

The carvings based on Maori designs in particular have special significance. The pre-European Maori had no written language so tribal history and the stories of the gods were kept using many forms of fine arts and crafts ranging from basket and cloth weaving to complex wood, bone, shell and jade carving. These artifacts were then handed down through generations of tribal elders and became sacred objects or treasures "Taonga", telling the history of a tribe and taking on the spirits of past great leaders and warriors who had worn them.

It is believed that a carving which is worn with respect or given and received with love, takes on part of the spirit of those who wear or handle it. In this way it becomes a spiritual link between people spanning time and distance. A carving that has been worn by family or tribal members over many generations contains the spirit of all of those people and is truly a great and powerful treasure.

Pendants, jewelry and various tools such as needles, spear tips and fish hooks made from bone developed into a fine art form with great importance being placed on every piece, many of which took years to make using stone tools. Some have inlays of precious stones or colourful shell and all have a story or meaning behind their design. The Maori have a great respect for nature and have many legends about the creation of the earth and all its inhabitants. Many of these legends revolve around the spirits or gods who created or protect each part of their world such as the mountains, the forests, the lakes and the creatures of the sea. Most carvings combine elements from several areas of mythology which interact with each other to tell a story. Each element has its own specific meaning and the way they are portrayed or combined is what gives a carving its own special character.

The meanings of some elements vary from region to region but all share common roots.

The spiral is a Koru, represents the fern frond as it opens bringing new life and purity to the world. It also represents peace, tranquility and spirituality along with a strong sense of regrowth or new beginnings. The Koru is also often associated with nurturing so when interlocked with others is frequently used to represent the strength and purity of a loving relationship within a family.

Hei-Matau: These very stylized fish hooks represent strength, prosperity, abundance, fertility and a great respect for the sea.

It also is said to provide good luck and safety when traveling over water so is often worn by travelers. Hei-Matau are also symbols of power and authority which are held in great reverence by the Maori people.

They were used as a practical tool for fishing and were often decorated as a sign of respect for the creatures of the sea. There are many styles of Hei-Matau from the true hook designs to the more ornamental styles which became treasured heirlooms for generations following.

Circle: The closed circle is said to represent the circle of life which is has no beginning or end, is seamless and of which we are all a part. It also tells of the stars and planets which are part of the circle of life and contain the knowledge of our origins. It is often used to enclose other elements such as the Koru, linking love and new life or new beginnings with the circle of life. For an artist the circle represents the relationship or oneness between the artist and his craft, bringing together head, hand and heart.

Twist: The twist with its crisscross form represents the many paths of life and love and as such is regarded as the original eternity symbol. The single twist in particular shows the joining together of two people for eternity. Even though they sometimes move away from each other on their own journeys, they will always come together again sharing their lives and blending to become one. It tells how the strength of bond of friendship, loyalty and love will last forever.

The double and triple twists have a similar meaning but refer more to the joining of two peoples or cultures rather than individuals.

They also refer the three baskets of knowledge.