

HAWAIIAN TREASURES AT THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

by Adrienne L. Kaeppler

Hawaiian Treasures, Nā Mea Makamae O Hawai'i, an exhibit featuring Hawaiian historic objects, photographs, and works of art, opened at the National Museum of Natural History on September 22, closing March 27, 2005. This exhibition honors Hawaiians as Native Americans and complements the September 22 opening of the National Museum of American Indian (NMAI), which does not have a collection of Hawaiian objects.

The Smithsonian Institution has been the recipient of Hawaiian materials since its inception as the National Museum of the United States in 1858. Many of these pieces came as important individual gifts, and others were collected during major exploring expeditions. The 1840 United States Exploring Expedition under Captain Charles Wilkes brought back numerous pieces of barkcloth, ornaments, stone tools, and gourd bowls. Nathaniel B. Emerson's collection for the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, held in Seattle, Washington, in 1909, accumulated musical instruments, puppets, and many items of daily life.

Hawaiian Treasures was organized in consultation with the four Royal Societies of Hawai'i—benevolent societies that focus on Hawaiians and their identity in the modern world. This short essay focuses on three important sections of the *Hawaiian Treasures* exhibit—a canoe, featherwork, and bowls.

The Queen Kapi'olani Canoe

The centerpiece of *Hawaiian Treasures* is the 19-foot Hawaiian outrigger canoe given to the Smithsonian by Queen Kapi'olani in 1887. It is the oldest documented existing Hawaiian canoe in the world and underwent extensive conservation for this exhibition.

In May, 1887, Hawaiian Queen Kapi'olani and Princess Lili'uokalani stopped in Washington, D. C. on their way to London to attend the Jubilee of Queen Victoria of England. During their visit, the Queen and Princess met with President and Mrs. Cleveland at the White House and visited the Smithsonian's National Museum of the United States. Upon her return to Hawai'i, Queen Kapi'olani gave to the National Museum: "a ca-



Kapi'olani canoe with its sail when it arrived at the Smithsonian. Photo: National Anthropological Archives.

noe similar to those in use by the Native Hawaiians many years ago." The canoe was sent via steamer ship to the Customs House in San Francisco, and arrived in Washington, via the Alaskan Commercial Company in January, 1888.

When Queen Kapi'olani sent this fishing canoe to the Smithsonian, it was already quite old. A hole at the bottom of the canoe suggests that it had hit a reef and would have been difficult to repair. The canoe has its original mat sail, but because of the sail's fragility, it is not exhibited. A wood engraving from a daguerreotype in the publication *Wide West* for 17 August 1856 illustrates a very similar canoe.

Featherwork

Feather cloaks and capes, known as *'abu'ula* (red shoulder garments), are the most spectacular of all objects of Hawaiian manufacture. Depending on length and kinds of feathers, *'abu'ula* were visual symbols of prestige and power.

'Abu'ula were composed of a backing of *olonā* fiber, made by a technique similar to making fishnets, and covered with natural colored feathers from a variety of forest birds. The designs, usually crescents and triangles, were created by tying small groups of feathers to the backing. The largest cloaks required some half-million feathers.

Traditionally, feather cloaks and capes were worn by male chiefs in sacred or dangerous situations, such as

warfare, when cloaks of losing chiefs were taken as battle prizes. The feather cloak of Kekuaokalani on exhibit was worn in the 1819 battle between Liholiho (Kamehameha II) and Kekuaokalani, the keeper of the war god Kūkā'īlimoku. Kekuaokalani was killed in this battle and his cloak was taken as a battle prize by Kamehameha II. The cloak was given to Commodore John H. Aulick, of the US Navy, in 1841 by Kamehameha III. The cloak has been in the Smithsonian since 1869, given by Commodore Aulick's descendants.

During the 19th century, chiefs wore feathered cloaks and capes on ceremonial occasions and for events such as funerals of other chiefs and as visual expressions of status and prestige. Cloaks and capes were made for specific individuals and it is unlikely that they would be worn by others because of the prohibition against wearing clothing that had touched the body of someone else, especially the body of a high chief. Individuals who did not respect clothing prohibitions were considered careless and were vulnerable to sorcery. Today, most featherwork is in museums for safekeeping of these treasures that are associated with Hawaiian identity and the renaissance of Hawaiian art.

King Kalākaua, Bowls, and Hale Nauā Society

David Kalākaua, of the Keawe-a-Heulu chiefly line, was elected King of Hawai'i in 1874 and quickly took on the trappings of a European monarch. 'Iolani Palace was built in Honolulu and a belated coronation, with crowns ordered from England, was held in 1883.

Following the lead of an earlier genealogical society called "Hale Nauā," Kalākaua combined earlier Hawaiian traditions with rituals derived from the Masonic Order, of which he was a member, in an effort to revitalize Hawaiian society. On ritual occasions young men wore replicas of traditional feather capes and members of the Hale Nauā kept a series of symbolic objects—including small pieces of barkcloth, a hook ornament, and a ball of twine—in specially made covered wooden bowls.

King Kalākaua was particularly interested in bowls and amassed a large collection. On his fiftieth birthday in 1886, King Kalākaua received more than 200 bowls from his admirers. These were marked with a special monogram of a crown and a forward and backward K.



Photo: Donald Huribert

Kekuaokalani's cloak. The exhibit also includes five feather capes.

Two of these bowls in *Hawaiian Treasures* were passed in the Prince David Kawanānakoā line to Princess Abigail W. Kawānānakoā, who left them to the Smithsonian in her will in 1947.

Many of the exhibition objects are no longer in daily use and present-day Hawaiians marvel over the sophisticated tools and techniques employed in their fabrication. Using stone tools, animal skin, feathers, and teeth, wood and fibers from various plants, Hawaiians made intricate wood and stone sculptures, clothing, ornaments, musical instruments, bowls, and tools. Each object is treasured because of its beauty as well as its individual history and the genealogy of individuals who once owned and used it. The Smithsonian's Hawaiian objects have become treasures and are an invaluable resource for those interested in traditional knowledge and material culture. Through these treasures Hawaiians feel they are "reconnecting with their ancestors" and that Hawaiian cultural and ethnic identity are linked with museum collections.

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Photo: Donald Huribert

Covered bowl that belonged to King Kalākaua