Art deco examples distort Hawaiian culture, history

By David A.M. Goldberg
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"Art Deco Hawai'i" is a groundbreaking show that should be seen by anyone who claims to have an interest or stake in what it means to live in 21st-century Hawaii. From the deluded cultural apologist who wonders why we can't "all just get along" to the most vehement advocate for "ejecting all the settlers," there is something for everyone.

Between these extreme reactions are opportunities for varying intensities of outrage, admiration, idealization and nostalgia. But everyone should come away from this astounding array of diverse works having recognized one underlying truth: Each piece contributed to a powerful, profound and ongoing misrepresentation of Native Hawaiian culture. Curator Theresa Papanikolas has given us a context that helps us recognize this in a way that is neither arbitrary nor overly academic.

The show gathers (and in some cases, reunites) exemplary works that, viewed together, provide a much more coherent overview of their commonalities. First, they are all examples of art deco, an international, European-born style of architecture, design and graphic arts. Second, most works were commissioned by corporations such as Matson and Dole, which were either trying to sell the islands' products, or the islands themselves as product. Thus, through art deco's popularity and accessibility, Hawaii's modern commercial mythology was created, promoted and distributed globally.

The "native body" is on display everywhere, stylized, flattened and layered in art deco's signature fusion of Egyptian-inspired lines, bold geometry and modern industrial minimalism. Repeating rows of dancers in clinging dresses are depicted in Eugene Savage's paintings. Arman Tateos Manookian's boys and girls present tropical Gardens of Eden. Marguerite Blasingame's interpretations of "ancient Hawaiian rituals" appear in rich bas relief sculptures, and the female subjects of Madge Tennent and Cornelia MacIntyre Foley lounge in timeless repose, limbs entwined with furniture, land, flowers and each other.

When the "noble savage" isn't bathing, laboring, dancing, or presiding over a royal entourage, a fetishization of Hawaii's vegetation takes over. Artists such as Genevieve
Springston, Agnes Lawrence Pelton, Shirley Russell and Lloyd Sexton all contribute to this effort, clearly impressed by non-native flora that has nevertheless come to represent Hawaii. Then there are the skies, seascapes and mountain ranges of the islands themselves, always in the background to finalize the exotic context of the people and the plants, sometimes with a ship or airplane in the distance, connecting the allure of primitivism with modern luxury.

In isolation, many of these works are just "images of Hawaii life," admiring tributes at best, to be appreciated on the grounds of their artistic merit. But the bulk of these images were produced for commercial consumption, starting as paintings and illustrations but ending up on the covers of magazines, brochures, menus and posters.

The tourist-directed image of Hawaii has little to do with actual day-to-day life here, and if the local person can recognize such facts, he or she should be able to empathize with the considerably more complex reactions someone from the Hawaiian community might have.

There can be no greater example of the erasure of actual Hawaiian history in favor of a sponsored message than celebrated painter Eugene Savage's "Hawaii's Decisive Hour," which depicts the 1898 annexation of the islands as nothing short of a celebration featuring rippling flags, lei-draped Hawaiian women, liberated doves and dozens of onlookers with their hands raised in adulation. Queen Lili'uokalani sits passively while the deal is made.

Savage's works, which include an absurd representation of Kamehameha I's festive first encounter with Captain Cook, and several tableaux of royal celebration that are absolutely adored by an entire generation of local people, are just the most egregious examples of the commercial exploitation and distortion of Hawaiian culture. "Art Deco Hawai'i" argues and demonstrates that these and other images were not "accidentally racist," but systematically produced according to a very successful design trend that is comparable to that period of recent history when everything copied the translucent candy curves of iMac computers.

What is truly amazing about this show is that none of the observations I offer here, which in effect summarize the exhibit's detailed and incisive wall text, diminishes the quality of the work itself. That is the show's challenge: Can you separate what is technically amazing, images you may have grown up with or can get lost in for the first time, from the fact that these willful distortions, omissions, appropriations and caricatures established commercial strategies that are still in use today?

Should you?
'Art Deco Hawai'i'

>> **On exhibit:** Through Jan. 11; 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesdays to Saturdays and 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays

>> **Where:** Honolulu Museum of Art, 900 S. Beretania St.

>> **Admission:** $10; free to ages 17 and under, on the first Wednesday of each month and the third Sunday during Bank of Hawaii Family Sundays

>> **Info:** 532-8700 or honolulumuseum.org

Eugene Savage's painting "Hawaii's Decisive Hour," though admirable and innovative from a technical and aesthetic standpoint, is an example of "the commercial exploitation and distortion of Hawaiian culture," according to art critic David A.M. Goldberg. // COLLECTION MATSON

The show features an amazing collection of white women surfing.

Gene Pressler's "Surfer Girl" stands out because the model is clearly not a surfer and all of her accessories come from non-Hawaiian cultures. In one frame she appropriates lion's teeth, a grass skirt and gold bracelets. // COLLECTION MICHAEL AND LINDA HORIKAWA