

An artist's collection – a partial catalogue of Sydney Lough Thompson's collection at Canterbury Museum

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This paper will explore the personal collection of Sydney Lough Thompson, an internationally successful artist originally from Canterbury who spent much of his career overseas. In 1968 and 1969, Thompson gifted a number of kākahu (cloaks) and other taonga to Canterbury Museum. Thompson had received these taonga in recognition of his portraits of Ngāti Tūwharetoa who he had painted in the early twentieth century. This paper is a catalogue of these four kākahu and an overview of his life story.

Keywords: Cloaks, collecting, collector's collections, kākahu, material culture, textiles, weaving.

Introduction

Canterbury Museum is home to the personal collection of significant Canterbury artist Sydney Lough Thompson. This private collection of taonga Māori and Pacific objects was gifted to the Museum by Thompson in the late 1960s. This paper will describe the objects that he gifted, with a specific focus on four kākahu (cloaks), which were gifted to him in recognition of his artistic works. It will look at how they were made and discuss what is known of their provenance and materials. It will consider the collection items as personal objects that had intimate connections to the artist, so intimate that one cloak appeared in a portrait of his family.

Sydney Lough Thompson

Sydney Lough Thompson was one of New Zealand's best known artists during the 1920s. While he spent much of his career in France, he returned to New Zealand often and exhibited widely in his homeland. His biographer, Julie King, notes that in "the early 1920s, he was easily New Zealand's most celebrated painter. Thompson became a model of the professional artist who had achieved expatriate success"

(King 1990: 69). It was noted by Australian critic William Moore that Thompson's work was known by the public as well as the art world and in 1923, when Thompson returned to New Zealand to exhibit, a civic reception was held in his honour (King 1990).

Thompson was born in 1877, in Oxford, Canterbury. His parents owned a general store and later a sheep run. His early training and work were influenced by Petrus van der Velden, a Dutch artist who settled in New Zealand and was known for his majestic landscape paintings of the West Coast of the South Island. In 1895, at the age of 18, Thompson began his studies at the Canterbury College School of Art. At the same time, Thompson took private lessons with van der Velden. Thompson's talents were quickly recognised by the School and he received a scholarship in 1896. He went on to receive a silver medal from the British Department of Science and Art, at that time the highest award gained by an art student in New Zealand, for his still life of a saddle (King 1990).

Like many artists of his generation, Thompson went to Europe to further his studies. He lived and studied in London, Yorkshire and Paris.

In France he spent time at the artists' colony at Concarneau in Brittany, a place that would later become his home and the regular subject of his paintings. While in Europe he exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in London and at the Paris Salon of the Société des Artistes Français (King 1990). While studying in Paris, he was influenced by the work of Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley and Edgar Degas (Robert McDougall Art Gallery 1976).

Thompson returned to New Zealand in 1905 and became Life Master at the Canterbury School of Art from 1906 to 1910. He was also on the council of the Canterbury Society of Arts from 1905 to 1911. He exhibited in New Zealand during this time and became well known as a portraitist, painting prominent Canterbury families. One of his most charming portraits is of the three daughters of Robert McDougall, a successful Christchurch businessman and arts patron, painted in 1910 (King 1990).

But it was not just members of the local Pākehā elite who sat for Thompson. During the summers of 1906 to 1910, Thompson travelled the North Island and stayed at Tokaanu, on Lake Taupō, painting portraits of local Māori (King 1990). He became friends with the Te Heuheu family (Ngāti Tūwharetoa) and found sitters through this friendship. Returning each summer, he became well known to local iwi and was known as Tāmehana, a transliteration of Thompson (King 1990). According to the 1968 Canterbury Museum annual report, "Because the young Christchurch artist declined to accept any payment for portraits of the local elders he was immediately recognised as a rangitira [sic] and so treated." This included gifting Thompson taonga: between 1907 and 1910, he was presented with four kākahu or cloaks (Canterbury Museum 1968). According to Museum records, three were especially made for his future wife Maude and were delivered to his home in Canterbury, while the other was an older example (King 1990). These kākahu were later gifted to Canterbury Museum and are the subject of this paper.

Thompson married Maude Ethel Coe in 1911 and the couple left for Europe. After a brief stay in England, they settled in France. Thompson studied with Lucien Simon in Paris and attended classes at Académie Colarossi (where another New Zealand artist, Frances Hodgkins, taught watercolour) (Gill 1993) and the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts (the French national school of fine arts) (King 1990). His work was influenced by Simon, employing his "vigorous drawing and courageous colour" (Robert McDougall Art Gallery 1976). When he and Maude settled in Concarneau, Brittany, where he had previously spent time, Thompson's work became focused on capturing the colour and movement of the port and seascapes in an impressionistic manner (Robert McDougall Art Gallery 1976).

Thompson and his growing family – a son and two daughters – remained in France during the First World War, returning to New Zealand in 1923. Thompson had been exhibiting in Europe and he continued to show in New Zealand (King 1990). The family returned to France in 1925, but the shifting politics of Europe meant the family again returned to New Zealand in 1933, settling in Canterbury. That year, he resumed his involvement with the Canterbury Society of Arts, becoming the President, as well as the Vice President of the New Zealand Society of Artists. He was also a member of the Committee of Management of the National Art Gallery (Wellington) and was involved with Christchurch City Council's Art Gallery Committee. He was awarded an MBE in 1937 and continued to lecture, exhibit and paint until his death – his last work was completed shortly before his 90th birthday. He continued to live in both France and New Zealand, passing away in Concarneau on 8 June 1973 (King 1990). Despite spending much of his career in France, he considered himself a New Zealand artist (Keen 1991).

Thompson's work can be found in all New Zealand metropolitan galleries and in several major Australian galleries. There have been two survey exhibitions of his work at the

Christchurch Art Gallery, in 1976 and 1990 (Robert McDougall Art Gallery 1976). The 1990 show, *Sydney Lough Thompson – at home and abroad*, included a catalogue of 70 paintings by Thompson. King's biography of Thompson was published in 1990 to coincide with the exhibition and a smaller version of the exhibition toured New Zealand in 1991 and 1992 (Christchurch Art Gallery 2017). As recently as 2017, a local art gallery in Concarneau (Galerie Gloux) was exhibiting Thompson's work, in an exhibition entitled *Peintre voyageur, Retour à Concarneau*, which translates as "Painter traveller, returns to Concarneau" (Galerie Gloux 2016).

Thompson's collection at Canterbury Museum

In 1968 and 1969, Sydney Lough Thompson gifted a number of objects to Canterbury Museum. The gift included four kākahu, a number of taonga Māori, several objects from Fiji and one of his paintings - a portrait of a Māori chief in a korowai (cloak) holding a pounamu (greenstone) mere (Canterbury Museum accessions register, 80/68).

The Canterbury Museum accession register records the gift as: 80/68 "Part of a group acquisition. Collection of Maori artefacts given to donor by Lake Taupo Maoris, over period 1905–1910: Carved canoe bailer of early vintage; early Kaitaka cloak; 3 Korowai cloaks specially made for donor; Taniko border sample; whale bone patu; 4 greywacke and one nephrite adzes (Taupo); 1 argillite adze, Oxford District; wooden comb and fork, Fiji. Oil portrait of Taupo chief, with portrait face tattoo, painted in 1906–7." (Canterbury Museum accessions register).

This additional object, which came to the Museum in 1969, is described in the Ethnology register as "Cloak of cabbage tree, the broad leafed, cordyline indivisa [sic], toi, made by working loops of tufts in alternate rows of weft" and "closer inspection shows weft of flax" (Canterbury Museum Ethnology register, E169.473). It is a paki or rain cape.

The 1968 gift was significant enough to be highlighted in the Museum's annual report of that year. The statement included is unusually long and gives us a considerable amount of information about the collection:

A superbly carved canoe bailer, a tribal heirloom, possibly 100 years old when obtained by the donor from the Maoris of Lake Taupo in 1910, is an outstanding item of a collection presented by the well-known New Zealand artist, 91-year-old Mr Sydney Thompson of Christchurch. Mr Thompson found himself concerned at the continuing loss of Maori artefacts which continue to leave the country despite the prohibition of the Historic Articles Act, and decided to present the bailer and other artefacts with the stipulation that they never leave the custody of the Canterbury Museum. The collection also includes an early vintage man's dress cloak with a taniko border, three women's korowai cloaks specially made during the years 1907–1910 by surviving weaving experts, and a whalebone patu. Mr Thompson also presented a portrait of an unnamed Taupo chief, with part tattoo, painted by him in 1906–1907. The donor's contacts with the Lake Taupo Maoris date to annual summer vacation painting over the years 1905–1910. Because the young Christchurch artist declined to accept any payment for portraits of the local elders he was immediately recognised as a rangitira and so treated. While the bailer, bordered cloaks, and the whalebone patu were already old when given to him, the three specially made korowai cloaks took three years in the making (Canterbury Museum 1968).

Early Māori paintings

Thompson showed an interest in painting Māori subjects early in his career, from 1898 to around 1910. It is difficult to know how many paintings of Māori subjects Thompson made, as few have known locations or exist in public collections.

Only five of these works have been identified or publicly exhibited: *Maori Mother and Child*, 1898 (Christchurch Art Gallery); *Untitled*

(*Portrait of a Maori*), 1907 (location unknown); *Portrait: Taupo Maori Chief with Mere*, 1907 (Canterbury Museum) (Fig. 1); *A Maori Belle*,



Figure 1. *Portrait: Taupo Maori Chief with Mere* Sydney Lough Thompson 1907. Canterbury Museum Ethnology register, E168.538.

1908 (location unknown) and *Aged Warrior*, 1910 (location unknown). It is likely that others are in family collections or displayed on marae as

portraits of respected tupuna (King 1990).

In 1898, he painted *Maori Mother and Child*, which is now in the collection of the



Figure 2. *Maori Mother and Child* Sydney Lough Thompson 1898. Oil on canvas, 770 x 615 mm. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu. Presented by R E McDougall, 1932.

Christchurch Art Gallery (Fig. 2). This is well before his recorded painting trips to the central North Island, so is likely influenced by the work of other painters, such as Gottfried Lindauer, who were painting Māori subjects from the 1870s. Indeed, this work appears to be influenced by Lindauer's 1878 painting *Heeni Hirini and child*, until recently called *Ana Rupene and child* (Borell 2017; Mason 2017). Lindauer's original work shows a Māori woman with moko kauae (tattoo of the lips and chin) carrying a child wrapped in a cloak on her back. While the woman and child in Thompson's work have quite different faces and expressions to the Lindauer work, there are similarities in the pose and the cloaks worn by the two women – both are mixed kākahu, edged in feathers, with black corded hukahuka and red feathers. Both women wear moko kauae and a pounamu (greenstone) ear pendant. It is not surprising that Thompson was influenced by such a popular work. The subject of a mother and child was a universal and sentimental favourite and Lindauer painted over 30 versions of this painting in his lifetime (Borell 2017; Mason 2017).

From 1906 to 1910, Thompson spent his summers in the central North Island, painting portraits of local Māori. In 1968, he gifted one of these works to Canterbury Museum. Little is known about this work, other than that it was painted in the summer of 1906–1907 and according to documentation from the time of acquisition, the sitter is an unnamed chief from Taupō. King notes that the work is “an intense realization of the man's powerful presence, painted in a style derived from northern realist tradition” and showing the influence of his training with van der Velden (King 1990).

While Thompson continued to paint portraits throughout his career, his style changed from the ‘realist tradition’ noted above to a more impressionistic style. Much of his later work depicted landscapes and seascapes (King 1990).

The story behind the kākahu

The 1968 Canterbury Museum annual report notes that Thompson was presented with four

cloaks, a canoe bailer and a whalebone patu (club) in recognition of his artistic skills and talents by the people of Ngāti Tūwharetoa. While we do not know exactly who gifted these taonga to Thompson, the provenance of another cloak owned by Thompson gives us some clues.

In 2003, Thompson's daughter Annette returned a kahu kiwi (a kiwi-feather cloak) to Ngāti Tūwharetoa. When her father gifted his other taonga to Canterbury Museum in 1968, Annette had asked to keep the cloak because of her strong attachment to the taonga. When it was time to pass it on, she decided to return it to the people who had made it. The cloak was accepted by Rangiiira Hedley on behalf of the iwi (Trevett 2003). An article in the *New Zealand Herald* from 2003 notes that the kahu kiwi was originally gifted by Hepi Kahotea Te Heuheu, son of Tureiti Te Heuheu Tukino V. Te Heuheu Tukino V was the paramount chief of Ngāti Tūwharetoa. His son Hepi was destined to follow in his father's footsteps but died of influenza in 1918 (Trevett 2003; Gartner 1996). The kahu kiwi featured kiwi and kererū feathers and symbolised the protection and affection of the Te Heuheu family (Trevett 2003).

Four kākahu (cloaks)

The next section looks more closely at the four kākahu that were gifted to Thompson in the 1900s and which were, in turn, gifted to Canterbury Museum in 1968. This section includes a master weaver's comments about the kākahu, the materials used to make them and how they were made. This updates the information previously held about the kākahu and recognises the skills of the women who made them.

There are four kākahu or cloaks in the Sydney Lough Thompson collection at Canterbury Museum. Three of the kākahu were originally described at the time of acquisition as korowai, which means they are adorned with hukahuka or kārure (rolled or twisted threads of muka, flax fibre). However, only one would now be described as a korowai, with the other two now being described as kahu kiwi – kiwi feather

cloaks. The final kākahu is a kaitaka, made of fine muka and bordered with tāniko (finger weaving) (Pendergrast 1987).

I gratefully acknowledge the knowledge of master weaver Ranui Ngarimu and expertise of Canterbury Museum Senior Curator Roger Fyfe in identifying and describing these taonga. Future conversations with the Te Heuheu family and Ngāti Tūwharetoa weavers may reveal more about these kākahu.

The first kākahu (Fig. 3) is described in the Canterbury Museum Ethnology register as “Cloak, kaitaka, small, with simple coloured textile decorations worked across on the weft and visible only on the outside. Taniko borders of intricate designs and limited colour range are wide across the bottom and narrow across the sides. The top of the cloak is damaged – frayed out where the ties and some of the decorative textile has come

completely detached. This cloak is early, TAUPO.” Its catalogue number is E168.528, indicating that it is part of the Ethnology collection and was the 528th object catalogued into that collection in 1968 (Canterbury Museum Ethnology register).

Ngāi Tahu master weaver Ranui Ngarimu describes this kaitaka as a “stunning piece of work ... [with] exquisite tāniko ... a chiefly garment” (Ngarimu pers. comm. March 2017). She notes that the kaitaka has been worn: there are signs of wear at the hip, where the garment would have rubbed against the wearer's body. There are also signs that the whenu (warp) has come away where ties would have been at the top of the kaitaka. The aho (weft) is very fine, precise and consistent, indicating a very skilled weaver. The kaitaka has puka (shaping), which means that it has been made to be worn. The whenu tāpuri (finished edges) elements are also beautifully and



Figure 3. Kaitaka. Canterbury Museum Ethnology register, E168.528.



Figure 4. Annette Thompson stands in front of her father's painting, *In my studio at Kerizett, Concarneau, Annette, Yan and Mary* in 1991. Fairfax Media NZ, *Press*.

tidily woven (Ngarimu pers. comm. March 2017). Tellingly, there are paint stains at the edges of the cloak, suggesting that Thompson kept it near him when he was painting. This is the cloak described as an “early vintage man’s dress cloak with a *taniko* border” in the Canterbury Museum annual report of 1968.

The paint splatters evident on the edges of the kaitaka are not surprising when you learn that Thompson kept this object close to hand. In a painting from 1929, the taonga he was gifted about 20 years before can be seen (Fig. 4). *In my studio at Kerizett, Concarneau, Annette, Yan and Mary* (1929) shows his children at home in Concarneau, Brittany. The *tāniko* bordered kaitaka is visible in the corner of the painting above the piano, draped over a framed painting (King 1990). It seems that Thompson treasured his gift from the Ngāti Tūwharetoa people and took it with him when he settled in France.

The second kākahu (Fig. 5), a kahu kiwi, is described in the Ethnology register as “Cloak, feather bordered and feather decorated. Border kiwi and kaka feather, decorations kiwi and other

bird feather sparsely [sic] spaced instead of flax thrums. Made especially for donor’s wife by the Taupo Maori ladies. This cloak has blue and natural textile decorated borders top and bottom and a thin yellow border on the sides. At the two top corners many threads have been left loose & long. TAUPO.” Its catalogue number is E168.529 (Canterbury Museum Ethnology register).

Ngarimu (pers. comm. March 2017) notes that this is a wide garment, carefully shaped for wear, but was perhaps designed to be worn across the body (under the arm and across the opposite shoulder), rather than around the shoulders. There is some wear and loss of feathers that would indicate this use (Ngarimu pers. comm. March 2017). She also notes the unusual purple alternating chain stitch at the bottom of this kahu kiwi. Roger Fyfe suggested this purple colour may have come from crushed indelible pencil lead (Fyfe pers. comm. April 2016). This kākahu also has some splatters of paint. All four borders have kiwi feathers with kākā underwing feathers. There are also domestic fowl feathers in diagonal rows, alternately and irregularly paired with kiwi



Figure 5. Kahu kiwi. Canterbury Museum Ethnology register, E168.529.

feathers (Fyfe pers. comm. April 2016).

The third kākahu (Fig. 6) is described in the Ethnology register as “Cloak, korowai, with feathers. Kiwi feather borders wide on sides and narrow on bottom. Row of thrums on the top. Thrums and kaka feathers sparcely [sic] spaced for decoration. Some thrums are gone. Yellow and black textile decorations on sides and bottom. Made specially for donor's wife by the Taupo Maori ladies. TAUPO.” Its catalogue number is E168.530 (Canterbury Museum Ethnology register).

This cloak is a kahu kiwi, featuring both hukahuka (often called thrums) and kiwi and kea (not kākā) underwing feathers (Ngarimu pers. comm. March 2017). Further investigation of this cloak reveals that there is no sign of wear or collar

ties, suggesting that it was only ever displayed, not worn. The body of the cloak has a pattern of alternating diagonal rows of black hukahuka and kea underwing feathers (Fyfe pers. comm. April 2016). The hukahuka were beautifully made but have broken off over time, either through wear (which is not so likely) or because of the dyes reacting with the fibre. This kākahu has some anomalies: Ngarimu wondered if the cloak had been trimmed, as the finish was not as perfect as that of the other kākahu (Ngarimu pers. comm. March 2017).

The fourth kākahu (Fig. 7) is described in the Ethnology register as “Cloak, korowai, small, with dense thrums on the top & other thrums sparcely [sic] spaced elsewhere. Has black and natural textile decorations all round, wider at the bottom.



Figure 6. Kahu kiwi. Canterbury Museum Ethnology register, E168.530.

Made specially for donor's wife by the Taupo Maori ladies. TAUPO." Its catalogue number is E168.531 (Canterbury Museum Ethnology register).

This cloak is a korowai, featuring kārure (twisted cords or tassels). This cloak is made from the finest muka. Ngarimu (pers. comm. March 2017) describes this is a "treasure ... amazing". This korowai has not been worn: there is no indication of ties or wear. The kārure would have sprung upwards towards the wearer's neck but have fallen downwards over time. Ngarimu (pers. comm. March 2017) notes that these are not true kārure: they are made with two strands, rather than the usual three. They have been coloured with paru dye, a black dye derived from mud, which is highly acidic (Wallace 2011). This garment has been made for a woman, evident by

its small size, which matches with the information given at the time of acquisition.

Ngarimu (pers. comm. March 2017) suggests that three of the cloaks were made by the same weaver, or group of weavers, due to the consistency of style and patterns. The korowai and kahu kiwi have been described in the Museum Ethnology register as being made especially for Thompson's wife Maude, although only one seems to be of a smaller, woman's size. The Museum's annual report also notes that these kākahu were delivered to Thompson's home in Christchurch after 3 years of work, a sign of the time required to make such fine pieces (Canterbury Museum 1968).

Sydney Lough Thompson was gifted precious taonga as a sign of the esteem in which he was held by the people of Ngāti Tūwharetoa due to his artistic talents and commitment to returning



Figure 7. Korowai. Canterbury Museum Ethnology register, E168.531.

to the area to paint its people. Thompson's respect and admiration for the people he knew and painted is reflected in the care he took of the taonga that were gifted to him. The kākahu travelled with him around the world, even appearing in a painting of his children. He chose to gift the taonga to Canterbury Museum before his death because he wanted the taonga to remain in his home region.

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