

ART

by Jean Charlot



Primitive arts

Only in our century has the significance of the primitive arts been realized to the full.

When this misleading label was affixed, it meant more than a touch of smugness. It meant: "We civilized people do better art of course, but given that you are savages, it is not bad!"

Similarly, Gothic architecture, Impressionist painting, were baptized "for keeps" by men quite obtuse as to their significance.

Originally, tribal implements and paraphernalia were collected by ethnologists. The collections were stored, rather than displayed, on the shelves of science museums. They remained there, a help to the study of material cultures.

What only yesterday were specimens is upgraded today to the level of art. To the surprise of the scientist, art lovers invade his sanctum!

The trend is not truly new. Gauguin started it at the end of the 19th century. Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands were his inspiration.

Twentieth century art "isms" found in the arts of the Pacific a fertile humus. Around 1909, Picasso, then young and poor, was photographed hugging a wood-carving from Melanesia that reappears in slight disguise in his cubist paintings.

Surrealism also learned much from primitive art. But whereas Cubism borrowed only its physical distortions, Surrealism delved in depth in its magical content.

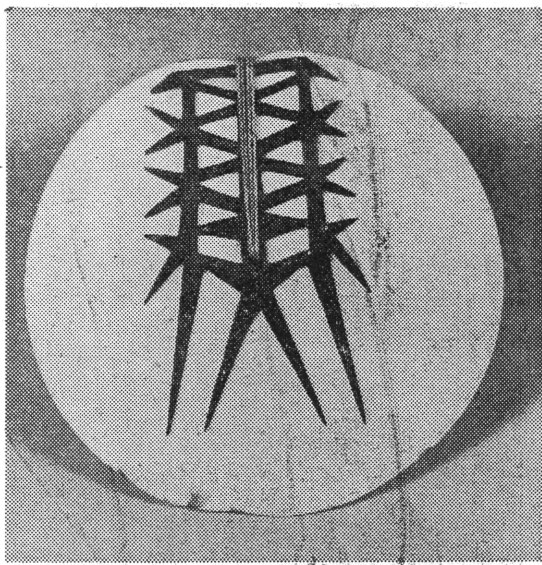
Splendid show

Acknowledging the shift of wind, the Bishop Museum stages a splendid show, "Arts of the Pacific," in its Hall of Pacific Life.

The stuffed birds and mounted fish that used to make in it their home are for the nonce stored out of sight. Ethnological specimens replace them, freshly groomed to fit their new status as works of art.

Some of the items displayed are recent accessions. Others have been seen before, but not under such optimum conditions.

Space becomes a positive factor. Isolated from its neighbors, each object re-



A "kap-kap" or breast pendant of tortoise and tridacna shells, from New Ireland.

gains its self-respect.

The new zeal, the new spirit, rejuvenate even the architecture of the venerable hall. All non-functional parts of its fussy woodwork are eliminated. A job of paint in beige and red brings it nearly up-to-date.

When I arrived in Hawaii, already long ago, I enjoyed many a safari through the disused corners of the old museum.

Exhibits were piled up high and thick as if they were household discards, forgotten in some giant attic.

Dark halls

I loved to wind my way through dark halls veneered with dark paneling, to peer through the glass of high cabinets, dimly aware of their contents.

Wherever I went was felt the weighty presence of the ersatz whale, unexplainably anchored overhead.

The whale is still with us, but safari days are over. The director of the museum, Roland Force, is intent on displaying its superb collections with maximum clarity.

The old-attic type of display appealed to the heart. The new museology bids the visitor use his head, too.

The balcony that runs along three sides of the hall makes it easy to divide the exhibits into three main geo-

graphical areas, Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia.

However widely scattered over the Pacific, however distinct in appearance, the three cultures have traits in common.

Pacific arts were at their greatest in what we call the stone age. Then, they flourished sans benefit of art dealers, art lovers or collectors.

Native languages lacked a word for art — that is, for art as we understand it: art for art's sake.

Carved in wood or stone, monumental or jewel-like, none of the works exhibited came into being as an assertion of self, or as a gesture of defiance against an established order.

For community

Instead, the art-maker would willingly put his skill at the service of the community. It was his role to make worship easier by giving a face to gods that otherwise would have remained faceless.

In peace time, the artist patiently carved and polished such things as a coconut grating stool. He did not resent the fact that his object d'art was to be sat upon.

In war time, the artist refined the functional curves of clubs, the better to split enemy pates or slap their jaws out of socket.

There is bound to be some awkwardness as we apply our concept of the arts to those of the Pacific. Beauty alone cannot be a safe criterion. The Bishop Museum experts who put together the show understood this.

Some pieces are ornate enough to fit the standards of interior decorators. Others appeal to us because, closing a full cycle in the history of taste, they remind us of works of modern art.

And modern art came into being because the values of primitive art were at last understood.

For me, the most exciting items are those that fit the least comfortably within the confines of our esthetic: undecorated chunks of stone or wood hacked into functional shape with a stone adze.

A Fijian friend, acquainted with my interest in the primitive arts, mentioned that he owned a panoply of family weapons, a reminder of tribal glories.

Hair and blood

He remarked, "I don't know if it is art, but human hair and dried blood still fill the cracks of grandpa's war-clubs!"

In this show, monumental pieces are displayed with the dignity they deserve and in proper perspective.

Maori war canoe parts, painted red, and not unlike the carved decorations of the Viking ships that roamed the seas on the other side of the world.

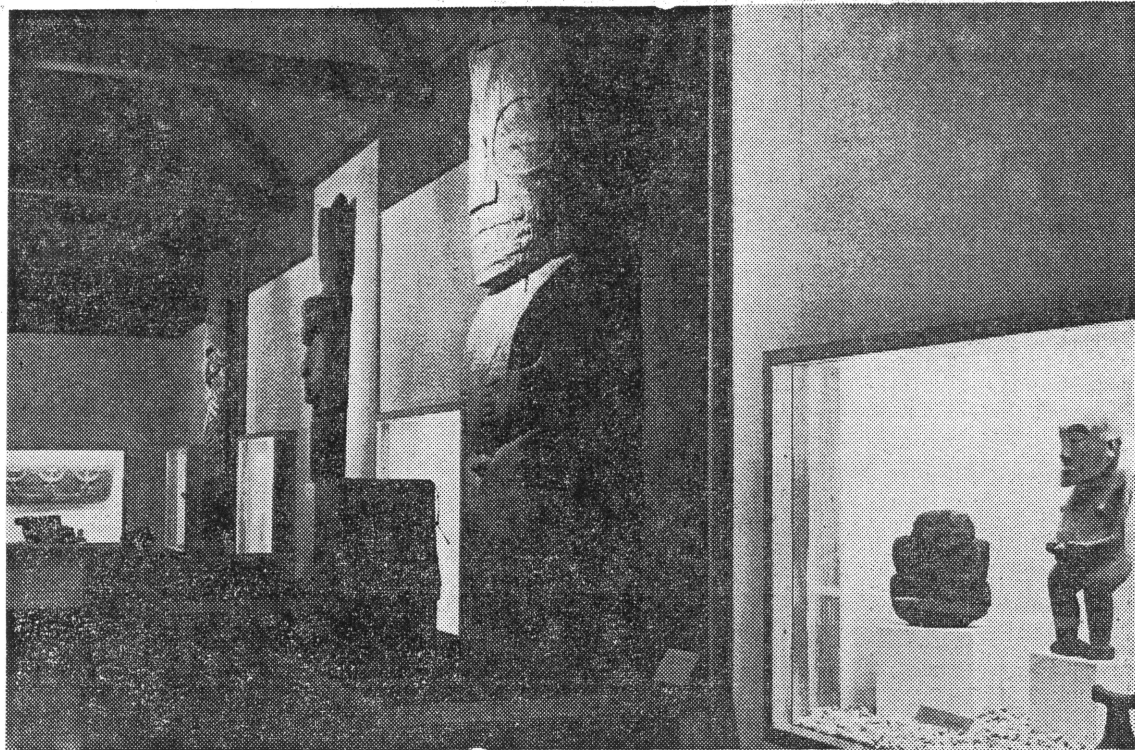
The Hawaiian guardian spirit, a fragment heroic in scale, comes from Kealia, Kauai. One should picture it watching over the irrigation ditch it was its duty to protect.

Another giant, this time from the Marquesas Islands, is Gauguin's dream of a Golden Pacific Age come true. Yet Gauguin never saw such heroically scaled monuments, unless it be in his own paintings.

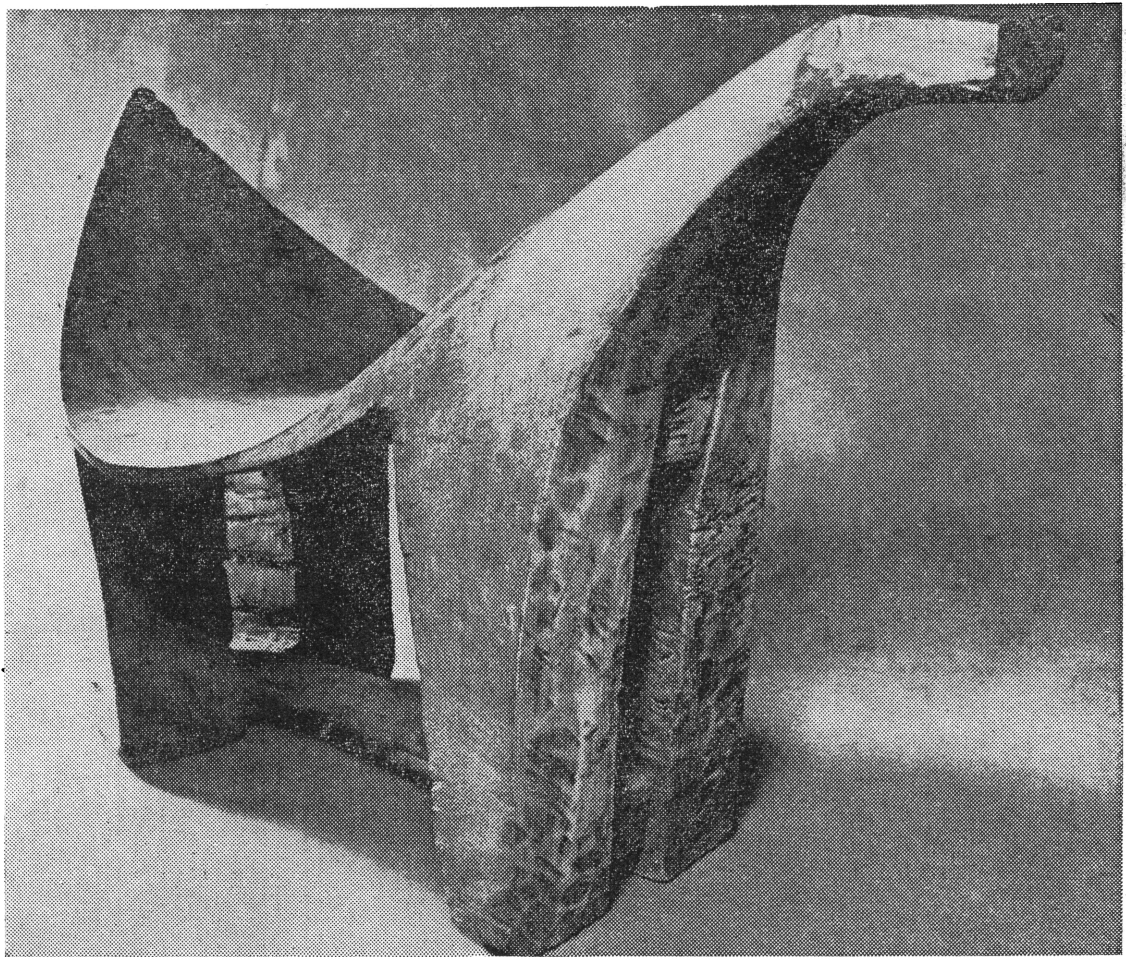
Smaller items are no less impressive. Easter Island is seen at its most mysterious in a piece of charred wood covered with exquisitely minute hieroglyphs.

Melanesia brings color into play. The black artist never knew our chemical pig-

Turn to page D-6



The Hall of Pacific Life in the Bishop Museum is showing "Arts of the Pacific." — Photos from the Bishop Museum.



A coconut grating stool from Nukuoro, Micronesia.

Charlot

Continued from page D-1

ments. Crushed shell for white, charcoal for black, plenty of mud, and red and yellow earths, served his inspiration.

Grimacing spirits

Posts made of tree fern, hapu, cut and planted inverted, roots up, are carved in the semblance of grimacing spirits. Daubed with black, white and red, they ooze undoubted magic.

From New Guinea comes a polychrome statue, man-bird or bird-man. This new accession was collected in situ by Roland Force.

New Ireland offers the most delicate art, that of the kap-kap, or breast pendant. Cutouts of tortoise shell are silhouetted in black against the iridescent white disk of a tridacna shell.

Seen in Hawaii this show is most meaningful. Granted that the Narcissus and Cherry Blossom Festivals belong here, and the 4th of July of course, these are not the whole picture.

Our Hawaii is much more than a raft conveniently located for a meeting between East and West.

Hawaii existed long before it became the Sandwich Islands. Hawaii existed long before it became the 50th State.

To see this show is to understand in context the cultural values of our Polynesian heritage.



"Bird-man" — a polychrome sculpture. It's a new accession by the Bishop Museum from New Guinea.