RINASCITA HAWAIIANA

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The ancient Hawaiians excelled other Polynesians artistically because their tradition accepted innovation. The Hawaiian Rinascita, or "rebirth," is the modern continuation of the ancient Hawaiian tradition, and together they are making statements that are authoritative and controversial.

We may say that a stylistic rebirth occurs when the works of contemporary artists show signs of being exploratory, exciting and creative while drawing upon and evoking a past artistic tradition. A stylistic rebirth obviously has nothing to do with making counterfeits or multiple duplicates. It relies instead on a true understanding of the symbolism, abstract design, geometric forms and choice of colors of ancient things.

What we see in Hawai'i today is the growing influence of a great artistic tradition that was almost totally destroyed at the beginning of the 19th century. The making of ceremonial objects and sculpture ended abruptly with the abolition of the *kapu*, the system of government and religion that ruled every aspect of Hawaiian life before the coming of the Europeans. It is interesting to note that even today the works of art that enrich our environment in Hawai'i would not have been possible without the stimulus and support of the community at large. The Rinascita Hawaiiana is an idea that can help us interpret artistic activity in Hawai'i since statehood.

The Abstract Beauty of Hawaiian Art

An artistic style and tradition can be understood in relation to other styles. The late Gustaf Ecke, professor of art at the University of Hawai'i, would often point out in his lectures that the exquisite beauty of a Chinese beheading axe and the demonic power of a Hawaiian fishhook can be examined together without having one contradict the other. So can the sculpture of the Hawaiian god *Ku-Ka'ili-moku* which is in the British Museum and the Roman copy of an original Greek bust of Pericles which is in the Vatican Museum. Each sculpture is exemplary of its own artistic style and tradition. However, the two specimens stand at polar extremes; one is abstract, the other naturalistic.

Needless to say, they represent two different world views. The Hawaiian artist did not find reality sufficiently expressive while the Greek artist did. The Hawaiian artist abstracted and distorted beyond recognition the facial characteristics of his war god; he used every device to make it appear less human. He covered it with red *i'iwi* feathers, inserted mother-of-pearl in its eyes and delineated its mouth with long rows of dog's teeth. The Greek artist's approach was very different. He used several models when necessary to achieve the ideal human form: the shoulders of a discus thrower, the legs of a runner, the hands of a lyre player.

Hawaiian sculpture, which was light in weight so that it could be carried as a battle standard, was carefully stored away from view when it was not being used for ceremonial purposes. *Secrecy* was essential to ensure the continued presence of the deity it represented. The Greek sculpture, however, stood in the Parthenon of Athens in homage to the city's most godlike citizen. Its *exposure* was necessary to promote noble thoughts among the people.

Greek art seems to have derived from an attitude of trust and confidence in the outer world. Hawaiian art, on the other hand, seems to have been the product of a feeling of anguish and bewilderment in the face of an unstable environment. The Greeks considered beautiful and good art to be that which had a liberating effect, gave a feeling of well-being, conveyed an illusion of movement and communicated pathos—a sense of suffering that is more touching than horrifying, that expresses noble stoicism. The Hawaiians considered beautiful and good art to be that which placated their ancestors, protected their families, prevented unwanted pregnancies, ensured harvests and helped win battles. Beautiful ceremonial objects could spare

villages from lava flows—the volcanic activity we find so thrilling today was for the Hawaiians "the fierce breath of the goddess." Beauty was inextricably entwined with *mana*. Once a work of art lost its *mana*, however, it became valueless and could be discarded. This nonchalant attitude toward artistic beauty probably accounts for the ease with which the early collectors accumulated shipfuls of Hawaiian art.

The early European explorers who discovered Hawai'i must have been puzzled by the austere abstract quality of its native art. They must have also wondered why so much imagination and craftsmanship were lavished on functional,

everyday objects and why Hawaiian sacred art was so frightfully ugly. They must have looked in vain for art forms that mirrored the beauty of the natural landscape and the beauty of the native people. They did not find Hawaiian art aesthetically pleasing, and yet many of them were fascinated by it and became avid collectors.

In 1820, Alexander Liholiho, a convert to Christianity, "ordered the [Hawaiian] priests and householders to burn all tribal, clan and family *tikis* in public or domestic shrines" (see Elizabeth Green Handy's concluding chapter in *The Polynesian Family System in Ka'u Hawaii* by E.S. Craighill Handy and Mary Pukui, 1958). Much of the splendid collection at the Bishop Museum, Honolulu, consists of art objects that were hidden in caves by dissenting Hawaiians. What is preserved there and in the largest museums of the world is the source of many of our insights into the lifestyle and culture of the ancient Hawaiians and a wellspring of ideas for today's artists.

Sculpture of Father Damien

At Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C., it would be impossible to overlook the bronze of Father Damien. Sculpted by Marisol, it is stylistically remote from the other statues, which seem to have been conceived in the mode of "romantic" realism. However, it would not be out of place in the Bishop Museum, among the Museum's collection of sculpted ancestor images and gods.

When asked to consider a commission from the State, Marisol revisited the Polynesian collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum, for to her Father Damien was not Belgian but Hawaiian.

Indeed, Marisol's modern sculpture shares many of the aims and characteristics of Hawaiian sculpture. The ancient Hawaiians were not interested in representing the outward appearance of people and things. Like many modern artists (Giacometti, Rodin and Marisol among them), they sought to capture the "inner meaning" of their subjects—a metaphysical and symbolic meaning.

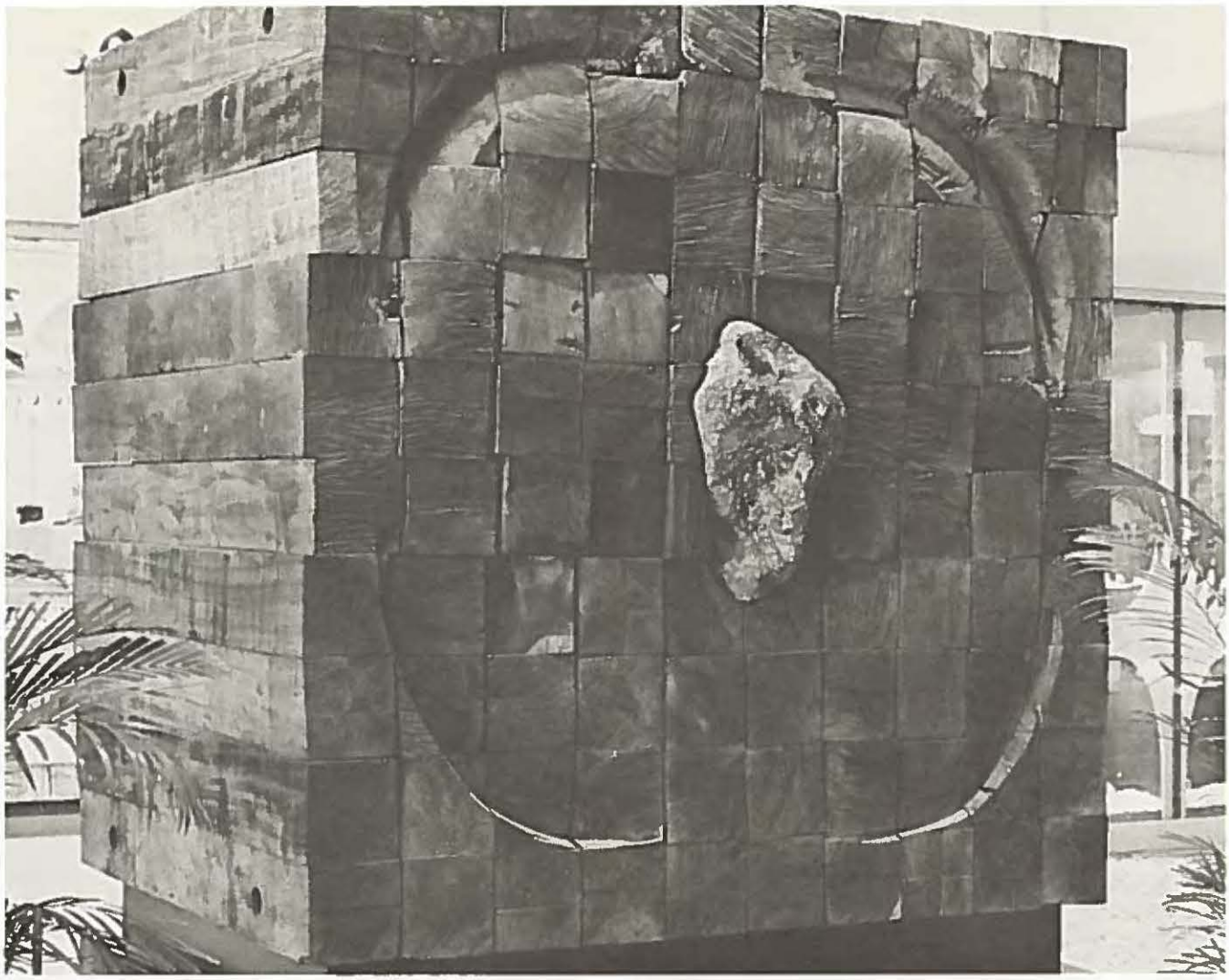
One of the aims of Hawaiian art was to interpret the gods. Less egotistical than the Christians and Buddhists who fashioned their gods after their own images, the Hawaiians made their gods abstract, expressive and terrifying.

The gods were sculpted in two different styles: the body in an exaggerated naturalism, the head a total abstraction. The mouth was cut into a kind of figure eight with upturned nostrils almost meeting

the forehead, giving the illusion of an unearthly grimace. Body and head were united by the extension of the textured hair, just as Father Damien's cane cunningly unites the heavy, cumbersome body (one element of design) and the priest's swollen feet (a separate and very distinct element).

Hawaiian sculpture was always left unpainted to show the grain and the quality of the wood. The concave and convex areas were smoothed to a perfect finish. Strong crosscutting was used for the stylized hair, beard and teeth. Among all of the Polynesian woodcarvers, the ancient Hawaiians were the most skilled at handling pure sculptural forms.

One criterion of beauty of art is its capacity to survive. Ancient Hawaiian art has met this criterion as is obvious by its influence on this contemporary sculpture.



The "Kahuna Stone"

The ancient Hawaiians believed that all natural phenomena were controlled or influenced by the gods. Their legends described the gods as powerful beings that were multiformed like the Greek god Proteus, who was able to change his shape at will. According to the legends, the gods were the ancestors of both animals and men, and the creators of the world. The Hawaiians believed that their well-being and happiness were rewards for good conduct, while death, disease and unwanted pregnancies were caused by evil spirits as punishments for breaking a *kapu*. Not surprisingly then, the worship of the gods was held to be of paramount importance.

The gods were honored with elaborate ceremonies and sacrifices; prayers were offered to the images which represented the gods and served as vehicles between god and man. The images were carved from the wood of the *ohia* tree or fashioned out of *i'iwi* feathers and aerial roots. Divinity was also represented by unshaped pieces of gnarled wood; impossible to carve, they were sacred in their natural state.

Hawaiian stone images, roughly carved representations of the human figure, are disappointing works of art. It should be remembered, however, that it was the observer's mental attitude rather than craftsmanship that converted objects into gods. Often in fact even unworked pieces of stone were thought to be sacred and found to possess *mana*. *Puhakua 'aumakua* (also called *"kahuna* stones") have an inescapable appeal to the contemporary artist; for the determination of spiritual power, not unlike the determination of artistic quality, is largely based on an individual's expectation.

I feel the ancient Hawaiians would have accepted the "irrationality" of Dada Surrealist art (along with the "minimal" art of the 60's and the "conceptual" art of the 70's), which sometimes took the form of famous artists signing and exhibiting "unworked" found objects. The bottlerack Marcel Duchamp put on a sculpture stand in 1914 was seen by Robert Motherwell, 50 years later, as having a more beautiful form than any deliberately made sculpture of that year. In a strange way *kahuna* stones, Dada "readymades" and Tony Smith's "Die" (a six-foot cube) presuppose the existence of extra-

sensory experiences and a "meta-world." The idea is that if a shadow is a two-dimensional projection of a three-dimensional form, then a three-dimensional object must be the projection of a four-dimensional form. If one accepts this explanation, the simplest objects, even primary geometric forms and unworked stone, can hold the possibility of a revelation.

So it was that *mana* was sometimes attributed to stone—that is, to stone of great beauty (imperceptibly changed like the well-known Phallic Rock of Molokai), to perforated stones that were found entwined in the roots of ancient trees or to stones that presented themselves as ready-made sculpture to the eye of the *kahuna*. Stone which the high priest designated as links between the real and the unknown also contained *mana*.

By designating a stone as sacred, the *kahuna* "put it on a pedestal" and created an object of importance. In 1968 the metaphysics of the ancient priests were evoked by a boisterous, multi-faceted artist in a powerful work which he fittingly called "Kahuna Stone." A sculpture may be made of anything and will be valued for its own sculptural qualities. However the natural media of *koa* and basalt, alive before man was, has a greater capacity to confront us with our Hawaiian past and the reality of our being. The integration of stone and wood is as natural and complete as if the rock had been entwined in the roots of an ancient tree.

When the representatives of the client, the Ala Moana Hotel, came to see "Kahuna Stone," they loved it. But both the interior designer and the art coordinator found it too simple, too unfinished. They offered Okino helpful and well-intentioned suggestions, and Okino listened without hearing a word. An artist knows when his vision has become a reality.

Kamehameha in the Classical European Manner

Standing in front of Aliiolani Hale, the state judiciary building in Honolulu, is a statue of King Kamehameha I designed by the American sculptor T.R. Gould in the late 1870's. The sculpture portrays Kamehameha in the classical European manner as an idealized "heroic nude" and as both commander of the army and high priest. His bearing is majestic, and his face expresses *gravitas* (official concern). His stance is gently *contrapposto* (at ease). One hand is extended like that of a peace-bringing Mars; the other is holding a spear, the Hawaiian equivalent of the more traditionally familiar scepter surmounted by an eagle.

The Roman toga, however, has been replaced by a feather cloak, and the tunic by a *malo*. Also, the patination of the bronze body has been considerably darkened. The gold patina on the bronze cloak, *malo* and helmet, which is supposed to simulate the yellow feathers of the *malo* bird, would have just the right effect in a darkened hall (similar to the gold leaf used on Japanese screens, which are perfectly displayed in the somber settings provided by feudal castles and ancient temples). Under the tropical sun, however, their elegant gold coloring takes on an outrageous hue.

But these optional accessories do not hide the fact that this colossal figure is more of a Roman emperor than an Hawaiian *alii*. The sculpture, I would venture to guess, would have been unrecognizable and meaningless to the ancient Hawaiians who knew, feared and loved Kamehameha—who buried his body with such secrecy that it has not been found to this day. Another conjecture is that an early Hawaiian sculptor's representation would not have been gently *contrapposto*. His body would have bulged with an excess of strength, his toes gripping the ground, his knees flexed—the King would have been shown ready to lunge forward in defense of his people. His face would have been contorted with powerful feeling, not in an expression of *gravitas;* his nostrils, enlarged with emotion, would have almost met his forehead; and his spirited eyes would have stared at the sun, his mouth open wide, yelling a rallying cry. Someday, perhaps, a Hawaiian sculptor will be moved to crystallize this near mythical figure into a sculpture of pure form, strength and pathos within the Hawaiian artistic tradition.

Woven Walls

Signs of rebirth are inescapably on view at the Capitol. In each of the two chambers there is a handwoven tapestry by Ruthadell Anderson; each covers 1,200 square feet and animates the architectural curvature of the chambers. There is an environmental suitability, a majesty, a monumentality about the weavings that make them "read" as Hawaiian feather capes.

Feather capes were the prized possessions of high ranking chiefs and were in themselves symbols of government and power. It is estimated that a half million feathers, tied into a basket-like warp, were used for each cape. And to supply the feathers 70,000 birds had to be trapped and plucked.

Handmade objects, because they have been planned, supervised and executed by a single

anticipated or solved by the artist herself. The result is beautiful craftsmanship that could have been achieved only with sober intensity and fine administrative skill.

Ruthadell Anderson's operating credo was "to develop simple, non-objective forms, monumental in scale, which would compliment the architecture, lend dignity and warmth to the chambers and be evocative of things Hawaiian." She has indeed succeeded. Her weavings have become architectural elements; they are not separate works of art conflicting with the special identity of the walls. She has designed wall surfaces.

Tapa

In tropical parts of the world, if spinning and weaving were not practiced, bark was stripped from trees, soaked and flattened into a kind of cloth. This was the case all over Polynesia, where the making of *tapa* was a major activity and where bark cloth was used not only for clothing but for bedding, banners and sails as well. As in the quality of their sculpture and featherwork, Hawaiian tapa surpassed that of the other Polynesian groups. The Hawaiians made the softest, the shiniest, the most flexible and the most absorbent tapa; some of it was decorated exquisitely with designs so complete that they resemble paintings.

Tools that were necessary for the preparation of tapa included wooden beaters and anvils which were carved by the men, but tapa-making itself (from gathering bark to painting designs on the finished cloth) was the creative domain of the women. Fine tapa was infinitely more difficult to

person, have a special kind of unity and control, and a uniqueness that is the essence of art. Things handmade are also a special kind of aesthetic object. They please us by their absolute singularity, by the fact that they cannot be found elsewhere.

Ruthadell Anderson had complete responsibility for her creation—for the sketches, models, selection of colors and textures, and all the adjustments of design, as well as for the adjustments that were necessary to meet various architectural and acoustical requirements.

Fifteen hundred pounds of wool were spun, dyed and mothproofed to her specification in New Richmond, Ohio. Eleven basic colors were used for each tapestry. The weaving technique is similar to that often found in Oriental carpets with ghiorde knots on a linen warp. Each mural consists of 842,000 ghiorde knots which took Ruthadell Anderson and her Looms Original's crew 5,000 hours to tie by hand.

The artist used an analogous palette of warm earth colors (reds, yellows, oranges for the House tapestry) and cool colors (blues, greens, violets for the Senate) to blend with the existing colors of the already carpeted floors of the two chambers. Her use of color is spectacular, unblended and bold as in Hawaiian feather capes. The passage of color and texture can be enjoyed best at close range from the sides; the sculptural effect created by the rich wool pile can almost be felt.

The 90 woven panels, each sewn on an aluminum backing and screwed to a framework of wood and metal, distribute their weight evenly. There is little danger of their ever sagging or moving.

From the beginning to the last details of installation, every aesthetic and technical problem was

make than the common sort; it required higher quality bark, and additional steps were needed in the bleaching and felting process. Decorating the finer pieces was a job that was reserved for *alii* women, who performed their task for amusement and for pure aesthetic pleasure.

The paintings on Hawaiian tapa do not consist of representations of human or vegetable forms. They convey nothing but geometric patterns based on imprecise repetitions. The resulting divergences are small and do not disrupt the feeling one gets of well-marked, rhythmical designs. All the elements of the composition seem to be out of scale or out of place within very small tolerances. The designs are made of straight lines, which often have abrupt variations and sudden stops. The lines sometimes incline toward each other, crossing to form right angles or acute angles of varying degrees. The areas formed by the lines are often filled with color and dots.

Unfortunately, the Hawaiians abandoned the making of fine tapa soon after contact was established with foreign traders. The chiefesses began to wrap themselves in Chinese silk or English cotton and to devote themselves to learning the new religion and language with such dedication that they had no time left for the old activities. The neglect resulted in the near extinction of tapa-making and many other aspects of Hawaiian culture. The echoing sound of tapa-beating in remote valleys was preserved by the commoners for a while, but eventually even the production of everyday tapa was abandoned.

By 1891, the year the Bishop Museum was opened, tapa-making in Hawaii was beginning to take its place among the lost arts. Recognizing the perishable nature of the delicate and beautiful fabric, the Museum collected the best specimens. At the time several books were also put together with actual samples of tapa glued to the pages. These albums are precious and irreplaceable. Sometimes they are opened and exhibited in airtight cases at the Bishop Museum.

Two years ago one of the Museum's well-preserved pages fulfilled its greater function. Alice Kagawa Parrott, an artist who had returned to her native Hawaii to complete two commissions and to spend an academic year as artist in residence on Maui, was in that heightened state of awareness which often precedes a period of artistic creativity. She had looked at the patterns of flowers and those formed by steep *palis*, and from a plane she had seen patterns in pineapple fields. She found possibilities for her woven art everywhere, but it was at the Bishop Museum, where she finally saw Hawaiian art clearly for the first time, that she found her true inspiration. It was the graphic two-dimensional design on a piece of tapa that motivated one of the finest pieces of her current exhibition, which she appropriately calls "Tapa No. 16."

The criss-crossing and overlapping bands of "Tapa No. 16" (91 inches by 242 inches) create a dynamic composition. The work is a "plain weave," which was executed with brown, white and black wool on a linen warp. White is used minimally, but next to the black areas, it vibrates. The placing of the black areas teases the eye into folding the weaving and connecting the "broken knee" lines; the illusion created by this visual fold forces a three-dimensional effect. "Tapa No. 16" can be seen at the Contemporary Arts Center in Honolulu.

Body Ornaments as Art Objects

In Victorian times ancient jewelry made of gold or precious stones was exhibited in art museums along with paintings and works of sculpture, while other body ornaments made of teeth, bones, hair, feathers or seeds were stored away in museums of natural history with "other crafts" and regarded as ethnological exhibits rather than art. Our values have changed, for these same ornamental objects are now admired for their artistic qualities: their rhythm, proportion, texture, form and composition. They are seen as art objects which were created for the sake of expressing an emotion. What we find satisfying today is the "presence" of an object—its intrinsic quality, not the intrinsic value of its materials. The distinction between "fine art" and crafts has become so blurred that separating objects into folk and classical art can only be done on the level of quality. Both are expressions of the human spirit in material form.

In ancient Hawai'i the craftsman was both an artist and a priest because functional objects as well as ceremonial objects were believed to contain spiritual value or *mana*. In fact, he commanded as much respect as a chief.

Although early Hawaiian craftsmen were not identified as individuals (they did not put seals on the works they created), they could be distinguished from one another by the individuality of their art. The system they worked under was regulated by conventions and was unforgiving to anyone who broke the rules. Nonetheless, it did

allow artists hundreds of nuances, subtle variations and every opportunity to display their talent as they created within boundaries set by convention.

Hawaiian jewelry was, like other art forms, nonrepresentational, abstract and inventive. Some kinds—like the *lei niho paloa*, which may have been inspired by the tongue or the crest of a bird and modified in the imagination of the artist—were free-form. The *lei niho paloa* was the most spectacular of all Hawaiian ornaments. It is a hook-shaped ornament which was made from the tooth of a sperm whale and suspended by two coils of braided human hair. To make these two coils, which averaged from six to nine inches in length, over 1,000 feet of hair was needed, in addition to infinite patience. The *lei niho paloa* was made in a variety of materials and shows variation upon variation and incredible ingenuity. The innovations worked into the ornament might surprise us but never wholly deceive us, for its form is unmistakable.

A richer variety of ornaments for adorning the body was made in Hawai'i than in any other part of Polynesia. Included among them were flower leis (which were for temporary use), tattoos and ornaments made of shells, seeds, ivory and teeth.

Hawaiian design for personal adornments was geometric without being symmetrical; it never repeated itself. Rhythm was gained through repetition and progression, and there was an informal balance which could not be quickly assimilated by the eye. Due to the scarcity of earth pigments in these volcanic islands, color was not an important part of design; it was not used, except for feather leis. More important than color was the line of design that ran through a work and created a path for the eye to follow. Linē in Hawaiian jewelry was dynamic and exciting, and might be considered the essence of the ancient jeweler's art.

The work of Barbara Engle depicts another aspect of the Rinascita Hawaiiana. She, too, has been influenced by ancient Hawaiian art and a cultural tradition which was abruptly interrupted 200 years ago. Her body ornaments of bone and shell look strangely familiar, as if they were subtle variations on accepted Hawaiian themes—and yet, they are like nothing we have seen before.

In one of her necklaces she has assembled cut bones and small worn shells. She has used a silver wire as space between three irregular shapes, creating a line which flows from the neck form of the necklace through and beyond the pendant. In another she has created a rhythmic variation by inserting dark shells and weathered beads among uniform, light-colored shell discs. This piece has considerable unity and a formal balance that is relieved by the two unexpected pieces of forged silver. Her catches are "primitive" and visible, and in keeping with the character of the work.

Petroglyphs

The Hawaiians never developed a writing system of their own, for they had a strong oral tradition: their legends, genealogies and histories were chanted from one generation to the next. Moreover, their tendency to express themselves in three dimensions did not encourage drawing and painting, activities that are necessary to the development of a written language. When they worked in two dimensions, they made petroglyphs.

The tradition of carving petroglyphs on lava rock is over a thousand years old, but it seems to have reached a high point in its development at the time just before European explorers made contact with the Hawaiians. Had the tradition of making petroglyphs continued, the rock carvings might have developed into the first stages of a writing system, functioning in much the same way as did Egyptian hieroglyphics and the earliest known Chinese ideograms.

Like any other form of pictorial writing, the petroglyph encompassed a whole message. Each petroglyph was a visual form of communication that could be "read" without knowing the ancient language.

Yet, the Hawaiian petroglyphs were not organized into a system. Each one was still an isolated and unique effort when foreign languages and writing systems were introduced at the end of the 18th century by the European explorers—as can be witnessed by the random appearance of petroglyph designs of horses, guns, sailing ships, Arabic numerals and words written in the Roman alphabet. As writing became accepted, the practice of carving petroglyphs declined.

Petroglyphs are the most spontaneous expressions of Hawaiian art. They are abstract, nonrepresentational designs made of circles, dots and lines, but surprisingly expressive and immediately endearing. They are as public as graffiti and an integral part of the landscape. "Fields" of them occur on ancient trails, boundaries and gathering places; they are numerous on every Island.

They do not relate directly to the human experience of most observers, but can be enjoyed for themselves as visual forms.

For those who have never seen a petroglyph, the Fort Street Mall underground pass is a good place to start. There one can find a heavy, textured concrete wall that is a simulation of a petroglyph "field." It is a State Foundation for Culture and the Arts commission and was executed by Edward Stasack. The wall is a work of art. Each of its details is a good reproduction of an existing Hawaiian design. Much more important, however, is Stasack's selection of petroglyphs and the way he arranged them into a total composition. He took great care to avoid the illusion of perspective, background and foreshortening, to convey the free sense of space that the Hawaiians had.

Transferred to this wall are some of the most imaginative and most characteristic Hawaiian petroglyphs. Some are human figures that share limbs or heads. The wall includes many non-representational designs and many circles which are thought to relate to the ritual disposal of the umbilical cord. Stasack's selection also includes representations of petroglyphs that were made after writing was introduced to the Islands. The work has an impressive unity. It is beautifully understated and elegant, and shows the artist's lively understanding of the functional beauty of the Hawaiian petroglyph.

Hawaiian Art in the Schools

A major thrust of the Governor's Committee on Hawaiian Text Materials has been to learn about useful teacher-created instructional materials, and to publish and disseminate them to the schools throughout the State. A slide-tape presentation I had prepared for my art students at the University of Hawai'i Laboratory School was "discovered" by the Committee and made the prototype material for a filmstrip with taped narration and an illustrated teacher's guide. The project, the "Hawaiian Artistic Tradition," fosters an understanding of the art as it flourished in these Islands before European contact and as it influences the surge of art works in Hawai'i today. It includes one filmstrip of seventy-five color frames, and a twenty-eight minute cassette tape of narration and music. Ka'upena Wong chants the *mele* and plays the nose flute on the tape. A second edition will be available through University of Hawai'i Press.

This visual publication, self-contained in its music, images and narration, may seem complete and in no need of elaboration. This is not so. For this curriculum aid to grow it needs thoughtful cultivation; younger students should be encouraged to *feel* the creative experience of Hawaiian art by direct contact with natural fibers, native woods, chipped stone, vegetable colors. Older students should be helped to *discover* the relevancy of the ancient tradition to their own lives by having them experience its influence on the surge of art works in Hawai'i today. Through discussions, projects, and excursions students can be helped to *understand* a culture where a level of unconscious perfection was achieved, where everything made was appropriate and beautiful, where the life of the artist was a total commitment to form and meaning, to the known and the unknown.

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