

# No room for triptych at new lake centre

ONE of New Zealand's most infamous works of art is on display again.

But Colin McCahon's Te Urewera Triptych, which now hangs at the Te Kura Whare in Taneatua, is a long way from home.

McCahon, who was born in Timaru in 1919, was a determined and driven artist from a young age, attending Saturday morning art classes under war artist Russell Clark. On leaving Otago Boy's School he enrolled at the King Edward Technical College Art School while working part time in the orchards — a country setting which would eventually find its way into his paintings.

McCahon's landscapes, for which he became famous, were unusual in that he rendered them stark and empty, rather than picturesque.

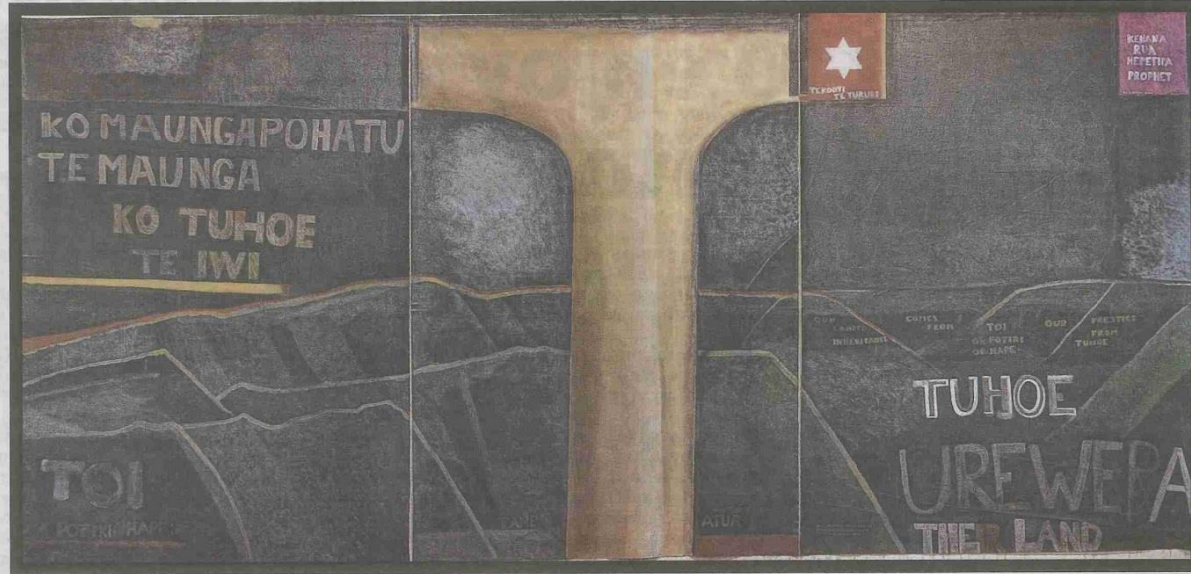
Heavily influenced by religious iconography, by the 1940s McCahon was adding words and phrases to his works — a technique employed in the Te Urewera Triptych and one that was to cause much controversy.

The triptych set tongues wagging from the moment McCahon's brush first daubed paint on its canvas.

The unframed, oil-on-canvas work by the highly acclaimed New Zealand modernist painter was commissioned in the mid-70s, specifically for the John Scott-designed Aniwaniwa Visitor Centre at Lake Waikaremoana. But soon after its unveiling, Tuhoe activists requested changes to the completed work, while others demanded its removal on account of the political and cultural imagery contained in the painting.

The triptych or three-panelled work of art remained in situ and unaltered.

In June 1997 it was stolen by Tuhoe Activist Te Kaha who later said, "I took it for a while, but I did not steal it." The painting, which had only just been restored by Sir



Edmund Hillary's eldest daughter, Sarah, at the Auckland Art Gallery, was eventually returned after a year, when it required a second restoration at a cost of \$5000. Following its liberation, the painting was loaned out to a number of North Island sites — the notoriety of the stolen artwork making it a significant drawcard in any collection — before being returned to the Aniwaniwa Visitor Centre in 2000.

The triptych's return was short-lived, however, as the condition of the visitor centre had deteriorated to such a degree that the painting was once again removed to Auckland.

Later the painting was stored at the Whakatane Museum Research Centre, awaiting a decision on a more permanent home.

These days the infamous, multi-million dollar artwork, which remains the property of The Department of

Conservation, graces the walls of Te Kura Whare in Taneatua where it has been on permanent public display since April 2015.

It has a custom case built to preserve the painting at museum standards.

"It's such a high-profile piece and is studied by many New Zealand and Maori art history students," said communications team leader Waikare Kruger, one of the work's current custodians.

Currently, there are no plans to return the painting to Lake Waikaremoana.

"There is no space in the new Waikaremoana building to accommodate the McCahon," she said.

Towards the end of his life McCahon's health deteriorated preventing him from starting any new paintings after 1980. He died in 1987 after a long illness.

Adored and abhorred, McCahon's controversial mural provokes strong emotion to this day.

## Pilfered paintings

THE Te Urewera Triptych's status as artwork 'lost and found' ensures membership to an infamous club of pillaged paintings. Other illustrious members include —

- Edvard Munch's *The Scream*: Stolen not once, but twice. There are four versions of the artwork with the pastel rendering selling in 2012 for US\$120 million.

- The *Mona Lisa*: La Gioconda, as she is known in the painter's tongue, was stolen from the Louvre in Paris in 1911 and discovered two years later in the possession of a disgruntled Italian

national. The da Vinci masterpiece is considered priceless and due to numerous acts of vandalism, today lives behind bulletproof glass.

- Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum theft Boston, Massachusetts: Thieves disguised as police officers gained entry to the gallery in the early hours of March 18, 1990 and made off with 13 paintings, including artworks by Vermeer, Rembrandt, Degas and Manet. Collectively the haul was valued at half a billion dollars, making it the largest private property theft in history. The paintings have not been recovered.