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New look Cook sails off to British Museum

By DAVE BURGESS • 07:55, Sep 17 2009



GONE NATIVE: Michel Tuffery's *Cookie in the Cook Islands* shows Captain Cook with Polynesian features and flowers in his hair.

Wellington artist Michel Tuffery is definitely a clever cookie, becoming the first Polynesian artist to have a painting bought by the British Museum.

Cookie in the Cook Islands is from a series of Tuffery paintings that illustrate factual and imagined stories of Captain James Cook's explorations in the Pacific.

Tuffery, 43, of Samoan, Tahitian and Rarotongan descent, said the name of the work used Cook's name as if he was a personal friend. "Cookie is [also] a throwaway nickname for a Cook Islander."

The acrylic-on-canvas work, painted last year, portrays the Yorkshire-born mariner with Polynesian features and flowers in his hair.

It was bought last month for an undisclosed sum, British Museum curator Natasha McKinney said. "[It] is an attractive, accessible and powerful representation of Captain James Cook, as a British audience will never have seen him before."

It gave a Polynesian perspective on Cook and his voyages of exploration. It also created a natural connection with the museum's artefact collection from the Pacific, collected by Cook, Joseph Banks and others, Ms McKinney said.

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"These artefacts are amongst the oldest objects the museum has from this part of the world, and are highly valued by Pacific Islanders today."

The painting is the only representation of Cook by an indigenous artist in the collections and the first by a Polynesian artist to be acquired by the museum.

Tuffery is arguably best known for a series of giant bulls he made using recycled corned beef tins. That could eventually be rivalled by Nga Kina, a series of concrete kina-shaped sculptures he has designed for Kumutoto Wharf in Wellington.

The sculpture is included in Wellington City Council's draft waterfront development plan, which opened for public comment on Tuesday.

Tuffery is currently an artist-in-residence at the University of Hawaii in Manoa.

