Roger Neich. Photograph by Krzysztof Pfeiffer, Auckland Museum.

Roger Neich was a member Polynesian Society Council, a recipient of the Society’s Elsdon Best Memorial Medal and a frequent contributor to the JPS. A publication is in preparation what will provide a detailed account of Roger’s research, publications and other achievements. Rather than echo that record, I take this opportunity to share some personal memories from over a decade and a half as Roger’s colleague in the Ethnology section at the Auckland War Memorial Museum.

Roger came to the Museum in 1986 to take up the position of Ethnologist. In August 1992 I started my two year curatorial internship at Auckland guided by Roger, and working alongside then Ethnology Assistant, the late Mick Pendergrast, and Assistant Ethnologist, Te Warena Taua.

Roger led his small team by example. He could be found either carrying out archival research in the library or constructing polypropylene storage boxes in the work room or registering objects in the department or vacuuming the storeroom floor. He had a strong egalitarian work ethic which made an
immediate and lasting impression on me. A man of great generosity, deep humility and wealth of knowledge, Roger was always a little bemused to be lauded for the intrinsic values that he unconsciously applied.

The better I came to know Roger the more significant became the snippet of a poem he had long ago pinned above his desk. All those who have visited Roger’s museum office will be familiar with it.

Do not hurry the journey at all.
Better that it should last many years;
Be quite old when you anchor at the island,
Rich with all you have gained on the way.
Not expecting Ithaca to give you riches.
Ithaca has given you your lovely journey.
Without Ithaca you would not have set out.

This verse of Cavafy’s poem *Return to Ithaca* has hung in his office for so long the slip of paper has become brittle and curled at the edges, its shape imprinted on the faded cork board. It speaks to one of life’s ideals I know Roger took to heart.

Roger loved to travel. Whether to present his latest research, to consult with colleagues overseas, or to attend auctions or private sales, Roger took those opportunities to build in side trips to follow up his many research interests. Mick and I would use Roger’s absences in the vain attempt to match his output. We usually managed to at least be propelled forward in his slipstream registering new acquisitions, putting objects into storage, and upgrading data files and records. And just as we’d settle to our own research and writing, Roger would appear with several half sketched articles of his own and a briefcase full of information for other papers.

Beyond the Pacific and Māori material, Greek, Roman, Indian and Buddhist art were of great interest to Roger. To view works of renown first hand, to experience form, mastery of material and aesthetic intent, for him went hand-in-hand with theoretical considerations. Writing, particularly about non-Western art, helped inform his thinking and writing about Pacific and Māori art. Roger often spoke of his debt to his mentor Nelson Graburn, who encouraged his students to take a broad approach to art and material culture.

Graburn’s work on folk and tourist art and the work of Bill Holm on the analysis of form in Northwest Coast Indian art were significant early influences on his own consideration of art from our Pacific region. And so while a PhD student at the University of California, Berkeley, Roger and his family made many excursions to First Nations reservations, gatherings, exhibitions and galleries.
Roger’s first degree was a BSc in Geology and Zoology. Armed with that qualification he got a job as a geologist for the Australian Bureau of Mineral Resources in Port Moresby in the mid-1960s. While there he observed the many canoes that would come in to Port Moresby to trade or buy and sell produce. He marvelled at their different types of construction and was amazed at the diversity of dress and languages around him. He wondered about people’s lives in their villages after a day in town. In the Highlands, Roger was intrigued by the costumes and the ceremonial exchanges being enacted. He often said he had resolved then to return to New Zealand and take up studies in anthropology. The rest, as they say, is history.

Roger never took for granted the position that allowed him to indulge his passion, and his passion was the material expressions of culture. He spoke often to me of not losing the object in the writing up, and would point out examples of verbose and mystifying art texts or dry academic descriptions of stunning works of art. Roger read widely and his knowledge of Pacific and Māori publications old and new was prodigious. Mick and I kept testing him by bringing books to his attention in hope that he did not know of them. In 15 years, we succeeded six times.

One could not help but be affected by Roger’s enthusiasm. He was equally moved by old whare nui and Buddhist temples as he was by Banks Island nalot pounders and Aboriginal flaked glass arrowheads. For Roger the monumental was less about scale and more the realisation of an ideal; the power of objects for him was in the harmony of cultural ideals and aesthetic expression. He believed one could not be understood without the other.

His enthusiasm was at times almost childlike; he would at times buzz with excitement when acquiring items for the collections. I remember the wonderfully unique model waka taua obtained in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Roger could hardly contain himself as he prepared to go to bring the canoe back himself. Whether he was hunting down waka taua, Nukuoro figures or, as he later did, the collectors themselves, anticipation hummed around the office with each of Roger’s successive projects.

Possessed of an easy going temperament, very little fazed Roger. The very few times I saw him angry and exasperated was in the face of cultural intolerance and ignorance. I recall when, soon after I arrived at the Museum, he and I attended a concept presentation for the new children’s social history learning centre. The central theme of the centre was to be “Grandfather’s Attic”. “Grandfather” would be a generic person who visitors could identify as one of their own ancestors. Spatial design would reflect the attic of treasures grandfather had picked up on his international travels. The attic, we were informed, could be found in any one of the established homes in nearby
affluent Parnell. The family’s wealth, the narrative continued, came from the successful business established by this ancestor in the mid-19th century when he arrived in New Zealand from England.

I was speechless, fortunately Roger rarely was. Roger queried: “How would the African cultures be dealt in this context? Where are the Chinese stories? How will you talk about Māori culture and history within this framework?” Another curator suggested that “they could marry in” or “their stories can be told through grandfather’s mementoes”. Aside from the prevalent monocultural views expressed, what disturbed him more was that these were views held by senior museum staff.

Roger passionately believed that New Zealand museums should be world leaders in negotiating issues of biculturalism. The commitment, as he saw it, would be through the articulation and prominence given to Māori voices in exhibitions and displays, the value afforded Māori world views in changing management structures, and active engagement in training Māori to care for *taonga* within museums and galleries. As sites for forging new relationships and approaches, museums were undermined by concepts such as “Grandfather’s Attic”, and by narrow visions of the public role of museums in a multi-cultural New Zealand society.

Perhaps the jewel in Roger’s career crown was his appointment in 2000 to a personal chair in the University of Auckland Anthropology Department in recognition of his research and scholarship. For Roger the appointment was an acknowledgement of the assistance received from his mentors, *iwi* elders and colleagues. But first and foremost it was recognition for the unwavering and loving support of his family, of his daughter Kay and especially his wife Sene, without whom his lovely journey would not have been as rich.

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