

# ART

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by Jean Charlot



Two current shows, however unrelated their styles, pair to challenge our present-day ideas as to what makes the artist what he is: paintings and masks from Bali at the Central Public Library. At the Academy of Arts, folk sculpture and cotton applique designs by the Cuna Indians of Panama.

Dissimilar as these shows may be, both raise disquieting questions that may force us to reappraise the basic articles of faith that justify our brand of contemporary art. Most of us envision the true work of art as the heroic gesture of one individual who dares to go against the grain of the beliefs and MORES of a majority.

Contrariwise, the Balinese and the Panamanian, both esthetic achievements, depend on the willingness of the art-maker to make his own self conform to all community standards.

BALI DIFFERS from the rest of Indonesia. Its distinct language, and the fact that it is an island, help maintain its cultural autonomy. Hinduism, the ancient religion that was once believed by all, remains Bali's own.

In other parts of Indonesia, such as Jakarta, there rise imposing ruins of Hindu temples. These stand, for the Moslem Indonesian, as majestic witnesses to the past.

Though mostly provincial in size and style, Balinese temples, however disreputable their moss-grown appearance, are no ruins, but houses still graced by the presence of living gods. In Bali, race, faith and architecture, stand as one.

The processions of pious women, carrying on their heads offerings of fruits and flowers piled high, are neither survivals nor revivals. They are in no way pageants put on by tourist bureaus, need not the incentive of camera carrying "guests" to come into being. These beautiful rites are today, as they were in the past, at the marrow of the people's faith and life.

In the 1930s, when Miguel Covarrubias was taking notes for his classical book about Bali, he was befriended by a native master of the dance. Miguel, well known also as a painter, sketched the dancer's head with the sharp, accurate line that characterized his art.

PLEASED WITH the result he presented it to his model. Said the Balinese: "Not bad, but not quite accurate. I'll show you the way we are." And, pencil in hand, he corrected the profile to conform with one he firmly believed to be his own.

To Miguel's eye the result seemed entirely impersonal, being an exact replica of the hundreds of profiles seen in cutouts of shadow puppets, or painted and sculptured on the walls of temples and palaces, old and new.

This creative dancer gathered strength to practice his art not from a sense of being different from others but from a sense of belonging, of merging anonymously into the racial cliché of his race.

WHEN IN BALI, I too contacted a Balinese artist, a painter still in his teens, who roamed along the beach in the vicinity of the one air-conditioned hotel, a roll of canvases under his arm. I was sketching on my own. We talked and he offered his wares, in this case not for sale but for criticism.

Would the foreigner, an artist himself and aware of what was going on in the outside world, suggest improvements? Unrolled, his paintings displayed jungle landscapes, rice farmers at work, kings spying on princesses at their bath, blue gods and black gods slaying golden dragons. The exquisite minutiae of the brushwork, the rococo intricacies of foliage, crowds, clouds and palaces, all spliced into one, dazzled me.

My past as a professor, ceaselessly expounding the history of art from cavemen to Andy Warhol, surged uneasily before my eyes.

The young artist modestly waited for an opinion. Obviously his strength came from a perfect adherence to what ancestral guidance moved his hand. His art came into being as a sort of psychic automatic writing.

WHY SHOULD I loosen his secure tie with his own inheritance, only to send him on a most dubious quest to "find himself?"

I sincerely thanked him for the pleasure his work had given me and we went our ways.

The display of the art of the Cuna Indians of Panama

opened July 30 at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, and remains until Sept. 6. This folk art — whittlings in wood and applique panels of cloth — appears as primitive as Balinese art is sophisticated. However different may be both media and styles, these shows raise similar questions.

The Cuna Indians are also islanders. Their identity as an ethnic group is so ingrained that to save that identity from encroachment from the Republic of Panama bureaucracy, they attempted independence by armed uprising. This was in the 1920s, the last organized rebellion on record by American Indians.

Though defeated — overwhelmed by the arrival of the U.S.S. Cleveland, carrying battle-ready Marines — the Cunas were granted the autonomy they sought. Today they live as they have for centuries under native CACIQUES and according to their own laws.

PRESENTED AS they are, stretched flat and under glass, it would be misleading to visualize the colorful cotton appliques as a row of paintings hung on gallery

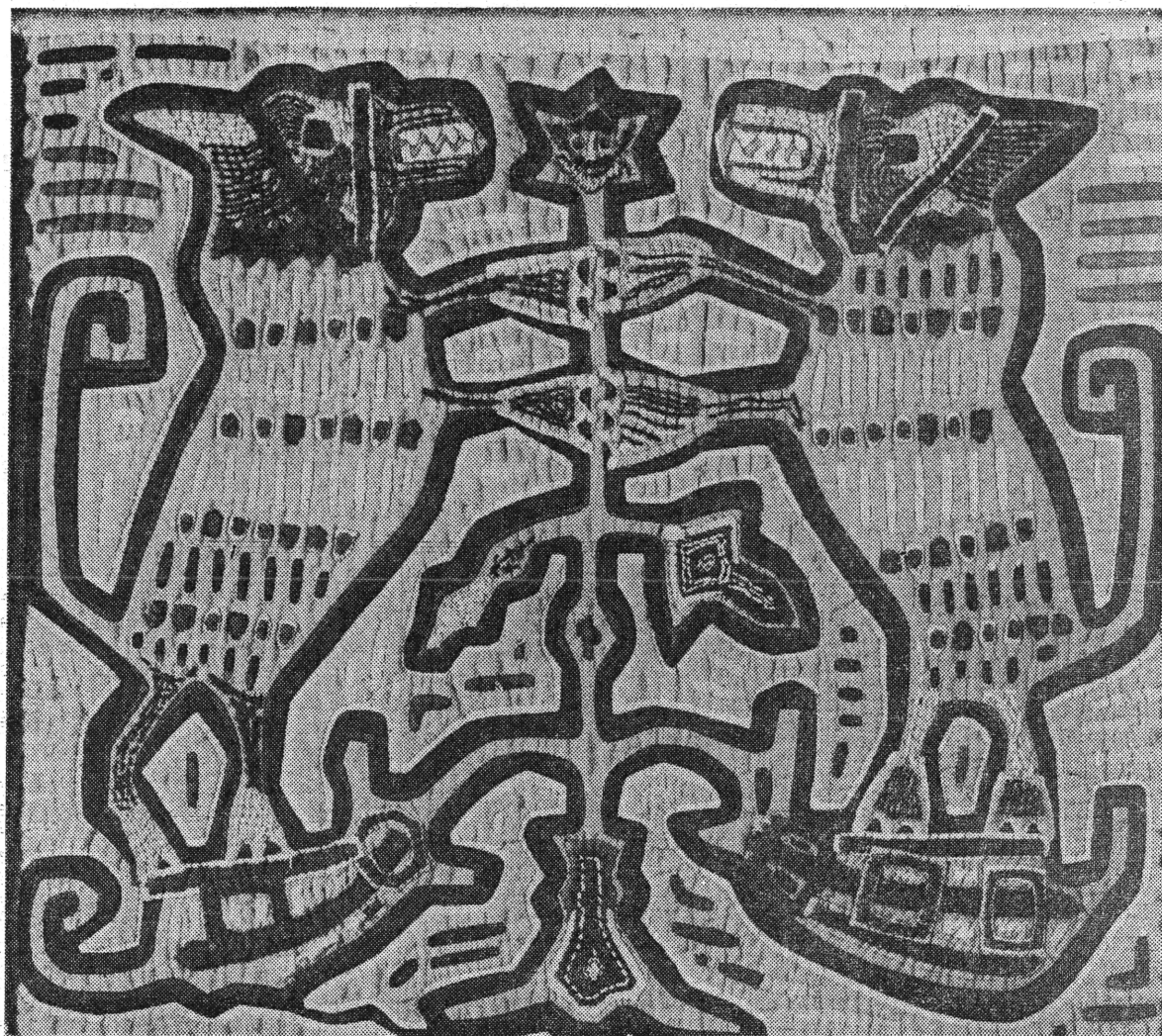
walls. Photographs of Cuna village life correct this impression. It is an art conceived to be seen in action, motifs stitched front and back of the women's short-sleeved blouses. The designs adapt themselves to the shape of bodies, answer the motions of the wearer at work, hulling rice with mortar and pestle, carrying a child, or dancing.

The strong colors, with reds and yellows dominant, set well against the dark orche of the Indian skin, add their accent to that of gold breast plates, ear pendants and nose rings.

The subject matter is culled from everyday sights — snakes, pelicans, goldsmiths at work, a fisherman spearing a manta ray — to ritual images — thunder god, sea monster, devils of death.

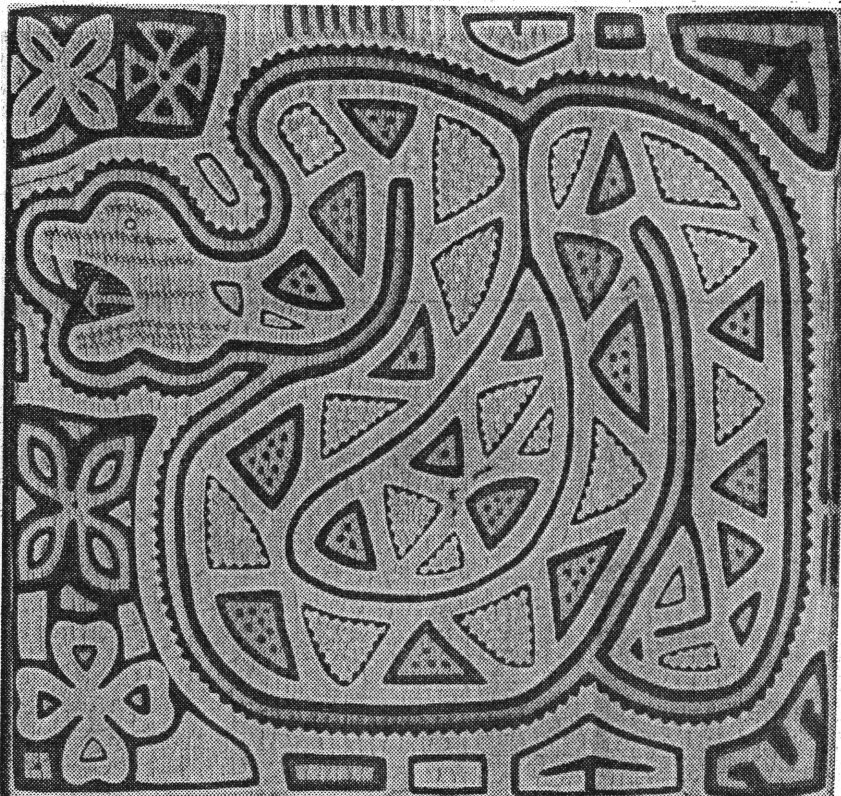
Far back into unlikely time and space must, one search for the roots of these traditional images. The scenes of creation, the tree of life between two lions RAMPANT, have undoubted affinity with Assur and Mesopotamia. Though on what raft made of papyrus they came, only a Thor Heyerdahl would dare surmise.

Each woman creates her



**TREE OF LIFE**—"Far back into unlikely time and space must one search for the roots of these traditional images."

own design, then cuts stitches and embroiders it. Here as is the case with Balinese art the artist is as one with the community.



**SNAKE**—"The subject matter is culled from everyday sights — snakes, goldsmiths at work, a fisherman spearing a manta ray..."



**DETAIL**—From a painting which tells the story of a prince who saw seven bathing goddesses in the woods.

Jogjakarta