

## ART

by Jean Charlot



A heartfelt tip of my beret to our State Senate for its forthright endorsement of Marisol's statue. It constitutes a clear vindication of the arduous labors of the Hawaii Statuary Hall Commission.

These were consuming and lasted close to one year.

By a vote of five to two, the commission chose Marisol's model out of seven entered.

It recommended that the artist execute a full-scale statue. It would be cast in bronze in two copies — one to be erected in our State Capitol and the other to be placed in Washington's Statuary Hall.

This carefully weighed decision should have closed the matter.

The commission's two dissenting members, however, refused to abide by the majority ruling. They spread their discontent to the State House. It looked like the commission's work had been in vain.

True, by profession, politicians need not be art experts. Political rulings that touch directly on matters esthetic must be exceedingly few.

One cannot hold it against the members of the House that they did not clearly see the demarcation line between the making of monumental statues and the fashioning of effigies such as are found in wax museums.

It is easy for an artist to understand and to forgive. In a reverse situation, how many of us, suddenly called upon to take decisions in matters political, would prove wise at doing so!

Nevertheless, statements attributed to the dissenters show them groping their way through art as if it was a peaspout fog. This raises in turn a troubling question.

Art is a priceless birthright for all men, whatever their calling. A man who would have no need for art could only be a man diminished.

This is why it is reassuring at this juncture that a second body of non-specialists — and they too politicians — chose to side unequivocally with the considered findings of the Hawaii Hall Statuary Commission.



**PAINTED FROM LIFE**—This is the well-known portrait of Kamehameha I painted from life by Ludwig Choris on November 24, 1816. (Academy of Arts Collection).

only speak when erected side-by-side in Washington's Statuary Hall, the two entries chosen to represent our State would doubtless engage in lively discussions!

My direct concern here is not with the person of the great king himself, but only with his statue. More specifically with its style.

I have described the democratic process by which the first statue, that of Damien, was chosen. If we are to believe press releases, matters in the case of the Kamehameha statue seem entirely distinct.

The people of the State are faced with a package deal which ties the choice of the subject matter with the choice of a sculptor. There is no mention of an open competition.

Perhaps as a variance from Marisol, who is very much alive, the favored sculptor in this case is very dead. He is the one who created, about 1880, the statue of the king that has

stood for generations as one of the city's landmarks.

A reduced replica of same would be sent to Washington as a gift from the State.

How truthful the report or how final the decision, I know not. If official it obviously reflects a desire on the part of some among our legislators to shy away from live artists and from living art as well.

Having juggled too carelessly with esthetic decisions, they now know by experience that these are not the trifling things they appeared to be. Like trick cigars, art matters are not as harmless, nor are matters of taste as defenceless, as some unwary men would believe.

Still this is no valid reason to hide behind the shade of a long dead artist or to endorse, and in a sense resurrect, a totally obsolete form of art. A braver solution ought to be found!

Admittedly, everyone here likes the Kamehameha statue. Unquestioning souls,



**TWO VIEWS** — On the left is the statue of Kamehameha which stands in front of the Judiciary Building. Created about 1880, it was sculptured by an artist who relied on photographs of Hawaiians in general for his conception. On the right is another Choris portrait of the great king shown in a black tapa cloak (Detail from "Vues et Paysages des Regions Equinoxiales").

unaware of the fact that it was never meant as a physical likeness of the king, admire its kingly countenance.

For most others, daily sight breeds a relationship of acceptance. They think of the monument as if it was a family relative, sound enough, though with eccentric taste in clothing.

Even our advanced esthetes, cynical in most other matters, salute the work's blatant polychromy as a "camp" masterpiece dipped in chocolate and gold!

A local landmark loved by all, neither the statue nor the aloha it generates are easily exportable.

The one excuse for the choice would be in terms of authenticity. But history belies this. It appears probable that its sculptor never even saw a valid portrait of Kamehameha.

We know for a fact that the data he relied upon were photographs of Hawaiians picked as ideal examples of racial beauty. Proofs of these were mailed to him in

Europe.

From each the sculptor picked in turn the part he liked best, a face here, a leg there, a torso or an arm. These he put together as one individual, set in the classical posture of the marble portrait of Emperor Augustus addressing his Roman legions!

The 19th century enjoyed such idealizations. Close to 100 years later there seems something unethical in fostering this composite fantasy on an unsuspecting Washing-

ton as a portrait of Kamehameha the Great.

We know more today than was known then about the king's stance and features. In 1816, Ludwig Choris three times sketched the king from life. Only in our century did the originals come to light.

One of the artists' lithographs represents the king and his court, assembled to receive the Russian Imperial embassy. The detail illustrated shows Kamehameha wrapped in his ample black tapa cloak. It describes the

Buddha-like posture of the king. It shows moreover the awesome simplicity that characterized this great man, and that so impressed foreign emissaries.

It would be better if the State, in regard to this second statue, attempted no shortcut. We owe it to Kamehameha himself that our century should create its own version of the hero in terms of our contemporary sensibilities.

After all, the 19th century already has had its say.

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"Statues, statues  
in the Hall,  
Which one is the  
fairest of all?"

This quite irrelevant ditty goes through my head as I read in the papers that a second Hawaiian hero is to be given the coveted accolade of Statuary Hall.

This time the chosen one is Kamehameha I, called in his day the Napoleon of the Pacific.

An early visitor to our Islands describes the mighty monarch in his less known facet, that of a deeply religious man.

He saw Kamehameha embrace tightly one of a heiau's wooden idols, at the same time swearing to the visitor that he, the king, would die a pagan.

And so he did.

"If they could only speak," people used to say of pictures when realism was well thought of; and if they could