

LETTER TO JACOB ADLER ON THE STATUE OF KAMEHAMEHA BY THOMAS R. GOULD¹ JEAN CHARLOT

In *Honolulu Magazine* for July, I read with interest your enquiry into “Who was the model” for the Kamehameha statue. I agree with your solution that both John T. Baker and his brother, Robert Hoapili Baker, served as models. I just wish to add a few reflections that suggest themselves more readily to a practicing artist.

A layman, looking at photo A, posed by John T. Baker, is struck by its obvious resemblance to the finished statue and considers this to be a clinching argument. A practicing artist, however, knowing the many successive steps that go into the making of a statue on a heroic scale, knows that this cannot be the whole story.

Academically trained as he was, the sculptor, Thomas R. Gould, required much more than the surface data offered by photograph A. To take a famous example of a sculptor’s point of view, in the 1890s Auguste Rodin started working on his statue of Balzac by doing a number of studies after the nude model. Only as a final step did he wrap around the body a loose dressing gown that hides all his hard-won anatomical knowledge, only the head of his Balzac left visible.

Gould, an older man, nurtured on classical art, similarly required at the start factual data concerning the Polynesian body, as distinct from the Greco-Roman body he knew so well from statues.

His correspondence with Walter Murray Gibson, chairman of the Statuary Commission, proves this to be so. November 11, 1878, Gibson reassures Gould that the required data is on its way: “Furthermore I expect, as I told you, photographs of nude kanakas to assist you in the study of the frame.”

Frame, of course, refers to the bones and flesh that will be the indispensable substructure over which the feather cloak will eventually flow.

The photos arrived in April 1879. Gould acknowledges receipt to Brewer, who acted as an agent for Gibson: “(Received) five photos, three of them being a nude native Hawaiian, and the other two a Hawaiian in the royal feather cloak and baldric, with helmet and spear, countersigned by the King.”

The two photos of the cloaked model are known to us (Photos A and B). The three photos of a nude model were not, to our knowledge, preserved, presumably because, by strict Victorian standards, there were judged indecorous.

However, a close analysis of the two photographs preserved shows that a fragment at least of one of the three “nude kanakas” has been saved.

Photo A is a straight photograph of John T. Baker, cloaked and standing indoors, in the photographer’s studio, set against a canvas backdrop. The soft cast shadows on the floor match the

indoor light. Under the feather cloak, the model is clothed in a tightly buttoned long cotton underwear that reaches to the ankles and wrists.

Photo B is a much more complex affair, being a photomontage. Two independent photographs have been cut and joined as one.

B1 is cut from photo A and set against a plain white background that replaces the backdrop of the photographer's studio. The edge of the dark underwear has been fuzzed over at the left wrist to suggest that the arm is bare. But the edge of the undergarment still shows plainly at the right wrist.

B2 shows the addition from another photograph, now lost. From the waist down, the legs of John T. Baker have been replaced by those of another man, of a more athletic build, presumably the legs of Robert Hoapili Baker. He wears a flounced cotton *malo* and underneath linen shorts can be seen.

B2 is taken outdoors in sunlight, the feet solidly planted in sand casting sharp shadows. A beach location is suggested.

The terms used by contemporaries as they allot their respective roles to the two brothers strengthen the data furnished by this quaint photomontage. John T. Baker was chosen to pose for the statue of Kamehameha "due to his striking likeness to the ancient ruler." Likeness refers to a likeness of features rather than of body. Gibson refers to Robert Hoapili Baker in different terms: "The artist has copied closely the fine physique of Hoapili of whom photos were sent by the committee and it presents a noble illustration of superior Hawaiian manhood."

Fine physique suggests body build rather than a facial resemblance.

Photo B, a curious composite, adds to the "striking likeness" of John T. Baker what little is left for us to appreciate of the "fine physique" of his brother, Robert Hoapili Baker. Thus, in a single picture, we see what roles each of the two models played who posed for the Kamehameha statue.

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Photo B

¹ Jean Charlot had been doing research on the statue of King Kamehameha, gathering many documents, and had published a newspaper art column on the subject (Charlot 1967). This column was used by Jacob Adler (April 1969) in a magazine article that stated that the model of the statue had been “Robert Hoapili Baker (died 1900), a close friend and aide of King Kalakaua.” Maryann Baker (1969) then published a letter to the editor in which she stated that her grand uncle, John Timoteo Baker, Robert’s half brother, had been the model. Adler (July 1969) “immediately went to work re-checking his research” and published his conclusions in the same issue: photographs of both brothers had been sent to the sculptor, and the model in the surviving photographs of a man in a feather cape and helmet was John Timoteo Baker. Charlot stopped work on his own article because Adler’s had already been published. He did, however, write this letter to Adler stating his findings. Charlot’s photo A is Adler’s photo C; Charlot’s B is Adler’s D (Adler July 1969: 27).

Charlot’s guess on the identity of the model for the legs was wrong. A photograph was later found of a Hawaiian fisherman from which the legs had been taken (John Charlot 1979: 35). This must have been one of the photographs of “nude kanakas” sent to Gould; the loin cloth of the model seems to have been added later. On other points, see also John Charlot 1979.

Edited by John Charlot.