

ART

by Jean Charlot

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Towards the 1976 bicentennial celebrating, among a choice of events, the discoverer of our islands, people with foresight already have called forth conferences and round tables.

The aim is to exalt in well-balanced programs the rapport of the many races that constitute our present-day Hawaii. From what I gather, Captain Cook is cast as the hero of the script.

May those who work towards such a worthwhile goal not forget, as they praise the discoverer, to reappraise the role of the discoverers.

After all, men of this race we now know as Hawaiian also did discover the Sandwich Islands, 1,000 years before Captain Cook, and with such meager means available that heroism of a superior kind alone made the deed possible.

We shall never come across an American Indian version of the conquest of North America by this Johnny-come-late, the white man. Unlike Indians, Hawaiians did manage to put down, soon after the event, their own version of the discovery.

As conquests go, this one was not an unusually bloody one, though Captain Cook — had he been allowed a last say — would have worded it differently.

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that they alone are in the right. Flashbacks into past episodes make this a doubtful fact at best. Fashions change and, at times, in history, it is the civilizer that may figure as the savage, and his ward as the sophisticate.

When Portuguese missionaries reached India in the 17th century, they intended to dress their converts to their own taste. De rigueur would have been knee breeches extravagantly puffed up, and a giant wheel of starched linen slung around the neck. Though newly baptized, Hindus robed simply a la Gandhi piously declined the honor.

Unlike the Hindu, whatever his mental reservations, the Hawaiian adapted himself as best he could to haole mannerisms.

Kings encased themselves unflinchingly in military uniforms, with bemedalled chests and plumed helmets.

Chiefesses submitted their well-rounded bodies to what tortures European fashions decreed. To do so throughout the 19th century was no slight matter. The crinoline, that skirt spread out over wire hoops, encased the legs. Iron corsets flattened the insides. Then, about 1880, there came into fashion the bloated false derrieres that, besides being ridiculous, made sitting on their metal springs hazardous.

HAWAIIANS WERE more puzzled than dazzled by such

quaint sidelights on the newly imported culture.

The later Kamehamehas still could strip down to a loincloth and climb coconut trees with ancestral know-how. Their ladies, shedding the obnoxious fashions, never forgot how to dance hulas, sacred or otherwise.

Had the islands just been discovered today instead of 200 years ago, it is strange to speculate that, with the same aplomb with which we preferred the savage stays and corsets, we would have introduced him to the bikini!

From an artist's point of view, the cardinal sin of the discoverers was a total blindness to the beauty of native art. When the first English navigators felt in need of firewood, they loaded aboard ship what ancient idols they could loot out of a neighboring heiau.

Presumably, Captain Cook appreciated the English art of his time — mostly court portraits, such as Reynolds' "Pinky" and Gainsborough's "Blue Boy". This fluffy art still touches us as would a shred of ancient lace or a whiff of patchuli. These paintings speak of a world long lost, fragile, exquisite, a stench of death mingling uneasily with the perfume.

NOWADAYS, IN art, the wheel of taste has turned to the full.

Weaned on the brutal statements of a Picasso and the visionary flights of a Max Ernst, art lovers do prefer to the fragile charm of the

"Blue Boy" the so-called barbaric strength of a Hawaiian carved log.

Adzed planks, poi boards, canoe bailers, whalebone necklaces, feather cloaks, hold for us today an unabated vitality.

Great art is much more than mere decoration. Ancient Hawaiian sculptures are not only the interlocking rhythmical shapes that undoubtedly raise them to the status of art. Neither are they only surrealist images, even though they too look like nothing ever seen on earth.

Today, we have lost the key to the ampler and deeper meanings that, in pre-discovery times, were clear to priests and faithfuls alike.

By location, Hawaiians were unusually conscious of the superhuman strength of natural forces, framed as they were between the fires of Pele and the depths of the ocean. It would have been disrespectful to represent the gods in the image of man, all in all only a puny part of creation.

Much of the hidden meaning, now lost, could have been saved for us, had the discoverers and the civilizers possessed even a tiny dose of humility.



"Firewood?"



"The Stench of Death . . ."

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May those who work towards such a worthwhile goal not forget, as they praise the discoverer, to reappraise the role of the discoverees. After all, men of this race we now know as Hawaiian did also discover the Sandwich Islands, and that a thousand years before Captain Cook, and with such meager means at hand that heroism of a superior kind alone made the deed possible.

We shall never come across an American Indian version of the conquest of North America by this Johnny-come-late, the white man. Unlike Indians, Hawaiians did manage to put down, soon after the event, their own version of the discovery. As conquests go, this one was not an unusually bloody one even though Captain Cook, had he been allowed a last say, would have worded it differently.

When Europeans sally forth bent on civilizing, it is with an unshakable faith that they alone are in the right. Flashbacks into past episodes make this a doubtful fact at best. Fashions change and, at times, in History, it is the European that may figure as the savage, and his ward as the sophisticate.

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Had the islands been discovered today instead of two hundred years ago, it is strange to speculate that, with the same aplomb with which we proferred to the savage stays and corsets, we would have introduced him to the bikini!

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