



The green dream

Used by the Maori to create weapons and iconic symbols, jade is enshrined in New Zealand's culture. Now, sculptors use it to create stunning works of art. Mark Andrews explores its history

The diamond-tipped drill whirrs as it cuts into the hard green stone. I feel a sympathy pang in my tooth as Gordon Wells, of New Zealand's Just Jade Experience, cuts a circle from a huge slab of the green precious stone with surgical precision, then watch as he skilfully shapes the piece with his high-speed grinding. Next, with a series of ever-finer grades of sandpaper, he smooths the surface to create a glossy finish: a laborious process taking up to four hours.

When finished, the light seems to glow from each piece – captured within the translucent green stone that is strangely warm to handle, almost as though it's alive. Even the most sinuous curves and complex symbols appear somehow organic – as though the design was already sitting at the heart of the gemstone, just waiting to be uncovered.

But modern tools have transformed jade carving. It was much tougher for the first Maori settlers, who prized

the precious green substance as much as we do today. To work it, they were forced to strike the jade with hammer stones, which would leave it vulnerable to breaking – or, later, would saw at it with files or grind it flat using *hoanga* (grindstones).

AN ENDURING LOVE

Known as *pounamu* to the Maori, New Zealand nephrite jade has long been prized for its enduring qualities – its toughness and beauty, says Dougal Austin, curator of Mātauranga Māori at Te Papa, the National Museum of New Zealand.

Many of the decorative pieces you see today at craftsmen's workshops are contemporary interpretations

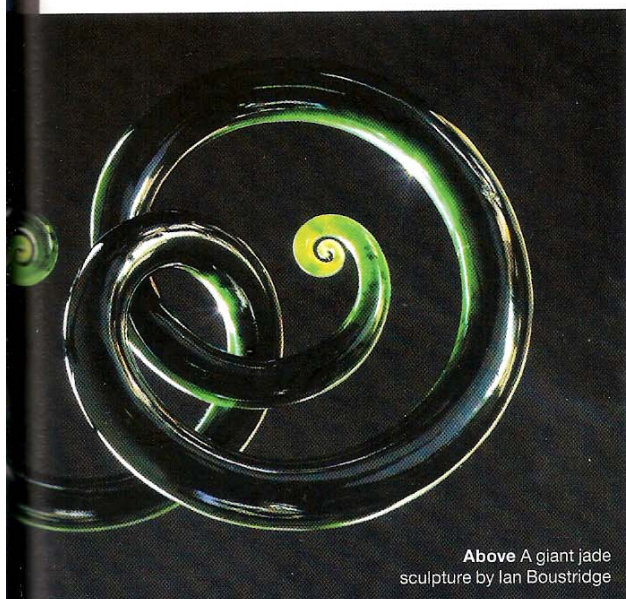
The light seems to glow from
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of traditional Maori designs, carved for centuries. However, when the first European explorers came to New Zealand and saw Maori people wearing *pounamu* they didn't even realise what it was. They called it greenstone – still a commonly used term.

WHERE TO FIND IT

Geologically active New Zealand is a prime site for the precious stone. As the Pacific and Indian/Australian tectonic plates clashed, pushing up the 650-kilometre spine of the Southern Alps along South Island, jade worked its way to the surface. Rivers and glaciers separated the gemstone from the rock and scattered it in the form of vast boulders along rivers.

New Zealand jade (nephrite) is only found on the South Island. The area known as Westland on the sparsely populated west coast is its main source, with >>



Above A giant jade sculpture by Ian Boustridge

Left: www.janboustidge.com, far left: Tourism New Zealand, above: Shutterstock

Above A necklace with a *koru* jade symbol represents new life and peace

Left Jade is cut with surgical precision to make intricate designs such as this

Far left Frequently made into items of jewellery, jade is prized for its beauty

Meet the sculptors

Renowned New Zealand sculptor, Ian Boustridge, says jade is a fabulous medium for artistic expression, being the most easily carved of gemstones, as well as having translucence and coming in a range of different colours."

Gordon Wells of the Just Jade Experience agrees, "It's a treasure; every rock is a piece just waiting to be carved," he says.

Both artists began jade carving due to the influence of art teachers at school. As a teenager, Ian was also interested in archaeology and kept himself busy by exploring old gold mine workings, where he found pieces of jade, a by-product of the mining process. Inspired by his finds and a tiki jade carving owned by his father, he began heading along the mountain streams looking for the gemstone.

After leaving school in the 1970s both men became jade carvers. Ian set up his own workshop and studied traditional Maori, Chinese and pre-Columbian designs, largely teaching himself how to carve. "Jade represents the essence of New Zealand, reflecting the flora, fauna and water of the islands," he says.

Gordon first began helping tourists carve their own jade pieces when, 13 years ago, a German tourist badgered her way into his studio. Soon afterwards he started the Just Jade Experience, teaching visitors about the art of carving.

"It's about bringing out the beauty of the stone," says Gordon, who these days, mainly carves subjects associated with the sea. His source of inspiration is never far away, as his workshop is a stone's throw from the waves.

Ian has few problems sourcing jade, as his job also involves prospecting for the stone. The last person in New Zealand to hold an extraction license, he has amassed a large quantity of jade from remote locations, and now works as a consultant for the *Ngai Tahu* (the authority of the principal Maori *iwi* (tribe) of the Greenstone Isle – New Zealand's South Island. Ian also differs from Gordon in his style of work; while he still produces stunning jewellery, both contemporary, avante-garde and traditional, he is now working on sculpting pieces on a grand scale – including vast, architectural-style carvings.

USEFUL CONTACTS

■ **Ian Boustridge – Jade Sculptor.**

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■ **Gordon Wells – The Just Jade Experience.**

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large concentrations around the Taramakau and Arahura rivers and on the coast, with more around the Lake Wakatipu area of Otago. However, Bowenite – an iron-magnesium compound that looks very similar to jade – is only found near the entrance to Milford Sound.

Above Gordon Wells uses a diamond tipped drill to cut into the jade

Below right Ian Boustridge shifts the huge green jade boulders strewn along the river banks

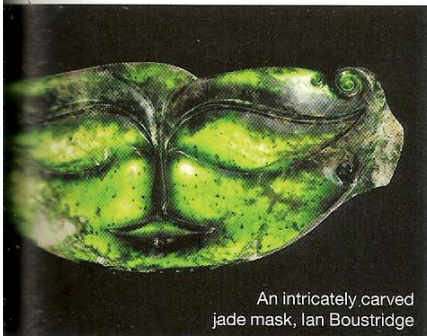
MAORI TRADITIONS

Pounamu is an important part of Maori culture, and may even explain why the first Maori settlers chose to inhabit New Zealand. One story says that Kupe and Ngahue, the discoverers of Aotearoa (Maori for NZ), took it back to their tribes, and this was made into the tools used to construct the canoes bringing the first settlers. In Westland along the thickly forested banks of tumbling rivers – the first Maori came across the prized *pounamu*. They soon realised its worth. Chisels, knives and adzes were commonly created from it, as well as ornaments,

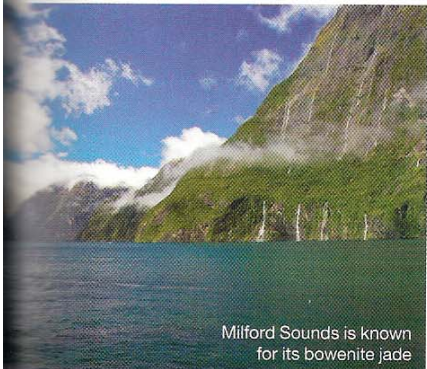
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the strength and durability of the stone making it ideal for the purpose. Jade became widespread throughout the different tribes in Aotearoa, and is still considered by Maori to be *tapu* (sacred) and to possess *mana* (status).

Each tribe had items it used to symbolise chieftainship. The most important – the *mere pounamu* (or *patu pounamu*) – was a kind of club carried by the chief to symbolise authority, along with the *toki poutangata* – a



An intricately carved jade mask, Ian Boustridge



Milford Sounds is known for its bowenite jade

Maori carved symbols

Maori jewellery is made from both bone and pounamu.

However, jade's scarcity and difficulty to carve gave it mana (status). There are many designs, but here are some of the most common ones...

HEI TIKI was worn close to the throat to absorb the life force of its wearer. It's in the image of a distorted human sitting in a squat legged position.

The head is extremely large with the mouth set to either the right or left. The abdomen is

relatively large and the hands rest on the legs.

These days, it's usually worn by women and is taken to be some form of fertility charm due to the *tiki's* embryonic look.

The **HEI MATAU** forms the shape of a fish hook, and is linked to the myth of the formation of Aotearoa. The story goes that Maui, a demi-god, went fishing using a hook baited with blood.

He caught a huge fish which, when pulled to the surface, became the North Island. The South

Island is the canoe from which he used to fish.

Particularly useful for those undertaking a voyage over water, it's a good-luck talisman representing strength and determination, and brings peace, prosperity and good health to those wearing it.

KORU forms the shape of a fern frond and symbolizes new life, peace and tranquillity.

MANAIA is part man, part bird and is regarded, among other things in folklore, as a tribal guardian acting against evil forces.



HEI TIKI



HEI MATAU



KORU

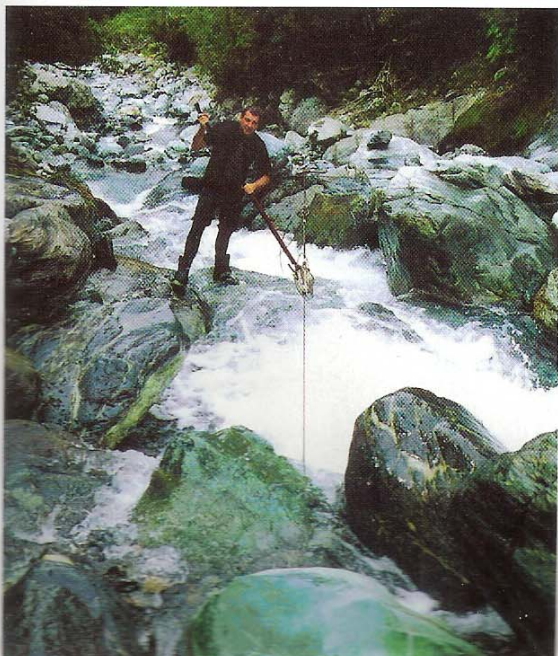


MANAIA

war adze mainly used on ceremonial occasions. Various tribal heirlooms made of jade would be passed from generation to generation. Jade items were also frequently exchanged as part of peace agreements between tribes.

GREEN SPACES

Tē waipounamu (the waters of greenstone) is the traditional Maori name for South Island. South western New Zealand was known as *te wahipounamu*, the place of greenstone. The *Ngāti Wairangi* tribe were the original occupiers of the greenstone area. However, the *Ngai Tahu* – a rival tribe – gained control at a later date. After the 1860s, the Crown restricted the tribe's access to the pounamu: a point of much contention. However, since



1997, full legal ownership of pounamu has returned to the Maori. The Mawhera Incorporation controls jade from the Arahura river catchment, and the *Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu* control all other deposits. "Pounamu remains of great cultural value to Maori today and is a cultural icon to New Zealanders as a whole," says Austin.

The thriving greenstone industry in New Zealand today owes a lot to the restrictions on the export of raw pounamu in place since 1947. Also, the use of helicopters now allows much larger boulders to be brought out of previously inaccessible locations. While many places in New Zealand sell jade, the real centre of jade country in Westland, and the town of Hokitika, close to the mouth of the Arahura River, is the unofficial greenstone capital.

But whether you decide to try your hand at carving your own unique greenstone design, or simply marvel at the vast jade rocks along the rivers, taking a piece of *pounamu* jewellery away with you from New Zealand, will ensure you have an everlasting souvenir of your stay: a constant reminder of an incredible country. 🇳🇿

Jade facts

- ▶ New Zealand jade is more accurately known as nephrite, and is one of two types of jade found globally (the other being jadeite, rich in sodium and aluminium).
- ▶ Nephrite is a tough, hardwearing compound of calcium and magnesium.
- ▶ The amount of iron within the stone determines its green hue.
- ▶ The Maori recognised four types of jade: *kawakawa*, *kahurangi*, *nanga* and *tangiwai*. The first three are nephrite but the fourth type, *tangiwai*, is bowenite, an iron magnesium compound – which, strictly speaking, is not jade at all. In New Zealand it can only be found near Milford Sound.

Left, from top: Collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (x2), Mark Andrews, Gordon Wells