



TOI NGĀPUHI

FEATURED TOI NGĀPUHI CREATIVE



FEATURED:

ALEX NATHAN - LAST MAN STANDING
NGĀPUHI, TE ROROA, NGĀTI WHĀTUA

Alex Nathan is a leading silversmith jeweller, negotiator, activist and conservationist.

After working for many years as a chief Treaty of Waitangi negotiator on behalf of his iwi, Te Roroa, he is now taking time to concentrate on his artwork and to spend time with his mokopuna.

Alex was born in 1946 to parents Ned and Katina. The story of Ned and Katina's relationship is a dramatic one and much told including by Patricia Grace in *Ned and Katina: A True Love Story*. Ned was in the 28th Māori Battalion when he met Katina following the Battle of

Crete. After the war, he returned to Katina's village where they married and before coming back to New Zealand to settle and raise three sons in Wellington.

The whānau that Alex was born into is rich in both Māori and Cretan history and his whakapapa has always been integral to the way Alex has lived his life. Alex and his brothers were Māori boys who spoke Greek and had deep knowledge both of their father's history from Northland and their mother's Cretan background.



ABOVE: *Nā Tāne te Iringa*, Manawa Exhibition 2005, Spirit Wrestler Gallery, Vancouver BC

Alex thinks that he first began his creative journey at boarding school in Wellington when he began to whittle pieces of wood into various forms. When he left school he worked in several places around Wellington before he got the call to head north to live with Māori Marsden and his whānau. This is where he began to learn how to 'garden the land', and this work of bringing the land back has remained an essential part of life to this day. It was also during this time that Alex started to gain knowledge and experience as an artist.

In the early years of his practice, Alex worked as a carver and also used materials such as bone and stone to create his art. In 1991, Alex took part in a workshop organised by Te Waka Toi and led by American Hopi silversmith artist, Michael Kabotie. Not only did this lead to a long-standing friendship and collaborative partnership but it also led to a change in the way Alex was working. Michael introduced Alex to the traditional Hopi overlay method of constructing jewellery and his work since then has encompassed this way of making jewellery and pieces of art while always looking to his own background.

Another significant milestone for Alex and many other Māori artists was a symposium at Apumoana Marae in Rotorua in 1995 run by Toi Māori.

Attending were 35 international indigenous artists and 42 Māori artists and this set in motion bonds and networks across indigenous arts communities that are still active today. It also set in motion wānanga that have continued every two years in places around the Pacific Rim.

Alex has said of his practice:



My work reflects an evolving process of adaptation and exploration of traditional Māori designs and motifs drawn from whakairo, kowhaiwhai, tukutuku and taniko using the non-traditional medium. Pieces are constructed from sterling silver sheet and wire and they feature hand carved finishing.

Alex's exquisite pieces which are made from materials such as silver, copper, semi-precious stones as well as bone and shell are held in very high regard and have sold nationally and internationally. His work has been shown in many exhibitions over the years, including overseas in Canada, Japan, the United States of America and within New Zealand at Te Papa Tongarewa and Toi Matarau Gallery which is an online gallery located with the Māoriland hub in Ōtaki.

Special exhibitions that Alex has taken part in were 'Fusion: Tradition and Discover' in 1999 and 'Kiwa - Pacific Connections' 2003. Both of these were at the Spirit Wrestler Gallery in Vancouver Canada and there were others at this gallery that Alex took part in. As part of his collaborative partnership with Michael Kabotie, in 2008 Alex exhibited in a 2-man show at the Glenn Green Gallery in Tesuque. This was essentially a Master and Apprentice Show but sadly Michael passed away soon after this exhibition.

As well as creating and exhibiting the finest jewellery, Alex has been involved in many other projects over the years. He worked as part of a larger team on the massive rock carvings carried out around Lake Taupo in the late 1970s.

Alex also worked with his artist brother Manos and others on a very large project - the relocation, deconstruction and then reconstruction of St Peter's Catholic Church which was originally located at Te Kōpuru and built by French missionaries. Ned, Alex's father purchased the deconsecrated church in 1981 and it was moved to Waipoua and became the whare on Matatina Marae. This is the main building that was officially opened on 18 August 1988.

One of Alex's most complex and long-standing 'projects' was becoming a negotiator in Te Roroa's Treaty Settlement claim. In the 1880s, the Crown had initiated the alienation of land from Te Roroa and so they lost much of their estate. Initially, Ned Nathan lodged the claim on behalf of their iwi but when he became ill, Alex and Manos put the claim into their names. When this process moved into the negotiations phase, Alex and four others became the negotiators.

It was a difficult, complex and at times hostile time for these negotiators. Not only were they dealing with change after change in the Crown team of people they were negotiating with but they bore the brunt of a racist movement led by a local farmer who lied and also took to vandalism to protest. It took 13 years of unpaid negotiation to finally settle and by then Alex was the only Te Roroa negotiator left - the last man standing.

Alex needed a complete break after this fairly difficult period of time and in 2011 he took his whānau back to Crete to reconnect with their maternal line of ancestry. He was also able to go back to his art and as well as continuing to make beautiful jewellery pieces, he took part in various exhibitions and worked with others to initiate cultural exchanges in the USA and in Canada.



TOP: Papa John Klaracich and Alex Nathan
ABOVE: *Koiri*, 2006, Spirit Wrestler Gallery, Vancouver BC

In both 2014 and 2018 he took part in the Toi Ngāpuhi exhibitions which were part of the larger Ngāpuhi Festivals. In 2018, he was one of 80 leading artists ranging from emerging to senior practitioners who submitted works on the theme 'Ko au te wai, ko te wai, ko au - I am the water, and the water is me.'

Alex is still very involved with his community in Northland particularly with those caring for the land and natural resources. He is Chairperson of the Waipoua Forest Trust which has as its mandate to protect and restore the Waipoua kauri forest. As well, he still gardens his land, makes his jewellery and is very involved in his whānau.



TOI NGĀPUHI

Inspiring excellence in
Ngāpuhi cultural and
creative expression
across Te Taitokerau

Te whakaoho i te ihiihi,
mō te kounga o ngā
tikanga, me ngā
auahatanga o Ngāpuhi,
puta noa i Te Taitokerau.

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