

Ink, iron and everything in between: Graham Tipene's wide influence

Artist Graham Tipene's involvement in bringing the Māori world, te ao, to Tāmaki Makaurau has made him one of the most sought-after contributors to crown and council led projects.

When people refer to Graham Tipene as a tattoo artist, he usually lets it slide. He understands it's a sweeping term that makes it easier for the layperson to comprehend. That is until they enter his studio. Then he sets them straight on tā moko.

"Tā moko has geneology, history, whakapapa and connection to the land and people," Tipene explains. "Tattooing is sometimes just a pretty picture and skin. We don't give people a book for them to choose number 25 in red..."

Tipene takes his art seriously – and it's easy to understand why. His designs are both figuratively the face of Auckland and literally on the faces of Auckland.



His passion for traditional Māori design was fostered by the woman he called mum, his biological mother's cousin who adopted him at birth. "She planted the seed, just waited to see what the skill set was and drawing was it."

"She pushed me into art classes and the reo I learnt from her at home."

It was at her insistence that Tipene attended a wide range of kaupapa on the marae. "We were always going to funerals, meetings, ceremonies...in houses with weavers with a room full of flax and they'd sit there and weave all day. My job was to sit there, listen and make cups of tea."

Tipene says it was only in later years he realised it was his mum's way of teaching him, which made the path he chose "a no brainer." It's helped establish an understanding of the culture that's guided his outlook on life.

“You have to accept it (Māori culture) as a whole and take a holistic approach to creativity, the reo and our design work. If you make connections to everything, that’s where you find actually everything we’re doing - no matter how big or small - if it’s still connected, then that’s awesome.”

Tipene can even place the moment, as a nine-year-old, that he first knew tā moko was his calling. “My mum was the caretaker at Gladstone Primary. She’d give me the keys to open the junior block and I always did it in minutes, which gave me about a 15 minute window to sit in the junior block and draw,” Tipene reminisces. “I remember drawing my first matoaroa - just squiggles on a face at the time - I realised this is what I want to do when I get older.”

While he was studying and practicing Māori art at AUT from 1996 – “just designing for other people” - Tipene didn’t make the leap into picking up tools with tā moko until 2007. “It was always going to happen,” Tipene states. “I just needed to find the right person to push me.

“Everyone was saying ‘you can do it’, but I found the right person who said ‘you can do it and I’m going to help you’. That was Katz Maihi.



“I didn’t need to be pushed blindly, he pushed but was with me every step of the way and I think we need people like that to help others to come through and do it right. ”

It led to the establishment of the Te Wheke Moko Design Studio, which is garnered a reputation he is proud of but the Ngāti Whātua artist says it didn’t come easily. “I got into right before I understood Instagram and how Facebook could help – the younger ones, they understand that stuff, I had to figure that out later.

“Getting a name for yourself back then was harder. These days you can do it pretty much instantly, back in the old days it was harder, word of mouth was about it.

It’s paid off. His artistry has opened plenty of doors – including into civic architecture. Tipene has played a key role in bring Māori kaupapa into some key features around Auckland, including the Waterview tunnel, Victoria Park and Auckland Library.

The transition from ink to iron may not seem an obvious one, but it fits Tipene’s philosophy. “Every design opportunity I get, whatever we do, wherever we do it, has a holistic approach to it,” he says.

“They’re not picking just the water, just the bush, just the people – it has connection. It gives everything some kiko, some context.”



The design work is where things get more challenging. “Civil construction, they like things that are repetitive and mirror each other, although that’s fine, it’s just too easy.

“So I like to try make it harder (laughs), at least know what’s possible. I always ask the project manager what hasn’t been done, and say cool, let’s do that.”

The work that stands out the most to Tipene is the Tiirohanga Whānui walking and cycle bridge in Albany – but the main reason isn’t the award-winning quality of the project, rather what happened after the work and the conversation it started.

Tipene was overlooked on the list of invitees for the 2019 Auckland Architecture Awards when the project was recognised, and felt he needed to speak up for Māori artists.

“It brought to light, OK, they want the Māori design when it suits them, but when it comes to the awards night, ah we don’t have to acknowledge that part of it.

“Once it got addressed, everything’s fine now.”

Tipene’s involvement in the arts reaches far further than ink and iron. He’s heavily involved in governance as well, proving he’s an artist who just can’t sit still.

“My missus hates it,” he laughs. “If I see something my skillset can help enhance, then I’m going to offer and I’m going to accept offers. If I can, I will.”

As well as sitting on the board of the Auckland Arts Festival, Tipene’s particularly proud of his involvement in Ngā Rangatahi Toa (NRT) – a programme that uses creativity and education to help give young people an opportunity to grow that they otherwise wouldn’t have.



It’s a continuation of his home-grown values. “My mum knew it, there’s no such thing as a bad kid, just on the wrong path. We had lots of people coming through our house all the time,” Tipene enthuses. “I thought I could help rangatahi by helping guide the board at governance level. I’ve got an open heart for rangatahi, and rangatahi that want to be leaders - ones that make right choices - let’s help keeping them make right choices. If we look after these kids and show them some love, it will be possible for them.” Rather than conform to governance and civil structure, Tipene still gets a kick out of confronting the norm with his work.

“I love pushing boundaries. The passion to make things cooler, the passion to make people go ‘how the hell did they do that?’ The passion to make people go, ‘that’s the new path that we’re going to take.’

“Make what’s hard easy, then find something hard to do. That’s pretty much what I try to do.”

Artists are more than used to books being judged by their cover – it’s essentially part of their brief. But in Tipene’s case, how he is judged isn’t always within his control.

“The minute someone walks out of my studio with my artwork in their skin, that’s my name on the line. So I have to tell people ‘when you walk out of here, you gotta lay off the pork, no swimming for two weeks, don’t scratch it...you mess that up, I look stupid.’”

So take that as a gentle warning to those who want to become one of Tipene’s walking exhibitions, of which there will be many in 2020. Tipene’s excited about a range of collaborations in the coming year, including putting his imprint on another Auckland icon, Myers Park in the CBD.

Images Courtesy of Graham Tipene

Head Shot: Waiheke High Student project

Mahi Shot at Ngati Hine Festival 2019

Shoulder Piece 2019