



The Painted King: Art, Activism, and Authenticity in Hawaii

Glenn Wharton

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The famous statue of Kamehameha I in downtown Honolulu is one of the state's most popular landmarks. Many tourists and residents, however, are unaware that the statue is a replica; the original, cast in Paris in the 1880s and the first statue in the Islands, stands before the old courthouse in rural Kapa'au, North Kohala, the legendary birthplace of Kamehameha I. In 1996 conservator Glenn Wharton was sent by public arts administrators to assess the statue's condition, and what he found startled him: A larger-than-life brass figure painted over in brown, black, and yellow with "white toenails and fingernails and penetrating black eyes with small white brush strokes for highlights. . . . It looked more like a piece of folk art than a nineteenth-century heroic monument."

The Painted King is Wharton's account of his efforts to conserve the Kohala Kamehameha statue, but it is also the story of his journey to understand the statue's meaning for the residents of Kapa'au. He learns that the townspeople prefer the "more human" (painted) Kamehameha, regaling him with a parade, chants, and leis every Kamehameha Day (June 11). He meets a North Kohala volunteer who decides to paint the statue's sash after respectfully consulting with kahuna (Hawaiian spiritual leaders) and the statue itself. A veteran of public art conservation, Wharton had never before encountered a community that had developed such a lengthy, personal relationship with a civic monument. Going against the advice of some of his peers and ignoring warnings about "going native," Wharton decides to involve the people of Kapa'au in the conservation of their statue and soon finds himself immersed in complex political, social, and cultural considerations, including questions about representations of the Native Hawaiian past: Who should decide what is represented and how? And once a painting or sculpture exists, how should it be conserved?

The Painted King examines professional authority and community involvement while providing a highly engaging and accessible look at "activist conservation" at work, wherever it may be found.

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