

U of H Administration Building Frescoes

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(Ed: We thought you'd be interested in the history of the two murals in the lobby of the Administration Building—one on the first floor and its continuation on the second floor. We asked Dr. Charlot for an article on the Frescoes and he was kind enough to write the following.)



Charlot

On arrival in the summer of 1949, I began to work on the first floor fresco of the Administration Building. Its theme was "The Relationship of Man and Nature in Old Hawaii." It was based on documentation mostly taken from engravings in travellers' report, on studies from the Bishop Museum Collections and from nature.

This fresco was commissioned by the Classes of 1949 to 1952, and I had many a talk with student representatives who watched the progress of the work and made various suggestions. One of these, that could not be acted upon at the time, was that an excellent theme for a mural would be campus life in Hawaii, with special emphasis on the various racial strains living and blending in harmony.

This suggestion was carried out in the latest fresco on the second floor of the Administration Building. On one of the first days after my arrival, I assisted at Commencement exercises. There were, of course, features similar to those one expects of such an occasion at mainland universities, but there were also many features that struck me as peculiarly Hawaiian—in fact, as a survival of the spirit of ancient Hawaii. I noted the academic processional along the jungle growth that forms a tropical background for the stage of Andrew's Theater; the parents with leis ready to give

to the graduated students; the mixture of hoods of academic character and of leis of a more carefree significance; above all, the many races working together toward one unified goal. All these impressed me deeply. Later Commencements added other details and I started making sketches of small things, such as the strewn petals of discarded leis, together with exploded photographic bulbs, that litter the lawn the day after. As the smaller data accumulated, the larger lines formed themselves. As always with murals, the architectural setup is all-important and determines, in great part, the composition. A mural is not static, but is made to be seen along the normal lines of traffic within the building. As the first sight one has of the second floor wall occurs as one ascends the stairs, this gave me the idea of painting the group of students who, after commencement, ascend the stairs of Andrew's Theater. The processional of professors, somewhat lost in the jungle of palm trees and hala trees, forms the background. The crowd seated in the amphitheater is suggested in its various costumes, and the parents waiting, leis in hand, each for his own student—son, daughter, or husband—forms a frieze that is not intended as realistic, but is instead suggestive of an Egyptian frieze. Grandparents of Chinese or Japanese stock frankly dress in native dress, with both manners and types diluted in the next generation. A child out of school has hid behind one of the entrance gates to look at the spectacle, thinking of the days when he too will go to college. Two gardeners,

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that age makes immune to enthusiasm, look at the vivid scene with philosophical detachment.

Typical of our campus, birds mingle freely with humans and a flock of mynah birds, strewn along the lower edge of the mural, repeat the slightly stylized theme of the waiting parents on another scale, silhouetted in dark green against the vivid green of the lawn.

This fresco could be executed thanks to the gift of an anonymous donor and it is my impression that, taken together with the 1949 fresco, it constitutes a whole more meaningful than would either one of them alone. The first mural has a certain epic intent, certainly unlike the Hawaii we know today, but I do believe related to the Hawaii to be found in ancient chants that tell of the heroes of old. The new mural, in contrast, is made with elements that are an everyday occurrence on our campus and portrays the very same people that work, or pass through, the Administration Building where it is painted. As the work proceeded, it was an encouragement to see the interest with which everybody, from janitor to president, followed its progress, giving advice that was all the more interesting to me as it was not given from the overspecialized point of view of the professional artist. One must remember that a mural painting is painted for the people at large and not for a few collectors or critics. The fresco painter cannot afford the speculations and researches that some easel painters pursue in the isolation of their studio. To tell a story clearly, and to tell it in architectural terms that will blend with the existing architecture, is the purpose of the mural painter.