

ART

by Jean Charlot



Art show at the planetarium

Displayed currently in the Kilolani Gallery of the Bishop Museum Planetarium is a beautifully presented show, small in size and large in scope. Its title, "People From Many Lands: The Heritage That Is Hawaii's".

As I realize that this is the first time that I review a show at the Bishop Museum, it is no digression to first describe the locale.

Honolulu can boast of two first-class art museums. One, the Academy of Arts, was, from its foundation, intended as an art museum. The other — to give it its rightful title, the Bernice P. Bishop Museum — became an art museum almost by accident.

Its founder intended it as a scientific institution featuring the zoology, ethnology and botany of the Pacific islands. Indeed, through its collections and publications, it is recognized as the leader in these fields.

When I arrived here nearly 20 years ago, collecting and publishing were the goal. Display remained secondary.

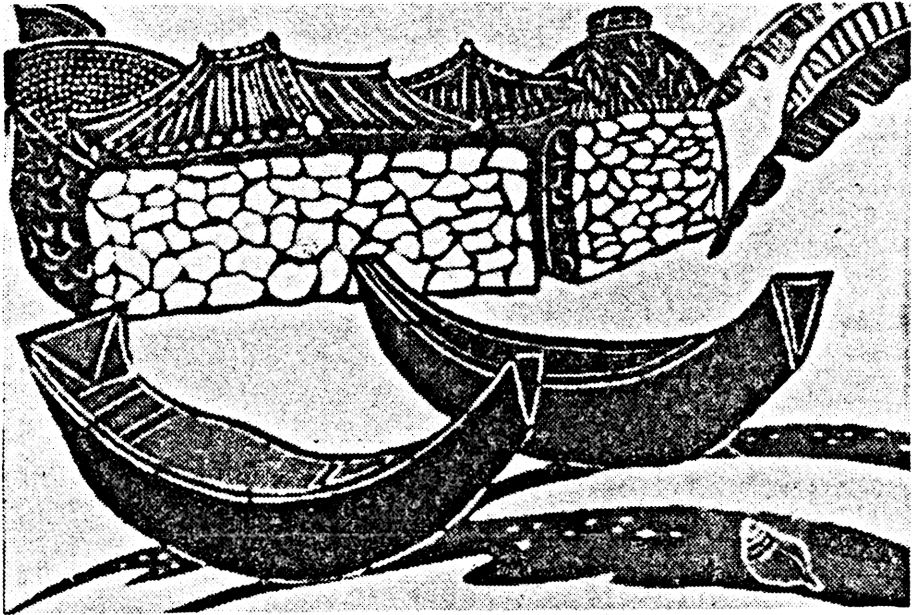
Surprises in a gloomy museum

I liked to loiter through halls as ornate with brown wood work as is Iolani palace. To peek into the darkness of the glassed-in showcases afforded no end of surprises.

The atmosphere was that of an alchemist's den as recorded in 18th century engravings.

Instead of retorts and alambics, there were, piled up in dark recesses, artifacts equally puzzling.

Instead of the mummified crocodile hanging from the rafters there was — and



Bingata Stencil Painting, from Okinawa.

there is still — the majestic stuffed whale.

As I paced for the first time the main hall, a lady visitor, standing under the leviathan, asked in an awed voice of the one guard in attendance, "Is it soft?"

Cases contained lifelike casts of native Hawaiians, painted in lifelike colors, with tapa loincloths, wigs of human hair and gleaming glass eyes.

The dust of decades had settled over their frozen chores, beating tapa, pounding poi, weaving mats.

The kahuna and his god

To this day, my favorite remains the kahuna 'ana'ana, set on all fours, presumably praying to death some unsuspecting visitor.

In those days of innocence, the evil sorcerer kept to himself, jealously sequestered in his darkened and realistic habitat, one of the most beautiful Hawaiian sculptures of a god in existence.

Our century witnessed a new understanding of the manifold cultural expressions labeled "primitive arts". For better or for worse, modern art would not

be what it is without this latter-day revelation.

It all began in France

It began early in the century when Parisian painters — Matisse, Derain, Brancusi — would swap their work for African and Pacific sculptures with sailors returned from far-flung lands.

The geometric distortions that savage art favored enthused the young masters. Cubism resulted.

A little later the surrealists, probing beneath the form of similar objects, discovered in turn the magical and ritual purposes that put their makers to work.

Collectors, dealers, followed suit. Millionaires endowed such places as the New York Museum of Primitive Art with budgets close to limitless. Values on the art market rose steeply.

To their surprise, the scientists that staff the Bishop Museum found that their collections had risen in value as much as had the lands of the sister institution, the Bishop Estate.

What only yesterday were tools and idols had become overnight objects d'art.

Given their new dignity, * They are chosen not only

A museum rich in art

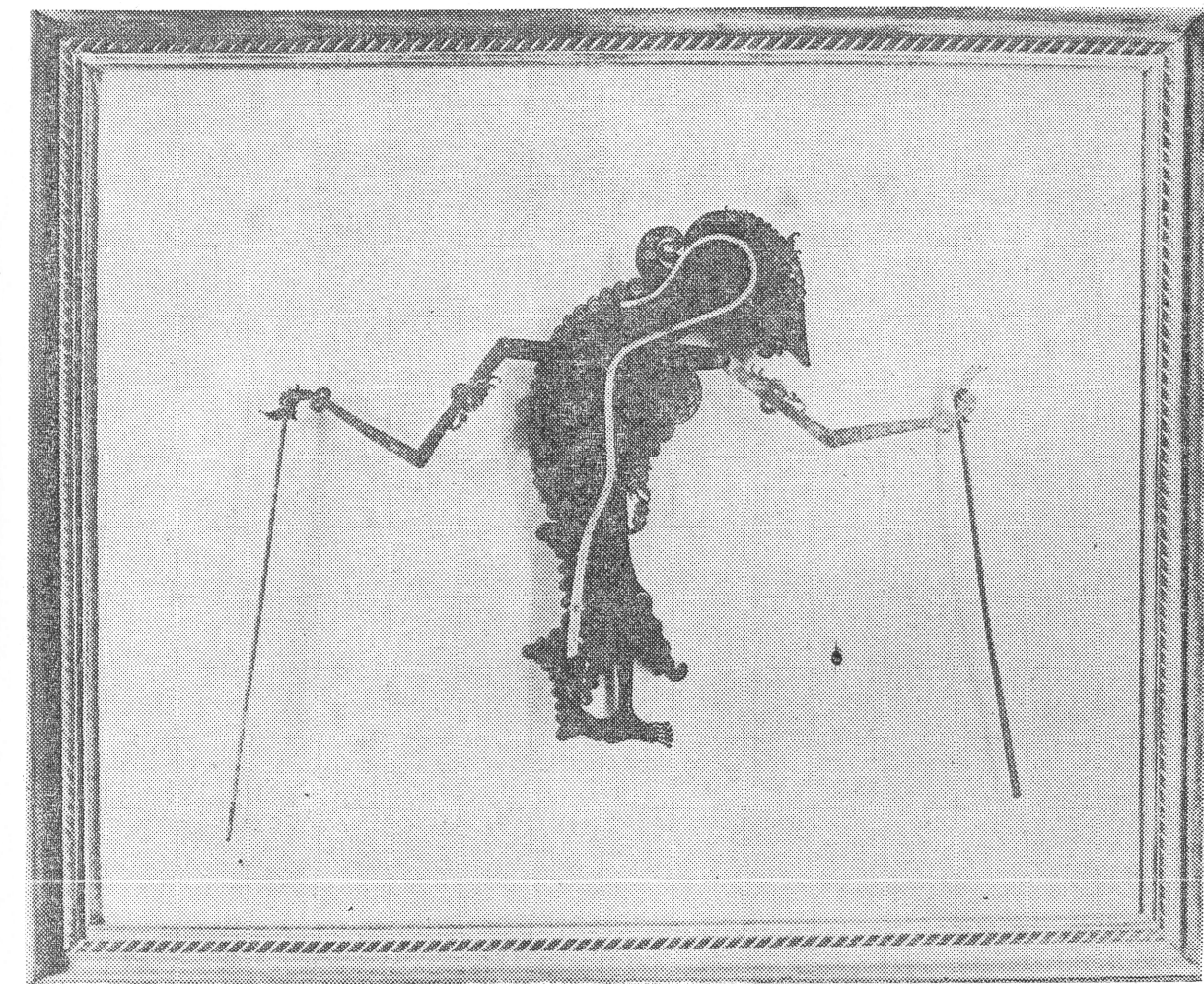
Together with very few other art museums — the Uffizzi and the Louvre come to mind — the Bishop Museum is so rich in art items that 10 times the space now available would hardly allow a proper display of its collections.

Scientists may also be art lovers.

Roland Force, director of the museum, has returned from a trip to Asia with important items, predominantly of folk art, that will enlarge the geographical range of the collections. Some of the new acquisitions are displayed in the present show.

Scientific discipline need not clash with art appreciation. Wherever man is, art comes into being. Art is made of the innermost stuff that separates man from animals. Art is valid data for the anthropologist.

The present show illustrates this fact. Gathered together in one place are token items of cultures found around the Pacific basin.



Java Puppet-in-a-Frame

for the beauty of their forms and colors, but in direct reference to the cultural blends that go into the making of the people of Hawaii.

Children in the gallery

When I visited the show, the people of Hawaii, mostly schoolboys and Boy Scouts in uniform, were milling about the Kilolani Gallery waiting for the planetarium show to begin.

There, on a screen more complex than any Cinerama screen, they would see the sun rise and the moon set, and the earth revolve around the sun and the moon revolve around the earth.

But the door of the planetarium was closed and the boys were trapped for the while in the circular hall, with nothing to look at but art.

It was a special kind of art, impressively tuned to its special audience.

The boys' parents or grandparents had come from the same countries as the art — China, Japan, Okina-

nawa, the Philippines, Korea.

Forms and colors carried with them a whiff of ancestral epic tales, the same ones that atavistically coursed in the blood of the young spectators.

Perhaps unconsciously they felt it and idle looking grew to appreciation.

Kilolani Gallery is round in shape. At the hub of the wheel is a display of Buddhist memorial tablets, stones set in sand in the manner of a minute monastic garden.

Fingers in the sand

There had been an attempt to carefully rake the sand in a sort of sea-and-islands theme. But the busy little fingers of the small visitors were taking tactile delight in messing its surface to fit their own non-zen requirements.

To present the art of China, or of India, or of Japan, in one or two small show windows, is an undertaking

small in size but staggering in its difficulty. It is beautifully resolved.

Using but very few objects, the art of each country, ancient and contemporary, aristocratic and folksy, is summarized. No crowding, but an ample spacing that belies the small confines.

My own preference in the show goes to folk art. From Okinawa a peasant dress made of cloth woven of banana fiber, also stenciled decorations.

From Japan, an iron kettle hanging from a pothook, with an iron carp as a counterweight.

But where are the haoles?

The accent of the show is on Asia. To be true to the central theme "The Heritage That Is Hawaii's," the other edge of the Pacific should be represented. Haole culture is indeed very much a part of Hawaii's heritage.

If China, if India, can be summed up within the small compass of one or two show

windows, so can the United States.

As an idle exercise that is certainly not a reflection on a show that is as well planned as it is presented, I dreamt of a solution.

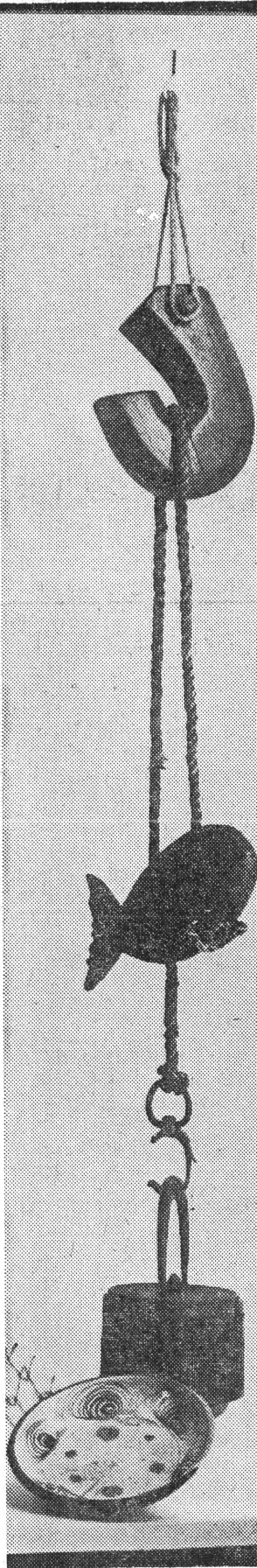
Ancient America is easy to picture. A few pre-Hispanic objects, a Tarascan terracotta dog, a metate grinding board of volcanic stone, perhaps also a Mayan jade.

But what of our present-day American culture, the most obvious ingredient in our everyday life?

Folk art in America

To translate the theme in terms of forms and colors, pop art comes handy: Stop and Go signs borrowed from the City, a sample shelf from a supermarket featuring canned foods and packaged detergents. Such is our folk art.

And for the fine arts, my own choice would be a Krazy Kat original cartoon. Heriman remains the greatest master of this uniquely American genre.



A hook, kettle and counterweight from Japan.