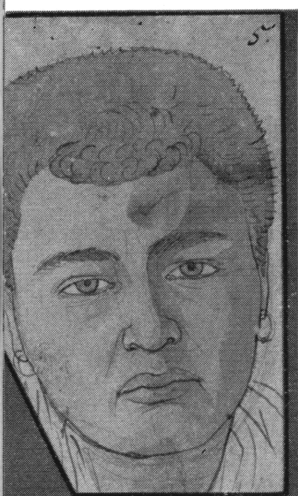
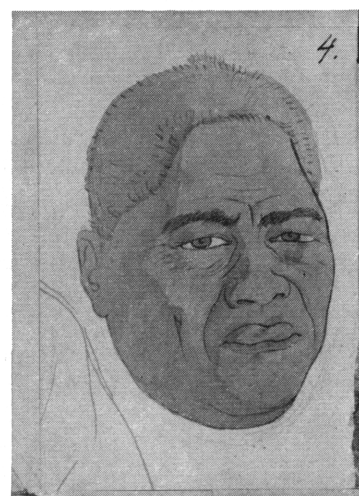


a "find" in the art world a new portrait of Kamehameha

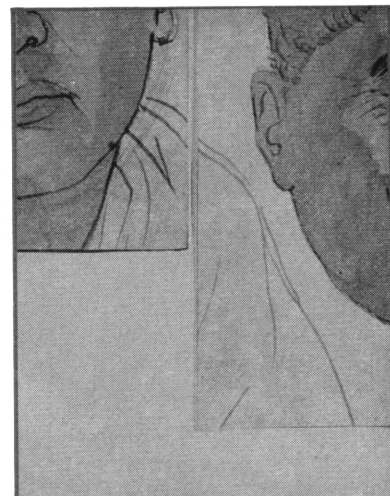
By Jean Charlot



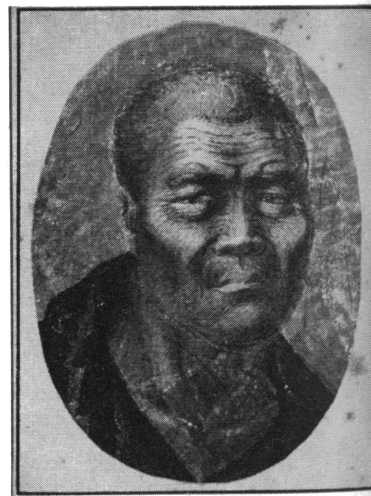
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KAMEHAMEHA I was painted once from life. The artist was Louis Choris, attached to the Imperial Russian expedition led by Captain Von Kotzebue, whose ostensible purpose was to discover a Northwest passage. Its members sailed on the ship Rurick, that came to Hawaii after having visited San Francisco. At daybreak, on November 24, 1816, the Rurick faced the coast of Hawaii, where Kamehameha resided.

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, Adelaide de Chamisso, who was the botanist of the expedition, and Louis Choris, the artist. Together with Elliot de Castro, who had boarded the ship in San Francisco and who 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.”

Native warriors, old chiefs, and courtiers made up the picturesque crowd facing the explorers, some with plumed capes and helmets, some tattooed and sporting a medley of native and foreign weapons. Kamehameha was dressed simply, in a black mantle of native tapa, squatting in a Buddahwise posture.

While waiting for Von Kotzebue, reports de Chamisso, “Eschscholtz and I requested to go botanizing, whilst Choris remained in order to draw the king’s portrait.” Adds 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.”

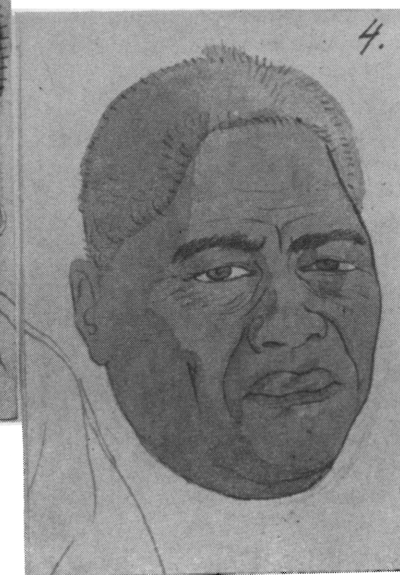
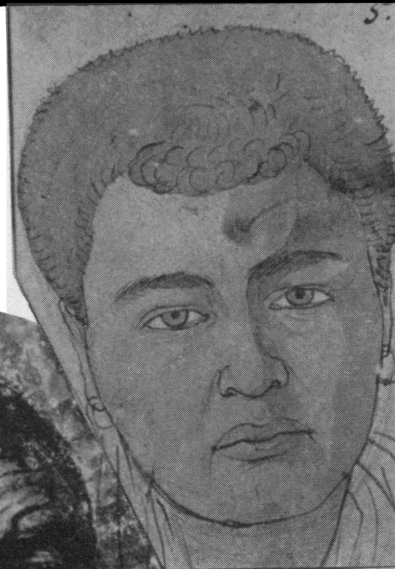
What was accomplished at this early morning sitting? The sketchbook that Choris used does not exist any more in its original form. Choris himself, on his return to Europe, cut it to pieces, according to subject-

matter, and pasted on cardboards the fragments, adding explanatory captions.

Many of his Hawaiian sketches are now preserved at the Honolulu Academy of Art, and it is among them that I looked for evidence. The keypiece to the puzzle was not a portrait of Kamehameha, but a female head. When Choris pared down this sketch, he sacrificed parts of the two shoulders, wrapped in tapa cloth. (Fig. 1)

A small, not too successful sketch, that Choris purposely captioned “Chief of the Sandwich Islands,” is usually considered to be a head of Kamehameha. Choris’ refusal to acknowledge it as such, proves his dissatisfaction with it. It has a long skull, instead of the round

photographs by Raymond Sato



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of a locket-frame, for which Choris may once have cut this watercolor to fit. (Fig. 4) This formal appearance 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 watercolor washes of the gray-green background. Obviously out of context, the strokes were drawn before the two sheets were joined, as they stop sharply at the slanting cut.

What neighbouring 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 the edge in the oval, now hidden with paste and paint. To bring together these two edges is sufficient evidence that the ‘meaningless’ lines of the Kamehameha portrait complete the scarf started in the other drawing. (Fig. 5)

We have de Chamisso’s eye-witness description of the original page of Choris’ 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. (Fig. 6) 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 at the left—an acknowledged likeness of Kamehameha—as the portrait de Chamisso had in mind.

But the oval portrait shows the king wrapped in a native tapa cloak, and we know that he posed in an English sailor’s costume. The oval portrait shows the black tapa cloth, it is true, but was not at first as we see

it now. Under the surface version there exists an older version, that Raymond Sato brought out artfully in specially conceived photographs, using slanting light and a red filter. The lines thus brought out describe the King dressed in the European shirt, the flowing neckerchief, and the vest, that he wore at the sitting.

Having received on board the Rurik Kamehameha's assurances of friendship, Von Kotzebue landed at noon. He had missed entirely the morning sitting, over when the King, 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. It was a full day for all concerned, with a ceremonial kalua pig dinner, a visit to the heiau, visits to the queens and to Kamehameha's heir, Liholiho. A political exchange of gifts, and the details of the provisioning filled in what was left of the day. Listing it as the last event before leave taking, Von Kotzebue mentions now how the King sat to Choris, "Tammeamea . . . a long time resisted my entreaties to have himself, as they say here, put upon paper, probably fearing some enchantment . . . 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 up to now unnoticed. Would Von Kotzebue 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 per-

mission 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 plausible 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, "Tammeamea, to make it more difficult, would not sit still for a moment, but was making grimaces all the time," writes Von Kotzebue.

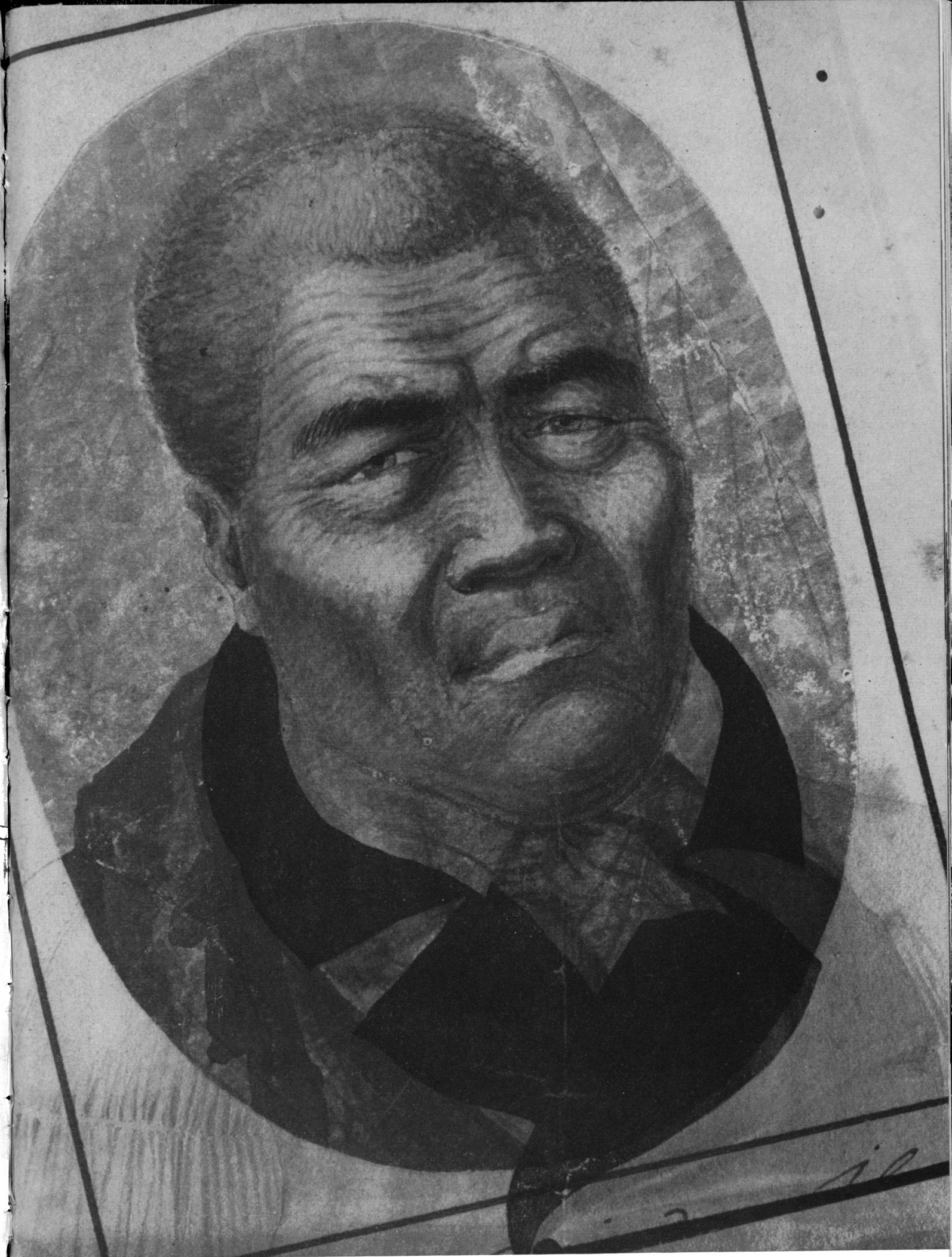
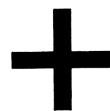
What was done at this afternoon sitting? We have not accounted yet for a third likeness that Choris painted of Kamehameha, the famed watercolor that shows the King in the red vest? (Fig. 7) It must have been also painted on that day, as it was officially displayed, and much admired, when the Rurick anchored at Oahu, four days later.

How did Choris, confronted by a model who refused to stay still a moment, manage this outstanding result? Primarily intent on gathering data, the artist was not averse to shortcuts. More than one of his sketches shows evidence of tracing, of making carbon copies, as it were. Thus, the first version of the oval portrait, showing the King in European costume, was once transferred to another sheet, as its incised lines still testify. That this transfer was the groundwork for the final portrait of the King in the red vest can be proved. Again I am indebted to Raymond Sato for his striking composite photograph that superposes the portrait in the red vest

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A "Find" in the art world . . .

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and the oval portrait. (Fig. 8) The coincidence of head and features is perfect, to be explained only by mechanical duplication.

Beautiful as the watercolor of the King in the red vest is, its cool and patient rendering lacks fire. This fire we find in the oval portrait, despite its fumbings, superposed versions, and scratched lines. Thus the composite of both versions does more than prove a point. It constitutes a 'find', a new portrait of Kamehameha, entirely from Choris' own hand, a final summing up of what he saw and experienced, as he drew King Kamehameha from life.