One of the most comprehensive exhibitions of Māori carving in decades is taking centre stage at Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

***He Toi Whakairo: The Art of Māori Carving*** brings together 147 taonga, including works dating back seven centuries.

Senior curator mātauranga Māori Dougal Austin told 1News it will be the first time many of the taonga have been publicly displayed.

Senior curator mātauranga Māori Dougal Austin. (Source: 1News)

“At the heart of the exhibition is the transmission of living knowledge: from stone tools to contemporary technologies, from inherited forms to bold new materials and colours,” Austin said.

The exhibition features significant works by carvers spanning several centuries. But, because many taonga were taken overseas, the origins of some treasures have been lost.

“Sometimes all we will get with the taonga is just a note that might only have a region scribbled on it,” said co-curator Jana Pātete.

Austin said his team is determined to learn more about the taonga “to contextualise them and, in a sense, give them a voice".

*Hei Tiki Ruatepupuke* by Stacy Gordine. (Source: 1News)

Among the taonga on display is a patuki, or hand club, featuring carvings associatedwith strength, bravery and tenacity.

“You can see the mangōpare coming through, and the mangōpare represents the hammerhead shark,” said Pātete.

Also featured is a tokotoko, or walking stick, dating from the early 1800s. “You can see the groove running through it, so it would have been a vine wrapped around the wood as it was growing.”

From Rangi Kipa’s 2.1m tall hot pink poupou, carved from engineered stone more commonly used in kitchen benchtops, to Ngaroma Riley’s puppet self-portrait *Kapa Haka Queen swinging poi*, the exhibition also showcases contemporary works.

Co-curator Jana Pātete with Ngaroma Riley's puppet self-portrait *Kapa Haka Queen*. (Source: 1News)

"This exhibition brings together wāhine Māori artists who are navigating male-dominated carving traditions and reshaping them through their own whakapapa," said Pātete.

Te Papa chief executive Courtney Johnston told 1News *He Toi Whakairo* is a significant exhibition for the national museum, with hopes it will help reverse a decline in visitor numbers, which were down 15% last year compared with the previous year.

"We have seen some impact from the introduction of visitor charges at the museum, and people are also contending with cost-of-living pressures," Johnston said.

Te Papa's latest visitor experience report found nearly half of overseas tourists wanted to see more exhibitions related to Māori history.

"It is on for five years. That means our local visitors can experience it again and again, while international visitors, who we know are eager to encounter taonga Māori, will also have the opportunity to see it."

**He Toi Whakairo: The Art of Māori Carving opens on August 29.**

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