14) lahaina-luna print

ART

by Jean Charlot

AT THE Contemporary Arts Center on Kapiolani Boulevard, the recent show of Lahainaluna engravings was part of the sesquicentennial celebrations of the first missionary arrivals in Hawaii.

Peter Morse accepted the delicate task of assembling the rare collection of prints and books, and did so from many sources. The show illustrates the role that the visual arts played at the mission school of Lahainaluna, Maui, beginning in the 1830s.

The engravings did not come into being as an exercise in esthetics. Teachers and students alike turned to art only as an adjunct to pedagogical requirements. The tools used were uncomplicated, some of the burins homemade.

As to the brass plates to be engraved, some were bought from ship chandlers, others were nautical discards given to the school by benevolent ship captains who berthed at nearby Lahaina.

AT FIRST SIGHT, these timid engravings seem unexciting fare for eyes keyed to the sort of contemporary art that 'does its thing' dressed in motley, amid drummings and alarums. And the obvious lessons in piousness and goodness that are at their core today may fall on shallow ground.

Yet, intimately spliced as they are with threads of Hawaii's early history, these mild prints, looked at with good will, acquire scope, depth and beauty, as witnesses to an era. The tales they tell in images cannot be told as well in words.

The Lahainaluna engravings date from the period when mission and missionaries were young. The aim was to mold Hawaiian nature and the Hawaiians themselves to approximate the New England habitants and habitat that the missionaries knew and loved.

MODERN CRITICS censure these newcomers to Hawaii for the little respect they showed for native culture. As doctors, the missionaries were hardly more skilled than they were as artists. They could no doubt have profited from the ancestral know-how of the kahuna lapa'au.

As to art, America at that date was budding into what historian Flexner has aptly called "the first flowers of our wilderness."

In New England itinerant portrait painters, cooped up at home during the winter months, would paint without benefit of model torsos of gentlemen and ladies, modishly dressed, holding genteel accessories, such as books and flowers — but headless.

Come spring, loaded with his pack of half-finished canvases, the painter, roving from townlet to townlet, would fit to each torso the head of a willing customer, working from the model this time.

BEFORE leaving home, the future missionaries, if at all interested in art, had looked up to these professionals for enlightenment. It is no wonder then that they saw little of worth in Polynesian sculptures, adzed out of a log by Stone Age pagans. A typical opinion was: "The idols are wooden beams tipped with human configurations of an obscene nature."

Those "cons" are no more than an exercise in hindsight 150 years after the fact. In the Hawaii of the 1830s it was all "pros" and an exciting adventure. The native mission student was in the process of discovering in his turn a new wide world outside his islands, a discovery vaster than the one that had cost Captain Cook his life.

Looking at the hesitant web of lines, garishly hand-colored, of Lahainaluna maps engraved c.1836, the student could marvel at the actual shapes of continents, faraway Africa, China, even Palestine where Jesus had walked.

THESE SIGHTS were as exciting as had been to their forefathers ancestral memories concerned with far flung kahikis.

To animate the maps, bare bones of the earth, what botany and zoology could be found in haole textbooks came to the student's help. Even before launching these early engravings, Lahainaluna had issued the first Hawaiian newspaper, Ka Lama, in 1834.

In it were featured images of mammals, awkwardly cut in wood by Dr. Alonzo Chapin. For Hawaiians, for so long conditioned only to the pig and the dog, the rat and the bat, these Leviathans and Behemots excitingly suggested a dangerous outer world. In it the hippopotamus, the giraffe, the lion freely grazed, roamed or devoured their prey.

THUS, IN OUR attempt to see the prints through the eyes of a Lahainaluna student, they acquire depth and life.

But what do these same prints tell us in regard to the missionaries? That their task had been to convert the native and his land to Christ? Well and good — but they themselves, stirred by the new sights, what had they been converted to?

The lushness of the Sandwich Islands was basically out of tune with the New Englander's moral climate. Advocations that were safest at home acquired here tinges of the forbidden fruit. To catch butterflies with a net had been in New England a sport fit for young ladies.

One of the engravings, with a touch of magic realism, shows the needed accessories and how best to dry the specimen without damaging its wings.

UNLIKE THE New England insects, those caught in Hawaii sported the strangest hues and shapes. In the delight of the eye there lurked temptations of excessive beauty.

Botany proved as unsafe as entomology. Another print, a closeup of a night-blooming cereus, still has power to shock by its baroque display of petals as heady as had been in the not so faraway pagan past hula dances on a night of full moon.

Even geology laid its traps. Reports of eruptions, the surging of cinder cones, the curtains of lava fountains, the hellish belch of smoke, these could only too easily be visualized as a backdrop for some spectacular entrance of gods, unchristian ones.

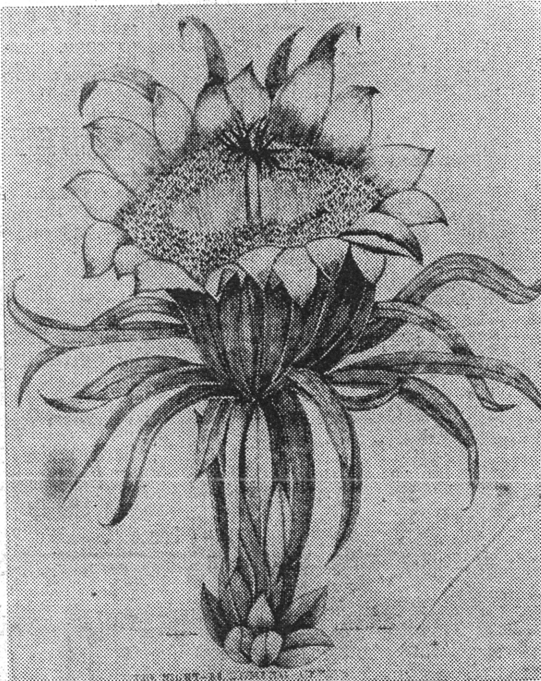
To cleanse souls of their pagan stigma was the missionary's goal and this, to the limit of his power, he conscientiously achieved. To change tropical nature proved a task beyond his forces.

IN VAIN DO THE engravings proudly report how the convoluted Hawaiian landscape, in the haole effort to tame it, became dotted with plain cubic houses, their proportions tight-lipped, their walls as whitewashed as redeemed souls. The locale rejected these rational architectures, taking rather to the disheveled native huts.

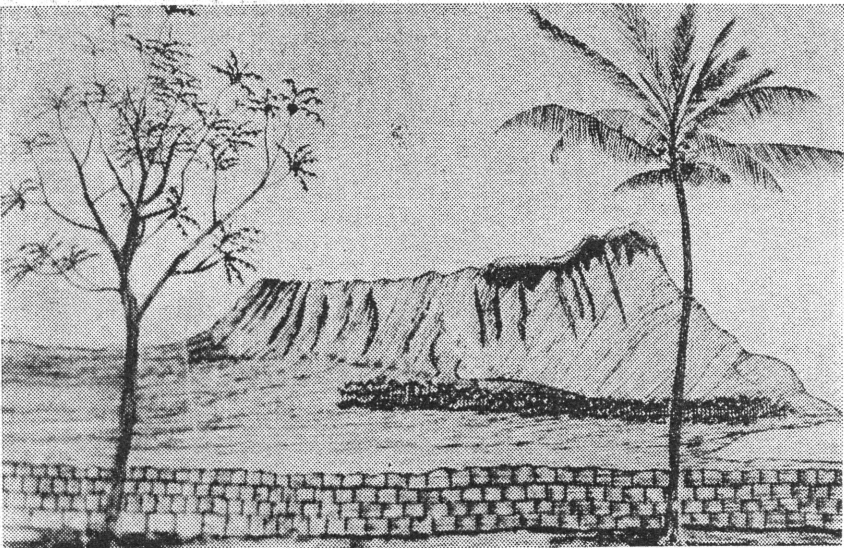
The more Hawaiian nature refused to yield, the more grew a longing in the missionary's heart for the tamer nature he had left behind, more often than not forever.

Some of the prints exude this feeling. A view of Edward Bailey's home in Holden, Mass., was doubtless engraved for its pedagogical value, to introduce natives to the restrained sights of temperate climes. It also was, known or unknown to its maker, a conjuring on the polished surface of the copper plate of a wish better left unformulated.

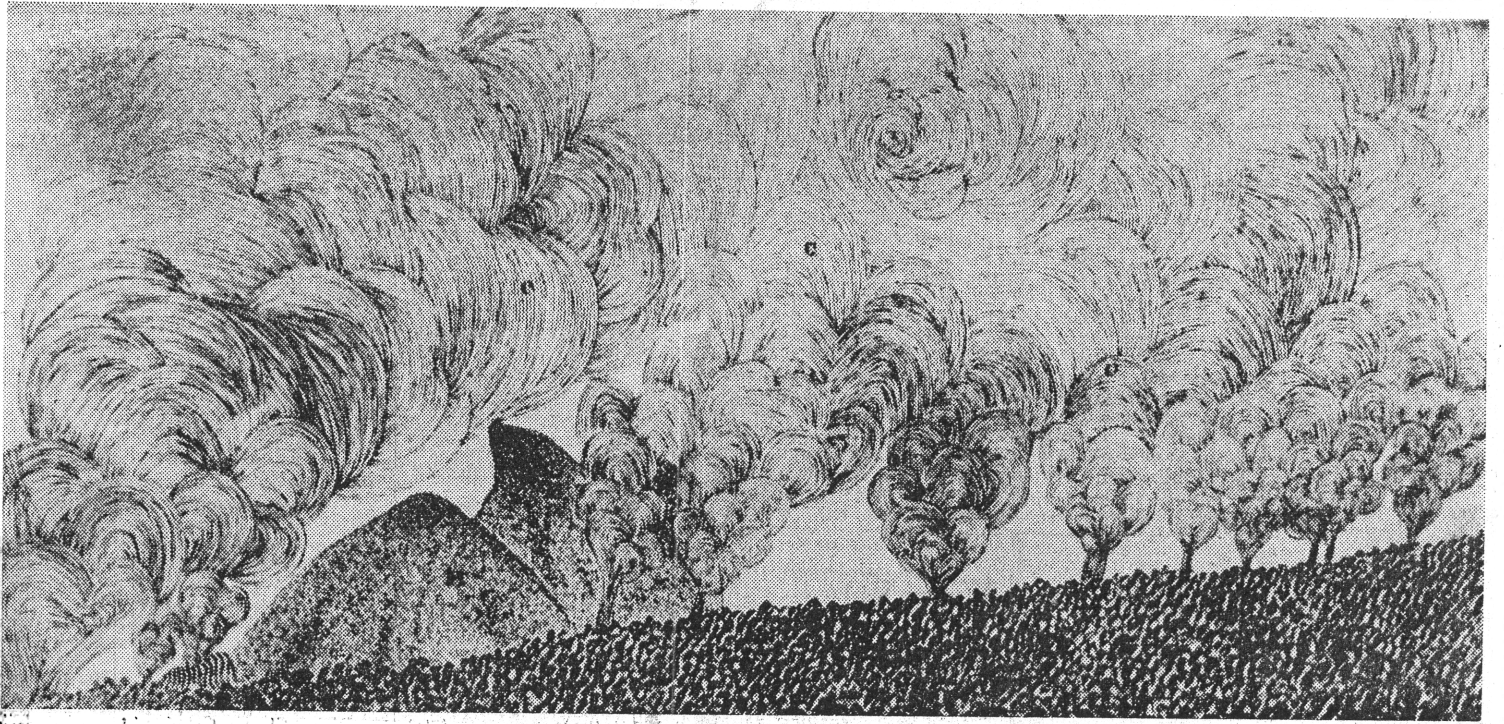
Half a century after Mr. Bailey, Paul Gauguin did something similar, though with more perfect means. Sick, aging and now certain that he was to die where he was, in the Marquesas Islands, he consoled himself by painting a Breton winterscape of cottages, their thatch white with snow.



Night-Blooming Cereus



Diamond Hill (after a sketch by Edward Daily, 1837)



View of a Stream of Lava as it Entered The Sea at Nanawale.