

Traditional Māori Art Forms – kōwhaiwhai for beginners.

Kōwhaiwhai patterns are a unique Māori art form in Aotearoa New Zealand. Traditionally painted on rafters of whare and waka paddles, increasingly they are used in many other contemporary contexts, from sports clothing to phone covers. Often kōwhaiwhai elements are also used in the design of corporate logos. Once you learn about some of the traditional shapes and motifs, you may recognise these beautiful, elaborate patterns in your local environment, buildings, and contemporary artworks.

For more information about the relationship of these patterns to natural resources and forms in nature as well as associated artforms such as tukutuku please see the resource links in the appendix.

SOME BASIC KŌWHAIWHAI ELEMENTS

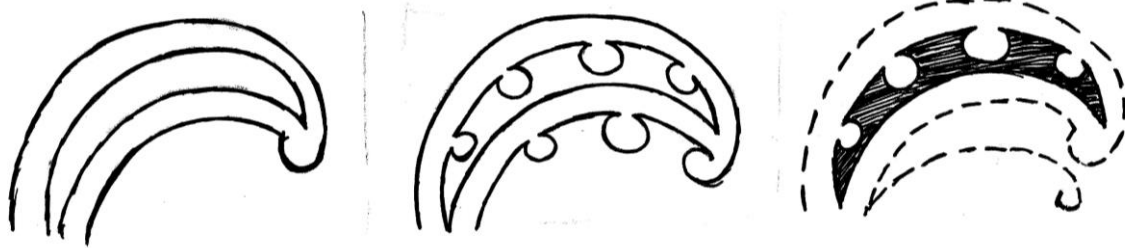
Koru

The dominant element (or motif) in kōwhaiwhai is the koru inspired by the shape of the pītau (the young shoot of a fern frond scroll).



Kape

The kape crescent is another important motif in kōwhaiwhai. One theory is that kape shapes originated from the negative space between two koru curves with pītau bulbs. Sometimes associated with the moon or whales.



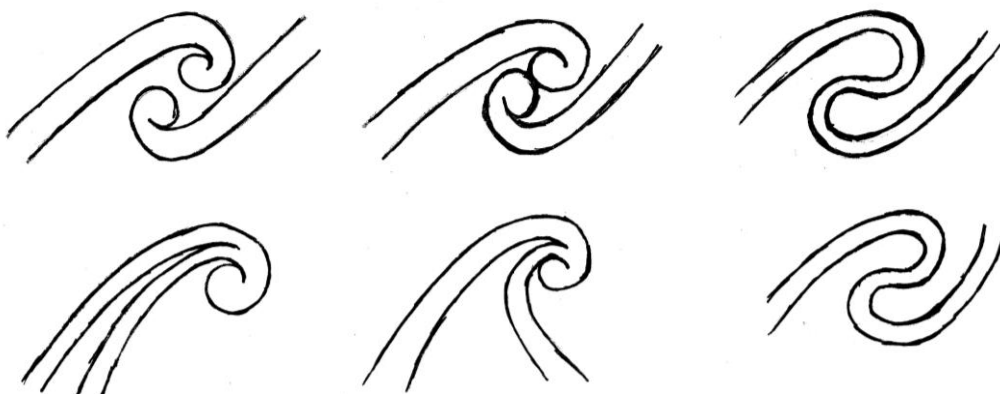
Koiri

Koiri patterns are repeating koru that turn back and forth branching off each other infinitely it seems. This type of pattern is said to symbolise the flourishing of nature and the 'breadth of life'. At points bulbs and stems connect.



Rauru

Another main element of whakairo that is present in kōwhaiwhai is the rauru or spiral. It can be visualised in several different ways such as the two examples below (two koru merging or one splitting)- a multitude of variations exist.



Below you can see some examples of well-known kōwhaiwhai patterns and general descriptions – these examples have all been sourced from the National Library and are ink drawings by [Bishop Herbert William Williams](#)

Puhoro – [Image attribution & link](#)

Found predominantly on waka indicating speed, agility, and water skill. Reminiscent of folded fishing nets. One of the few kōwhaiwhai patterns that uses straight lines.



Pātikitiki- [image attribution and link](#)

Flounder shape, symbolic of kai moana, the sea, the availability of food, fertility...it is also a tukutuku pattern with similar associations.

Ngaru – [image link and attribution](#)

Relates to the sea with the koru = symbolic of the white caps of the waves.

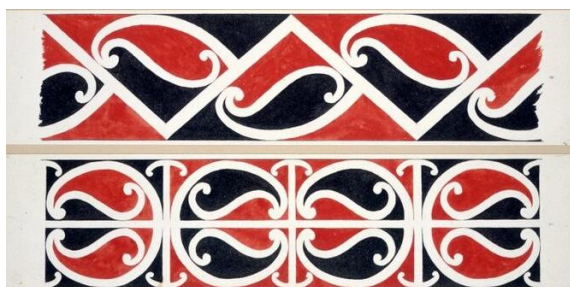


Mangōpare – [image attribution and link](#)

Symbolic of the hammerhead shark representing courage, determination and strength.

Ngutu kura - [image attribution and link](#)

The red beak of the parrot, associated with oral ability, speech, song. It can also suggest a relationship with the moon, seasons, times of month and for some whales. In these examples the kape is repeated with the beak section extended from the inner side.



Kōwhai ngutu kākā- [image attribution and link](#)

Often has a central line dividing the pattern into distinct sections. Flowers of the kākā - beak span each side, the fronds stylised into looped back koru. The main motif is usually linked to the centre line by the stem.

Pītau a Manaia- [image attribution and link](#)

This design combines the pītau and manaia shapes. If you look carefully you will see rauru also.



Little written information is available about kōwhaiwhai patterns, but some are widely reproduced with well-known associations. Each iwi can have different meanings associated with specific kōwhaiwhai which have been passed on from generation to generation. depending on the where they adorn or the ancestry of that iwi.

Originally the patterns were painted using locally available pigments which created the traditional colours of white, red (sometimes blue in some areas) from different types of clay. The black created from charcoal. It has been said that these pigments were mixed with a medium such as shark liver oil as a carrier to make paint. Sometimes surfaces were sized with sap from specific plants prior to painting.

Kōwhaiwhai painting and its relationship to tukutuku (latticework) and whakairo (carving) in the wharehau embodies important cultural values linked to ancestors of each iwi.

KŌWHAIWHAI

Arts Online [kōwhaiwhai poster](#) - Kōwhaiwhai patterns are inspired by plant, land and life forms and aspects of nature. This poster shows this through images of plants and animals alongside designs.

The Dowse – [kōwhaiwhai video](#) – great video explaining the forms in nature some common motifs are derived from and demonstrating how to draw them

NZ math's - [kōwhaiwhai activity](#) – level 4 geometry related to translation, rotation, symmetry and more.

[Kōwhaiwhai Tuturu Māori](#) – an Auckland Museum pamphlet on common materials and designs of kōwhaiwhai

TUKUTUKU

Arts Online [tukutuku poster](#) – an overview of some patterns

ChCh libraries – [tukutuku panels](#) – images and information about well-known designs

NZ Math's – [tukutuku patterns](#) – level 3 algebra activity

[Poutama – symbol for learning](#) about theories of learning but good visuals of the process

[THE WHAREHUI](#) – resource covering many of the traditional artforms found within whare.