

Mea No'eau

by Kanalu Young

Introduction

This unit has been called "Art as a Reflection of the Environment" for as long as Hawaiian Studies 107 has been taught. The point of view expressed in this title is that the source for indigenous Hawaiian art is the physical environment. This is true because both raw materials and spiritual life force or, mana are gifts of this environment. This essay is about using the English word "art" when describing the mea no'eau (skillfully created works) of the Native Hawaiian people. It is hoped nā haumana (the students) will better understand these works and their meaning in the Hawaiian sense through this brief text.

When different kumu take their respective turns to teach the same course and do so several times over, the natural tendency is to modify aspects of the content, without really altering its overall purpose or objectives. Such is the case concerning the new title of this unit developed by three kumu for use in their respective versions of Hawaiian Studies 107 only. Jon Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio and Kanalu Young (UH-Mānoa) along with Pua Mendonca (Kapi'olani Community College) have taken some time to apply their collective experience teaching this unit to think critically about the meaning of the word "art" as it relates to indigenous Hawaiian culture and the mea no'eau of the Native Hawaiian people. Dr. Lilikalā Kame'eleihiwa, the author of this course, is to be commended for enabling the kind of academic flexibility it took to develop the following mana'o about this unit and the meaning reflected in this alternate title.

Is Art a Hawaiian Idea?

The key element that makes something a work of art to most Western-trained specialists is that the piece or composition has no actual function. This means whatever the object of fine art is in a physical sense, it cannot have a practical use.

With fine art, a watercolor painting or charcoal sketch of a hammer and some nails depicts, represents, or portrays what the artist sees and defines as a hammer. Most observers will either agree or not to the artist's perception as they gaze carefully at the work, but no one can actually use the painting of a hammer to drive a nail into a board. This is the very obvious difference between a hammer that has the capability to function and one represented in a work of fine art.

The point is, skillful works by indigenous Hawaiians, like the brilliantly colored, meticulously woven 'ahu'ula (feathered capes) and similar works by other Native peoples of the world have been classified as "folk art" or "craftwork" because something like an 'ahu'ula, despite possessing the "artistic" beauty of fine art to some eyes, also has a function or practical use as something a Hawaiian person of noble rank would wear. The same can be said of a ki'i (figure or image) carved from wood. As remarkably attractive or frighteningly stunning the object is, someone with a particular kind of Western training in the field of art would probably hasten to add that the ki'i also served a functional purpose as the image of an Akua (god or deity).

To summarize the main idea of this essay so far: in the minds of many Western-trained art specialists, the category of fine art does not include the appealing and skillful works of Native peoples. How, then, to understand these works and where they belong in an academic discussion such as this? There are some who would ignore the Western specialists completely and say art, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. That being the case, defining art is left to individuals -- the artists and those who view their creations. For someone of this mind, an 'ahu'ula or a ki'i is defined as a work of art, despite the fact that both of these works have an actual use.

Hana No'eau: Another Perspective

The mana'o (thought and feeling) of hana no'eau (skillfully created works) suggests an alternate possibility to the two already described. Hana no'eau is the

name of this unit and it also defines these skillfully created works as functional, but that is not all. Another quality in these Hawaiian works parallels something in Western art described best with the English word “aesthetic.” Western art has aesthetic value, meaning it is precious for itself as a piece of art without any other purpose. In the Hawaiian definition of hana no’eau, there seems to be an acceptance of the idea that one work like a kīi can possess both functional and aesthetic qualities.

Hana no’eau is a Hawaiian language phrase that expresses a Hawaiian sense of the two qualities – function and aesthetic value within a single object. This is based on an idea shared in Unit One: language is the carrier of culture. Consequently, because mea no’eau is a Hawaiian language phrase, the Hawaiian culture is carried in its meaning and through word power (Chimera, Unit 1), the concept is strengthened with each verbal and written expression. In comparison, the English term “art” does not possess these same qualities and as such, does not describe the skillfully create works as appropriately as mea no’eau does. With language as the source for the idea, Osorio, Young, and Mendonca believe that mea no’eau is a more culturally appropriate term for interpreting and appreciating the meaning in these works than “art” or “craftwork.” This passage by Lahilahi Webb written about featherwork shows how actual use and aesthetic value are both qualities that a single Hawaiian work possesses: “They were so unusual, so beautifully made, so spectacular, that they always attracted attention and interests.”¹

As an idea, mea no’eau makes it okay to think about an ‘ahu’ula having a functional purpose as a cape and also an aesthetically pleasing quality to it with no conflicts or awkward influences from the foreign word art. Nā haumana will learn about these skillfully created works through a video, excerpts from articles, an essay

¹ Lahilahi Webb, “Featherwork and Clothing” in Ancient Hawaiian Civilization, edited by E.S. Craighill Handy et al, Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co. (1965): 135.

from a journal, and through a lecture as well. Your kumu will interpret this idea further, including concepts covered in the video and the articles.

Art is a fine general category for creations by people of other cultures. Mea no'eau is seen as a equally appropriate category for a better understanding the many excellently created, skillful works of Native Hawaiians. Like our history and political views, what is aesthetic and also functional should be up to Native peoples around the world to decide for themselves.