementary Information File,
Chantal Knowles


13Fax from Grant to Idiens, 8th September 1999. Supplementary Information File, K.2002.481.1-3, National Museums of Scotland.

REFERENCES


