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A NEW VISION:
REINTERPRETING
HAWAIIAN HALL

BY MELANIE IDE

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THE MUSEUM: Bishop Museum, founded in 1889, continues its mission today—to study, preserve, and tell the stories of the cultural and natural history of Hawai'i and the Pacific. It is the largest museum in Hawai'i, the premier institution of its type in the Pacific, and ranks among the top tier of natural history and cultural history museums in the United States.

Unique, however, among its institutional peers, and perhaps easily overlooked, is Bishop Museum's stated primary purpose of serving and representing the interests of Native Hawaiians—a group of people whose stories have never been told from their own perspective in a museum context, illustrated by the exemplary materials of their cultural heritage.

The reopening of Hawaiian Hall in 2009 marks 120 years since the founding of Bishop Museum. Over the years it has served generations of the public, but today's children will find a different museum than that of their parents and grandparents, and one that may provide an important link to their past and their future.

While many museums are struggling to find their voice and relevance as they reinvent themselves and look forward, this museum is presenting to its community an extraordinary gift that will fulfill a role that has been sorely missing in Hawai'i. Whether you are a native, local, or tourist, Bishop Museum's Hawaiian Hall will be a place to gain new insights into a culture that has, more often than not, been misrepresented in popular culture, commercialized to a broad audience, and sometimes taken for granted by those who are closest to it. Hawaiian Hall makes the knowledge, wisdom, and materials of the past accessible to all, and provides a platform for sharing the culture's rich and ongoing practices of today.

THE PROJECT: Museums often traverse paths of competing interests and find themselves providing multiple and changing functions. But the one constant among all museums is that they have been created from peoples' passions—whether scouring the earth for ancient adzes, caring for delicate artifacts, telling stories, or making a perfect mount. Channeling these passions toward a shared

Opposite: Contemporary acrylic art piece by Imaikalani Kalahela.

Below: An array of mea kaula, Hawaiian weapons, some enhanced with shark teeth and animal bone.



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Top: The original museum library on the third floor of Hawaiian Hall, pre-1915. [Source: Bishop Museum Archives]

Bottom: Hawaiian Hall interior, ca. 1935. [Source: Bishop Museum Archives]

mission is what ultimately allowed a small army of people to accomplish the renewal of Bishop Museum's Hawaiian Hall.

In early 2005, our firm was hired by the museum to serve as planners and designers for the project. We functioned as content development facilitators, helping to bring consensus around various levels of decision-making, and as designers to compose the interpretive experience of Hawaiian Hall.

Together with a core, dedicated group of museum staff, we began the process of re-conceptualizing Hawaiian Hall. This group would represent the diversity of the museum and in a sense also represented a microcosm of Hawai'i's community. The core team would also reach out to a broader community of scholars, practitioners, and artists who gave their guidance to the project. Developing an exhibition of this sort required an intensity of focus and a high level of commitment, but more than anything, a mutual respect and trust between all participants of the project, which grew over time.

The first and foremost artifact of the exhibit would be the hall itself, a Victorian-era, restored jewel of a building originally built to honor Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop, the last descendant of the royal Kamehameha family. The

striking contrast between the building's architecture—a symbol of Western culture and authority, and the contents it would hold—powerful yet intimate material belonging to the Hawaiian culture, created a potent mixture, one full of emotion. It challenged us with designing an exhibition that would match the nobility of the space and allow its contents the ability to live comfortably in its surroundings.

Given the museum's exceptional collections, diverse interests, and vibrant community, we appreciated both the opportunities as well as the complexities that would be presented by the project. The act of fully reinterpreting the most treasured collections of a past nation and current culture's collective heritage meant rendering a monumental story of origins, beliefs, life, beauty, trials, perseverance, change, and discovery—by its nature, a story full of interpretive pitfalls and challenges.

THE PROCESS: We started our engagement with a full immersion in the history and culture of Hawai'i, and the museum's history and collections. A key part of our process and vital to the project was community participation. Our initial consultations with community advisors and content specialists gave us a broad perspective on the project and the story we would be telling. We heard about Polynesian cosmogonies, Hawaiian values, ancient beliefs, cultural



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*Lau hala (pandanus leaf)
mat used for the interior
of the Hale Pili.*

practices, scientific research, and groundbreaking educational programs. What we learned from these meetings was invaluable to our understanding of the project's ethos, and helped us crystallize its mission and goals.

Drawing from these sessions and through further development, a conceptual framework for Hawaiian Hall was established. It identified three "realms" that would

provide an organizational structure for the content of the hall, consistent with the hall's physical structure. On the first floor would be Kai Ākea, the wide expanse of the sea where life originated, inhabited by both gods and man; on the second floor Wao Kānaka, the realm of man and daily life; and on the third floor Wao Lani, the realm of spirits and the ali'i who are considered descendents of the gods.

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Left: Lei (necklace) of faceted, polished kukui nuts.

Right: 'Ahu 'ula (feather cloaks).

Opposite: (left) Nawa pōhaku or stone hand clubs; (right) Kapa or bark cloth viewed through a display case window.

Hawaiian concepts, values, and themes began to emerge that would eventually be embedded in the project: lua, the duality of all things—representing light and dark, openness and secrecy, joy and sorrow; kini akua—the multitude of deities; mana—recognizing and respecting the power that resides among and around us; 'onipa'a—to hold steadfast; kuleana, to have responsibility; and pono—to make things right.

Once the major themes, key program elements, and narrative structures were identified, and collections resources preliminarily explored, we could develop a concept design and begin to describe a visitor's experience of Hawaiian Hall. To assure a solid foundation for moving forward, we brought this work to the museum's content

and community advisors for review, where it found broad acceptance.

For the better part of the next two years, the primary iterative effort that would occupy our project team was to render the images and develop the content that would bring to life the concept for the hall. Collections staff, content developers, researchers, archivists, and designers delved into the wealth of material—both tangible and intangible—to identify and assemble the topics and stories, artifacts, and images around which we would shape rich and layered exhibits. During this period of development and collaboration, both internal and external presentations and reviews were essential to gain further insight, expertise, and maintain perspective.

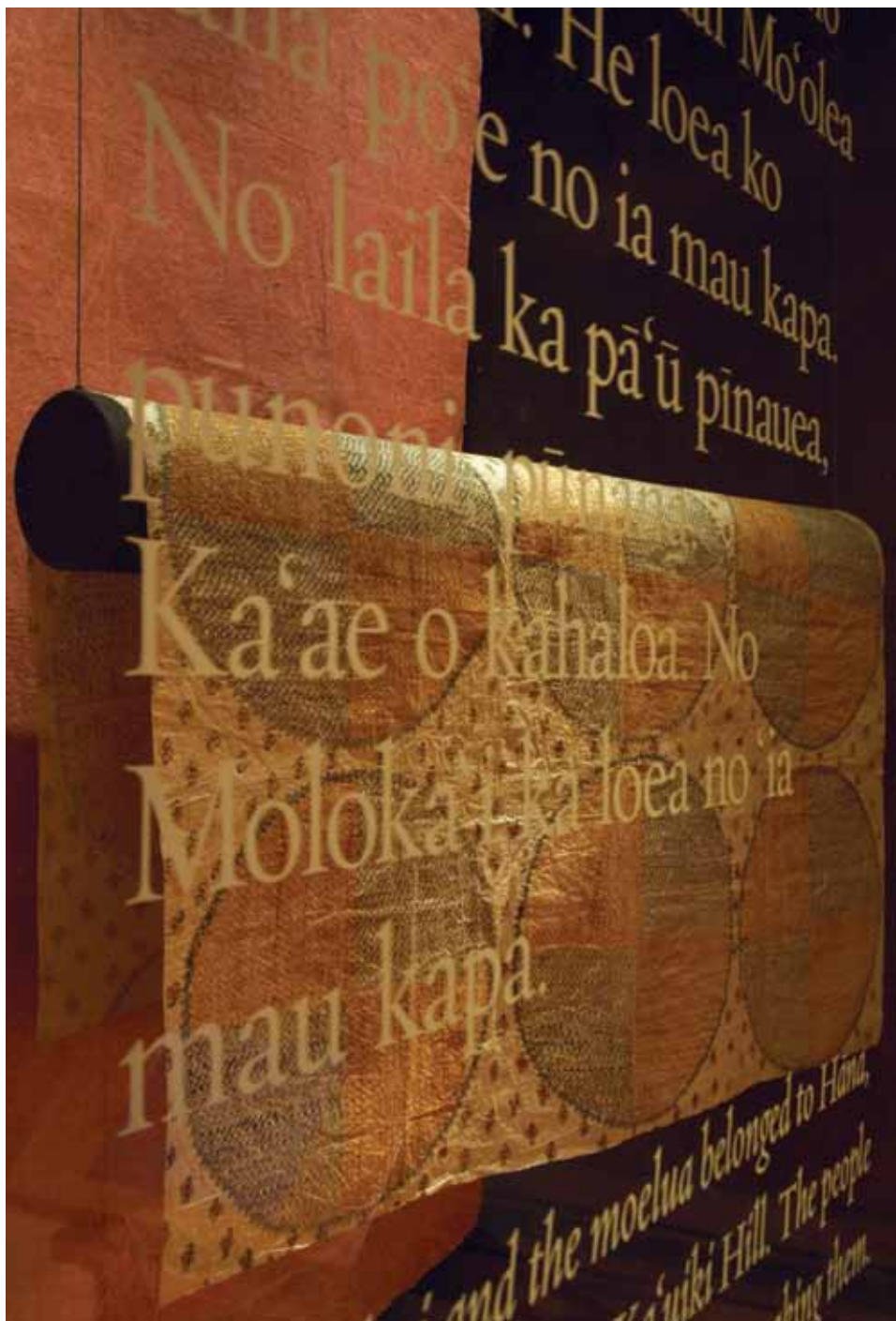
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Over time, some key decisions were made: locating the ki'i (god) images in the center of the hall; restoring the hale (traditional house); respecting the existing location of the heiau (temple model); and suspending kino lau (animal manifestations of gods) in the hall to join the sperm whale.

CONCLUSION: In all, more than 1,000 artifacts were selected for display, from ki'i of power and significance to treasures of delicate kapa (cloth); from imposing shark tooth weaponry to spectacular featherwork—more than the museum has ever been able to show before. The conservation, preparation, mounting, and final positioning of these artifacts was handled with care and sensitivity by museum staff, a group of people having a deep knowledge of and relationship to the material being put on display.

In addition, over 700 contemporary and historic images and documents from the museum's archives have been incorporated into environmental graphics, interpretive rails and cases; newly commissioned work by Native Hawaiian artists and cultural practitioners bring forward the stories and traditions of the past in the visual language of our time; timeless photography captures the spirit of land and place; specimen mounts and reconstructions bring nature into Hawaiian Hall's realms; and multiple media pieces including soundscapes of nature and mele (chants) are integrated into the hall.

The reality of native voices occupying and fully permeating Hawaiian Hall marks a new era for the museum and its community. Our hopes as both participants and observers in the process of Hawaiian Hall's remaking is that new eyes will be opened, dialogue will be spurred, debates will be informed, and people of all cultures will be inspired by their visit. What people gain from this experience will be in direct proportion to what they bring with them—as their knowledge increases, the higher their understanding will be of the place and its kaona (hidden meanings).



We leave the project enriched by the history and culture of the people of Hawai'i, and thankful for the wonderful opportunity of working with the staff and friends of Bishop Museum. We will always remember that the Hawaiian word for learning and teaching is the same, a'o, and that aloha means much more than hello and goodbye.