

ART

by Jean Charlot



Just out, a beautiful book, one of special interest in our Hawaii: **Maori Wood Sculpture**, by Terry Barrow. As the illustrations attest, these sculptures, created a thousand miles away from our chain of islands, bear with Hawaiian 'idols' an unmistakable family resemblance.

In what we label smugly prehistoric times—as if Pacific history had waited for visiting haoles to begin—great artists, albeit anonymous, handled here, as they did there, stone tools that shaped and textured logs to express metaphysical concerns with the doings of the dead and the epic genealogies of gods.

Thanks to art, the simple man, unversed in intellectualities, absorbed ideas that otherwise would have remained the secret appanage of the priest.

BEING BY TRADE a bookish man, the historian of art leans too often for his appreciation of the Pacific arts on tales of native mythology, stated in words, and thus fated to find their final form in books. Barrow is the surprising exception.

His text ungrudgingly underlines an obvious truth, so obvious as to be rarely acknowledged: the realm of art and the realm of words barely overlap.

The dominant factor in these sculptures, loaded though they may be with meaning and mana, is not

the priest who commissioned the work, but the artisan who carved it.

The Maori carver was a manual worker, by our American classification a blue collar worker. As I myself have done when bid to decorate parish churches or monastic chapels, the adze-wielder doubtless stood at attention—as his employer, the cleric, enumerated moral points to be developed, and detailed the intricacies of dogma. "Yes, sir. Indeed, father" must have been his answer as it has been mine.

The artist starts to think only at the time that he takes tools in hand and faces the task to be done. And artisan thinking remains conditioned to the end by the vagaries of the grain of the wood, the weight, bluntness or sharpness, of the adze or chisel, much more so than by any metaphysical concerns.

IT WOULD BE all the easier to forget the art-maker when the subject, as is here the case, can be assimilated to folk art, and the doer remains faceless. It comes as a pleasant surprise that the author has contacted some of the contemporary Maori carvers still at work along traditional lines, has interviewed them respectfully, and learned from their folksy wisdom things not to be found in books.

To date Maori sculptures,

Barrow evolves somewhat diffidently a simple rule of thumb. Sculptural concepts fully in the round and with a minimum of decorative addenda stand for antique nobility. In more recent times, all-embracing curves as clinging as the many arms of an octopus progressively hide and eventually stifle the underlying sculptural form.

Such a proposed sequence flatters our modern habits of thought that lean to the clean outlines of racing cars and skyscrapers, and remain wary of decorative ripeness. That the Maori artist would as readily agree with this point of view, I doubt.

THE DESSICATED heads of chiefs, and their sculptured renderings as well, exhibit the fullness of a sculpture in the round that the skin taut over the skull bones emphasizes. Together, hand-in-hand as it were, is displayed an allover pattern of tattoos featuring a thousand curves as unhibited as the tendrils of a vine.

Though maimed, the more ancient sculptures have survived the world of ideas that gave them birth. Some of the noblest among those illustrated were found in mud-verts, embedded in the mud of streams, or beached alongside driftwood after a storm. It is a proof of the timelessness of art that those bits of carved wood re-



... "The desiccated heads of chiefs..."

main today witnesses to a lost culture, and to the hierarchies of chiefs and priests who commissioned them.

Conceived in the heroic eras that Barrow labels as archaic and classical, these sculptures too have died to an extent. The meaningful bond between them and the people is severed. They end as specimens on a museum shelf, with a number for an identity, prisoners of a culture not their own.

Reading this book, I was struck by the similarities between New Zealand art and Hawaiian art, between the Maori language and the Hawaiian language. These similarities could be multiplied

over the immense extent of the Pacific Ocean, wherever submarine peaks pierce the waterline.

IT IS AS IF, by some inconceivable catastrophe, the nations of Europe were blown off and scattered intact thousands of miles apart from each other. It is as if, throughout history, treks in dugout canoes needing on the part of the paddlers a lifetime of heroic endeavor proved the only way to go from England to France or from Belgium to Germany.

I wrote these notes on the birthday of King Kalakaua, who attempted to restore its

valid unity to Pacific culture, in spite of this gigantic geographical handicap. To accomplish what he sought he had but a single steamer manned by a crew of boys from the reformatory school, armed with six small brass cannons, and captained by a good man somewhat addicted to the bottle.

Against Kalakaua all the great European powers stood aligned. That the King failed is no reason to belittle his noble attempt.

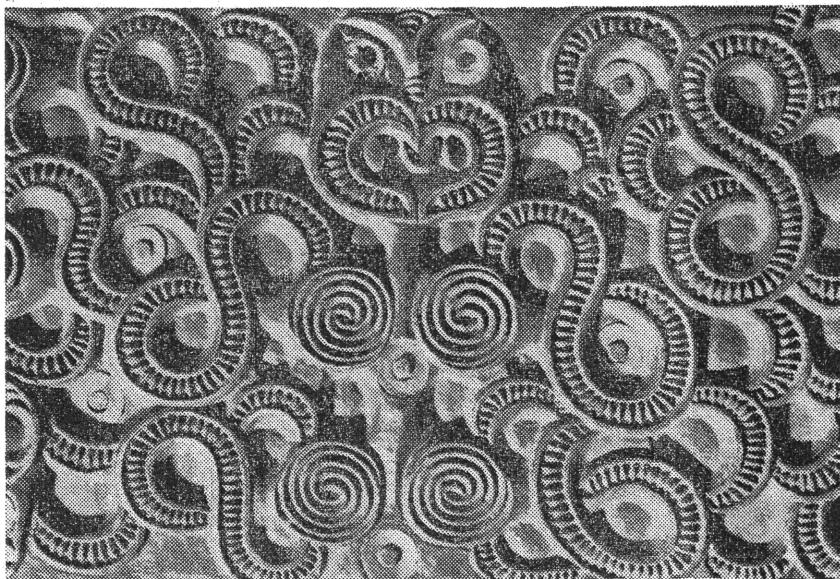
Ka Iml Loa, the name he gave his lone ship, does not only mean "The Far Seeker" as some have translated it, but also, and preeminently, "Deep Wisdom."



... "An obvious truth—the realm of art..."



... "And the realm of words—barely overlap."



... "A thousand curves... witnesses to a lost culture."