

ART

by Jean Charlot



In honor of the 128th anniversary of the birth of Queen Liliuokalani, a Hawaiian quilt show was featured last week in the Pacific ballroom of the Ilikai. It lasted only two days.

Mostly local people came to look at the dazzling display. A few feet away, unaware of the choice event, tourists were lulled by professional hula dancers.

It was perhaps better that it be so. The swaying and strummings under a hula moon fulfilled entrenched expectations. By contrast, the quilt show would have proved too much of a jolting

experience for some of our visitors.

Quilts recall two happenings

The technique used to make Hawaiian quilts conjures for me two happenings. The one is very naive and the other most sophisticated.

The simplest of children's games—at least of the children I consorted with in my youth—is the making of paper dolls. The paper strip is folded accordion-wise and cut. Unfolded, out comes a gay saraband of tiny dancers holding hands.

Henri Matisse, once the fiercest among Fauve painters, sickened in his old age. Bedridden, he could no longer paint. With scissors he would cut colored papers into patterns that craftsmen transposed to more permanent materials.

Thus, for the chapel of Venice did the cut papers become silk to decorate liturgical garments.

Hawaiian quilts, partaking of both techniques, blend simplicity with sophistication. To produce a pattern, the paper is folded eightfold. With scissors, the quilt-maker

cuts through the multiple thicknesses. The full pattern appears as the sheet is unfolded.

Stitching pattern takes know-how

Stitching the cloth pattern to a background takes know-how. In the finished product, patterned outlines expand in parallel ripples as fluid as those ever expanding ones caused by a pebble thrown into water.

Compared with the many crafts of stone age Hawaii, quilt-making is a late comer. Its beginnings are authenticated.

On board the brig Thadeus, about 1820, as it sailed towards Hawaii, seven missionary ladies kept their thoughts pure and their fingers busy with needlework. As the long voyage lengthened, a side-product of their gentle activities was a bagful of scraps of cloth of many colors, the prime material needed for the making of a typical New England quilt.

The scraps were put to good use.

Quilting party held on deck

After arrival, on a leisurely inter-Island trip, the first Hawaiian quilting party was staged on the deck of the Thadeus.

Four Hawaiian chiefesses were taught how to stitch. Despite weight and bulk, their brown bodies tapered into tiny wrists and nimble fingers. Soon the princesses emulated their teachers with the needle.

What were their thoughts as they stitched?

Only yesterday they had enjoyed pagan games on which their new found friends could only frown. Gambling for extravagant stakes had spiced their past. The novelty of needlework intrigued them.

Even though made in Hawaii, this first quilt was pure New England patchwork.

Docile as were the Hawaiians when taught foreign manners and morals, in matters esthetic they proved adamant. They were, after all, familiar with the superb simplicity of feathercloak designs, with the delicate traceries on their own tapa cloth.

Soon, missionary esthetics

suffered a radical transformation.

Time has proved Hawaiians right

The present show proves that it was the Hawaiians who were in the right. New England patchwork together with anti-macassar doilies and overstuffed settees appeal to us as quaintly remote.

Hawaiian quilts of the same period do not seek the excuse of age. They are beautiful in the bold visual terms of our own century. They are not "camp." They are "op."

Their color is what strikes one at first glance.

Quilts of only two colors are traditional. The resulting color chords can be brutal or subtle. Red and yellow, associated with royalty, echo the glorious assonances of ancient feather cloaks.

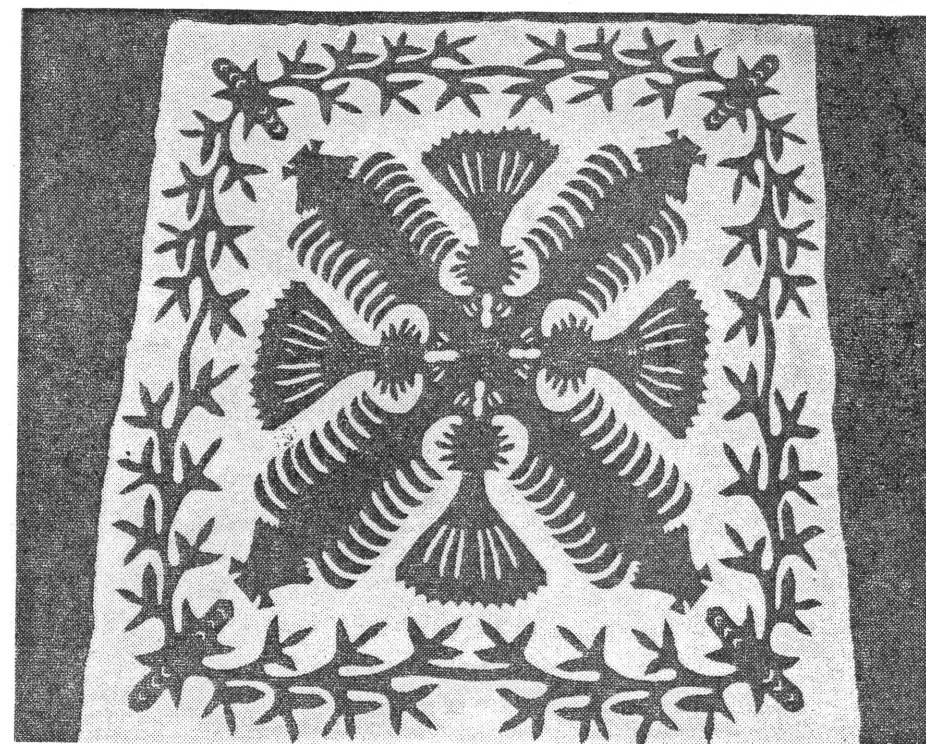
I jotted down other combinations: Magenta on green, rust red on daffodil yellow, leaf green on sea green, moss gray on pumpkin orange, pistachio on rose, harsh violet on orchid mauve.

Many designs are abstractions

As regards designs, native leaves and flowers are transformed by the play of the scissors into near abstractions. Most delicate was a design of pulu fern, featuring young leaves and crozier shaped shoots.

A design of monstera leaves and fruit struck me as the most monumental.

Royalty and country were praised as one. Bold styliza-



Ancient "comb and kahili" motif, blue on white. The quilt was once owned by Robert Waipa Parker, Minister to King Kalakaua.

tions of the chiefly kahili alternate with the outline of Spanish high combs, fit to top a queen's coiffure.

Even the crystal chandelier hung in the palace hall inspired a quilt of great dignity.

Hala leis, alternating fruit and fern; maile leis, green on white; ilima leis, the red ones and the yellow ones — have equally noble connotations.

Nature provides ideas for motifs

Some motifs, borrowed from nature, remain timeless. Others illustrate with equal felicity the news of the day.

In the 1880s, Halley's comet appeared in Hawaiian skies. It was promptly stitched into a quilt.

When the army experimented with carrier pigeons, a novel design formalized the deed. Called "manu

leka," it shows a stylized flock of birds winging their way over the ocean, each with a sealed letter in its beak.

When the United States annexed the Islands, patriots feared that the Hawaiian flag would not fly again. At that time was composed the noble "hae" pattern. It frames the national coat of arms between four flags.

Quilts have impressive decorative qualities, but their beauty is much more than skin deep.

One could say that lush colors and bold designs emerge to the surface from traditional depths.

The image of an island, crowned above sea level with lush growth, but anchored in the rocky depths of the ocean, comes to mind. The technique may be imported. The meaning remains genuinely Hawaiian.

I mentioned a visual continuity running from feather cloaks to quilts.

Those specifically designed for a given individual

follow the tradition of the "mele inoa" or name chant.

Some designs seen in dreams

The designs-to-be were at times visualized by their originators in a dream. Some are packed with spiritual secrets.

A heroic intent can go with such needlework.

Keahi Poire cherishes her own personal quilt. When she was a child, her grandmother decided to design it just for her.

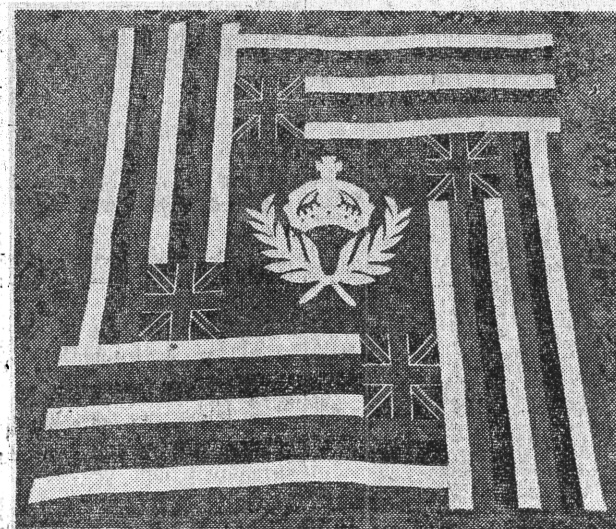
Her granny was totally blind. Feeling the rhythm of the curves with the moving scissors even though she could not see them, she created the superb pattern. Keahi's auntie lovingly stitched it into the finished quilt.

This exciting, if short lasting, display may become an annual event.

A fitting tribute to a great queen, it could provide for our ever present, ever shifting visitors a distinguished introduction in depth to Hawaii's art and culture.



Queen Kapiolani's personal quilt, pink on white.—Loaned by Mrs. Liliuokalani Kawanakoa Morris.



"Ku'u Hae Aloha" motif—flags in red, blue and white.

Jean Charlot welcomes questions on art from readers and will answer selected questions each Wednesday on this page. Write to: Jean Charlot, Star-Bulletin, Box 3080, Honolulu 96802.