

Book Review: *The Painted King: Art, Activism, and Authenticity in Hawai'i*

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Author Note

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The conservator's dilemma is the central drama of Glenn Wharton's *The Painted King: Art, Activism, and Authenticity in Hawai'i*. Grounded in professional expertise, which presumes that a valued yet deteriorating object is possessed of an identifiable nature, conservators are guided by a core value to preserve objective essence through a restoration of the creator's original expression. Success is achieved by employing the historian's commitment to contextualized facts, the scientist's technical skills of chemistry and engineering, and the subjective magic of the arts. Yet what if the object—in this case a 19th century sculpture of King Kamehameha I in the North Kohala district of the island of Hawai'i—has become so layered with local meaning that restoring the original appearance threatens to erase cultural heritage? Which values prevail, and who decides? This is the conflict Wharton works to resolve, and *The Painted King* details his efforts to balance professional ethics with the accidental activism of community purpose, illuminating a process that citizens and experts can apply to a broader range of public problems.

Wharton commenced his project in 1996, having already restored an identical sculpture situated outside a government building in Honolulu. Satisfied state officials contracted him to assess the condition of the North Kohala statue, which Wharton discovered was actually the first of the twin statues to be cast, although it was initially lost in a shipwreck and subject to extraordinary salt water damage after recovery. He encountered even more complicated challenges associated with this original sculpture: in addition to structural and surface deterioration, the eight and one-half foot bronze Kamehameha had been painted over through the years by the inhabitants of the area. Local citizens were strongly attached to the appearance of the statue as they knew it, with little interest in what the original sculptor intended. While he had previously worked in the area of public sculpture, Wharton had never encountered the layers of meaning and tradition this statue carried, literally painted on as expressions of historic and spiritual pride.

Working with local community organizers and educators, he came to understand that the sculpture—celebrating a great king who ended the tribal conflicts and united the islands under one peaceful rule—represented much more in the active life of the community. Political, economic, and religious threads were bound up in the intense feelings about the statue as a cultural centerpiece of public life. Wharton grasped the need to engage the community in some kind of public

discussion about a future for the sculpture that was resonant with its past: “I had the technical skills and capabilities to research the original materials used by *Barbedienne*, the Paris foundry that cast it, yet I was not equipped to address these concerns of the local residents.” Wharton enlisted the assistance of local non-profits and preservationist agencies, as well as civic clubs and other organizations dedicated to Hawaiian arts and heritage. Together they worked to secure outside funding sources for the work itself, since the state officials who had originally hired him were reluctant to engage the community in the actual decision about how a newly conserved sculpture would appear.

Without knowing for certain what a community based conservation project would even look like, Wharton worked to generate a public conversation about the project. “Our first task was to get people thinking about the sculpture in a new way—not just as a spiritual, educational, political, and economic object, but as a conservation object.” Initially, the strategy aimed to engage older residents by involving young people in projects that “would make adults talk about the sculpture.” Students of all ages contributed a variety of related presentations that were exhibited in public spaces such as hospitals and government buildings: murals, timelines, copies of known works of art featuring the sculpture, music and theater performances, and scores of school field trips captured and expressed the imagination of community youth. The project also utilized print and broadcast media to legitimize the goals of public art and to draw attention to “the project’s participatory aspects.” As one would expect, members of the conservation committee addressed local groups during their regularly scheduled meetings, but the strategy also made effective use of the traditional “coconut wireless” network—an informally generated yet essential conduit of public discussion.

Because of the long-term damage the sculpture had endured, there was no question but that restorative efforts were necessary to save it. Yet the question of the statue’s appearance drove a public conversation that was open and deliberative, communal and democratic. “No issue of the conservation more captured people’s imagination than the problem of whether to keep the sculpture painted or return it to its gilded foundry appearance,” Wharton writes. Still, the matter of who should decide—and how to decide—raised questions about authority and public voice. “In ways that could not have been entirely anticipated, the actual decision making involved an intricate mix of consulting with *kupuna* (local elders who represent a traditional ancestral perspective), public participation

through balloting, and the voice of state authority.” Framed around the necessity for making choices in public life, the challenging and often critical sixteen-month process was informed by, but not governed by, experts such as Wharton, who carved out an advisory role without rescuing the public from its own legitimate work.

Among the strengths of *The Painted King* is the presentation of the research Wharton and other experts conducted and offered to the public. Readers have chronological access to newspaper clippings, old watercolor depictions, and graphics illustrating the technical aspects of the metals and paint layers. More important is the display of countless images of the sculpture itself; we see close-ups of specific elements that document the condition of the statue at various times, as well as images capturing the restoration work in progress. The cultural and communal context of the sculpture is also visually represented in powerful ways that relate the public aspects of the project, such as meetings, presentations, children’s art exhibits and puppet shows—the details of the community work as well as the technical work on the sculpture. In this sense, the reader witnesses the evolving engagement and perspective of citizens in relation to public work. Vesting authority to determine the appearance of the sculpture is also an expression of the will to participate in the fullness of public life. The great strength here is the detailed story of community engagement, an activist stance fusing the conservation of public art and the reclamation of civic authority.

The strengths of Wharton’s book serve to highlight the only thing that might have provided greater depth. Criticism from professional conservators who resist community-based conservation did not fully emerge until the concluding pages of the book, and even then these perspectives were presented in a very limited way. And relative to the detailed narrative of the civic efforts Wharton described, he offered an inadequate unpacking of the important theoretical work going on around the question of community empowerment, which could limit the use of the book in an academic setting.

Ultimately, *The Painted King* illustrates a complex yet powerful way to conserve public objects and their public meaning. Perhaps even more important is the attempt to restore and reclaim public voice and imagination, creating new civic pathways for purposeful engagement on other issues.

Author Biography



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