

WOODEN BOX OF MAORI SCENE MADE BY A. FURNISS

A hand-made and decorated wooden box of a Maori scene, signed 'A. Furniss' was offered for auction on Trade Me in September 2020.

Furniss was a relatively populous name but there are some clues to narrow down who might have made it.

The period looks late 1910s-late 1930s in particular the stylization of the signature which is clearly influenced by commercial logos of the time.

In tandem with this, Rotorua had become incredibly popular as a domestic tourist destination in the 1920s-1930s and thus tourism items were produced plentifully for sale during these decades.

Another point is, the box is very in keeping with returned soldiers craft items and yet again fits in the post-WWI period.

So it's very likely the creator was a man, probably in service, made it through combat in one piece, and spent some time in recuperation. He either made this to fill his time and earn a few extra shillings, or was part of a recuperative process like DSA-type craft making as a job.

Although not a rule we can assume the item was generally from where it's being sold, the upper North Island area in this case.

So we are looking for a male Furniss, name beginning A, who probably lived in Auckland and likely enlisted.

Although there were thousands of Furnisses in Aotearoa, once you narrow it down to 'A' names over the relative decades, there's very few. Once cross-referenced with service records it really only left one likely candidate who was in the First World War, Private Alfred George Furniss (1885-1940), service number 70466, 36th Reinforcements, A Company, NZEF.

He was originally a farmer in Waipipi, but lived in Franklin, Central Auckland between the wars after his 1919 discharge for 'Debility, no longer fit for war service.'

He seemingly never made it back to his original profession of agriculture dying fairly young age 55; he was still residing in Auckland Central less than 2 years before his demise.

Mostly speculation he is the creator, I can't say for sure, but it doesn't seem like he was rushing back into a physical job with lots of labouring; and his wounds and/or illness may well have done a lasting number on him and ended his life early.

There was also an Abraham Arthur Furniss, who lived in Waikato who was not conscripted and his fit may seem more geographically appropriate yet, as a working farmer I don't see him having time or energy for craft-making.