

ART

by Jean Charlot



The art of Polynesia

Much emphasis, perhaps a mite too much, is put on the role that our Hawaii plays as a meeting place for East and West.

This well-meant figure of speech suggests a raft, artificially built and shrewdly located in the center of the Pacific for this specific purpose.

Our Islands are far from being a raft, to be towed and to be anchored at will.

This ancient land is solidly rooted to the ocean floor. Hawaii's cultural past is intimately linked to that of other Pacific island cultures.

It owes nothing to either East or West, unless it be at some unknown dawn of their prehistories.

A newly published book by Edward Dodd, "The Ring of Fire: Polynesian Art," is a timely reminder of these facts. A Somewhat purple summary of the book's contents is found in its subtitle, phrased to wet a potential buyer's appetite:

"A pictorial Peregrination through the Shapely and Harmonious, often Enigmatic, sometimes Shocking Realms of Polynesian Art."

Though copiously illustrated, this book is not of the type one gives indiscriminately come Christmas time, decked in a surfeit of lovely, lovely colors.

This book may be leafed through with profit, but it better be read.

A borderline subject

Such a subject matter as Polynesian art is precariously poised on a borderline between ethnology and esthetics. Which may explain why studies of Pacific islands' art oftentimes carry a whiff of that musty air that settles on the display shelves and storage racks of museums of anthropology.

By contrast, one feels through this book the rush and tang of a true ocean breeze. The author thus describes himself, a seafaring man:

"I had sailed 10,000 leagues, surely, exploratory miles across the ocean in a boat where one could always, like a Polynesian of old, reach over the side and touch the water."

This attitude of a doer, rather than that of a dreamer, gives Dodd a needed insight into art as the craft of art-making, rather than as an idle spectacle. He reinstates the art objects each in its island habitat, and surprises their makers at their work.

Thus, on the stone carver of Rapanui (Easter Island to you):

"He had no studio with



CARVING—This head is a detail from a Mangareva wood carving now in the British Museum.

north light, no packet of chisels, assorted and well-balanced mallets.

"He must contrive from the raw stone of the volcanic crater with a tool patiently shaped from the harder stone of another crater.

"His creation lies prone before him and he must work in a deep narrow trench along the sides, literally mining himself under his image, instead of setting up a block of marble in his studio and being able to view it from all sides."

This book singles out Polynesian art forms as distinct

from those of Micronesia and of Melanesia. The thesis put forth by the author is that Polynesia, surmounting the hiatus of oceanic vastness, alone flourished as a cultural unit.

Thus the reader is spared two sorts of pitfalls. Either the excessive detail unavoidable when the focus is set on a single island. Or, when the whole of the Pacific is surveyed, the vague and grandiose dream of fleets of prehistoric canoes heroically crisscrossing oceans, to fit the preconceived notions of each author.

There is a touch of refreshing anger in Dodd's enthusiasm as he defends Polynesian art from the stigma of primitiveness.

His zest is reminiscent of that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and assorted "philosophers" who came, at the end of the 18th century, under the spell of the newly discovered noble savage.

Spiritual mana guides the island sculptor in the course of his work. Mana is as well the end product of his art. Its power exudes from the carved akua to strike with



TATTOO—This tattoo motif is from New Zealand.

awe the faithful.

Those are credentials noble enough for any art. Dodd does little to strengthen his thesis when he attempts to boost Polynesian art at the expense of European art.

He questions the geniuses

We part company when he asserts that "... the bland madonnas of Raphael, the fleshy extravaganzas of Rubens and the athletics of Tintoretto are for us today not much more than massive displays of technique."

One forgives much to a lover, and the author obviously has fallen in love with Polynesian art.

So have others, ever since Gauguin pioneered in the field, and that already was in a past century.

Picasso followed Gauguin. The works of his so-called Negro period are often patterned after Pacific carvings. A photograph of the artist, then in his twenties, shows him proudly posing before a New Hebrides sculpture that reappears, "cubed," in his portrait of the dealer, Ambroise Vollard.

Surely, 50 years later, there should be no mental hurdles left between us and a free appreciation of Polynesian esthetics.

The very fact that the adze-wielder made no pretense to copy superficial appearances, was interested neither in anatomy nor in what classical ages called beauty, is today one more reason for applause.

Even those well informed about such matters may learn from the author's sensitive approach:

"More than any other sensory element, the Polynesian sculptor appeals to the sense of touch.

"His statues, statuettes, pendants, even his fishhooks, set up a craving to handle, to fondle.

"Often the little ivory Tongan goddess has her features virtually smoothed flat by fingering, and even the adamant hei-tiki is eroded away

by generations of caressing."

Affinities between island cultures does not mean monotony. Each island possessed an art of its own. To a great extent, what material was at hand shaped the esthetic approach.

The Maori greenstone, susceptible to receive a high polish, dictates a quite different art than does the a'a lava rock, that no tool can tame.

Less predictable than problems of craft are the problems raised by the appearance of artists of genius. They are as rare in island culture as they are rare in our own. Yet their influence can be major.

Only genius could set a norm for the majestic beings carved on Easter Island. Only genius could devise the contorted features of the great Hawaiian gods, that look like nothing on earth.

"The Ring of Fire: Polynesian Art" is a vivid introduction to a most difficult subject. Naturally, given the book's complex scope, each specialist, armed with a magnifying glass, will pick minor discrepancies within his own field.

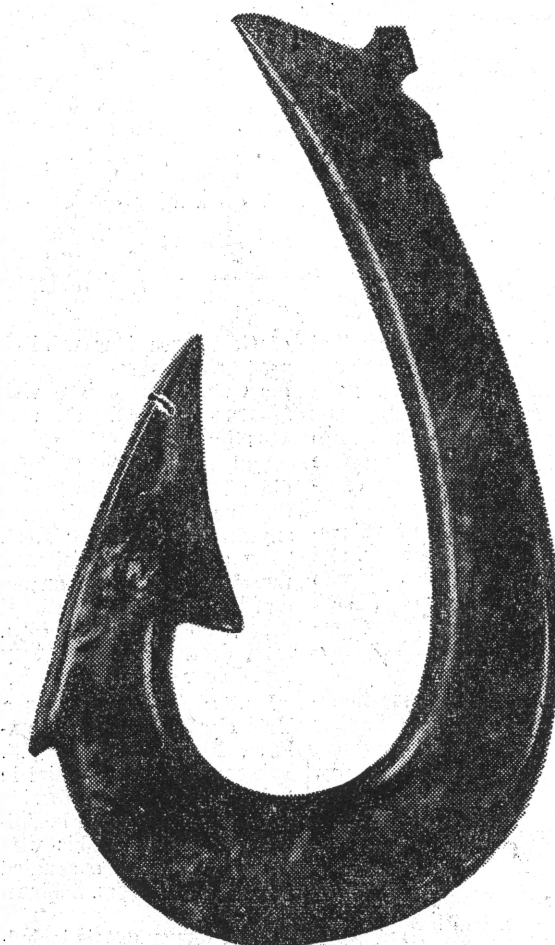
A sadder plight

The author's reference to Hawaiian *menehune* statuettes as embodying a jolly spirit of fun is too close to Disney's Seven Dwarfs for comfort. Some of these so-called *menehunes* may well represent instead captives forced to menial tasks, such as holding spittoons or food trays. Their grimace could be a grimace of shame and pain.

One needs to quarrel with the following statement:

"Kamehameha II, subverted by the missionaries, broke the food *kapu* by dining with the Queen, and the people rose against the old religion."

The breaking of the *kapu* happened in November, 1819. The first missionaries landed on our shores in March of the following year.



HOOK—Turtle-shell fishhook from Hawaii. At the Smithsonian Institution, Washington.

Stasack to substitute for art critic Charlot

Star-Bulletin art critic Jean Charlot and Mrs. Charlot are planning a world tour. His weekly commentary will not appear on this page for some time.

He will visit sons, daughter and grandchildren in New York, Alabama, Munich and Venezuela; open a show of his works in Mexico City's National Museum of Modern Art; give lectures on Western art at the invitation of the Government of Taiwan, and visit Indonesia for the opening of a meuseum by Affandi, noted Indonesian artist.

Edward Stasack will produce the Wednesday art page in Charlot's absence, in collaboration with Betty Boxold of the Star-Bulletin editorial staff, starting next week.

Stasack is one of Hawaii's best artists, described by Charlot in a commentary a year ago as "acknowledged master of printmaking . . . a master painter . . . (who) paints in terms of the monumental and of the eternal."

Stasack, 38, born in Chicago, joined the University of Hawaii faculty in 1956 and now is an associate professor of art there.

He has works in more than 30 museums in the U.S. and abroad. Last year his works were exhibited in Krakow, Poland, and in 1963 he was one of 12 Americans represented at an international show in Yugoslavia.

He won first prize in the last two Honolulu Print Makers' shows, and has won some 50 other prizes for his works, including a Rockefeller Foundation grant and two Tiffany Foundation grants.

His first Honolulu Academy of Arts one-man show was in 1962.

He and his wife, Mary Lou, have four children: Caren, 13; Jennifer, 11; John, 6, and Michael, 4.