

Helen Stuart, Portrait of a Maori Woman, 1885

This 1885 portrait by Helen Stuart of the head and shoulders of a Maori woman has been hand-coloured. It remains within the ornate picture frame in which it was first sold. The portrait is titled 'Portrait of a Maori Woman, Ronika Ruke, also known as Auntry Ruku, with moko kauae or ta moko (chin tattoo) and huia (feather head-dress)'. The young woman has an intent gaze, looking down and slightly off to the right. She has light brown skin and thick dark brown hair cut in short, folded waves, with two feathers standing up vertically from the top of her head – the feathers are black with white tips. A long emerald green feather is worn as an earring, hanging from a black ribbon. An ornate cream-coloured shawl is wrapped around her shoulders – the section over her right shoulder has woven bands and dashed patterns of red thread while the part over her left shoulder and throat is decorated with long, dark brown thread-like tassels. Delicate 'moko kauae' or chin tattoos have been carefully drawn in around the woman's mouth: thin blue lines follow the shape of her lips and curl into two spirals below the lower lip, with hatched triangles continuing down to the chin. The colour overall is soft and smoothly blended, with a scumbled brown background behind the woman, like a classical oil portrait. The photograph is surrounded by a textured gold mount and an ornate wooden frame with several layers, including a geometrical Greek key motif and a carved border of foliage with spirals that echo the spirals in the chin tattoo. The portrait is signed and dated by Stuart on the bottom left corner.

Lissa Mitchell of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa writes that the circumstances for the taking of this woman's photographic portrait are unknown. She notes that it is unclear whether the sitter was aware of the portrait's subsequent exhibition and sale at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition at the Royal Albert Hall in 1886, where it won a bronze medal. Described at the time as works of art, Stuart's portraits extend the brief of the colourist by applying layers of paint that hide the original photograph and cross traditional boundaries between the fine arts and photography. For Mitchell, the portrait embodies the effect of

colonisation on indigenous peoples: the woman's likeness is obscured and romanticised through the application of paint to create a European artefact.