

new frescos

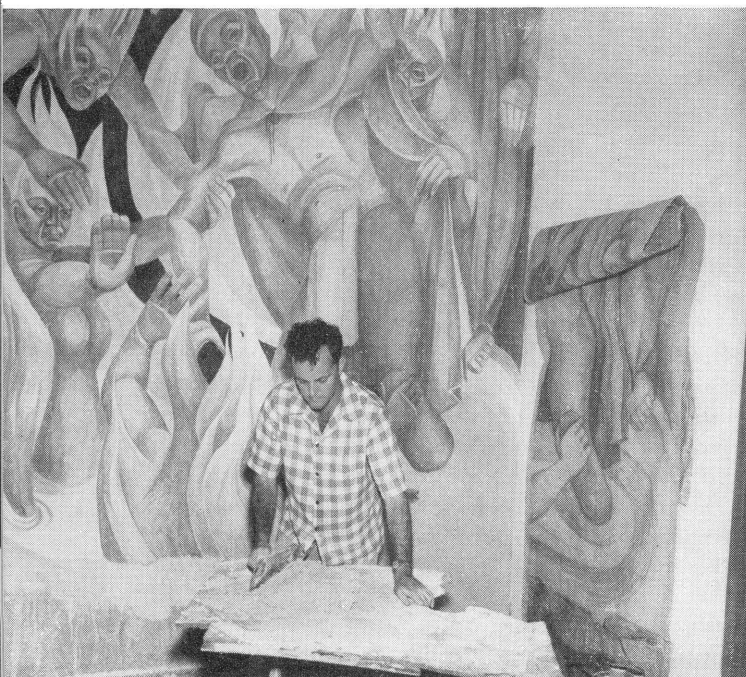
at the University of Hawaii

by JEAN CHARLOT

BEGUN in 1950, the decoration of the new chemistry building at the University of Hawaii is at last completed. Made possible originally through an agreement between Dr. Leonora N. Bilger, chairman of the Chemistry Department, and Ben Norris, chairman of the Art Department, this long-range plan combined art, science and local lore.



Above: Jean Charlot studies fresco. Below, left to right: Richard Lucier ("Fire"); David Asherman ("Water"); Hartley Gurrey, Claire Canby, Juliette May Fraser ("Air"); Sueko Kimura ("Earth").



It meant to describe in four mural panels Hawaiian myths related to the four basic elements: air, earth, water and fire. The technique decided upon was true fresco.

First in time was "Fire," painted by Richard Lucier: Pele, the fire-goddess, and her sisters, throw a human offender into the lava pit. Next came David Asherman's "Water," that shows the pig-god, kamapuaa striking with his magic wand a rock out of which gushes a bubbling stream.

With the recent unveiling of the two remaining murals, we may now appreciate the full scope of the completed

scheme. To symbolize "Earth," Sueko Kimura chose the heroic legend of Ku, transformed at his own wish into a breadfruit tree to insure the well-being of his family. Juliette May Fraser, in the largest panel of the series, elaborated on the theme "Air," with, as its central episode, the creation of man by the head-god, Kane.

An important addition to the mural treasure chest of the Islands, this newly completed fresco cycle fulfills the promise of its ambitious scheme. Beyond that, it clarifies the particular genius inherent to the craft of true fresco painting. Here, the painter, comes down from his famed

ivory retreat, chooses to work in accord with an architecture, and for all those that work in, or pass through, the building, rather than for a rarefied group of art appreciators.

This selfless intent is reflected in the very method followed to realize these large murals. For each panel, only one master painter ideated the work, drew in all details the final composition, and decided the minutiae of a color scheme. He acted, so to speak, as the architect of the work. However, when the time came to start work on the wall itself, group work was resorted to.

As a house is the sum total of many specialized efforts, so is the complex craft of true fresco. The mixing and laying of the lime mortar is better left to a master mason, in this case, Tsukasa Tanimoto, whose skill and interest in the work proved of great help. In each case, a staff of painter-friends volunteered its services to the master painter. As the work proceeded, they divided their tasks according to taste; some preferred to brush plain washes; others chose to render textures; others still would shade and model form. Though the final decision as to each line and color rests with the master painter, such team work is well suited to the didactical ends of a mural painting.

The art-lover of today is better versed in the autographic pride of experimental easel renderings. This sight of

The fresco palette is limited to lime-resistant pigments, mostly the range of earth colors. Its average value remains perforce very light, saturated as is the whole fresco with the pure white of the lime. Fresco drawing, passing through successive stages and technical manipulations, is planned to be finally incised in the wet mortar with a sharp nail. Naturally, it can hardly afford the dash and zest one relishes in free-hand sketches.

Geometry is the common ground on which architecture and mural painting meet. The mural composition should emulate the plumb of columns, and reflect the horizontality of the floors and ceilings that frame it.

The born fresco painter, however, understands that these unavoidable limitations, if they are willingly accepted, mar not in the least his originality. The panels here reproduced show clear marks of distinct personalities.

Sueko Kimura's "Ku" blends with perspective depth the charm of a balanced surface pattern. Aptly chosen for the place that the panel fills, the decorative color scheme is paired with excitingly strong textural realisations, centering on the gradation from the smoothness of flesh to the roughness of tree-bark needed to express Ku's astonishing metamorphosis.

May Fraser's "Air" evokes, as it should, the infinite upper spaces where moon and sun revolve. The color



a cluster of artist-craftsmen elbowing each other in friendly emulation, perched high on a precarious scaffold, may scandalize him as a departure from the accepted norm. The same sight may gladden the heart of men more inclined to make use of historical perspective, inasmuch as it resembles the collective zeal with which gothic communities built their cathedrals.

A difficult and demanding craft is that of true fresco. The severe limitations of the medium tend to make all frescos "look alike" to eyes jaded by the endless variety and fantasy with which oil paint may be set on canvas.

scheme is stretched between poles forcefully expressed by the two gods — idols come to life — red Ku and green Lono. May's complex mind ranges over all the rungs of this Jacob's ladder that is the Hawaiian universe, from majestic Kane, lost among the clouds, to the first man, so new that he remains the size and shape of the fistful of clay he started from. From there, the artist slides zestfully down to pigs, and owls, and fowls, and lizards, and doubtless — though I have not yet been able to locate it — down to the *uku*, the flea, among the first beings to be created, according to the Hawaiian Genesis.