HAUNAIN ART
An Anthropological Perspective

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The arts of Hawai'i and the society that created them were brought to the attention of the Western world by the return of the ships Resolution and Discovery from Captain James Cook's third Pacific voyage. During the succeeding two hundred years, the objects that were collected during Cook's visits and by the many ships that followed him have found their way to museums, the artists who fabricated them have departed, and the contexts in which they were used have changed. Poetry, music and dance could not be collected, as could objects, and have had a somewhat different history. They passed from generation to generation, primarily in the oral tradition until the 1920s, when sound recordings began to be made. Each of these aspects of culture, or the arts, if you will, have had notable exponents—Brigham, Buck, Cox, Emerson, Luquien, Roberts—who collected information about the arts and preserved it in written or recorded form. Their studies based on this information, however, have suffered from a lack of historical perspective, resulting in an illusion of timelessness and uniformity throughout the archipelago.

A more detailed study of objects and arts passed in the oral tradition with information on their dates and places of collection, as well as their subsequent histories, indicated that the artistic products changed over time and suggests that there were diverse traditions specific to areas and genealogical groupings. Indeed, the many traditions and schools may have had separate histories for centuries. Generations of students and teachers who have had continuing opportunities to elaborate, simplify, or change their acquired knowledge before passing it on. A multiplicity of styles has developed over the years, each having traditional antecedents—adhering more or less to the prototypes from which it was developed. The Hawaiian proverb, 'a'ohe pau ka 'ike i ka halau ho'okahi, all knowledge is not taught in one school, presents the Hawaiian view. In Hawaiian art of the past and present, there are many ways to be right. This multiplicity of styles and the changes in fashion over time require detailed examination of the arts individually and of their relationships to each other and their cultural backgrounds at specific chronological points.

As a separable product or activity, art was not a conceptual category of traditional Hawaiian culture, although no'au, skillfulness or cleverness, was a part of all activity. Thus, one might argue, at one extreme, that Hawaiian art did not exist or, at the other extreme, that art was all-pervasive. Both stances are unproductive for an understanding of Hawaiian life and those elements that have come to be considered its artistic products. In order to overcome such definitional and conceptual problems, it is appropriate to indicate how the term "arts" will be used here. For the purpose of this essay, the arts will be defined as cultural forms that result from creative processes which manipulate words, sounds, movements, or materials, in such a way that they formalize the nonformal. Poetry formalizes language; music formalizes sound; dance formalizes body movement; a designed bark cloth pa'u, skirt, formalizes a product made from inner bark; a wooden image formalizes a prepared piece of wood. During the creative process an artist or creator uses or manipulates a part of culture that exists on a nonformal level (language, sound, movement, bark, or wood) and creates a formal product (a poem, a melodic contour, a dance, a multilayered skirt, a wooden image) that makes an abstract statement about the society or culture of the creator. With this broad definition, aesthetics can then be defined as ways of thinking about these formalized products.

Hawaiian artistic traditions, then, can include, but are not limited to, poetry, music, dance, woodworking, plaiting of baskets and mats, featherworking, bark cloth making, carving of materials other than wood, and tattooing. The emphasis here will not be on techniques or the artistic products themselves, but rather on what the products can tell us about the society of which they were a part. The arts, these formalized products, are visual or aural representations of
Hawaiian life, when first recorded in written form, was based on strong spiritual beliefs intertwined with a stratified social system which included gods, priests, chiefs, and the people in general. Spiritual power and social rank were visually recognizable by wooden and stone images, clothing, ornaments, and other ceremonial or sacred objects. Rank governed relationships between individuals as well as between classes of people and was extended to gods, foods, and objects. Poetry, music, and dance, as well as objects, were used to designate and honor gods and people of rank. The societal structure distinguished chiefs, ali'i, from nonchiefs or the people in general, maka‘ainana. There was a gradation of social rank within the ali'i and a number of individuals were considered sacred. These sacred individuals inherited their sanctity because of the closeness of blood and rank of their parents.

A religious system based on mana and kapu gave sanction to the system and kept it functioning. Mana was conceived of as a divine supernatural quality, while kapu were prohibitions which safeguarded mana. Individuals with the most mana were the first-born offspring of a high-ranking paramount chief and his full-sister, half-sister or niece. These ni‘aupi‘o chiefs were so sacred that in their presence all would prostrate themselves (for offspring of a paramount chief and his full sister or niece) or sit down (for offspring of a half-sister). These observances were necessary even in the presence of some object that belonged to the sacred individual. The sanctity of an object, then, might have nothing to do with the beauty of its physical appearance, but rather was important because of the personage to whom it belonged. Traditionally, objects might acquire "aesthetic" power because of historic associations.

Hawaiian artistic productions were meant to endure. Time and creativity were lavished on objects that were to be passed as heirlooms from generation to generation, and occasions on which they were used became part of their history. Objects, then, became chronicles of history objectified in visual form and were inherited not only as works of art, but as information. This was especially true of the kahili—the feather standards symbolic of royalty—which were given personal names and were acquired by important chiefs together with knowledge of their history, and passed on again to others. As I have noted elsewhere in a more general Polynesian context, relevant aesthetic considerations included the fabrication of an object from appropriate materials, the symbolic representation of status and rank within an ever-expanding social and cultural system, the historic associations and sense of occasion that were enlarged through time, and the interrelationships of the various art forms. The process of an object's manufacture and later repair, in addition to its history and changing symbolism, were aspects of an aesthetic system concerned with ongoing process and use.

Poetry, music, and dance were also passed from generation to generation, were "repaired," and acquired new mana because of the high rank of the individuals they honored, the occasions on which they were used, and the importance of the person from whom they were learned. Songs and dances learned from Iolani Luahine, Lokalia Montgomery, or Mary Kawena Pukui, for example, have acquired a kind of mana because of the teacher. It follows, then, that a study of Hawaiian art must take into consideration not only visual and aural products that existed before contact with Europeans, but the multiplicity of changing forms that have arisen from them during the two centuries since Cook's visits. The coming of Europeans and other ethnic groups to Hawai'i brought new ideas, tools, sounds, and visual images that Hawaiians quickly assimilated into their own aesthetic systems. But simply because something has been carved with metal tools does not make it less "Hawaiian" in concept. Metal tools were useful to Hawaiians in order to elaborate or extend their own aesthetic ideas. If a man on horseback or a European sailing ship has been incorporated into a Hawaiian petroglyph, this does not make the tradition of which it was a part less "Hawaiian." These are, rather, new visual images which have been added within an ongoing aesthetic tradition. Whether an object is precontact is not necessarily relevant to its aesthetic merit. Or, whether poetry is sung with European pitch intervals is not necessarily relevant to its aesthetic merit.

Hawaiian society was dynamic and changing. Changes in objects and structures can be followed in the prehistoric sequences that have been uncovered in archaeological contexts. The ancestors of the Hawaiians brought with them to Hawai'i a quite different cultural tradition. These traditions were adapted and changed over centuries to evolve the culture and society that was first recorded in writing during Cook's visits. Fashions changed before European contact and after. What is widely considered "traditional Hawaiian" today is, for the
most part, based on 19th-century versions of tradition. Eighteenth-century versions fell out of favor as had earlier versions.

A study of Hawaiian art from an anthropological perspective, then, must take into consideration all products formalized by Hawaiians from words, sounds, movements, and materials and not just what, from the European view, would be considered art. Changes in fashion from the European view, would be considered as important indicators of social mechanisms—of status and prestige, of groups innovating, competing, and producing new forms that would be accepted or rejected. It is impossible to do justice to any of these components in the space of a short article, and the few examples included here will present only selected elements of an anthropological perspective.

Much of Hawaiian art was traditionally created by specialists who projected social concepts into visual or aural form. The resulting products can be considered as social metaphors. Symbolism, or hidden meaning, was incorporated in the artistic products, but was probably understood completely only by specialists. The Hawaiian concept of *kaonaa* is usually spoken of in reference to hidden meaning incorporated into poetic texts, but I believe *kaonaa* can be thought of as a general concept and applied to the arts in general. *Kaonaa* can be thought of as akin to symbolism, but given the added Hawaiian dimension that this symbolism is imbued with a power of its own which, in addition to its metaphorical properties, could honor or harm.

One of the distinctive artistic mediums used by the Hawaiians was the production of feather-covered basketry in the form of helmets and god images. There must have been a cultural prototype for these forms in central Polynesia, because it seems likely that the Tahitian wicker and feather helmets, the Marquesan feather headdresses, and the Hawaiian feather helmets evolved from a common ancestral form. It is unproductive to attempt to "explain" the origin of Hawaiian helmets by appealing to non-Polynesian origins or influences from Greece, Spain, Nepal, South America, or outer space. Hawai‘i was separated from its east Polynesian ancestral culture for about five centuries, yet the Hawaiian helmet and the Tahitian helmet had a striking similarity of form at the time of Cook’s visits. Indeed, if the forward curving front piece of the Tahitian helmet were shortened, the similarity to the front curving crest of Hawaiian helmets would be immediately apparent.² Both served as coverings for the sacred top of the head, and drew attention to the wearer’s status.

Any analysis of Hawaiian feathered helmets suggests that there were two main styles—one of which appears to have been unique to Kaua‘i and the other associated with the chiefs of the island of Hawai‘i. Although both styles were collected in almost equal numbers during Cook’s visits, the Kaua‘i style shortly after fell out of fashion. This style, of which there were at least six collected, has a wide, flat, and low crest. A seventh helmet of this type, now in the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Honolulu, was acquired from the British Museum. It is said to have come from George Vancouver’s voyage and is an 18th-century piece. There are a few other helmets which combine elements of both types; although they cannot be traced to Cook’s voyages they certainly have very early histories.

If one compares the helmets collected to the written descriptions from Cook’s voyages, it appears that the wide-crested type was collected on Kaua‘i and the narrow-crested type on Hawai‘i. Captain James King, in comparing helmets of Kaua‘i and Hawai‘i, notes that "there is some trifling difference in the shape of the Caps, those at Owhyee (Hawai‘i) not having the top or crest so broad (as in Kaua‘i), and their still having a stronger resemblance to the Ancient Helmets."³ The helmet given to Cook by Kalani‘opu‘u, the ruling chief of the island of Hawai‘i, was of the narrow-crested type. Another helmet associated with Kalani‘opu‘u, in the Bishop Museum, is also of this type. Not only were the two styles different, but the methods of manufacture were also different. Narrow-crested helmets were covered with a netting to which the feathers were attached; wide-crested helmets were covered with a long, thin feather-covered cord which was applied back and forth to cover the entire helmet and crest. This latter technique appears to be a more difficult method of manufacture and may be specific
to the island of Kaua‘i. It also appears that the wide crest and the double layer resulting from the application of the layer of cord would offer more protection to the head during indigenous types of warfare. This may be partly responsible for the demise of this style in favor of the more elegant (and later fancy) shapes which probably became more and more associated with prestige rather than function after the introduction of European weapons.

It is one of the accidents of history that almost all writers on Hawaiian featherwork of the 19th and 20th centuries have associated feather images with Kuka‘ilimoku, the war god; yet there is no indication of this in the writings from Cook’s voyages when they were first encountered. The one Hawaiian feathered image historically associated with a specific god is the image in Bishop Museum said to represent Kuka‘ilimoku. However, there is no reason why other examples of feather images should not represent some other god, or any of the principal gods that might be called to the images by prayers or offerings.

One might conjecture that the feathered images given to Cook would represent Lono, god of peace and agriculture, with whom Cook was associated by the Hawaiians, rather than Kuka‘ilimoku, the war god. The drawing by John Webber of the state visit of Kalani‘opu‘u to Cook depicts the feathered images referred to in Cook’s journals in a description of the scene:

“In the first Canoe was Terreaboo (Kalani‘opu‘u), In the Second Kao with 4 Images, the third was fill’d with hogs & Vegetables, as they went along those in the Center Canoe kept Singing with much Solemnity; from which we concluded that this procession had some of their religious ceremonies mixt with it; but instead of going on board they came to our side, their appearance was very grand, the Chiefs standing up drest in their Cloaks & Caps, & in the Center Canoe were the busts of what we suppos’d their Gods made of basket work, variously coverd with red, black, white, & Yellow feathers, the Eyes represent’d by a bit of Pearl Oyster Shell with a black button, & the teeth were those of dogs, the mouths of all were strangely distort’d, as well as other features . . .”

I can see no reason why these images should represent Kuka‘ilimoku. It would appear that the only god images given to Cook in a ceremonial context were feathered images, and a more likely explanation is that these images were associated with Lono. Feathered images were probably among the most sacred of Hawaiian artifacts and it is unlikely that they would have been used for trade. Those collected during Cook’s visits were probably all given to Cook in ceremonial contexts in his role as Lono.

A second drawing by Webber, in which feathered images are being transported by canoe, depicts the rowers in gourd helmets—also a problem in interpreting Cook-voyage evidence. It appears that no gourd helmets were ever collected, either on Cook’s voyages or at any other time. There are no extant gourd helmets and our only knowledge about them is based on the drawings by Webber. The masked rowers are thought to be priests of the god Lono, the vegetation being symbolic of Lono’s role in agriculture. The appearance of the masked rowers with feathered images in association with Cook strengthens the supposition that they are all connected with Lono. Gods could take several forms depending on specific contexts and functions. The manifestation of Lono during the makahiki as an upright pole with crossbar and hanging bark cloth panels probably generated the association of Cook with Lono because of their similarity to the mast, yards, and the square sails of Cook’s ships. Other manifestations of Lono, one of the four important national gods,
could well have included a feathered image. The contact situation in which feathered images changed hands from Hawaiian priests to Captain Cook suggests that feathered images were sacred dwelling places into which major gods could be called and that in this case the god being called or honored was Lono.

There can be little doubt that the most prestigious Hawaiian artistic medium was featherworking, which involved several difficult techniques that had attained a complex technical perfection. Feathered images were, as mentioned, dwelling places into which important gods could be called. The favored descendants of these gods were clothed in feathered robes and helmets. Even the featherworkers were required to be of high birth. Indeed, a completed feathered artifact was a reflection of Hawaiian social organization, involving interaction among gods, chiefs, and commoners, each of whom were called upon at different stages. No one individual could hope to fabricate a major piece of featherwork himself—only chiefs and priests had access to such an affluence of feathers and workers.

Contrast with this the techniques and personnel necessary to fabricate a wooden image. A skilled man could make his own tools, cut his piece of wood and carve an image. Not surprisingly, the finished product may have represented an aumakua, god of a craft or of a family or a personal nature, which did not require a highly-finished appearance. David Samwell, who visited Hawaii with Cook, described these images as “Ete . . . a small wooden Image which they form of various shapes and sizes & keep in their Houses & stick up in the Stern of their Canoes.” The sure, deft strokes of the adze are often clearly visible on the finished image. Rounded forms and flat planes on the surface of the image show that the maker was a master of his craft. Obviously he had wanted the tool marks to remain, because he had the technique at his disposal, if he had wished, to make the finished product smooth and polished, as with other objects such as daggers and bowls.

Hawaiian wooden images collected during Cook’s visits to Hawai’i contrast with later “classic” wooden images. Of the seven wooden images that can be associated with Cook’s voyages all are of the portable type rather than the large heiau, temple, variety. Unpretentious, small, and in some ways rather crude, the images reveal a good deal about Hawaiian woodworking techniques and artistic values.

Two of the images collected and two for which only drawings are known, are small images on pointed props with little body bulk. They may have been representations of aumakua and meant to be used by placing them in the thatch of a house. These four images have little to qualify them as great artistic examples of Hawaiian craftsmanship. Indeed, before they were recently associated with Cook’s voyages, they were relegated to near obscurity—the Edinburgh image even being turned down for an exhibition of Polynesian sculpture because it was thought to be from a later period and of little aesthetic merit.

The other two images (now in the New Orleans Museum of Art and the British Museum), one of which is traceable by documentation to Cook’s voyages and the other by similarity of style, I suggest, were made by the same carver. I further suggest that they may have been part of the fence that was removed for firewood by Cook’s men from Hikiau heiau at Ka’awaloa, Hawai’i. These two images have more bulk and their powerful forms would be suitable for outside use, for example, placement on a fence at either side of the entrance to a heiau. The accounts from Cook’s journals of the images seen inside the heiau suggest that these images were simply poles with only a head carved near the top. Those taken from the semicircle inside Hikiau were apparently not considered by Cook’s men to be worth saving and may have been burned along with the fence. That two images were disposed of by Hawaiians but saved by Europeans suggests that they were not considered particularly sacred to Hawaiians when they were not in use and that they had something to recommend them to Europeans, namely completely carved figures. It seems probable that from this “firewood” Captain Cook of the Resolution and Captain Charles Clerke of the Discovery might have decided to each keep one of the two similar images for themselves, just as they had divided the fence between the two ships.

Strangely enough, Cox and Davenport, in their book on Hawaiian sculpture, categorize these two images—which are so alike in both style and size—into two separate categories. One is elevated to a temple image, and the other becomes a so-called akua ka’ai. In my view these two images should be considered a pair and suitable as prototypes for the style that developed on the island of Hawai’i in the late 18th century. This style is epitomized by the large temple images in which the body is bulky and powerful, and heads have elaborate headdresses and tooth-filled, figure-eight-shaped mouths. These later images have the classic Hawaiian sculptural characteristics, including the heavy body planes, bulk, stance, musculature, hand form, and nose form. From the written accounts and drawings from Cook’s voyages, this so-called “Kona style” was not yet recognizable as a style.
These two images were, instead, representations of one of a variety of styles. The European introduction of metal tools would considerably simplify the manufacture of larger, more elaborate images to replace the pole images having only a carved head. Descriptions and drawings from later voyages show that inside the heiau on the island of Hawai‘i, large full-figure images eventually replaced the bodiless pole images. The style that developed can be considered a direct continuation of the style of the two images collected on Cook’s voyages. The new form, however, was enlarged and elaborated, reflecting new tools and new values.

Hawaiian arts and the aesthetic traditions of which they were a part, were concerned with appropriate forms, materials and uses. Artistic products—objects, poetry, music, and dance—conforming to Hawaiian ways of thinking, preserved in visual and aural forms the cultural concern with hierarchical ranking, status and power. They gave pleasure to the Hawaiian if used in appropriate ways on appropriate occasions. Through use they acquired a kind of historic and aesthetic power and became metaphoric representations of social relationships among gods, men and the universe.

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Footnotes

5. It is unlikely that the gourd helmets would have been used by war­riors, as is often claimed today. In warfare based on stones and clubs, a fragile gourd would be of little protective use and would hinder the wearer’s sight and movement.
6. A four-month festival beginning in mid-October which included sports and religious activities, and during which time warring was forbidden.
9. This categorization, as well as Cox and Davenport’s “Kona style,” is unnecessary and could be misleading. See, Kaepppler, 1979, op. cit., p. 6.

References

Beaglehole, J.C. The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery. Cambridge: Published for the Haleluyt Society at the University Press.


