

ART

by Jean Charlot

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At the Bishop Museum two simultaneous events: the long awaited appearance of the monograph on petroglyphs by J. Halley Cox with Edward Stasack, and the opening of a show dealing with Oceanic tapa cloth and its uses, presented by Dr. Adrienne Kaeppler.

The fact that the newly published "Hawaiian Petroglyphs" is a paperback, and modestly priced, should not disguise its importance. Both authors, J. Halley Cox and Edward Stasack, are creative artists turned for the nonce into scientists.

This book, easy to read, easy to look at, was made possible by thorough preparatory research. All the expected scientific paraphernalia is gathered here between covers: detailed site maps, numerical comparative tables, footnotes, bibliographical index, quotations from learned sources.

Yet the charm of the book, at least for the non-expert, is that, underlying the many facts enumerated in wilfully sober style, one feels an exhilaration that remains unexplained; unless one remembers that both authors, exchanging the beret of the artist for the pith helmet of the archeologist, marshal facts not so much for the sake of facts, but specifically to sharpen their esthetic delight.

IMPONDERABLES impossible to classify and to typeset remain the essential reason for the birth of this authoritative book. "A Love Affair between Artists and Petroglyphs" would be, doubtless, too flippant a title for a museum press to countenance.

Yet it comes close to explaining how such a staggering bulk of research is centered on what, to the bourgeois eye, and even alas to the scientific eye, remained up-to-now crudely carved doodles.

Only practicing modern artists could have written such a deeply-felt book. Only in this century, thanks to the shift in taste from realism to surrealism, have Hawaiian petroglyphs entered the range of our esthetic appreciation.

When the Venus of Milo was unearthed early in the 19th century, its marble blandness fitted the era. Today, however, we appreciate more readily the spice of some eccentrically conjured petroglyph Venus.

The blocked angular beauty of stickmen and women, their distortions and elisions seem somehow pertinent in the context of our modern art.

AS THE AUTHORS point out, by their nature, petroglyphs, precious though they be, are ineligible for the red carpet treatment of art gallery or museum. They remain part and parcel of Hawaiian nature at its roughest and toughest.

Fire and water are their habitat. Fire that poured out of the Island volcanoes and in lava form flowed to the sea. It is on these cooled-off lava rocks that most of the petroglyphs are carved.

We, artists, can learn from the petroglyph maker. The scratches and poundings

with which he patiently graved or bruised the rock were meant to relate himself to nature rather than to assert himself.

He did not mean to build skyscrapers of a sort, great works of art to scrape the skies with. He preferred to make a mark that he alone would know was there, and that could not in any way queer the landscape.

THOUGH THE Hawaiian race was tagged by the missionaries as sensuous, Hawaiian art remains undiluted

edly spiritual. Petroglyph dogs are spirit dogs. The grand friezes of warriors engraved on the floors of ancient paths are not meant as flesh. They are a conciliating gesture aimed at the spirit of the dead.

Old Hawaii is still at the core of present-day Hawaii. Once a friend of mine came close enough to such a right procession to smell the fragrance of the maile leis the ghosts wore, and hastily detoured the spot.

The earliest petroglyphs could date from a thousand

x night

years ago, when humans first landed on these Islands. When did the art cease to be? The book illustrates inscriptions dated from the 1860's. To add my grain of sand to the proposed sequence: in a cave on Kauai my own arduous search for antique lore brought me to a low ceilinged cave within a cave.

There, framed in the glow of my flashlight I read what may well have been one of the last messages of the kind, "Kilroy was here."

JUST OPENED at the Bishop Museum is a show concerned with another form of Pacific arts, that of tapa. Anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler arranged the striking display. To enter the room, one moves aside a curtain made of tapa strips, thus adding tactile data to what visual data awaits one inside.

Perhaps the show suffers from too much artistry. The undoubted skill with which Dr. Kaeppler throws, twists, knots and garlands her material, using light and lack of light for dramatic effects, leaves little peace to the fellow intent on observing the tapa as it came from the hand of its maker.

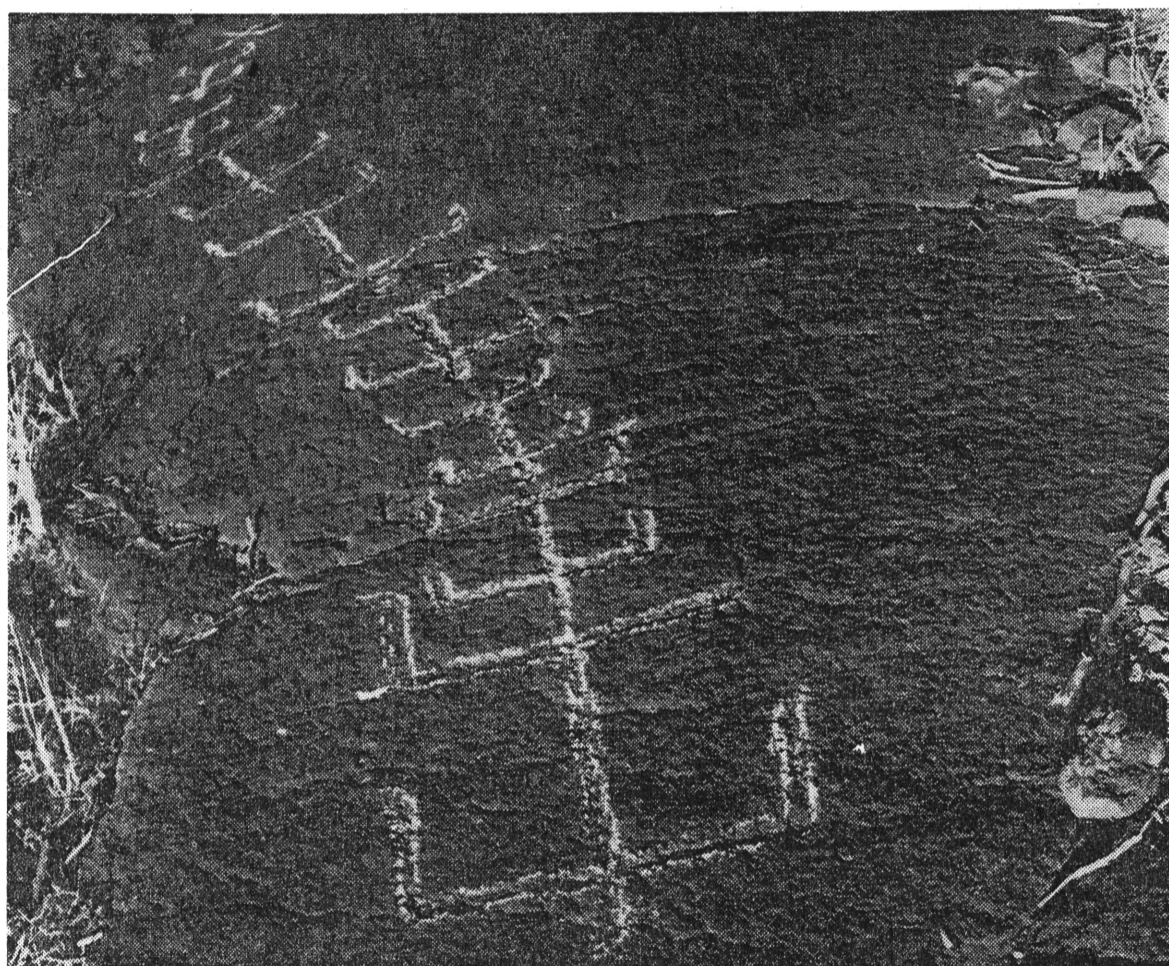
Yet, for the practicing artist the undoubted spell of tapa designs resides in their ties with our forms of geometric abstract, as is the case with the black and white strip from Futuna. Or with our own brand of uninhibited free forms, as happens with most of the Tongan tapa.

Ties between ancient tapa and modern art came forcefully to the fore in the decoration of the newly open Ala Moana Hotel, achieved under the guidance of David Asherman. The group of artists involved opted to paint on a ground of authentic decorated tapa, learning to blend their own style with the rhythm and color of the native designs.

To round up this show, one could wish that a preparatory panel for the hotel decoration would have brought up-to-date the story of tapa.



... "With the rhythm and color of the native designs ..."



... "The blocked angular beauty"

... Akua with tapa at the Bishop Museum ...