

XI. *History writ large*

TAYLOR WAS SOON ABLE to put into practice his recently acquired mural techniques. Almost immediately on his return he was commissioned to design several, in addition to the offer made while he was away. These included commemorative windows for the Otaki War Memorial Hall, the Khandallah Presbyterian Church, and the combined New Plymouth War Memorial Hall, Museum and Library. The first offer asked him to submit designs for a relief sculpture for the NIMU Building, then being constructed in Wellington under the architectural supervision of Maurice Patience. This was an opportunity to design and carve a highly stylised Maori figure, based on the *pare* (carved lintel) which was, once accepted by the owners, then cast in bronze and fixed over the building's entrance.

His designs for the memorial windows called for the pictorial representations to be sandblasted into the surface of heavy, opaque plate glass, a technique he had seen in Hawaii. He was necessarily at an experimental stage since work on this scale had not previously been attempted by any artist in New Zealand, nor had Taylor worked with glass before. But the representation of the *Ascension* in the Khandallah church, and the war memorial windows in Otaki, were successful and widely admired.

His third major work in glass, however, required a somewhat different approach. The New Plymouth building was designed by a local architect, Edgar Collins. He had been prompted to offer the job to Taylor on the strength, as he told the artist, of six years earlier buying several of his animal linocuts. Collins wanted a strong design and felt Taylor would be able to achieve one, so he offered him the commission, subject to design approval, in July 1959. The main part of the commission, a feature

wall in the war memorial, was awkwardly placed on the wall of the return stairwell of the entrance flight (at the point where the stairs turned at right angles). Essentially, the glass wall would be 3.3 by 1.8 metres high and lit from behind so viewers would see the full design as they walked up or down the stairs. His design had therefore to make visual sense from both perspectives. Collins required a deep-cut glass wall whose theme had to represent historical Taranaki "as being the place from which those whom this memorial commemorates left for overseas service and who did not return".¹ The design would have



Above: *Scissors*, Maori figure, boxwood engraving, 1954.
Left: bronze relief for the NIMU building, Wellington, 1959.
Opposite: *Maui* escape from *Mahuika*, boxwood engraving, 1956.

to be approved by a committee, likely to be a difficult business, he warned, because it was made up of local councillors – each of whom, Collins cheerfully added, would have their own opinions as to what constituted art as well as which elements should be incorporated in the final design. Collins was himself sympathetic and understanding of all these problems, having had much experience negotiating pathways through the minefield of local burghers' opinions.

“New Plymouth is, conservatively speaking, quite lacking in open minds,” the architect wrote to Taylor, “but we have piloted a number of ideas in this building which are to locals revolutionary, and elsewhere would not appear so startling.”² He offered the artist a free hand – then expressed approval of the preliminary sketches.

Taylor decided to visit the site (and while in New

Plymouth gave an illustrated talk to members of the Taranaki Architectural Society and the Taranaki Arts Society) and was able to submit a revised final design by December 1959. This showed Mt Egmont (Taranaki) prominent, surrounded by the rolling dairy farmland, elements of the cityscape and symbols of war and peace. Collins, responding to the sensitivities of his committee in this dairy farming district, suggested a cow be moved into the foreground so it would more strongly reflect the importance of the industry to the province, and after this was done the design was approved. Also featured in it was a carved taiaha (stave) which Taylor often used to represent war. It was typical of his meticulous approach to Maori subjects that he first researched the history of the distinctive Taranaki carving style so that this design, too, could be authentic.

Early settlers ~ Masterton Post Office mural created in glazed ceramic tiles in 1960.



New Plymouth liked his work and the Government Architect Gordon Wilson arranged for another job almost immediately - to design the glass atrium ceiling of the nearby Chief Post Office. This, when completed, was highly unusual in that it was made from sections which, when assembled in the ceiling of a central light well, showed the design of a Taranaki Maori warrior and a symbolic Southern Cross star group, viewed by customers looking upwards into the natural well of light. In 1996 this work was saved from destruction by the efforts of the New Plymouth Heritage Protection Group and others after the eminent resident painter and sculptor, Don Driver, expressed his concern. The building's new owners, the ANZ Banking Group, were refurbishing the interior and had planned to cover the ceiling, but public feeling persuaded them to preserve most of Taylor's work for all to see. The Heritage Protection Group pointed out that the mural was of national artistic importance.

Taylor was not to be so fortunate with several other major works he created during the next few years, which have since been witlessly destroyed or covered over.

Wilson had been gradually able to influence acceptance of the idea of placing art in public buildings since he became Government Architect in 1950. He now began to arrange more work for his friend - when money could be found. One was a mural for the lobby in the Masterton Post Office, which was completed in 1960. This feature, 4.4 metres square, was made of glazed ceramic tiles. A historical theme was interpreted by the artist to include some fifteen figures, including a representative Maori carrying a taiaha set against a symbolic landscape of native bush, its destruction by fire by the European settlers to make farm land, and the development of the farms that followed. A horse-drawn coach was prominent, as was a typical New Zealand farm worker - the Border Collie cross sheepdog.

Taylor produced another ceramic tile mural for the nearby Masterton War Memorial Hall, *Lest We Forget* (page 82), in which all the elements were to do with warfare but, boldly placed, also included a brilliant example of the artist's design skills: a dove of peace shadowing a four-engined bomber. Part of this commission also required a glass mosaic for the interior of the hall, and the artist this

time produced specifications for a special kind of glass, manufactured in Venice.

By the early 1960s mural painting had become the major part of Taylor's work, as he had hoped, although he still needed to exhibit regularly to earn income from watercolours, the remaining engravings, and his wood sculptures. The demand for murals, previously virtually non-existent in New Zealand, reflected greater prosperity and interest in art in public buildings, as well as an awareness of what was happening with public art in buildings overseas.³

Another major commission referred back to his interest in Maori legends. He was asked to design a ceramic tile mural on the theme of Maui for the foyer of a large public building in Auckland, the Commonwealth Pacific Cable Building. This was another job secured through Wilson and for it Taylor adapted the legend of Maui fishing up the North Island. He used a vigorous, original design to link the legend of Maui's fishing line with the telephone cable connecting New Zealand to the world. The *Dominion*, which in 1962 published an illustration of the work Taylor called *Te Ika a Maui*, described it as being of striking beauty and one of the artist's outstanding works. It was certainly one of Taylor's most fluid designs (page 81).

He had several other murals in preparation, two in particular giving him memorable experiences. He and his by now teenage son Terence (who, having drawn and painted all his life, often assisted his father) travelled to the northern Hawke's Bay town of Wairoa to paint another historical mural for the Wairoa Centennial Library. When he was working Taylor had little concept of time and would often continue through the night if things were going well. He and his son were painting one Sunday afternoon when the local police constable, evidently a stickler for the rules, saw them and ordered them to cease work. No 'manufacturing' could take place on Sundays, the law said, and in his opinion painting a mural was 'manufacturing'. At the suggestion of the constable, Taylor pasted paper in the library windows lest the citizens of Wairoa witness them working on the Sabbath. Then he and Terence got on with it.

A second experience consolidated his reputation among Maori for being a sensitive, accurate interpreter



A bone carving, below, 'Tau' some of Taylor's sketches from the Dominion Museum, researching

