

ART

By JEAN CHARLOT



Inspired by Hawaii

Currently on show at the First Unitarian Church are paintings and prints by Adele Sommerfeld, one of our better known local artists.

Having married into a family of New England missionaries, Adele Sommerfeld draws her inspiration from Hawaii. There is, of course, more than one Hawaii, even where the inspiration of the artist is concerned.

Prehistoric Hawaii, stone age Hawaii, can be as colorful a pictorial inspiration as was, to Gauguin, Tahiti. Especially if the painter, as did Gauguin, trusts to his dreams rather than to archeology.

Others have summed up

the characteristics of the Hawaiian race in an overpowering ideal of physical beauty. In antiquity, Greek sculptors had done just this for their own folks. No living Greek ever looked like a Greek statue.

In the same way, a Hawaiian type may be sought and found that embodies better than any one individual the characteristics of the race.

Adele Sommerfeld's Hawaii is still another Hawaii. Her concern is with the spirit perhaps more than with the body. Her Hawaii is that of the early Christian missionaries.

Her models are mostly men and women of another century. Archives or family papers document their passage on earth. Art alone has the power to bring them

back to life.

Paganism and Christianity cohabitated in these early converts. Born Llagan, their bodies were raised in the nude, with sea and surf and cliffs their habitat.

When God replaced their gods, they had to learn new and stranger ways.

As a token of their baptism and renewal, converts covered themselves with foreign clothes as a visual sign of their redemption.

Oval portraits of three men

I like the oval portraits of three of these earliest Christians, John Honolii, Thomas Hopu and William Kanui.

Their very names are torn between two cultures. So are their strong bodies, paraded

in Beau Brummel attire, high starched collar, white cravate, frilled jabot, coats bottle green or brown, with flaring lapels and gold buttons.

Adele Sommerfeld is conscientiously factual. She prefers to stay in the background, the better to bring in focus her models. The documentation for these portraits must come from engravings, as the fashions date of the 1820's.

In mid-century, daguerreotypes replaced handmade portraits. Again here, the artist is content to transpose the camera work into painting without resorting to obvious distortions or fire-works of personality.

It is the sitter that she wishes to forcefully thrust before us, rather than the



Adele Sommerfeld's "William Kanui".



"Daughter of Hawaii," a linoleum cut by Adele Sommerfeld.

painter.

Her "Princess Victoria Kamamalu" is such a successful evocation. There is color, but so discreet that it suggests the shimmering monochrome of the original daguerreotype.

In early Victorian attire, the princess poses patiently for the photographer, then a very prolonged affair.

She is brown-skinned, in black evening gown and gray gloves, with only a touch of gold at the brooch that ties her scarf. Her hair is made up in the equivalent of "boucles a l'anglaise."

The ambivalence is there. Who knows what mental processes attended the transition from woven mat to anti-macassar.

Photo can inspire painters

Much has been said about photography as an art. Less is said of photography as an inspiration for the painter.

Delacroix, ca. 1850, mused aloud about the intercourse between the two arts.

Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, both based on photographs pictures now famous. And in our own country, so did Thomas Eakins, as creative a photographer as he was a painter.

Naturally, in our century of abstractions and distortions, the tie between the two arts is loosened. Adele Sommerfeld, in her frankness at acknowledging her

sources, remains an exception. The literalness found in her art is born of a selfless interest in the model. She feels she cannot better its worth by adding subjective commentaries.

In this show, two paintings of a different hue prove that this factual approach is one of free choice. One of the pictures is an outright abstraction.

The other, "Pineapple Factory," is semi-abstract with a strong overlay of geometry.

A linoleum color cut

From among the contemporary subjects I illustrate on this page "Daughter of Hawaii," a linoleum color cut. The difficult medium, unlike oil painting, forces on the artist an element of stylization.

It represents an old woman's head, with dark skin and white hair.

Her face is lined, the folds and furrows of her neck are forcefully rendered. She is dressed in a blue holoku. Head lei and shoulder lei are of feathers, red and yellow.

There is something both regal and humble in the woman's bearing. That something is best expressed by the Hawaiian "oluolu."

A similar combination of assertion and of diffidence marks Adele Sommerfeld's paintings.

Well, what's next after 'pop' art?

Jean Charlot welcomes questions on art from readers. Write to him at the Star-Bulletin, Box 3080, Honolulu, Hawaii 96802.

Q.—What do you think will be the next "ism"?

A.—Look in your own crystal ball. Your guess is as good as mine!

In the forties, when abstract expressionism was the up-to-date form of modern art, John Canaday, art critic of the New York Times, launched a one-man crusade against this exciting style.

Abstract expressionists and their admirers branded Canaday as a traitor to modern art.

His objections were not the usual ones of a reactionary. He stated that abstract expressionism had doubtless bred a few masters. He added that this style was a boon for weaklings and fakers, that it was their one chance to pretend mastery.

To put the argument in terms closer to the Bronx than to the Louvre, how are you to tell when sauerkraut goes bad?

Abstract expressionism enjoyed at that time a powerful lobby. The dealers who had launched it, the critics who had hailed it, the museum men who had bought it, all united in an anti-Canaday crusade.

Flag-waving came into the act. Abstract expressionism was said to be the one true American style. When American art was officially represented in international shows it was by abstract expressionists.

John Canaday was branded a traitor!

The curator of the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr, came mildly but firmly to Canaday's rescue. He stated that "isms" do not last forever. His own feeling was that abstract expressionism had run its course.

Coming from one of the most revered of tastemakers, this statement was a blow to the progressive

cohorts. Barr was asked to recant. Cautiously he modified his statement: abstract expressionism was not dead, only rather sick.

There is something touching in the way people, once they have acquired interests, quickly yearn for the status quo.

Originally, abstract expressionism had been launched under heroic conditions. A true revolution, be it in art or in politics, is started by a handful of famished youngsters howling in a cellar.

In this case the youngsters succeeded. They attracted men who felt they could cash in on their heroism, and cash they did.

It profited the painters. It profited the dealers. Museum curators made their reputation by boldly buying the new product.

Indeed, it would have been pleasant for many if abstract expressionism had been here to stay.

I remember a cartoon seen long ago. It is winter. It is snowing. Two children have proudly built a snowball as high as themselves. They roll it towards home. Caption: "We'll keep it in the icebox so we can play with it next summer."

Back to the crystal ball. In the course of the heated argument Alfred Barr was challenged to define what would the next "ism" be, as long as he dared to state that the present one was not immortal.

Barr knows his history of art as well as any. He is informed, cautious and reflective. His oracular pronouncement: "The next 'ism' will be figure painting of a severe kind." Alfred Barr proved to be a poor prophet. When the next 'ism' was born, it was pop art!

One consoling point in this matter of "isms" is that they are not art itself. They are no more than a projected simplified image, a label devised for purposes of classification.

True masters, breaking open the path, never know and hardly care where it is that they will emerge.