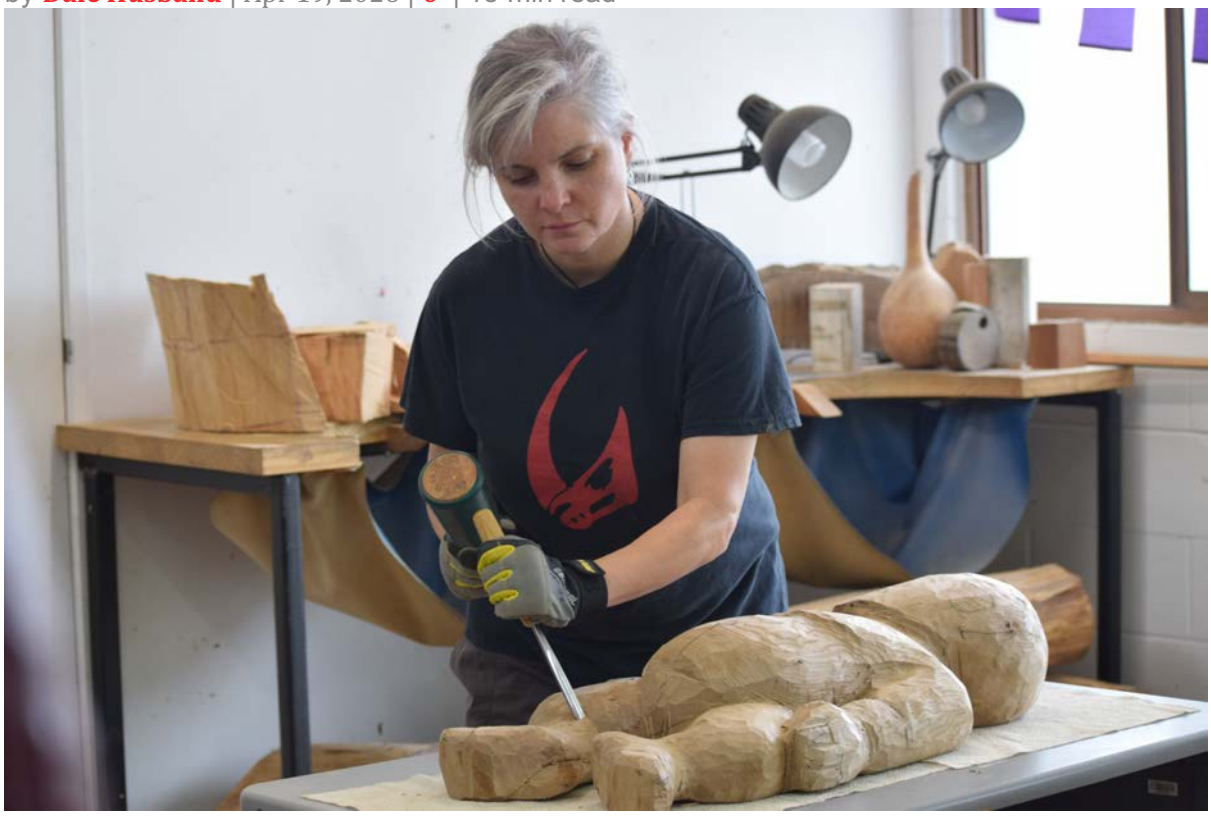
KŌRERO

Ngaroma Riley: Carving out a place for wāhine

by **Dale Husband** | Apr 19, 2026 | **0** | 15 min read



Ngaroma Riley carving. (Photo supplied)

Whakairo, or traditional Māori carving, isn't an area that's been especially welcoming of women, so it wasn't until Ngaroma Riley spent time in Japan that she finally got the chance to learn carving. Now she's one of a small but growing number of wāhine carvers in Aotearoa.

Her work, especially with karetao, or Māori puppetry, was recognised recently when she was awarded the $40,000 Fair Trust Art Prize. Here she is talking to Dale Husband about overcoming the resistance to wāhine in whakairo.

Tēnā koe, tuahine. Can you tell us a little bit about your whakapapa lines? And also your names and how they came about?

I'm Ngaroma Ann Riley, so I have a very bland middle name. People often ask me if Ngaroma is a tupuna name, and I have to tell them that, no, it's not. I was named by my Pākehā father after a woman he thought was hot. My mother agreed to it, so that's a good thing.

But, yeah, I always feel slightly embarrassed when I have to say that my father named me after a hot Māori chick. Although, as one of my uncles said: "Well, that's better than being named after an ugly chick."

Fair enough. Where did you grow up, and tell us a little more about your folks and your wider connections?
I grew up in Tāmaki. My grandfather is from a little place called Pukepoto, outside of Kaitaia. He married my grandmother, Norah Hart, who was Pākehā and my first art teacher. She was a great craftswoman. She taught me how to do tāniko.

My grandfather was a minister, Reverend Mangatitoki Cameron, and as a minister's wife, my nana used to do all the artistic things at church, such as making dioramas. As children, we used to make the crosses for Palm Sunday, all those sort of things.

Ngaroma, front row, with her Tupu, grandfather, Manga Cameron, and her cousin Matt. Back row: Ngaroma's Nana, Norah Cameron, brother John, cousin Huia, Aunty Margy Crosby.

What about this relationship you had with your nana? How important has it been to foster your love of the arts?
It's been huge. I get a bit emotional thinking about my lovely nana, but everything she did was to support her Māori family. She would embroider the altar cloths and use kōwhaiwhai patterns or tāniko patterns. Under his vestments, my grandfather

would wear a tāniko belt that she wove for him. All these things that she made were to whakamana him and her family. And she passed it on to her children and her mokopuna. I used to love going to stay with them. She'd always have craft activities lined up for us to do.

It's a lovely thing that, āe? Transferring the love of art and storytelling. I can imagine you in the lounge or her art room as kids, being inspired by what was available to you. Because so often, you know, kids are told not to touch. It's quite the contrary when you're creating art and being creative.
Plus, her being Pākehā but interested in Māori art is also a neat sign of how things can be. Tell us about these little moments where you found yourself literally at the feet of your nana, and she says: "Here, this is how you do that"?
I used to like asking Nana lots of questions. I wish I'd asked more, but I remember asking her about how she met my Tupu, and how their relationship developed. She used to tell the story of when he proposed to her, and how she had to think very carefully about whether she would accept, not because he was Māori, but because he was a minister, and being a minister's wife would come with all sorts of responsibilities.

And when he did actually take her up home, they weren't too happy about it. Because he was an educated man, they had the puhi of the tribe lined up for him, and they were a bit horrified that he was going to marry a Pākehā.

So he'd taken her up north to meet them all, and she said it was a real test, because they sat around speaking in Māori, and it wasn't until the end of it that she realised that they all spoke fluent reo Pākehā, and were just giving her a run for her money.

She asked if they would teach her how to weave a basic kete. She just wanted to learn to make a kete kūmara, but they were testing her out and instead showed her something far more sophisticated.

So I gather that she had some challenges in the early days, but she also had some wonderful teachers who were willing to share raranga (weaving) with her. They moved around to various parishes, including living in Waitara for some time. So she picked up lots of skills and was determined to use them and share them with her children.

Ultimately, you're the benefactor of her interests and their aroha.
Absolutely.

One of Ngaroma's works, "Once Were Gardeners", 2024. (Photo supplied)

When you were at school, I'm assuming you were already confident in being creative, but were there some mentors who stand out for you as helping to develop your love of artistic endeavour?

I did one year at Dunedin Art School. I probably should've done more, but I wasn't confident enough as a maker. And as a tauira Māori, there wasn't a lot that resonated with me. There was one other Māori student there, Keri Arlidge.

Her father was Clive Arlidge, a renowned Ngāpuhi artist. He wasn't directly associated with the art school, but he embraced all the tauira Māori and other hangers-on. He was a contemporary of Ralph Hotere and Marilyn Webb, and he would invite us over for morning tea and other things, and he awhi-ed us.

At some point, he asked us if we were looking forward to our end-of-year exhibition, and we said there wouldn't be one at the art school for us. So he suggested that we all give him 10 bucks, and then he set up a group show for us. That was my first time showing in an exhibition.

He did that for us twice. He was just amazing. We'd go over and visit him, and he'd show us what he'd been working on and give us kōrero about the work. He was just always there for us.

Fair Trust Art Prize recipient Ngaroma Riley. (Photo: Tui Hirabayashi)

From an early age, you had a passion for whakairo, for carving, which is such a holder of the richness of our stories and history. Tell us about your early fascination. What was it about the rākau and about its forms and shapes and the skills involved in bringing these stories into the open?

I can't really pinpoint when it began, but I think it was the experience of visiting marae, being inside wharenui with all the whakairo Māori. They really spoke to me. I loved sitting under the poupou in the wharenui, looking at the koruru and the pare.

What I love about rākau and raranga is that you're working with natural materials. If I go into a pā harakeke, a flax bush, and I'm doing a hauhake to harvest the flax, you

can feel the wairua of the pā changing. And you stand back, and you see the leaves kind of lifting up and bouncing around and moving, and you can almost hear the appreciation when you weave them, like you're looking after the mauri ora of the harakeke.

That's what I love about working with wood as well. There's always that exchange, that mauri exchange.

"Kai hī ika/Fisher" (Photo: Claire House)

Of course, there was a traditional hesitation about wāhine and carving, and I'm pleased you're part of a vanguard movement which is overcoming that in contemporary life. It's quite acceptable now for wāhine to get into this space. Was it always the case for you when you showed this interest in whakairo and expressed a desire to do it yourself?
There's still quite a bit of resistance towards wāhine in whakairo. I think quite often it just comes down to individuals. When I initially wanted to learn, it was hard to find anywhere to learn. It's not easy for anyone, even for our tāne, to have those opportunities to learn, but there's certainly more for them, and if I did find anything, it would often say "tāne only". I think that's probably still fairly standard.

I started learning when I was in Japan, and it was just amazing to have that opportunity because I'd always wanted to do it. I could carve with no restrictions, and the women there are poto, they're small like me, and they're wielding these big chainsaws and things. So it was great to have those role models. And I thought: "If they can do it, I can."

I learned from some Indigenous Japanese Ainu friends of mine, who had a great connection with Bentham Ohia at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, that they had a whakairo course there. So I signed up for that as soon as I came home in 2020, and learned under Cory Boyd for a year. That was super exciting for me, not only to be able to do whakairo, but to be in a Māori-led institution. Whereas I'd struggled at the tertiary level before, I loved being at Te Wānanga.

But coming out of that, and then discovering that there are so many restrictions, that there are a lot of narratives around why women shouldn't or aren't able to carve, was a bit of a reality check. And that's something that we're having many conversations about now.

One thing that's changed is that there are more wāhine carvers now, so we can support one another when we're having these discussions. And when we're working together, it's wāhine-led, so we're not imposing any restrictions on ourselves, and we're there to support one another.

I think there is a lot of mamae still for wāhine carvers who've been told by their whānau that they shouldn't be carving. But that's all changing gradually, and I think it's something that needs to be talked about at a hapū or iwi level.

I have the support of my hapū. I was part of a rōpū that built a tomokanga at Pukepoto, which was so cool to be a part of, and really amazing to have their support.

Ngaroma problem-solving at Te Ana o Hine with her husband, Yukio. (Photo supplied)

Yeah, attitudes are changing. And while we're discussing Pukepoto, my friend Mea Motu is a world-class boxer, and she's from Pukepoto. She says: "Don't say I'm from Ahipara, don't say I'm from Kaitaia." She wants Pukepoto to be celebrated.

We're seeing more women carving now than ever before. What are some names you can throw at us of wāhine whose work you've been enjoying?

There are quite a few of them. Actually, we have a website for Te Ana o Hine, and a dedicated studio space at Te Tuhi, which has been championed by the gallery's director, Hiraani Himona. We've had a couple of wānanga now, and hope to hold another one later in the year. There are about 17 wāhine carvers associated with Te Ana o Hine. I want to make sure that I don't miss anyone out.

Could you share with us a bit about the Japanese wāhine who inspired you and their efforts with their chainsaws? And since you're a wahine who loves her chainsaw, I might as well ask you what brand is your favourite chainsaw.

Well, Japan has a very rich, unbroken history of carving, and often several carvers would work to bring a piece together. Then they would have people who would paint it. There were different people at various stages, I believe. I don't know how many women carved traditionally. I think it was probably mostly men, but there are quite a few women carvers now. It's very physical work, and I've met a few women carvers, including Misato Sano, Fumie Chiba and Ami Yoshida. They are definitely very inspiring.

Ngaroma's work "Portrait of the artist as a daughter-in-law." (Photo: Sacha van den Berg)

And the great thing is that they teach it. I mean, there's an unbroken history of carving for them, so they haven't had the struggles that we've had in losing the art form in many places, particularly in the north, where I'm from.

That's all part of the colonial project, isn't it? The decline of cultural activity is inevitable when you have land loss, war, and all the rest. There's no room for cultural activity then, and it was also discouraged by a lot of the Christian missionaries, who did some great things in the north — but also some pretty detrimental things. They

cut off the ure (male genitalia) on many of the carvings because they didn't agree with our way of storytelling.

One of the difficult things when you're trying to revitalise cultural activity is that when there's a void, there's a tendency to fill it with things that we don't necessarily have knowledge about any more.

I believe that there are lots of kōrero about women being the puna mātauranga, the knowledge holders, around carving, and we have stories of women who've carved in the past, but a lot of that has been lost or not recorded. And I believe that everybody would have known how to do everything to a certain extent. But the revitalisation has sought to exclude women, and that's just part of post-colonisation, I guess.
But things are changing. The stone and bone carving school at the New Zealand Māori Arts and Crafts Institute has opened up to wāhine for the first time this year, which is hugely significant.

I've asked about the wāhine carving tradition in Japan, but I don't know what took you to Japan, Ngaroma. Was it to go carving over there with those wāhine, or was there some other reason you ended up in the land of the rising sun?
We moved over as a whānau. My husband's Japanese. My nana had passed away, and my mum was living in Saudi Arabia. My sister was in France, and my brother was in Korea. We were desperately wanting to have whānau around, and it was also about language.

My grandfather was a native speaker of te reo, but none of his children spoke the reo. I didn't want that to be the case for my children, not being able to speak their father's native tongue. I wanted them to be able to communicate with their Japanese whānau, because none of them speaks English, and when he passes, it'll be important for them to stay in touch.

We were there for 12 years. I initially taught English at a high school, where I became good friends with the art teacher. It was an all-girls school, and he was teaching carving in the curriculum. I asked him if I could jump in on one of his classes.

He said, absolutely, and that's where I started. I took to it quite quickly, and as my Japanese improved, I looked through newspapers and signed up for a weekend Buddhist carving course. I went along to have a look one afternoon, and said: "Look, I'm not Buddhist, I'm a woman, and I'm a foreigner. Are you okay with me joining?"

The teacher was very welcoming. So that moved me on to carving. The first style I learned was kind of low- to mid-relief, more poupou style, and the second style, the Buddhist sculpture, was more tekoteko, so carving in the round.

I was so hungry for it. I was so excited that, with my first carving, I just kept going and dug a big hole through the plank of wood they gave me. And they kind of said: “Whoa, slow down. It’s all good, we have time.” But that was an amazing experience.

I’m very dedicated to creating pathways for others so they can learn. It takes a lot of commitment because once you’ve gone in, there’s no going back. You need to know what tools to use, what wood to use. I tried making a tekoteko when I was about 15, and it was disastrous because I used the wrong wood and the wrong tools. Oh, you asked me what my recommended chainsaw would be, and it would be Stihl.

“Portrait of the artist as a ringa toi” from Ngaroma’s karetao collection of self-portraits. (Photo: Sacha van den Berg)

You're known for karetao, and I don't know much about this. These are hand-carved puppets, and I am seeing more of our whānau Māori reconnecting with this age-old form of entertainment. What was the source of your fascination with this?

When I first came back home and found that there was a bit of resistance to wāhine Māori carving, I thought, well, I don't want to step on anyone's toes. All I want to do is keep carving without trampling on anyone's mana — what can I do? I kept hearing "mahi tapu" being bandied about, and I thought: "All right, what is this mahi tapu that people say wāhine aren't supposed to take part in?"

I went to a wānanga, and one of the things they said was that women can take part in anything from the whare tapere, which is theatre or anything related to entertainment — anything that's noa or not tapu.

There are all sorts of karetao used for different things, but the ones that I make are specifically from the whare tapere. James Webster and Charlotte Graham have been a part of that revival, so it was great for me to see some examples. I guess I've always been fascinated with karetao because they're fun, interesting, and they move.

And because I like 3D carving, tekoteko style, I thought it would be good to start on something that would be a safe thing to carve, as well as something interesting. So I've been making karetao and playing around with different mechanisms, looking at collections in the museums. I spent a bit of time at Te Papa looking at James Webster's beautiful karetao, figuring out the mechanisms and then doing it in my style.

I've made a series of self-portraits in karetao form, which are now housed at Te Papa. They purchased them. There's me as a Māori, me as a Pākehā, me as a kapa haka queen — which is obviously a bit more fantastical than reality, because I'm certainly not a haka queen — me as an artist, and me as a māmā. They are stories about me in karetao form.

“Portrait of the artist as a māmā.” (Photo: Sacha van den Berg)

What are you looking for in a piece of wood? Does it talk to you? Can you see what’s inside it? How does that work for you?

I think different artists work in different ways. For someone like Tui Hobson, who’s a Cook Islands carver who’s been carving for a very long time, she would look at the wood and create a form based on the grain of the wood. She’s working with the organic form in the wood, and the wood speaks to her, and she works with that.

Whereas in my case, I generally have an idea. And then I find a piece of wood to express that idea. I’m still learning about wood.

Cory Boyd, my pouako at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, used to talk to us about “speaking wood,” because you really do have to be able to work with the grain of the wood and everything that goes on.

As I say, I’m still learning, so I never know what a piece of wood looks like on the inside. I might crack it open and decide where the upoko’s going to be, where the legs are, and I might look at a piece of wood and say, “Oh, this is going to be the front,” or the back. I can see that straight away. But once I’ve cracked it open, there might be a knot in the middle of the face or somewhere where I didn’t intend it to be. So that’s quite hard.

There’s a constant conversation, sometimes a bit of a battle, working around that and trying to make it look as best as possible and get the outcome that I want. But there does come a point, when the form starts to take shape, that the tree is taking over. So even if I have an idea, the wood will do whatever it wants. And then it’s a conversation between us, and the wood will often guide me in the way that it wants to be taken.

Ngaroma at work. (Photo: Hollie Tawhiao

It must be satisfying to see the rise in confidence from our wāhine mahi whakairo and to be part of the journey of bringing forward our wāhine skills in the arts, but in particular with the use of rākau. What would you like to say to those who read this piece about the journey you've been on, and why it's important that you pave the way for others?

It's really great to be a part of this movement that's happening now, and to have the support of other wāhine carvers like Chris Harvey, Hollie Tawhiao, Neke Moa, Zena Elliott, Tessa Harris and Tui Hobson. There are so many wāhine carvers. All their work is different, and I'm in awe of them, their skills, the way they tell their stories.

I'm reluctant, like a lot of artists, to be in the limelight. I like people to look at my work rather than me. But I also realise how important visibility is for other aspiring carvers, particularly for wāhine carvers. And for me, because my stories are whakapapa-based, it's about sharing these stories with my whānau, hapū, iwi and everybody. I hope there's something that everyone can relate to in them.

Ngaroma's mother, Moana Cameron, with one of her works. (Photo supplied)

I guess it's important that people can see that we're doing it. That was important for me when I was in Japan, where I could see that there were others doing it, learn from their example, and ask them questions as well.

One thing that I would say to people is, if you have questions about my mahi or how I make it, just holler out, send me a pātai. I'm always willing to share what little skills I have. I'm not secretive about any of them because I know that it takes a long time to build these skills, so anything I can do to help people along the way, I'm more than willing to do.

It's exciting. And there are a lot of tāne out there who are supportive as well, which is great. I'm grateful for that. I know how hard it is, so I love seeing what everybody is making out there, and I just hope that there are fewer obstacles for us.

There are enough obstacles for Māori as it is. We don't need to be making more for ourselves or each other. So I hope we can all uplift and support one another in our whakairo practice.

E-Tangata, 2026