

## Native Culture Lost Its Purity

# Foreign Ways Near Fatal to Old Art

By JEAN CHARLOT

Hawaiian art has roots in a tradition that goes back into the past at least a millenium. Before the coming of Cook, Hawaiian art was far from inarticulate.

It was one of the great expressions of the arts of the Pacific area.

Arts of the pre-discovery era were not however thought of



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who made them as art for art's sake. Esthetic remained subservient to function. The petroglyphs carved in stone, the pictographs painted on rocks, were messages of a sort, often proud footnotes to hazardous journeys by land or sea.

To the utilitarian purpose another was added that could be called a spiritual urge. Indeed, at all times, art has had as its purpose to imbue with timelessness objects and events that happen, are born and die, in time. Petroglyphs and pictographs are a poignant reminder of the longing of ancient Hawaiians for some sort of a spiritual survival.

Also, seen from the vantage point of our 20th Century, these shapes of men and dogs, of fans, of paddles and birds, deliver a message of beauty all the more entrancing in that, untainted by European Greco-Roman tradition, it could as well be the art of another planet.

HAWAIIAN sculptures of a monumental nature are as majestic as they are scarce. Carved to be planted as wooden monoliths at

testing to the sacredness of a heiau enclosure, these beautiful works were nevertheless considered expendable.

Made as a sort of transient perch for the god to alight upon, the sculptures were given homage and fed with sacrifices until the mana had waned, that the spiritual inhabitant of the image had tired of it.

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THE FRAGILE arts of tapa cloth decoration and feather mosaic complement pictographs and sculptures. Feather cloaks are the



An excellent example of early Hawaiian art is the temple

most splendid of these items.

Pre-discovery arts are the soil from which later forms of art in Hawaii do grow. They stand in regard to present-day art as do in Europe the arts of Greece and Rome. Hawaii should remain proud of what may be labelled its own classical tradition.

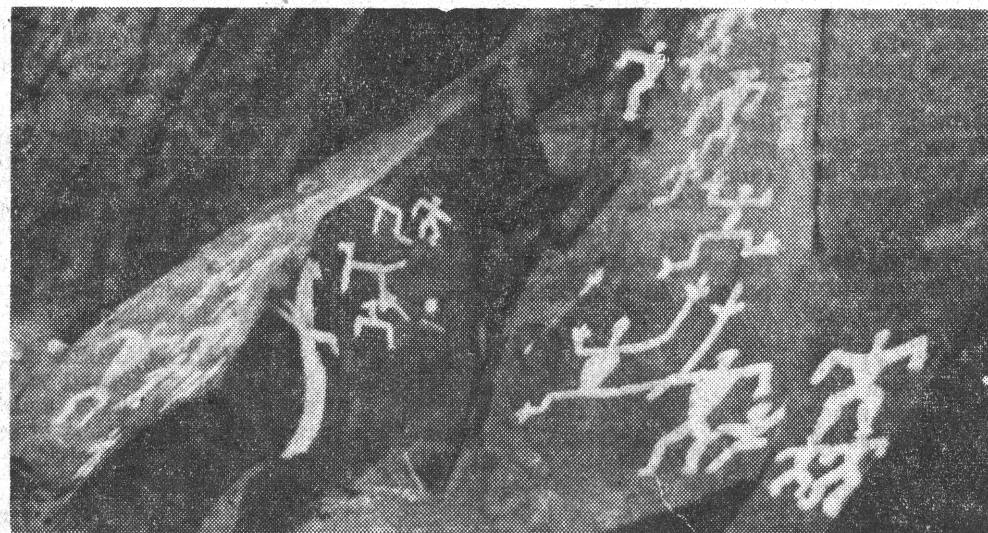
With the coming of the explorers, native culture became intricately mixed with European culture, never again to recover its original purity. A second period in the arts of Hawaii is that in which explorers and travelers imported artists trained in Europe to report on the sights of these far-flung islands.

It was a time when photography was unknown. Scientific and military expeditions included an artist in the crew, not for the sake of art, but to function as a sort of human camera.

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BEYOND THE description of the curios the shapes of anthropological accessories, the reports on the topography of coastlines, they added what the camera only rarely gives, the emotion of a fresh contact with a new culture, the awe and delight that only an artist may feel when put in contact with new forms of art.

In the first half of the 19th Century, so intent were the missionaries on teaching, so intent were the Hawaiians on being taught the foreign ways, that such an imponderable as art was bound to suffer. Picture-books, engravings after European old-masters, the works of imported artists, swamped native abilities in a sort of under-



Rebecca Banks

Old Hawaiians carved exuberant figures in this choice rock.

WITH THE hindsight that present day appreciation of primitive arts allows, we are tempted to call this period of transition one of relative decadence. At the time, however, it was construed as a period of speedy progress.

Indeed, only the most rabid ethnologist or a romantic artist could regret the replacing of the thatched hut by the wooden cottage or by the stone building.

As art goes, allowing the native to gaze at a suave English mezzotint more than repaid, or so it seemed at the time, for the loss of local art forms.

Nowadays, with esthetic fashions reversed, we bypass the niceties of imported pictures, and look for remnants of native culture under the veneer of imported mannerisms. This we find, for example, in engravings done by native students at the school of Lahainaluna, under the care of missionaries.

The uncouthness, the coarseness, the innocence,

of these engraved landscapes, even of the maps turned out at the school in the 1830s and '40s, jibe with the taste of today.

NEXT COMES an era of itinerant artists. These professionals were attracted to Hawaii as a potential art market. They were roughly of two sorts: painters of portraits and painters of landscapes.

Portrait painters were well accepted indeed, and received commissions sufficient to justify the expense of the lengthy sea voyage. Rather than artists, these men were artisans, albeit good ones.

The other type of artist was the landscape painter. Becoming more numerous, travelers in mid-century imperceptibly transformed themselves into tourists, even if not as obvious a type as the tourist of today.

THERE WAS already a market for souvenirs to take home, especially of the views and sights foreign to America and Europe.

Painters specialized in such views. Volcanoes in eruption, the red lava lighting up a night scene, were sought for by those who had been to Hawaii. Palm trees and blue seas, then as now, were enjoyed both in nature and in art.

ONLY ONE sort of pictorial curio lacked, reserved that it was for the tourist of today—paintings on black velvet!

A third esthetic source joined its flow to Hawaiian and European traits, rounding up the complexity of the present day "melting-pot." Asiatic immigrants of early days could hardly be spoken of as artists. They were businessmen bent on gain.

However, their records of gains and losses were inscribed with the brush in ideographs.

EVEN THE cheapest of Asiatic exports, kites, or paper cars to be flown on Boys' Day, bear the imprint of a very great culture.