

## CHORIS AND KAMEHAMEHA

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THIS STUDY of the portraits that Choris painted of Kamehameha is based on well known documents: the published texts of von Kotzebue and of de Chamisso, and Choris' own reports with pen, pencil, and watercolor brush.

My only excuse for going once again over this material, though it already was analysed with deep insight by Huc-M. Luquiens, is that my conclusions differ markedly from his own.<sup>1</sup>

At daybreak, on November 24, 1816, the ship *Rurick* faced the coast of Hawaii. Captain von Kotzebue had previously been advised of a strong anti-Russian feeling 'in the air', as a result of the awkwardly aggressive maneuvers of the Russian Scheffer against Kamehameha's political primacy. There were also the spiteful threats of sailors, dissatisfied with the details of their provisioning, who had sworn not long before that they would send a Russian warship to annex the archipelago; and the *Rurick* was such a ship.

Acting cautiously, and perhaps not unmindful of the lethal unpleasantness suffered by Captain Cook, Captain von Kotzebue chose to stay on board. He sent as his emissaries to the king—as more expendable than sailors—those men he quaintly chose to call "our scientific gentlemen": Eschscholtz, a doctor whose hobby was zoology, Adelbert de Chamisso, the botanist of the expedition (whose habit of drying his 'herbs' in the sun on deck irritated the captain), and Louis Choris, the artist. Together with Elliot de Castro, who had boarded the ship in San Francisco, knew Kamehameha, and was to act as interpreter, they were put over in the small boat, "in order to acquaint the king with the object of our voyage."

The landing of the small craft at dawn must have been dramatic. The scientific gentlemen could observe the swift moves on shore of groups of warlike figures, and surmise that they themselves were the object of such martial preparations. Some uncertainty as to their immediate fate must have mingled with the awe with which they made ready to meet Kamehameha, already famous as the Napoleon of the Pacific. For Choris, always the artist, the hues of dawn lent color and form to these mixed emotions.

De Chamisso left us a word picture of the landing: "On the shore, countless people were under arms. The old king, in front of whose house we landed, was sitting upon a raised terrace, surrounded by his wives, and dressed in his native costume, the red *malo* and the black *tapa*, the wide beautiful folded cape of black cloth."

Choris noted, "Tammeamea received us frigidly."

This first awesome sight of the king is recorded graphically by Choris in

<sup>1</sup> "Kamehameha's Portrait" by Huc-M. Luquiens, in the *45th Annual Report of the Hawaiian Historical Society for the Year 1936*.

*Vues et Paysages des Régions Equinoxiale*, Pl. XVIII, "Entrevue de l'expédition de M. Kotzebue avec le Roi Tamméaméa, dans l'île d'Ovayhi." (Fig. 1)

The beautiful plate is preeminently a landscape. It is only by focusing on the clustered humans that the historical importance of the scene becomes manifest. Choris, 'barely twenty', chose to represent himself in the foreground, hugging close his sketchbook. Next to him, de Chamisso in his mid-thirties, in a greatcoat with brandenburgs 'à la Polonaise', and a shirt with open collar 'à la Byron'. Eschscholtz is also there, and Elliot squats in the background, a tiny oldster thatched with white that de Chamisso once compared to a gnome in a fairytale. Loyal to his captain—who was in fact, at that time, safely on board the *Rurick*, awaiting news of peace or war—Choris added in retrospect von Kotzebue to the scene, imposing in his green uniform, sidewhiskers, sword, and cocked hat.

Native warriors, old chiefs, and courtiers, make up the picturesque crowd facing the explorers, some with plumed capes and helmets, some tattooed and sporting a medley of native and foreign weapons. The women add naked beauty to the animated scene. (Fig. 2)

The dominant figure, however, is that of Kamehameha, all the more imposing in that none of the picturesqueness of his court, helmets and capes, beards and miscellany weapons, bedeck him. The black mantle of tapa, cradling the limbs in its ample folds, brings forth for us classical memories of Roman senators and marble togas; the Buddha-wise squatting posture superimposes to these classical memories an Oriental inscrutability. (Fig. 3)

Though minute in scale, this lithographed version merits to take its place alongside the better known portraits of the king. Equally valid as a document, it records a first impression that was diluted all too soon to familiarity, as Kamehameha's mood veered from the majestic to one of amiable loquaciousness. The one objection that might have carried weight in Victorian times—that this portrait was not done directly from nature, but rather from memories—is not as impressive today as it would have been then, now that new theories of art have further clarified the relative values of objective sight and subjective vision.

Kamehameha's change of mood was noted by de Chamisso: "The old gentleman gladly welcomed the return of his doctor [Elliot] . . . and allowed him to explain the friendly purposes of our expedition. When this had been done, he gave us a friendly salute, shook us by the hand, and invited us to partake of a baked pig. We put off the meal until the arrival of the captain."

While waiting for von Kotzebue, continues de Chamisso, "Eschscholtz and I requested to be allowed to go botanizing, whilst Choris remained in order to draw the king's portrait."

Added Choris, "I asked Tammeamea permission to do his portrait; this prospect seemed to please him very much, but he asked me to leave him alone an instant, so he could dress. Imagine my surprise on seeing this monarch display himself in the costume of a sailor; he wore blue trousers, a red waistcoat, a clean white shirt and a necktie of yellow silk. I begged him to change his dress; he refused absolutely and insisted on being painted as he was."

It can be easily surmised that the change of clothing Choris asked for, and failed to obtain, was a return to the native tapa Kamehameha had just doffed.

What was accomplished at this early morning sitting?

The collection of Choris' original travel sketches preserved at the Honolulu Academy of Art gives pointers concerning his work that may help us sift the evidence at hand. Choris was unusually thrifty with his drawing paper, never quite knowing when he would be able to replenish his stock, or how demanding the incentive to sketch, as new islands and new sights materialized out of the Pacific. In his drawings, we see heads clustered on a single sheet, though made at distinct sittings; shoulders and torsos crowd each other uncomfortably; at times, they overlap unrealistically. No. 6-6, "Homme des Îles Radak," for example, describes two heads, the jaw and ear of the one seen in transparency through the skull and hairdo of the other.<sup>2</sup> Choris' thrifty habits came to a climax in the portrait presumed to be that of Kaahumanu, No. 11. Her fat face is wedged within the contours of a roughly torn off scrap of paper, that leaves room neither for the top half of the head lei nor for the chins of the sturdy queen.

The voyage ended, Choris dismembered his notebook. Its pages were cut into pieces according to subject matter, and the pieces were rearranged on cardboards for easier display. Choris also numbered and captioned the sketches. Despite all this care, so crowded had been some of the original pages that, at times, the outer lines of a subject were left spilled over an area meant for another theme.

Such is the case with No. 6-4, a head non-committally captioned, "Chef des Iles Sandwich," generally acknowledged to be Kamehameha. In its lower left corner, quill pen lines describe the shoulder of some other person, covered by a material of the texture of cloth or tapa. (Fig. 4)

On the same cardboard as this sketch, Choris pasted another quill pen and wash drawing, "Femme des Iles Sandwich mêlée avec un Européen." It is set in its present state on a small piece of paper, leaving just enough marginal clearance for the face. The shoulder scarf, however, was cut away at both ends when the original sheet was pared down. (Fig. 5)

Using tracings, or photographs, if we shuffle alongside each other the two heads, and make a visual allowance for a narrow vertical strip now missing between the two papers, we see how the shoulder pertaining to the female head spills its linés over the boundary of the other drawing. The concordancy is more than a coincidence. Lines are of corresponding value, width, and texture, and the double stroke that defines the outline of the shoulder runs through both subjects. Equally convincing is the change in direction of the folds of the scarf that, on both sheets, reverse their course from rightwise to leftwise, as they gather over the bosom. (Fig. 6)

A third head in the Academy collection, Choris plainly identified as a portrait of Kamehameha, "Tamméméa, Roi des Iles Sandwich." It was paired by the

<sup>2</sup> In numbering Choris' drawings, the first number is that given by the Academy of Arts to the cardboard on which Choris, as a rule, pasted a group of small sketches. The second number is that written, by Choris himself, on each sketch.

painter with a sketch made on the same day that the regal sitting took place, of Kamehameha's heir, Liholiho.

The king's bust is set with more than usual care on an oval shaped paper suggestive of a locket-frame, for which Choris may once have cut this watercolor to fit. Unlike the plain washes seen in most of his other portraits, he used here short staccato brush strokes reminiscent of the craft of a miniaturist. (Fig. 7)

The orderly appearance imparted by the regular shape is deceptive. The portrait is painted not on one but on two pieces of paper, skillfully cut and pasted together to appear as one. Set on a slant at the upper right, the joint affects part of the background. Quill pen strokes, unrelated to the main subject, are half-seen under the translucent watercolor washes of the gray-green background. Obviously out of context, the strokes are bunched at the right of the head. They stop sharply at the slanted cut and the small added paper is quite free of them. It appears that these fragmentary lines were drawn before the two sheets were joined.

The joining was done by the painter himself, as it preceded the painting of at least the background, where the serried brushstrokes override both papers.

What neighboring subject, in this case, left some of its lines astray in the oval portrait? At the lower left of the female head already described, the edge adjoining the shoulder scarf is cut on a slant answering that edge, in the oval, now hidden with paste and paint. To bring together these two edges is sufficient evidence that the 'meaningless' lines in the background of the Kamehameha portrait complete the scarf started in the other drawing. (Fig. 8)

We may add to this physical evidence de Chamisso's eye-witness description of the same page of the sketchbook, as he knew it before it was dismembered, "The painter had side by side with the king's picture the drawing of a woman of the middle class." Reconstructed, the page agrees on the whole with de Chamisso's description (linecut A). The female head may be safely recognized as "the drawing of a woman of the middle class." Not one, but two sketches of the king are brought in close relationship to it. However, the head at the right, Choris did not care to identify by name. This leaves the one seen at the left — an acknowledged likeness of Kamehameha — as the portrait de Chamisso had in mind.

Added de Chamisso, "Mr. Young, to whom this page was shown, expressed his doubts of the propriety of such a combination. He advised our friend [Choris] either to separate the two pictures or not to show them at all. Therefore the page was cut in two before the King was shown to other Hawaiians."

The mention of "Mr. Young" gives the place where, and the date when, the portrait was cut away from the sketchbook page: having missed John Young in Hawaii, the explorers contacted him on Oahu, where the *Rurick* anchored four days later.

Choris obeyed John Young's lesson in Hawaiian etiquette. Once isolated, the king's portrait would be worked over to give it the propriety it lacked, before being shown "to other Hawaiians." The stay on Oahu is the probable date when the drawing acquired its oval shape, and its careful watercolor finish.

One of the marks that previous researchers looked for in their quest for the 'original' portrait of Kamehameha was the sailor costume that the king undoubtedly wore at the sitting. Of the more tentative one of two heads, No. 6-4, Huc-M. Luquiens has this to say, "It could not be Choris' 'original' made when the king was posing, for . . . it is practically essential that the red vest should appear for such identification."

For the same reason, he dismisses the oval portrait, "It is somewhat rough, and shows a small portion of the 'black cloak' about the throat . . . The accounts of both Kotzebue and Choris himself are so circumstantial as to the insistence of the king on being painted in the red waistcoat that we cannot regard this watercolor as being Choris' 'original' made from life."

So plausible is this *sine qua non* of a European garb that it should prove in some way valid in the case of these same two drawings, now that another *sine qua non*, to wit "the drawing of a woman of the middle class," has stamped them as sketched from life.

The head, No. 6-4, stops at the chin; it lacks a neck and the attached neckline that could at least suggest the presence of the English shirt, or that of the Hawaiian costume. Nothing here conflicts, or agrees either, with the red vest requirement. (see Fig. 4)

The oval portrait shows the black tapa cloak, it is true, but was not always as we see it now. It is a plastic palimpsest, hiding a complex web of drawn and incised lines under the surface version. These lines coincide with the features and the general shape of the head. Most of them disagree, however, with the painting of the bust, that has the bare neck emerging from the V opening of the cloak. What these maverick lines configure instead are the European shirt with the tight collar, the flowing tie, the lapels of the vest, part of the shirtsleeves.

Thus, hidden under this puzzling portrait of the king in Hawaiian costume, there exists an earlier version, one that showed the king in the red vest. Judging from that part of it that remains exposed over the top of the head, it was a quill pen and wash rendering. The vest was painted a light red, now become underpainting, that modifies the dark gray of the cloak at the right shoulder, and the gray green of the background over the left shoulder of the king. It is this first version that is used in the reconstruction of the sketchbook page (see linecut A). The further significance of the incised lines shall be made clear later on.

Wrote von Kotzebue, "At 8 A.M., Mr. Elliot settled business to our advantage; he came on board with two of the most distinguished chiefs . . . who welcomed us in the name of the king . . . He invited me to his camp . . . whither I went."

Wrote de Chamisso, "Finally, our Captain arrived. The old warrior received him with great cordiality." Von Kotzebue was met by Kamehameha "upon the landing place, and he shook me heartily by the hand, when we had landed. His dress consisted of white shirt, blue pantaloons, red vest, and black neck-cloth."

Von Kotzebue had missed entirely the morning sitting, over when Kame-



Fig. 1. Plate XVIII of *Vues et Paysages des Régions Equinoxiales*.



Fig. 2. Detail. From right to left: Choris, de Chamisso, Eschscholtz, von Kotzebue, Elliot de Castro, Kamehameha, Kaahumanu.



Fig. 3. Detail, enlarged. Kamehameha in the black cloak.

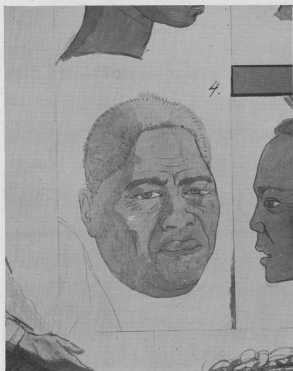


Fig. 4. Choris, "Chef des Iles Sandwich". Pencil, quill pen and watercolor.

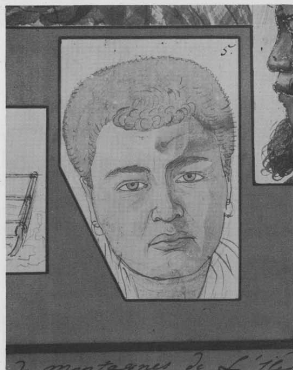


Fig. 5. Choris, "Femme des Iles Sandwich mêlée avec un Européen". Pencil, quill pen and watercolor.



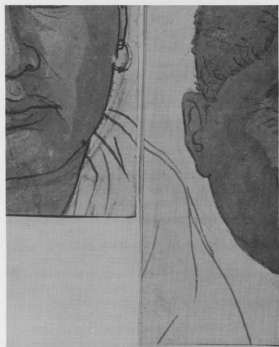


Fig. 6. Enlarged details from "Chef des Iles Sandwich", and "Femme des Iles Sandwich", showing original relationship.

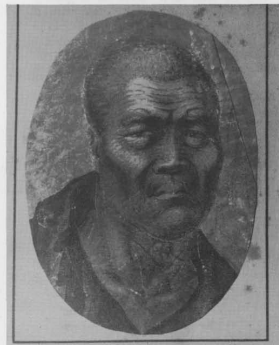


Fig. 7. Choris, "Tamméa-méa Roi des Iles Sandwich". Pencil, quill pen, gouache and watercolor. Photograph taken in a slanting light to stress diagonal cut and incised lines.

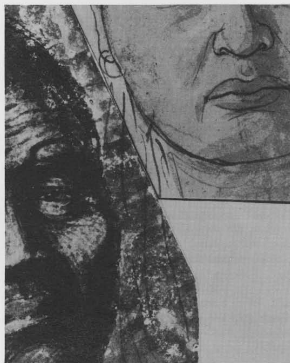


Fig. 8. Enlarged details from "Tamméaméa", and "Femme des Iles Sandwich", showing original relationship. "Tamméaméa" photographed with red filter to bring out hidden lines.



Fig. 9. Choris, "Kamehameha in the red vest" Collection Bruce Cartwright Jr.



Fig. 10. Composite photograph, superimposing the portrait in the black cloak over the portrait in the red vest.

Linecut A. Reconstructed sketchbook page used at the morning sitting.



Linecut B. Composite drawing superimposing a tracing of the oval portrait over one of the king in the red vest. Traced from the originals.



hameha, still clothed in the costume he had chosen to be portrayed in, left the house where the sitting had taken place to receive the Russian on shore. From then on, von Kotzebue was guided on a round of events that he records in his book, and that may be cross-checked in de Chamisso's independent account. As what von Kotzebue did and saw on that day bears on our problem, we shall follow him briefly through his crowded rounds.

After drinking their mutual health in Kamehameha's house, the king and the captain talked amicably of the unpleasant behaviour of previous Russian guests, both of them deploring it. They then settled the all-important question of provisions. Followed a visit to the favorite queen, Kaahumanu, and another visit, less appreciated, to the king's son and heir, Liholiho.

At long length, the delayed meal of kalua pig was served to the visitors, with Kamehameha merely watching them. This was followed by a visit to the nearby heiau, in pagan thanksgiving for the peace made secure. Said von Kotzebue, "When the king is in his murai no one is allowed to enter; but we admired in the meantime the colossal wooden idols." The wait allowed the untiring Choris to do there some of his best work: views of the sanctuary, 12 and 13-1; individual sculptures, 3-1 and 4.

Back to the king's house where it was Kamehameha's turn to eat, watched by the explorers. After dinner, the king detailed what provisions von Kotzebue would receive on Oahu, after which diplomatic presents were exchanged.

It was only now, as the last event listed before the final leave taking, that von Kotzebue mentioned how the king sat to Choris, "The skill of our draughtsman, who had sketched some of the chiefs in a most happy manner and very quickly, was admired even by Tammeamea, but who a long time resisted my entreaties to have himself, as they say here, put upon paper, probably fearing some enchantment, and it was only when I told him that our emperor would be glad to have his portrait that he consented to it."

The fact that there were two sittings seems to have passed unnoticed; yet every other moment of von Kotzebue's stay on shore may be accounted for. Would he have invented of whole cloth a late afternoon sitting, simply to claim for himself a part of the goodwill that did result from the morning venture? He may have exaggerated somewhat his own initiative in the matter, and stressed the reluctance of the king, but among the circumstances he recounts, at least one is incompatible with the mood of the first sitting. That morning, Choris found the king very willing, "I asked Tammeamea permission to do his portrait; this prospect seemed to please him very much." That afternoon, von Kotzebue found the king most unwilling, "Tammeamea . . . a long time resisted my entreaties to have himself . . . put upon paper."

It is credible that, when von Kotzebue pleaded so forcefully for the king to pose for Choris, he knew nothing as yet of the morning sitting. Choris, hoping to do better than before, would see no reason to interfere. As to the king, he frankly felt restless, "Mr. Choris succeeded admirably well in taking his likeness, although Tammeamea, to make it more difficult, would not sit still for a moment, but was making grimaces all the time" wrote von Kotzebue.

What was done at the afternoon sitting?

The incised lines that 'roughen up' the oval portrait are a complex of at least two distinct sets of lines. Both recognizable sets are tracing lines, made by Choris when transferring the king's portrait to some other surface. In the Academy collection there are other examples of his use of the method: No. 6-7, "Kadou, natif des Iles Carolines . . .", for example, where the tracing was done from the finished painting, the scratched lines plowing a white furrow over the dark watercolor washes.

One of the two sets of tracing lines seen on the Kamehameha portrait also shows white on dark, and was worked over the finished picture. This was a tracing of the king in Hawaiian costume. Minor departures from the painted version—a neck more thickly set, an even wider V to the opening of the cloak—agree with the lithograph of the king in the black cloak in Choris' published folio. This tracing dates then from his return to Europe, when he transferred the portrait, with variations, from paper to stone.

Of greater interest for the present study is an earlier tracing, one that preceded the substantial repainting of the portrait as we see it today. The lines of this tracing show up dark on light: as the wet pigment was brushed over the already scratched surface, it saturated the furrows with deepened hues. This early transfer was of the king in European clothes.

As we have seen, it is probable that the thorough repainting of the oval portrait dates from the few days that the *Rurick* anchored at Honolulu. To be still earlier, the tracing should be practically simultaneous with the making of the drawing itself.

A third likeness that Choris painted of Kamehameha is the famous watercolor of the king in the red vest. It is known to have been painted from life, though there is some uncertainty as to which one of the paintings of this type in existence is the long sought after 'original'.

Outstanding is the version owned by Bruce Cartwright Jr. (Fig. 9). Painted with extreme delicacy on a full sheet of Whatman paper watermarked 1813, it is undoubtedly from Choris' hand. The sheet once was folded in two, resulting in a vertical crease visible on the photograph.

Besides the distinct clothes and the ampler spacing, an obvious difference between the watercolor of Kamehameha in the black cloak and that in the red vest is a matter of plumb. The king in red vest is set awry on the page, shoulders tilting downwards to the left, with the axis of the head correspondingly on a slant. In contrast, the portrait with the black cloak is poised straight within the rectangular frame that Choris carefully ruled around it. The axis of the head remains true to plumb. (see Fig. 7)

In the course of this study, as I joined back into their relative positions the sketch of the woman and the oval portrait, a perceptible rocking tilt to the left had to be given the oval to fit on the reconstructed sketchbook page. It struck me that, in so doing, the head in the oval acquired the slant seen in the portrait with the red vest (see linecut A). It suggested a common root for both watercolors.

A further step was to trace each portrait, and superimpose the tracings into a composite (linecut B. Also composite photograph Fig. 10). The diagram

includes the rectangular frame that Choris ruled around the oval portrait, and the vertical crease in the Whatman sheet on which is painted the portrait in the red vest. Acting as plumbines, they help visualize the rocking tilt that started this enquiry.

The composite diagram and photograph show how the watercolor of Kamehameha in the red vest was washed over the linear framework, borrowed by tracing, of the first state of the oval portrait. In the outline of the head and all particulars of the features, the two pictures that go to make the composite merge into one. The lineal 'ghost' of European clothing hidden in the oval portrait neatly fits over the red vest version, but the latter shows minor variations, and is more elaborated. Only where both tracings are superposed—within the oval area—can this concordancy be checked. The parts of the portrait in the red vest that stand alone may well be a cue to that part of the oval portrait lost when the sketchbook page was cut apart, on Oahu.

All known facts are reconciled. In preparation for the afternoon sitting, Choris transferred the outlines of the oval portrait in its first state—with its slant and its vest—to a virgin sheet of paper, decorously centering his subject this time. The painter indeed could—as happen it did—dazzle his captain with his speed and accuracy, for his task at this second sitting would have been mostly that of filling in with local colors the excellent outline already arrived at that morning.

Perhaps the king's contortions, that von Kotzebue gravely assigned to magical fears, were after all little more than substantial winks at Choris, whose secret the king shared!

From Hawaii, the *Rurick* went to Oahu for provisioning and repairs, anchoring at Honolulu. An event of its stay was the visit aboard of Kamehameha's vice-regent for the island, Kalanimoku, and his retinue. Wrote von Kotzebue, "They immediately recognized Tammeamea's portrait, and when it became known that we had Tammeamea on paper, we daily received a crowd of visitors who wished to see him."

Wrote de Chamisso, "The very lifelike portrait of Tameiameia that had been done by Choris made a great hit. They all recognized it and were much pleased."

De Chamisso went on to tell the story of John Young and the sketchbook page. This episode was told in an aside, "I must not forget to mention . . ." and was stated to have been carried on *sub rosa*. It cannot be confused with the display of a Kamehameha portrait that met with social success. While the John Young incident fits all the evidence concerned with the oval portrait, the likeness of the king that was an instant hit can only be the watercolor with the red vest. It is the only one of the two portraits that had been finished in Hawaii. The oval portrait came into existence as we see it now as a result of old Young's advice, given on Oahu. The portrait in the red vest also fits what de Chamisso goes on to state, "Choris left several copies of this very successful portrait here. Upon arriving in Manila the following year [1817] the American merchants had already secured this picture and had had it copied for the trade. Choris took back with him to Europe a copy of this Chinese work."

To conclude, let us compare in terms of human values the two main painted versions of Kamehameha's portrait, the one with the black cloak and the one with the red vest. Huc-M. Luquiens proves to be a keen psychologist when he writes, "Choris had been horrified by the king's European costume. He had felt that the much talked of Hawaiian king should appear in Hawaiian dress. He still balked at the red waistcoat and in his own book undertook to be rid of it, substituting the . . . black cloak." What is described here as a psychological process is expressly backed by the physical evidence that the oval portrait yields. This portrait, on which much labor was spent, was the first version of the king's head that really pleased Choris, the only one of the two sketches done at the morning sitting that he cared to acknowledge openly. It also was the dark matrix out of which had emerged the more colorful and widely admired watercolor of the king in the red vest. The portrait in the black cloak remained the painter's favorite, combining as it did what objective facts came out of the first sitting with the artist's own deeply felt, previously experienced, emotions. Naturally, it is the head that Choris chose to draw on the lithographic stone for his own publication.

Von Kotzebue, on the other hand, had missed the majestic scene at dawn with which the oval picture is intimately tied. He had never had an opportunity to see the king in Hawaiian costume. From his point of view, the more successful portrait was that of the king in the red vest. It showed Kamehameha as von Kotzebue had known him, and was executed at the afternoon sitting that the Russian captain had both engineered and witnessed. Naturally, it was this portrait that von Kotzebue chose to have engraved for his own published report of the expedition.