70- Aloha Week, Hawaiian Arts. Sept-27-1967

ART

by Jean Charlot

Hawaiiana for Aloha Week

Aloha Week is just around the corner. Its festivities October 14 to 21 will stress what costumes and customs make our State unique among States.

For a week, the King and Queen will don feather cloaks, whaletooth necklaces, a helmet and a head lei.

They will stand on the bridge of a double canoe to be paddled to shore by quasi—naked paddlers, there to face the gauntlet of gawking tourists and exploding flashbulbs.

Come parade time, they'll ride on a float — a truck smothered in orchids — while pa'u riders prance about them, one of the most genuinely graceful events.

Downtown, businessmen will feel free to don aloha shirts instead of the white collar, honorable carcan of their call.

Behind their ivy walls, professors will, for a week, amble sleeveless, shirt tails outside their pants, heady with the knowledge that principal and president will also strip.

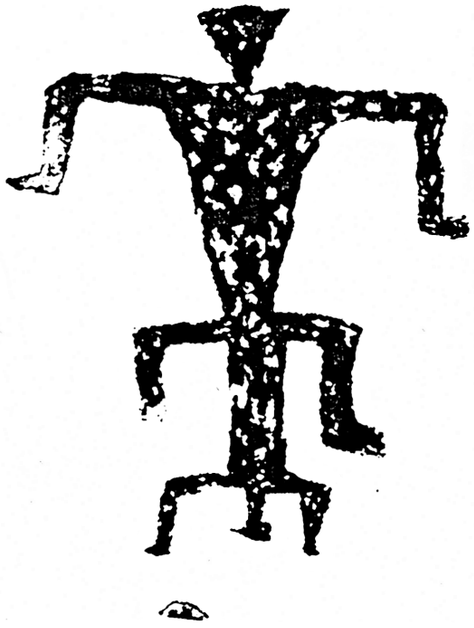
This gay annual fracas breeds unavoidable grumblings. There is something unAmerican, according to some, in this all-Hawaiian display. They fear what they call the mu'umu'u complex. Far better that every citizen, from birth to death, with an eye glued to Wall Street, should buy and sell, sell and buy.

Hawaiian culture

Even though ruthlessly trimmed to please Kodachrome and Polaroid buffs, Aloha Week is a genuine expression of Hawaiian culture.

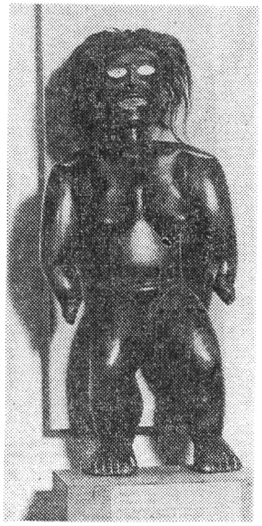
Captain Cook's fateful visit did make a difference, but Hawaiians had discovered themselves eons of ages before that.

Their culture goes back over a millenium and its roots tap true prehistory.



PETROGLYPH—An ancient Hawaiian rock drawing.

Some of Cook's gifts and those of later explorers were fateful ones. The imported cattle trampled the exposed roots of indigenous trees. The trees perished. The birds that depended on them vanished.



PELE?—This image, found in a Big Island cave, is believed to represent Pele, the fire goddess.

As regards the visual arts, things hardly went smoother. The English imported suave mezzotints. Next the Americans, proud of their knowhow, brought daguerreotypes and the machines that produced them.

Unable to compete with such realistic imports, native esthetic took to cover. Sculptures sought asylum in the damp darkness of burial caves. Petroglyphs, scratched on lava rocks, somehow survived, baked by tre sun or washed over by the sea.

The performing arts — music and the dance — have awed Hawaii's visitors ever since the 18th century.

Visual arts not appreciated

The visual arts, somehow, were bypassed.

The English sailors who stacked **ki'i la'au**, wooden god images, to be used as firewood, were no art connoisseurs. Yet they acted no differently than would have a genuine art connoisseur of the time, nurtured on an appreciation of the genteel art of a Gainsborough or of a Reynolds.

Petroglyphs were even less appreciated than sculpture. Perhaps because they were trodden underfoot. Perhaps because they showed not a hint of a knowledge of anatomy.

The English gentleman, fresh returned from a tour of Greece and Italy, brought back marble fragments, preferably of the nude, or busts of Roman emperors that matched daintily the neoclassical paintings they owned, painted by John Flaxman or Benjamin West.

In the eyes of these sophisticates, petroglyphs were mere childish daubs. At best, some suggested men or dogs. Even worse, some represented nothing at all, being a mere mumbo-jumbo of lines!

To express their contempt, the 18th century explorer, the 19th century visitor, literally had no words. Only in our century was a word coined: **abstraction.**

But then taste had changed and understanding had been born with the new word.

Beauty is not realized

It was given to our century to realize to the full the beauty of petroglyphs. Authentic contemporary masters, Dubuffet among them, work hard to achieve a pithy simplicity somewhat akin to that of the Hawaiian rock-scratchers.

Come Aloha Week, a visit to the Bishop Museum is a must. Its unique collection of Hawaiian sculptures has been reorganized for display.

Designed by Gerald Ober, the new presentation sets the deep patinas of the much-eroded sacred logs against backgrounds of fresh color that reinstate life in the ancient statues.

To appreciate these works because of their obvious affinity with modern sculpture is only a beginning. Their makers aimed at pleasing other beings than men.

More important than sheer esthetic, these logs darkly mirror the relation in depth that ancient Hawaiians had with nature.

WARRIOR — This detail is from a hand puppet made by Hawaiians in the days before the Islands were discovered by the white man.—Photo from the British Museum.

As stated in the Kumulipo, they knew of mysterious links between the fish and plants of the sea and their appointed guardians, the beasts and plants of the earth.

And they believed in a vertiginous ladder set in space, that ascended all the way from the **lewa manu**, accessible to birds, to the **lewa lani**, accessible only to gods.

London has a collection

The appreciation of Hawaiian art spreads far. In London, the British Museum is proud of its collection of Hawaiian sculptures, most of them gathered by explorers in the 18th century. I reproduce the head of an ancient marionette, used in the **hula ki'i.**

The body is shaped so as to be held in the hand of the animator. The limbs are non-descript, being once hid under a chiefly cloak.

There is something undoubtedly majestic in the stylized features topped by the heroically scaled helmet.

This all-Hawaiian version of a warrior doubtless comes closer to the idea that Kamehameha the Great had of himself than does the pudgy bronze patterned after neoclassical statues that our legislators — when and if it is recast — are intent on inflicting on Washington.

Museums are like cities of refuge where art objects for a while somehow defy death. It is even more rewarding, however, to contact Hawaiian art in its natural habitat.

To hunt for petroglyphs is a cultural safari infinitely more rewarding than to hunt for big game. As a non-academic course in Hawaii's ancient esthetic, I suggest a trip to the Kona Coast.

TEMPLE IMAGE—This is a "Bloxom" image named after the British explorer who found it.—Photo from the British Museum.

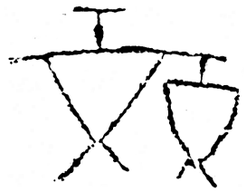
One could begin by getting "the feel of it" running in the sun along the antique King's Road, laid in the days of Kamehameha the First.

Straight as an arrow, it crosses for miles through a desert of unrelieved a'a lava fields. Brutally pitted, still hot from Pele's fires.

From time to time, the rough a'a gives way to plateaus of smooth **pahoehoe.** Rest a while there, as you must. So did the ancient Hawaiians, each leaving his signature in the form of a petroglyph cut into the stone with stone tools.

Nature is our teacher

Even better than museums, Hawaiian nature instructs us as regards Hawaiian art. The artist searched for **mana**, spiritual potency, and found it in caves where one has to crawl in darkness, in deserts of lava that cut feet to shreds, along rocks that each day, come high tide, are washed under by the tide.



Come Aloha Week, those who fear the so-called mu'umu'u complex have, after all, good reason to fear.

In many ways, there is a potential head clash between what the ancient Hawaiians held of importance and what most cultural carpetbaggers have to offer.

The following ditty, written by a young kama'aina, even though it makes use of Biblical imagery, applies most aptly to the field of esthetics:

"Little does the missionary in all his glory know
That those 'savages' live closer to the lily than he."