'Auhea 'o Kumukahi?
Aia i Hau'ula, ua noho ia, puni ana o ke kū'i.

Where is Kumukahi?
He is at Hau'ula, He has settled down, enwrapped by a statue.
— From The Legend of Halemano.

Pre-contact Hawaiian art has long been recognized as one of the finest in the Pacific and indeed the world. Hawaiian art is particularly valuable today because the artist working with his material provides a concentrated image of the Hawaiian working with his environment.

Most human beings have developed two types of culture or approaches to living. In the one, we impose ourselves on our surroundings, laying down roads, flattening mountains, erecting monuments. In the second, we move within nature, drawing on its forces without disturbing them.

Cultures of the first type have been studied more thoroughly. Their remains make them more accessible, and we Westerners recognize in them kindred aspirations, in fact, early stages of ourselves.

But there is a growing interest in cultures of the second type, especially as we become more conscious of environmental problems. We begin to feel the need to study the attitudes and techniques by which whole populations were able to support themselves on lands which they left virtually intact. Art is perhaps the deepest expression of an attitude toward the world.

Pre-contact Hawaiian art is valuable, not only in itself, but because we are aided in understanding it by Hawaiian literature, Western reports of early Hawaiian life, and the traditions and life-styles of contemporary Hawaiians. The unusually complete reconstruction possible can help us in our interpretations of cultures which have left fewer remains.

Chants of Cosmic Origin

Hawaiians were close observers of their environment. Their extensive vocabulary reveals their attention to minute details of plants, bodies, weather, light, and so on. Winds and rains were given names and their characteristics carefully noted. Similarity of form was one criterion by which objects were grouped and interrelated. Composed around 1700, the Kumulipo chant of the origin of the universe arranged natural scientific traditions in a sequential development of elements, plants, animals and humans, whose history was continued into the time of the composer.

This close observation was naturally practical. Hawaiians were and continue to be expert users of their environment. Hawaiian medicine, for instance, was superior to Western at the time of first contact and for years afterward.

But utility in Hawaiian thinking was inseparable from beauty. The octopus lure worked because it was attractive. A rock was sacred because of its power to elicit a response from the person who viewed it. The Hawaiian interpreted his deep esthetic response to his environment as the result of a power inherent in it, a power as important as the forces of winds and waves.

Emotions and reactions were therefore not unconnected to thought. Just as similarity of form was considered a revelation of affinities between objects, so feelings and responses were to be researched as indications of the cosmic order. Such responses were formulated into names, epithets, and sayings and then taught and passed down in the oral tradition as carefully as methods of farming and fishing.

At times, procedures and ceremonies were established to trigger the traditional reaction. The pilgrim to the narrow valley of Kaliuwa'a on Oahu's windward side would be told to cleanse his mind of all negative thoughts—all pettiness, rancor, and complaining—before entering. Then he would be led up the valley, reciting the prescribed prayers, making the prescribed offerings, and listening to each episode of the saga of the violent, local god as he passed the site where it had occurred. Finally, the pilgrim would arrive at the mountain end of the valley with its waterfall and pool. Prepared now, he would plunge in, and the shock of the ice-cold water would cleanse his mind blank.

A class of experts specializing in the choice of house and temple sites interpreted landscapes through traditional, codified principles. Standing at a temple, we can be sure that the landscape we view was meaningful. At the temple of Kū'ilioloa at Kāne'ōhi Point, Pōka'i Bay, Oahu, we seem to be at the center of a circle traced by the horizon of the
ocean on one side and the line of the mountains on the other. A near ridge seems to push the peninsula out against the waves which crash against it. Was the site chosen because it made visible the Hawaiian concept of a unified cosmos of balanced forces?

Clearly, the Western term “art” and the ideas associated with it can be used only with great caution in discussing Hawaiian culture. The Hawaiian lived in a universe he found beautiful and meaningful. The many sectors of his culture were designed to extend and deepen his appreciation of that universe and throwaways, as some could be in Samoan culture. Fishhooks and carrying sticks were sculpted and polished with the greatest care and passed down as heirlooms. Even leaves for temporary plates were gathered with religious ceremony and disposed of with thanks.

Because the environment was appreciated, it was disturbed as little as possible. The snarer was careful not to injure the bird as he caught it, plucked its few colored feathers, and then released it into its forest home. The builders of a house or temple were careful to enable him to live more fully his course and portion within it. The serious life was ka 'imi loa, the great search.

**Unobtrusiveness Expressed**

Because every dimension of life was involved, none was considered insignificant or unesthetic. Tools were not merely utilitarian not to displace or destroy the elements of a site which made it appropriate.

Because natural objects have an inherent beauty and power, the expert needed only to recognize them and do that minimal working and arranging which would render them useful and perceptible to all. The shell needed only as much polishing as would reveal its shine. The yellow feathers needed only the faintest scattering of red to release their full glow. Calabashes were rubbed and oiled until the grain of the wood itself became the surface decoration. A little chipping, and the
shark shape of a rock was even clearer. The artist could even let natural forces do most of the work. He bound twine around the gourd when it was young and let it grow into the desired shape. He cut away sections of the bark and let the sun print the pattern.

The humility of the artist before his material was that of the Hawaiian within his world. When he portrayed himself in petroglyphs, he chose sites and scales which expressed his unobtrusiveness: rocks hidden in the forest or covered by the ocean at high tide. Natural furrows and depressions were incorporated into the image as if they had prefigured it. When the image needed to be used, perhaps in telling the story of the forebear depicted, it could be daubed with moist red earth which the rain would later wash away.

The attitude of the Hawaiian artist enabled him to search deeply into the qualities of his materials. The kapa maker handled the fibers of her bark cloth so suavely that she achieved an unparalleled gauziness and transparency.

Concentrations of Power Gleaming in the Firelight

Indeed, the Hawaiian artist reached a peak of sensitivity to the effect of his own actions on his material. He saw how the stone adze compressed the grain of the wood as it struck, pounding as well as cutting. He then added to this effect by rubbing and polishing until he created images of wood made so dense that they seem as much pressed and molded as carved. Unwrapped and gleaming in the firelight, the images seem concentra-

Kukailimoku war god images wrought of wood, feathers, wicker and dogs’ teeth; from the collection of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum.
featherwork. Throughout Polynesia, feathers have been used and treasured, and religious speculations have been formulated about man's relationship to birds and the firmament. Yet Hawaiian featherwork is unrivaled for range, quantity, and esthetic achievement.

From the earlier, very limited use of small tufts of feathers, the artist had to envision the possibility of large objects covered over their whole surfaces. Techniques of snaring had to be invented; adepts found and trained. Generations passed in the gathering of the necessary quantities of feathers for large pieces. Methods of preservation had to be developed for the treasured stores. Vines were plaited into bases, and strong, thin twine was used to attach the feathers singly or by small tufts.

The Hawaiian artists elaborated whole new forms for feather-work: large and small capes, helmets and helmet bands, of various shapes and combinations of feathers; breastplates, fans, flywhisks, standards, wands, god images, and shrines. In literature, legendary houses were described which were entirely thatched with precious yellow feathers. This restless inventiveness continued into post-contact times, when feathers were applied to skirts, hatbands, ties, toques, and dresses.

Just Before the End,
A Great Efflorescence

This same creative search is evident in the history of Hawaiian design. Their Polynesian heritage included a highly developed sense for geometric surface decoration. Early stone god images resemble Marquesan art with simplified details applied like ornaments to the surface of the statue. This geometric tradition continued in many types of art work. But beside it, Hawaiian artists developed a new esthetic in which form produced the dominant impression.

That finished form was in turn largely determined by the shape of the natural object used as material. The shape of the tree trunk was retained in the post image, just as it was in the canoe. The main emphasis then was not on working the natural object, but on choosing it. This new esthetic suggests, therefore, a deepening realization of the consequences of the view that natural objects have inherent beauty and power and that man's search is to recognize them.

In turn, this new esthetic seems to have influenced surface decoration. Certain shapes on feather capes are simple, yet unlike the traditional geometric ones. They seem to be based on natural sights which the artist simplified into silhouettes appropriate to his medium. The artist's training in the geometric tradition is indicated by the simplicity of the silhouettes, but their untraditional character suggests that he wanted to preserve something of the natural sight itself. This same procedure can be found in petroglyph figures and has a utilitarian parallel in poi pounder forms which have been reduced to the minimum functionally necessary.

Hawaiian cultural history is marked by such innovations, stages in a creative search as far reaching as any in human history and which continues in various forms among Hawaiians today. The monuments of that search have inspired artists who came to Hawaii from all over the world and provide the basis for a contemporary movement of native artists centering around the Hale Naua III led by sculptor Rocky Jensen. But the classical visual arts, attached as they were to the native technology and religion, suffered more than most aspects from the arrival of Westerners and Christianity. Hawaiian artists turned to Western forms, and much classical art was lost or destroyed.

But just before the end, there was a great efflorescence. The Hawaii Island chief, Kamehameha, was preparing to launch the campaign which would eventually unite all the islands under his rule. He gathered all the great men of his domain, organized armies, built fleets, and collected supplies. He allied himself with the powerful priesthood of the war god Kū and began to repair and extend the major temples, having them furnished with an unprecedented quantity of god images carved on a new, heavily monumental scale and in a new, marvelously intricate style. Sculpturesque, muscular bodies in the clenched fist crouch of a boxer were crowned by slab-like heads with grimacing mouths, enormous eyes, and elaborately faceted hairpieces.

Living among the great men of his exciting time, feeling within himself the last surge of classical art, the Hawaiian sculptor left us, in his image of the god, a portrait of the human being—all courage, strength, and aural shimmer—at the fearful point of the great search.