

Louis John Steele emigrated from England to New Zealand in 1886. He was immediately attracted to Maori as a subject as some of his earliest New Zealand paintings attest. He often favoured compositions such as this where there was a strong contrast between a dark foreground and bright clear background. This apparently dark painting nonetheless rewards careful examination. Steele used the built form of the whare to convincingly create the illusion of depth. He masterfully captured the textures of the various floor coverings, which add interest to the foreground while further delineating space. Great attention has been paid to the architectural detailing, replicating woven tukutuku panels on the walls and painted kowhaiwhai patterns on the rafters. The paint work itself is surprisingly free in areas such as whare's dirt floor, built up from paint of surprising hues, or the glowing embers of the fire. The figures are well observed, likely drawn from his many sketches. Unlike many of Steele's paintings, he has not exoticised the figures. While the recumbent woman's pose recalls an odalisque, she is fully dressed with her back to us; she is in no way on display. Rather she, and the other figures, embody the everyday.

The painting was previously thought to depict a whare at the mouth of the Waikato River – at Port Waikato – however comparisons with other works by Steele reveal a more probable location. In January 1889 Steele, with his colleague Kennett Watkins, embarked on a sketching trip to the Taupo region. Sketchbooks belonging to both Steele and Watkins survive and reveal the close connection the artists made with Maori in the area. They were granted remarkable access. Steele's sketchbook is filled with images of daily life – men paddling waka, a man braiding a flax rope, people fishing with a net, women weaving, a kaumatua seated beside a sleeping child. A number of these drawings are set in the interior

of a whare which has distinctive poupou wall panels. Rather than being carved, the panels have notches at intervals on the side edges. Returning to Interior of a Whare the same notched poupou are visible particularly on the left-hand wall. The way the rafter posts intersect with the wall panels also recalls the sketchbook.

Two portraits in Auckland Museum's collection add further to our knowledge, suggesting that the whare depicted could be at Waihi, on the southern shore of Lake Taupo. Depicted inside a whare with the same distinctive poupou, the subjects are identified simply as Maori Woman and Maori Chief. Recent evidence has emerged which identifies the female as Takarea Te Heuheu, suggesting that the male portrayed is her younger brother the Tuwharetoa paramount chief Tureiti Te Heuheu.

Tukino V. Waihi, the home marae of the Te Heuheu family thus seems the likely setting for the portraits and *Interior of a Whare*.

Interiors scenes such as *Interior of a Whare* are rare within New Zealand art, but highly valued as they open a window onto a way of life long past. Yet the central focus of the painting – a child eating and engaging with a woman, perhaps his or her mother – is timeless.

Jane Davidson-Ladd

(1) These sketchbooks are in the Auckland Art Gallery (2005/8) and Auckland Museum collections (PD 65, vols 9 and 10) respectively.

(2) *Maori Chief and Maori Woman*, undated, oil on canvas, Auckland Museum, PD-2003-75-1 and 2.



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LOUIS JOHN STEELE

Interior of a Whare (with Lake Taupo Beyond), 1891

Oil on canvas 50 x 75

Signed & dated 1891

\$90,000 - 130,000

Provenance:

Purchased from Christie's,

Exploration and Travel with Polar Sale,

no. 7303, London, 21 September 2005