
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Glenn Wharton. *The Painted King: Art, Activism, and Authenticity in Hawai'i*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. Pp. 216. ISBN 978-0-8248-3612-2. US\$19.00 paperback.

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To Paint or Not to Paint, a Community's Question!

THE PAINTED KING: ART, ACTIVISM, AND AUTHENTICITY IN HAWAII is an interesting book that offers many things to many people. To the general reader, it provides an overview of Hawaiian history as well as a sense of the complexity of the current cultural/ethnic identities found there. For those in the conservation, area it provides a unique case study and also suggests a new way of working. For the Pacific scholar, the various and nuanced problems associated with community involvement is played out in a fascinating story. It is an excellent and easy read that should both inspire and teach its audience not only about Hawai'i, or conservation or community, but also of how these entities can interact to attain their mutual goals. It is the story of a statue and a community and the relationship between the two.

This sculpture was startling in appearance. Far from the influence of professional art circles, local residents had painted the figure in bright colors. Kamehameha's skin was brown, his hair black, and his cloak yellow. He had white toenails and penetrating black eyes with small white brush strokes for highlights. I had never seen a sculpture like this. It looked more like a piece of folk art than a nineteenth-century heroic monument . . . (6–7).

These words describe Glenn Wharton's first impressions of the *King Kamehameha I* statue in Kohala, Hawai'i. He had been sent to assess the condition of the statue and had been told that there was some "paint on the work (3). He questioned:

Why would anyone completely paint a bronze sculpture like this? . . . I wanted to remove the paint and return it to its nineteenth century appearance. After all, my directive from Honolulu was to do just that: to "research the original appearance and recommend methods for removing the paint. My report would list steps for 'restoring' the artists [sic] initial coatings . . ." (3).

These first thoughts/impressions provide the beginnings of a compelling story/process, of a conservator creating a community project that, in essence, was contrary to both his "brief" and all that he "knew" about conservation. This was the beginning of a project/relationship that would not only lead Wharton to question his process of working, but also bring into question numerous issues, such as heritage management, identity, indigenous ways of knowing, representation, authenticity, creating histories, and perhaps most important being "local".

Shortly after his first encounter with *King Kamehameha I*, Wharton crossed the street and entered a café where another baffling encounter took place:

"What were you doing across the street on the ladder?"

"I'm a sculpture conservator, and I've been contracted to assess the condition of the sculpture."

"Who contracted you?"

"The city of Honolulu."

"What for?"

"Well, the state may want to restore it."

"Whatever you do, don't remove the paint!"

"Why?"

"Because here in town we like him painted...the paint helps us relate to him as a human being..."

"Do most people in the community feel this way?"

"Everyone". (6).

Wharton was now facing a unique and confusing statue complicated by the assertion that “everyone” liked it painted. How would he proceed? This book not only tells us this story but also teases out the nuances and complexities of the process—one that took five years to complete. What became apparent to Wharton immediately was that this would have to be a community project. For those of us who “work in the Pacific” the importance of community—of seeking both permission and guidance from the elders—is now a “given,” but this was not always the case. Frequently the insider/outsider dichotomy would surface with the outsider/scholar’s knowledge taking precedent. Often the community was ignored. Clearly for Wharton, this would be a first, and as such, this is a story of accomplishment because the community was actively involved. Wharton comments:

The sculpture of King Kamehameha is arguably the strongest reminder of North Kohala’s fused and layered identity. With some knowledge of the community and who counts in North Kohala, I had a better understanding of the diverse voices and concerns as they emerged in the public process of deciding how the sculpture should look (75).

The relationship between Wharton and the Kohala community, with its myriad nuances and complications, is the foundation of this book (and project). What is fascinating is how Wharton interweaves a complexity of knowledges as the project itself brings the community together. He comments:

Agendas from inside and outside the community combined with other spiritual, economic, political, and social forces. There isn’t just one way to know or use the sculpture, there are many, and they change over time (168).

These changes are detailed as we move between knowledge gathered through archival research, reading the works of Hawaiian scholars and learning from the local community. We are provided with the social history of the statue, why it was commissioned and the surprising aspect that it was both lost at sea, then found. We are also given a brief overview of the Kalakaua period and his attempts to position Hawai‘i as a global power by combining traditional and Western ideologies. It also demonstrates how Kalakaua desired to associate himself with Kamehameha and assert his position a King of Hawai‘i. We also learn of the differing factions of Kalakaua’s government and the impending changes that his opposition would eventually enforce. The fact that this statue was created during this

turbulent time gives it historical importance. In addition to this, we also learn how the North Kohala community has reinterpreted this history and made it theirs; painting the statue reinforces this history. The community has embraced the statue in a very different time and place. It is the relationship between these two histories, as well as the different knowledge bases that various community members assert, that makes this story remarkable.

Building relationships is never easy, especially when people are leery of “outsiders”. Wharton was “warned”, yet what did that mean? What did being Hawaiian mean in this context? Did the descendants of Kamehameha have the “right” to assert their position in an ever-changing social hierarchy? For some, identity was associated with genealogy, for others the statue itself. These realities reflect how people interpret the past as well as the present. In addition to issues of identity, cultural politics also plays a role in this evolving story. Time (history) changes attitudes. We learn that some Hawaiian activists dismissed this statue, because the arm gesture was offensive and the sandals inauthentic. Even with the knowledge that Kalakaua was assimilating Hawaiian and Western forms of political representation, this did not give the statue historic credence. Others used that same knowledge to reiterate that the West had a tradition of painting sculpture, thereby justifying the current “tradition” of painting the statue. These arguments become fluid: no right or wrong; no black or white. Yet what does come through is the importance of this statue to the community of North Kohala.

This is evidenced by Wharton’s first encounter with Kealoha Sugiyama who had repainted the sculpture in 1996 (after Wharton’s first visit). Sugiyama explains:

I stood in front of the Kamehameha statue and dialogued with it that I was going to paint it, and lo and behold I was across the street at the Bond Library. I borrowed a few books about Kamehameha and the next day I stood in front of Kamehameha again. I looked at one book about cloaks and feathers, and I saw a picture of the Liloa Sash and to my astonishment, it was red with gold trimming. I showed Kamehameha this regal sash and I said is this what you wanted me to know? And I wasn’t sent back to the library so I knew that if I was going to paint the statue, Kamehameha wanted me to paint the Liloa Sash in the right color. I took the picture to a group of kahuna [priests, spiritual leaders] at the Pu’ukoholoa Heiau and I shared my story, and they agreed that It would be pono [proper procedure, righteous] to paint it red (9).

What became apparent to Wharton was that the issue was not getting history right or articulating the sculptor's original intent but "finding value in an active process of exploring versions of the past and analysing the power dynamics in deciding what the past should look like" (174).

To Paint or Not to Paint

Unlike a detective story, we know how this one ended. The statue was both conserved and painted. Yet, in this process, a community came together. Pro-paint arguments repeatedly stressed preserving local ways. "Growing up in Kohala, I always remember it being painted. We have so many changes in Kohala. The statue should remain the same!" "The local art and tradition of painting the statue is part of our pride" (117).

A final decision was made symbolically; by Kupuna Marie Solomon and voted on by the community. Solomon stated:

I think he (the sculpture) should be painted yellow and red, the symbols of the royalty. Why be like the Honolulu and Hilo statues? Kohala is special. We should paint him, not use gold, that's a haole thing. The statue will be as a teacher. It will have information, and anyone walking up there will know (135).

To get to this point however, archives were searched, conversations were held, and debates raged. For instance, they discovered that the sculpture was originally gilded. This fit perfectly with Kalakaua's efforts "to celebrate a Hawaiian conversion to European values, while retaining sanitized versions of both cultural traditions" (31). Wharton noted; "If I made it attractive to outsiders, it would enhance its value as a tourist commodity. Gilding it would further its royal European associations" (10). Yet this was contrary to the community's desires; they instead embraced the fact that there is a Western tradition of painting sculpture (even *Augustus Caesar of Prima Porta*, the work *Kamehameha* was "modeled" after, was painted). Clearly authenticity was not the issue. The history of heroic sculpture is political—it asserts dominance and power. The fact that the statue had been painted, although that was not the intent of the artist or those who commissioned it, reinforced the community's decision.

Authenticity though is a questionable construct; we learn that it was not an issue at the time of the works creation either. Wharton tells us of the process used to create the work—the compilation of body types.

As various forms of knowledge came to the table, they served to reinforce, complement, and question each other. The result was a dynamic process of

investigation and intervention, with each modality looping back upon the other. Both cultural and material knowledge affected the direction of the research and the material outcome of how the sculpture ended up being treated (176).

“This information, buried in the state archives, could have critical implications for how local residents understand their sculpture” (128).

One of the issues that this book highlighted to me was how different kinds of knowledge are given credence. As a master’s student at the University of Hawai’i I learned information that was contradictory to the oral traditions that my father had passed to me. It took quite some time for me to realize that there are different truths, each holding credence to the one believing in them. What becomes interesting is whose truth “we” prioritize, and why? Here, the descendants of Kamehameha were frequently afforded a particular status based on genealogy, not facts, not conservation knowledge and skills, but because they were related to the man that was being honored. As such, issues of identity also come into play and question what it means to self-identify as Hawaiian, the intricacies of mixed heritages and which identity one asserts and when. Kohala exemplifies the importance of being local and in response this project provided an opportunity to explore public and private memory about the sculpture and Kamehameha. It helped enrich readings of the collective past, not just by getting the past “right” for aesthetic purposes, but also by revealing opposing versions of the past and deciding what to communicate to future generations (166–67).

The community’s voices, in their entirety, were given the chance to be heard, and all of its different cultural heritages took precedent over the practice of conservation, scientific knowledge, and research.

Despite the combination of scientific and cultural research, we haven’t developed ways to embrace communities around these objects—especially people who bring new meanings to them . . . (10–11).

The result is a book that addresses many ideas and beliefs concerning what traditions communities put into place and what it is to be “local”. It also addressed how one learns history, customary practices and ideals, and respect for elders as well as the importance of community—being local—and assertions of identity even when these identities have changed. The book integrates years of conversations, archival research, scientific knowledge, cultural knowledge, and Wharton’s ability to develop relationships and inspire a community. There is not one methodology employed but a diversity of

human interactions that are revealed. In this process, Hawaiian history is painted with a broad brush, whereas conservation issues are detailed with scientific accuracy, and certain events/interactions are recounted repeatedly. To use these facts to be critical of a project and book that accomplished so much would be petty and contrary to the pride gained by and throughout this process. The GoHawaii website exclaims:

In front of the North Kohala Civic Center stands the original King Kamehameha I Statue, erected not far from where Hawai'i's greatest king was born

Today, iconic statues honor King Kamehameha's memory, the most famous King Kamehameha Statue stands across the street from Iolani Palace on Oahu. However, the story of the Kapaau statue has a history that is far more intriguing (see <http://www.gohawaii.com/big-island/regions-neighborhoods/north-kohala/kamehameha-statue-kapaau>).

Clearly the "restored" sculpture of *Kamehameha I* honors not only Kamehameha and Hawaiian history but also the community of North Kohala.