

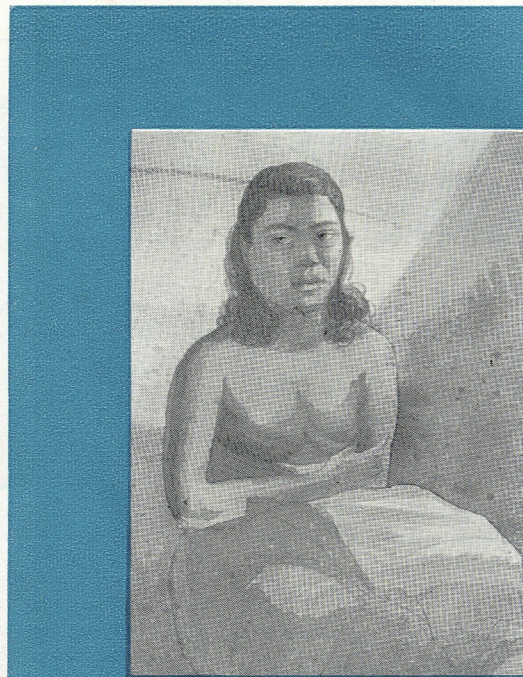
Unfettered, free to dream, Choris-the-artist painted truth in beauty he never saw (a further tribute to his artistry says Jean Charlot) in his "Femme des Iles Sandwich" above.

All photographs of prints from Academy of Arts collection.

LUDWIG CHORIS, draftsman to the von Kotzebue expedition, visited the Hawaiian Islands in 1817 — an era we think of as romantic, one of early contacts between European explorers and natives. Paul Gauguin, landing in Tahiti at the end of the same century, was hard put to reconstruct its pagan past from what fragments had escaped the efficient "big stick" of French colonial administrators. Was Choris' task easier than Gauguin's?

What confronted the Russian draftsman in 1817 was not substantially different from what the French painter faced in 1881. Whereas 18th century seamen had been able to admire the bodies of warriors and of princesses in primitive nudity, a hasty assimilation of foreign manners had already queered this Garden of Eden simplicity by the time Choris landed. At the time of his visit, lower class natives still went nearly naked, for want of a better choice. But men and women of high rank bundled themselves proudly inside dubious imported clothing which lacked, at least to the foreign eye, the picturesque dignity of ancient fashion.

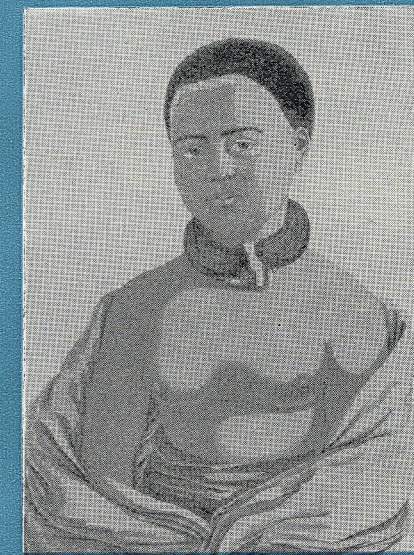
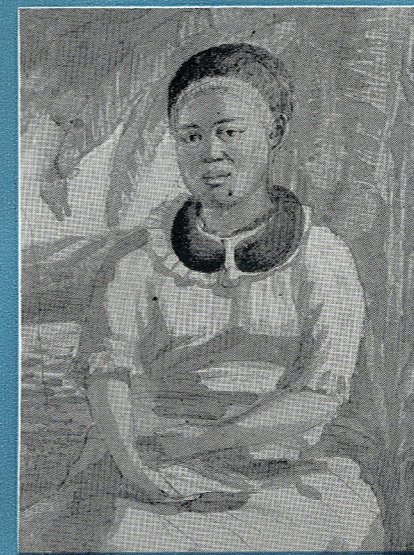
Typical of native taste is the well known story of a portrait Choris painted from life, of Kamehameha I. The artist was received by a king dressed in traditional kingly



Previously, Choris-the-draftsman with the von Kotzebue expedition had done two watercolors identical in size, which he himself mounted on a single mat, suggesting a relationship. Left, a portrait of a woman of the lower classes.

The other portrait of a woman of rank, right, with its contrasting mate, was painted from life, Mr. Charlot believes. As evidence of this, he points to the patient expression of the two models; their static, easy-to-keep positions.

"Sandvichanka," for the official von Kotzebue report, is an odd blend of the two previous models. For it, Choris borrowed the bare torso of one; pose, head, accessories of the other. Aesthetic intuition was at work here.



CHORIS AND THE CHIEFESS

by Jean Charlot

garments: a red malo girdling his loins and, on his shoulders, an ample black cloak of native tapa. When the time came for the sitting, Kamehameha begged to be excused and reappeared, shortly, punctiliously clothed in European shirt and scarf, blue pants and an English sailor's vest. So he was painted.

Our concern, however, is with the story of another Choris portrait — that of a chiefess, published in his "Voyage autour du Monde." This plate forcefully evokes a pagan paradise and must have brought a sigh to the armchair traveler of old, leafing through the pages of Choris' album. And the reader of today, looking at this successful evocation, may well envy the men of Choris' generation, such sighs —

The documents on which the following study is based are two watercolors owned by the Honolulu Academy of Arts and a plate, "Sandvichanka," from the Russian first edition of von Kotzebue's "Voyage."

The two watercolors are of the same size, and were mounted by Choris himself on a single mat — as if to suggest some sort of relationship. Choris was usually pressed for time, jotting down outlines from life in hurried fashion; scribbling color notes in the margin, to be acted upon later. Exceptionally, these two watercolors are drawn and painted from life. That they are suggested by the patient expression of the models, the

static, easy-to-keep pose, the fleeting light effects that hover over the forms and the spatial rendering of backgrounds.

Technically alike, the two papers describe contrasting models. One is a woman of the lower classes, perhaps one of the menial servants to be found in the suite of a royal princess. Wrapped in the native pahu that leaves the torso bare, she squats in a cringing posture. Her stooped back and rather flabby anatomy suggest anything but the beautiful or the heroic.

The second watercolor represents a woman of rank, dressed in European clothing. Her skirt is rather non-descript but the blouse, striped and with ruffles at the neck and sleeves, holds a whiff of the rococo of the previous century. There is a necklace made of beads of a type acquired by barter — possibly from American traders. A native touch is the lei palaoa, whale-tooth pendant hung from an elaborately braided bunch of human hair and symbol of its wearer's high rank. Equally native is the curious hairdo, cut short at the hairline and artificially discolored with lime baths, in startling contrast with the mass of natural black hair and the swarthy complexion of the face.

The third document, "Sandvichanka," is a plate from the Russian first edition of von Kotzebue's official report. Naturally enough, this print lacks the fresh, impromptu

quality of the watercolors. As draftsman of an imperial scientific expedition, Choris would tone down his art to meet his employers' standards. There is also a change of pace, technically: the drawing was translated for publication into a combination etching and aquatint, a medium for which the artist showed little affinity. The outlines are transferred sheepishly and the modelings simplified in stencil fashion. The plate was printed in a tawny buff that lacks accent.

"Sandvichanka" (Woman of the Sandwich Islands) is a curious blend of the two dissimilar models that posed for the watercolors. From the one, Choris borrowed the bare torso — better attuned to a returned traveler's tale than a calico blouse. In the original, the pahu reached to the breasts. By lowering it somewhat and by straightening up the cringing posture, Choris suggests a woman at ease in nudity. The pose, the head, the accessories are all borrowed from the other watercolor, with corrections. A hesitant search for proportions has scarred the face of the chiefess with multiple pendimenti lines around cheek and neck. These are now erased and the texture of the flesh is softened. The palaoa is moved from a frontal to a three-quarter position, the better to display the hook characteristic of this traditional form. The body, however, remains unchanged and an awkward

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The necklace of bartered beads shows under the native lei and a metal ring covers the one visible ear.

twist results while the bone pendant, which should fall in place along the median axis of the torso, tends to rest on the left shoulder. Lesser details, such as the pattern of light and dark on the forehead, ending on a vertical line, clinch the relationship between watercolor and aquatint.

Blending the two models into one type proved more than a conscious device. Aesthetic intuition was at work, and went further than the eye could see. As published, the woman acquires a gentle dignity — a native quality expressed by the Hawaiian word *oluolu* which, paired with nudity, captures the feel of native culture before it was marred by foreign inroads.

The final link in our sequence is Plate XVII of the section on Hawaii in Choris' own folio, "Voyage autour du Monde," published in Paris. "*Femme des Iles Sandwich*" is startlingly different from its prototype, the Russian "*Sandvichanka*." While scientific validity was expected of von Kotzebue's formal report, Choris was on his own here, free to do as he pleased. In the 1820s, a man in his early twenties would have pre-romantic leanings. Choris-the-artist and Choris-the-draftsman could be at odds.

When the artist did a bust of Kamehameha for von Kotzebue, he stuck to facts and engraved the king clothed in the red vest he wore for the sittings; for his own "Voyage," however, Choris cloaked the king in exotic black tapa, his own Rousseau-esque idea of the noble savage. In the same vein, von Kotzebue's "*Sandvichanka*" remains close to the truth, even though filtered through a corrective process. And "*Femme des Iles Sandwich*," reworked to the artist's own taste, borders on the fabulous.

Technically, the French plate is the better of the two. It is a lithograph and Choris proved more at ease with crayon on stone than he had with needle on metal. The body, now seen from the left, is posed after the watercolor of the servant woman and preserves the curve of its shoulders and the slant of its left arm. From the same source comes the change in the axis of the head, upright instead of slanted downwards as in the aquatint. Tired shadows under the eyes, underlined in the painting, are now eliminated and the smile, barely suggested before, is now warm with welcome. Hairdo, earrings and necklace are those of the princess. The string of beads and the *palaoa*, unlike the body, are seen from the same angle at which they appeared in the aquatint. As a result, the unnatural twist observed in the Russian tint is eliminated and the bone hook hangs normally, between the breasts.

The lowering of the loincloth or *pahu*, which had had but an indecisive start in "*Sandvichanka*" proceeds boldly to the hips, with some of the best crayon work modeling the navel in full light. A startling change of proportions transforms the woman into a giantess, her form forever free of stays and

corsets. As beautiful as a goddess, yet poles apart from the Greek, she might be a pre-figure of one of the dark beauties which Baudelaire was later to worship.

Indeed, it was only by turning his back on all models and letting his memories of Hawaii become dream memories that Choris could evoke such a chiefess. Here, as happened later with the work of Gauguin, the distortions proved even more meaningful than the observed facts.

Art has been defined as a truth expressed by means of a lie. "*Femme des Iles Sandwich*," bypassing as it does the bastard cultural moment of the 1820s, illustrates forcefully the heroic mood of ancient chants and myths to which Choris never had access.

That he never saw with his own eyes what this beautiful plate reveals is but a further tribute to his artistry.

FOR OVER THIRTY YEARS, the "Sandalwood Trade" between Hawaii and China was brisk indeed. History records that Vancouver, calling at Kauai in 1792, found men collecting the fragrant wood at eighteen dollars a month. By 1819, the cutting and marketing of the wood had become the Islands' chief export industry. It was Hawaii's first introduction of the profit motive and, in combination with the feudal tenure existing then, a national calamity. A visitor touring the island of Hawaii in 1823, records seeing a chief and three or four hundred people returning from the mountains, each man carrying two or three pieces four to six feet long and about three inches in diameter. By 1825, virtually no trees remained, the chiefs were in debt and traders ceased extending credit to them. Meanwhile, silks moldered in storehouses, worms riddled costly Chinese cabinets and chairs for which greedy chiefs had exchanged the forests of sandalwood.