Fowler
MUSEUM AT UCLA

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Uhengaparaoa, Taonga Tuku Iho: Ancestral Gifts and Contemporary Māori Art

exhibition celebrates the living legacy of Whakatōhea weaving

Unidentified artist(s); Uhengaparaoa, kaitaka (cloak), late 1800s; New Zealand flax, wool; X65.8014

LOS ANGELES—[September 17, 2026]—The Fowler Museum at UCLA presents *Uhengaparaoa, Taonga Tuku Iho: Ancestral Gifts and Contemporary Māori Art*, an exhibition bringing a treasured Māori cloak from the Fowler collection into dialogue with contemporary works by artists from the Whakatōhea iwi (tribe) of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The exhibition is inspired by Uhengaparaoa, a renowned Whakatōhea weaver who, before the 18th century, traveled to the East Coast of New Zealand to share her specialist knowledge of raranga (weaving) with the Ngāti Porou tribe. Her legacy lives on through the artists featured in the show, who draw upon taonga tuku iho (knowledge and cultural practices passed down from ancestors) to create new works rooted in Whakatōhea identity and traditions.

At the center of the presentation is an ancient kaitaka (cloak) from the Fowler Museum collection, fashioned near Ōpōtiki. One of the most prestigious forms of Māori clothing, the kaitaka is made by hand from whitau, the inner fiber of harakeke (New Zealand flax) and distinguished by its intricate tāniko geometric designs. Using the finger-weaving technique known as whatu, a skilled artist could take several years to complete a single kaitaka. Worn by people of rank, these cloaks represented mana (prestige), identity, and ancestral connections.

After leaving New Zealand, the cloak passed through private collectors and museums overseas, including that of pharmaceutical magnate Sir Henry Wellcome, arriving at the Fowler in 1965 as part of the Wellcome Trust's foundational gift to the museum. She lay in storage for nearly 50 years before Whakatōhea researchers visited her, prompting conversations that ultimately led to the development of this collaborative project. In August 2026, reunited with Whakatōhea, the cloak—regarded by them not as an object but as a living ancestor—received her name, Uhengaparaoa, in honor of the weaver whose knowledge it embodies.

Contemporary Whakatōhea artists were invited to envision works that would respond to the kaitaka and Uhengaparaoa's legacy. Their creations demonstrate how traditional practices can be carried forward through innovation, incorporating customary materials and techniques alongside recycled and contemporary ones. The exhibition includes baskets, cloaks, garments, and carved objects that explore genealogy, land, identity, sovereignty, spirituality, and cultural resilience.

Whakatōhea weaver **Tangimoe Clay** designed *Whaio ki te ao Mārama* (2024) to accompany the Fowler kaitaka. Her poi features a whetu (star) design symbolizing light and warmth, intended to comfort the ancestral cloak while it lies unseen in the museum storage.

Other pieces reveal the expansive possibilities of modern Māori art. **Anna Gedson** reimagined the traditional kete (basket) by using recycled copper drawn from electrical wires, demonstrating how mātauranga (knowledge) endures even as artists employ novel materials. **Anahera Alixene Curtis** used natural plant fibers to express connections to female ancestors and whenua (land). **Tutangiora Mafi** brought Māori and Tongan heritage together by recasting a Tongan garment in a Māori weaving idiom.

The show also includes works by **Ruka Alamein Hudson**, **Gina Tawhai Matchitt**, and **Rihari Campbell Collier** who engage with the revitalization of Māori language and culture, self-determination, urban life, gender and identity, and the continuing role of textile practices in carrying culture into the present.

Haki (flag, 2026), fashioned by a collective of Whakatōhea artists, reflects the community's history of resistance and spiritual leadership. Other contributions, including kapa haka costumes and Tangimoe Clay's kiwi-feather adornments, showcase how the Māori preserve whakapapa (genealogy), stories, and mātauranga (knowledge), while adapting to modern life.

Each artist announces themself through **pepeha**, a traditional form of greeting that establishes connections to mountains, rivers, ancestors, marae, hapū (subtribes), and iwi. These self-introductions underscore a key theme of the exhibition: that artistic practice is inseparable from relationships to land, family, community, and ancestry.

Uhengaparaoa, Taonga Tuku Iho emerged from an ongoing conversation between Whakatōhea community and the Fowler Museum. What began with a visit to the Fowler kaitaka evolved into a collaborative presentation guided by a shared kaupapa (concept). The exhibition celebrates the living histories, cultural knowledge, and resilience of the Whakatōhea people, demonstrating how ancestral gifts continue to shape contemporary artistic life.

Exhibition Details

Title: *Uhengaparaoa, Taonga Tuku Iho: Ancestral Gifts and Contemporary Māori Art*
On View: October 11, 2026–May 16, 2027
Location: Fowler Museum at UCLA
Curators: Tangimoe Clay (Whakatōhea), kairaranga (weaver); **Gina Tawhai Matchitt** (Whakatōhea, Te Arawa), curator, Te Whare Taonga o Waikato Museum and Gallery; and **Syona Puliady**, curator of textiles of the Eastern Hemisphere at the Fowler Museum; with advisors **Maui Hudson** (Whakatōhea, Ngā Ruahine, Te Māhurehure), associate professor at Te Kotahi Research Institute at the University of Waikato, and **Brent Kerehona Pukepuke-Ahitapu**; Whakatōhea, Ngāpuhi, Ngāi Tūhoe, Te Whānau-a-Apanui, educator and researcher.
Funding: Major support for the exhibition is provided by the Mary Jane Le whitauland Textile Fund and the Martha and Avrum Bluming Exhibition Fund. Additional support is provided by Dr. Carolyn Knobler and Dr. Charles Knobler. Special thanks to the Consulate General of New Zealand in Los Angeles. The curatorial team and the Fowler Museum also wish to extend gratitude for special contributions by Te Whare Taonga o Waikato Museum and Gallery (Hamilton, New Zealand); Haylee Alderson, collection manager; and Stu Bridson, technician at Te Whare Taonga o Waikato Museum and Gallery; as well as to the Friends of Te Whare Taonga o Waikato Museum and Gallery.

About The Fowler Museum at UCLA:
The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Indigenous Americas—past and present. The museum enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. The work of international contemporary artists is presented within complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action. The Fowler Museum is

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Admission to the Fowler Museum is always free.

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