

Hawaiian Art History

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Facts:

Hawaii is the 50th and most recent state to have joined the United States of America, having received statehood on August 21, 1959.

Hawaii is the only U.S. state located in Oceania and the only one composed entirely of islands. Honolulu is the Capital city of Hawaii. It is the only U.S. state not located in the Americas.



The eight main islands are—in order from northwest to southeast: Ni‘ihau, Kaua‘i, O‘ahu, Moloka‘i, Lāna‘i, Kaho‘olawe, Maui, and the Island of Hawai‘i. The last is the largest island in the group; it is often called the "Big Island" or "Hawai‘i Island" to avoid confusion with the state or archipelago.

Native Hawaii before and after European contact presents a unique and rich culture brimming with arts, including feather work, kapa (bark cloth), petroglyphs, wood and stone carvings, and tattoos. Meticulously crafted and invested with deep meaning, these works were never merely decorative – often they served practical, social and spiritual purposes.

Extremely valuable and once possessed solely by the alii (chiefs), a feather cape or helmet required a remarkable amount of industry to create. The kia manu (bird catchers) would have to gather an incredible number of feathers, from as many as 20,000 birds, who would be released after a few feathers were taken. Then the crafter created a unique design embedded with meaning for the chief and bound it all together on a woven foundation. Feathers were also used to fabricate kahili (feather standards) and lei.

Kapa, a fine material made by beating the wauke (paper mulberry) plant, was once the primary material for clothing and bedding. The labor-intensive process of making kapa began with growing plants for up to two years before harvesting. Beaten with a wooden mallet into papery sheets, the kapa is imprinted with symbolic designs and stained with colorful dyes.

Sculpting objects, such as wood, bone or stone, is another art form prevalent in old Hawaii. Ancient petroglyphs carved in stone can be seen around the islands, their meaning still an object of historic inquiry. Whale teeth were carved into a hook-shaped pendant for the lei niho palaoa, an ornament traditionally worn around the neck of a chief. Wood and stone were used to depict gods—many intricately carved master works can be seen at the Bishop Museum. And everyday objects, such as fishhooks, were carved out of bone.

Traditional Hawaiian tattooing involves hand-tapping a needle into the skin, a sacred process weighty with protocol to instill the wearer with spiritual power. The traditional process is experiencing a renaissance today. The designs, connected to the wearer’s genealogy and social hierarchy, are researched and determined by the tattooist.