

HONOLULU ACADEMY OF ARTS



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JAPANESE FOLK ART

Japanese Folk Art

The Academy's January exhibition is devoted to a documentation of one of the most uniquely interesting of all popular art currents,—the folk art of Japan. The exhibition includes architecture (models and photographs), painting, sculpture, graphic arts, clothing and textiles, lacquer and ironwork,—in short, the very media which absorbed the attention of the "fine" artist of Japan. Therefore, the question immediately arises as to what qualities distinguish the objects shown in the exhibition as "folk" rather than as "fine" art.

The Academy was particularly fortunate last year to have been able to offer here a series of lectures by Langdon Warner on the general subject of Japanese art, one of which was concerned with Japanese folk art. Mr. Warner's lectures have recently been published in book form (see page 10 of this issue), and his chapter on folk art is the most illuminating discussion of the subject which has ever appeared in the English language.

Mr. Warner points out three consid-

erations essential to the true folk art of Japan when he writes¹ that "... these objects differ from their aristocratic cousins in that they are not unique or even rare, that they are usually fashioned from less precious material, and that, for the most part, they lack obvious embellishment or what ornament they have is kept within the strait limits of essential fashioning." The distinction between folk art and other forms of art, he continues, has nothing to do with the purpose for which the object was made, but is rather one "... of the cheap against the costly, the common against the unique, the simple against the artful, the natural against the self-conscious." From this point of departure, Mr. Warner arrives at the necessary conclusion that folk art must then provide "... by far the most reliable documents of the spiritual as well as the physical life of the people."

It is difficult for those of us who have not been fortunate enough to have

(1) Langdon Warner, *The Enduring Art of Japan*, Harvard, 1952.

figure 1



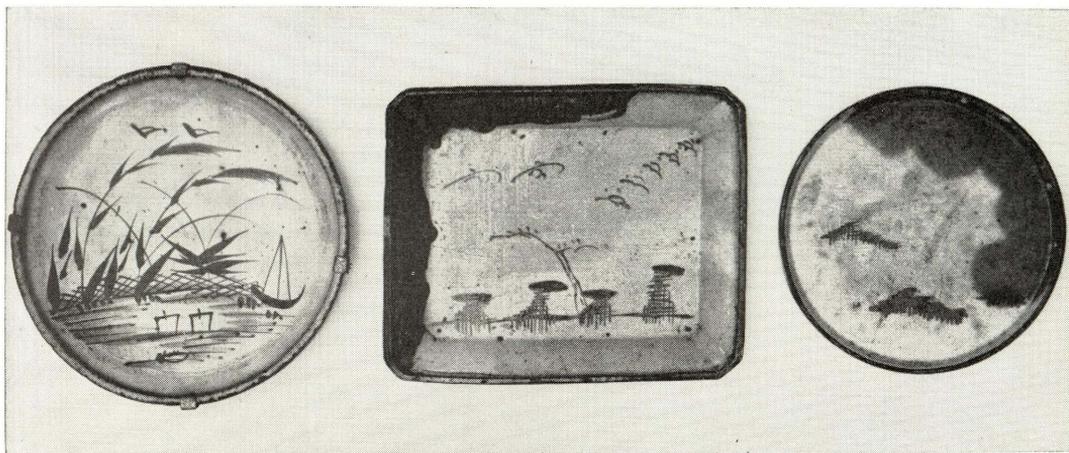


figure 2

lived in the Far East for considerable periods of time to appreciate the influence of the physical environment upon the development of the native arts. It is even more difficult for Westerners in general to understand the role played by the tradition-hallowed customs and ideals of the Orient upon that development, simply because most of us are so regrettably unfamiliar with Far Eastern religious and sociological history. And the majority among us fall into the common error of supposing that folk art, wherever it may be found, is the work of amateurs trying their untrained hands fumblingly at unaccustomed disciplines. As a result, the West often considers the subject matter of Oriental art to be "queer" because it is strange, and folk art in general to be "quaint" because it lacks the artifice produced by sophistication.

Mr. Warner's book forcefully demonstrates the fallacy of such conclusions by emphasizing that ". . . in Japan as elsewhere folk art has been for centuries the work of professionals, seldom the casual whittlings of long winter evenings in the farmer's cottage . . . (and)

on the whole the traditions are carried on by craftsmen, devoted to their specialties and owners of the special tools required,—forge, kiln, lathe, or dye vat, *and with the particular skills*" (italics ours). And if the observer will pause to admit ". . . that there is a domain in art where genius has no concern," it will be seen that Japanese folk art, far from being "quaint," consists instead of common things so beautifully made that they are true works of art.²

The exhibition shown here is the result of many years' collecting and includes a number of objects never before seen in Honolulu, thanks to the generosity of a number of donors. More than that, it is the first in a series of exhibitions designed to illustrate the whole picture of the development of Japanese culture, and has been chosen as the first in this series because of the ability of folk art to illustrate the point of view of the common man. Consisting of more than a hundred objects, the

(2) The preceding quotations are all from the work cited above.

exhibition will be available for loan later this year.

There is not sufficient space in this issue to offer a catalog of the works of art shown. Several among them deserve special consideration, however, one of these being the *makemono*, or handscroll recently given by Mr. Robert Allerton and illustrating "Pilgrims at Kumano Shrine."³

The name Kumano refers, geographically, to the province of Kishu in South Central Japan. It also is used to refer to three holy places of Shinto,



figure 3

the Japanese state religion, — Hongu, Shingu, and Nachi, — at each of which there exists a Shinto shrine site of venerable antiquity. At Nachi there is an additional site sacred to Buddhists, the temple which is the first on the list of the Thirty-Three Sacred Places to Kwannon.

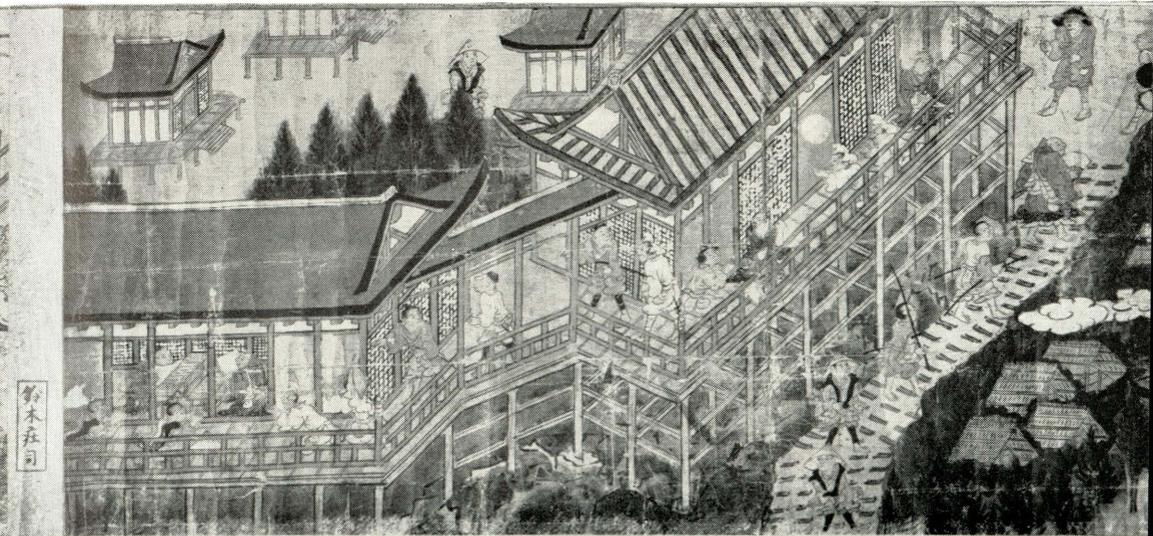
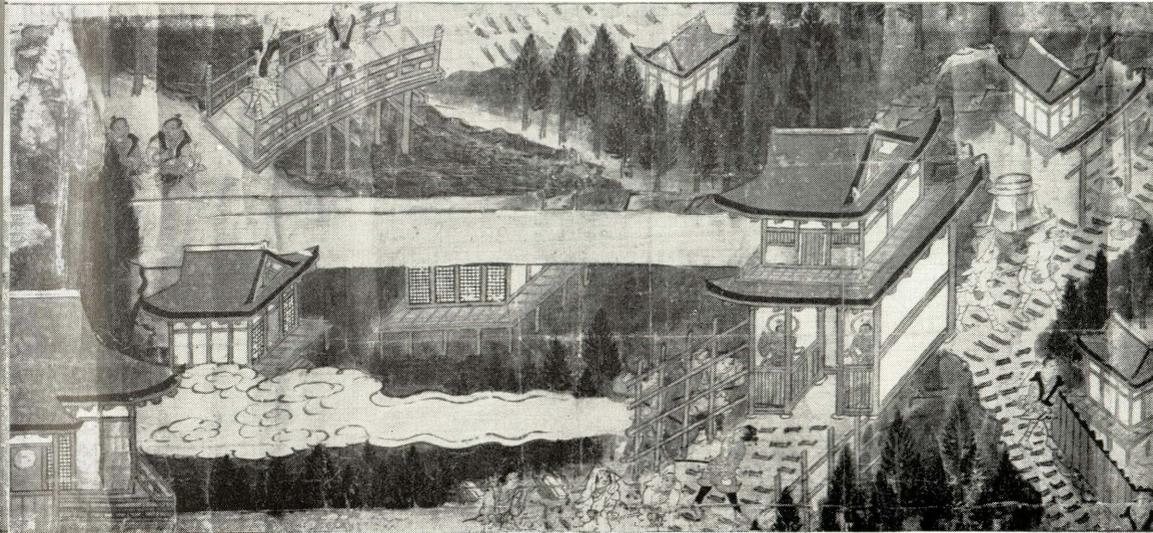
The locale of our picture is indicated as Nachi by the presence of the great Nachi waterfall (top illustration, page 6), the highest (275 feet) in Japan.

As is customary with Oriental handscrolls, our picture (which is illustrated in its entirety here) is read from right to left, beginning on the top right margin of page 8, continuing, according to the directional arrows, on the bottom of the page, and thereafter backwards through page 5. The left end of the lower illustration on page 5 ends the scroll.

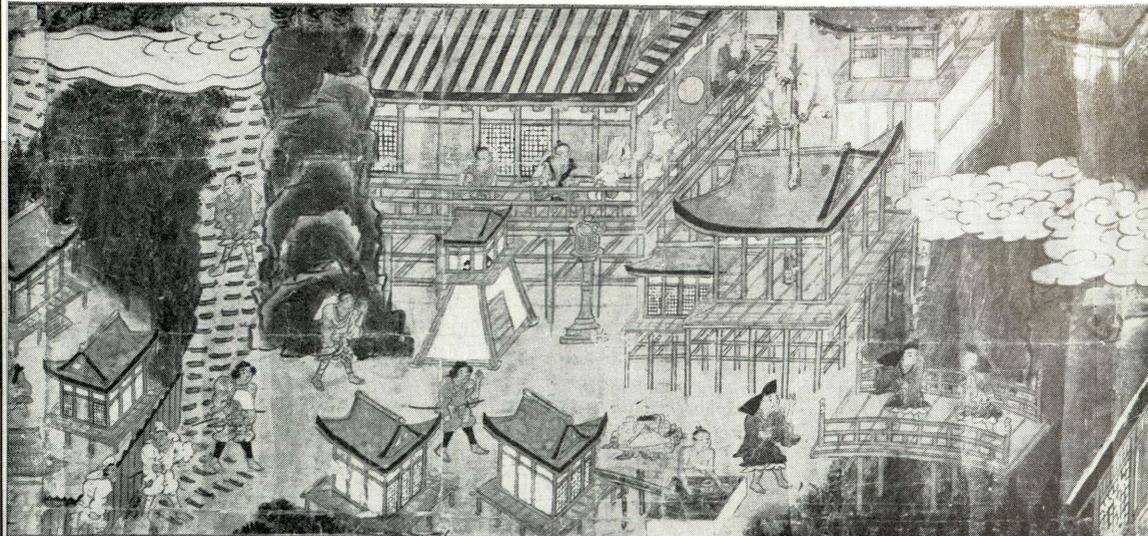
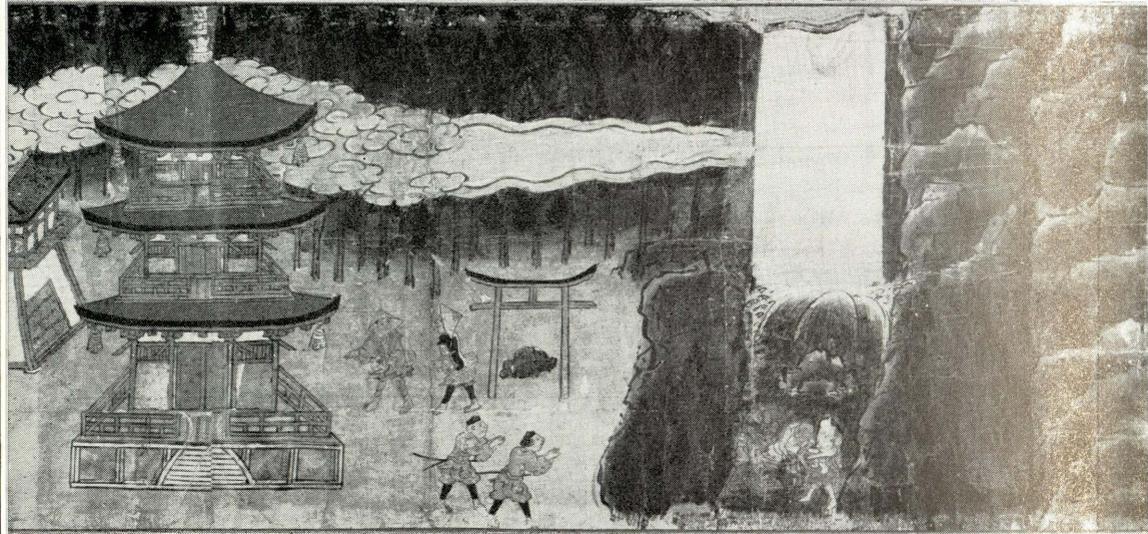
It will be noticed that the conventional sign of a Shinto shrine, the *Torii* gate, begins the painting. Near the end of the picture (top illustration, page 5), we find a *Sammon*, or characteristic gateway to a Buddhist temple and containing the *Ni-o* or two Deva kings, who protect the precincts of Buddhist temples from the influence of evil spirits.

The picture is puzzling in certain respects, particularly from an architectural point of view, and contains no purely Shinto buildings other than the *Torii* gates, while we know that Shinto shrine buildings did exist at Nachi when our picture was painted (circa 1450 A.D.). The iconography of the picture will be the subject of a later article, however. What is important to point out here is the fact that this long scroll is an early illustration of the directness and charm which is inherent in the best of folk art. The picture is so conversational in tone that it suggests the telling of a legend, and like such a telling, it was probably painted from memory by an artisan who himself might well have been a pilgrim to Kumano and who painted his picture in order to share his experience with his less travelled friends and family, or for use in some rustic shrine in his home village. Certainly the picture is naive, which simply means that it is not the work of a professional trained in the fashionable style of the day. But it is devout and sincere, both as a religious

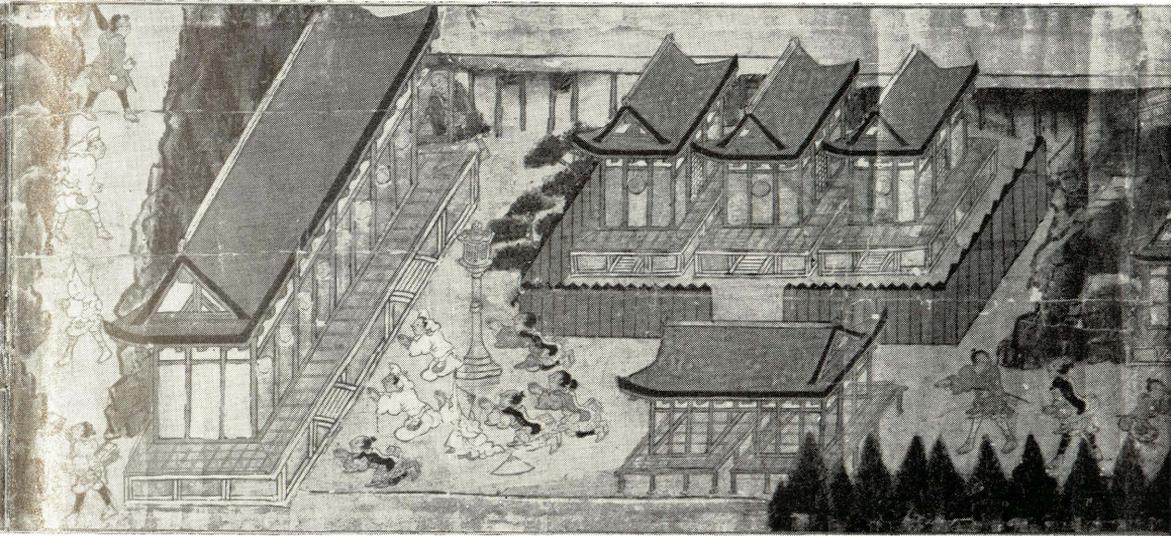
(3) Length 18½ feet; width 12¾ inches. Full color on paper.



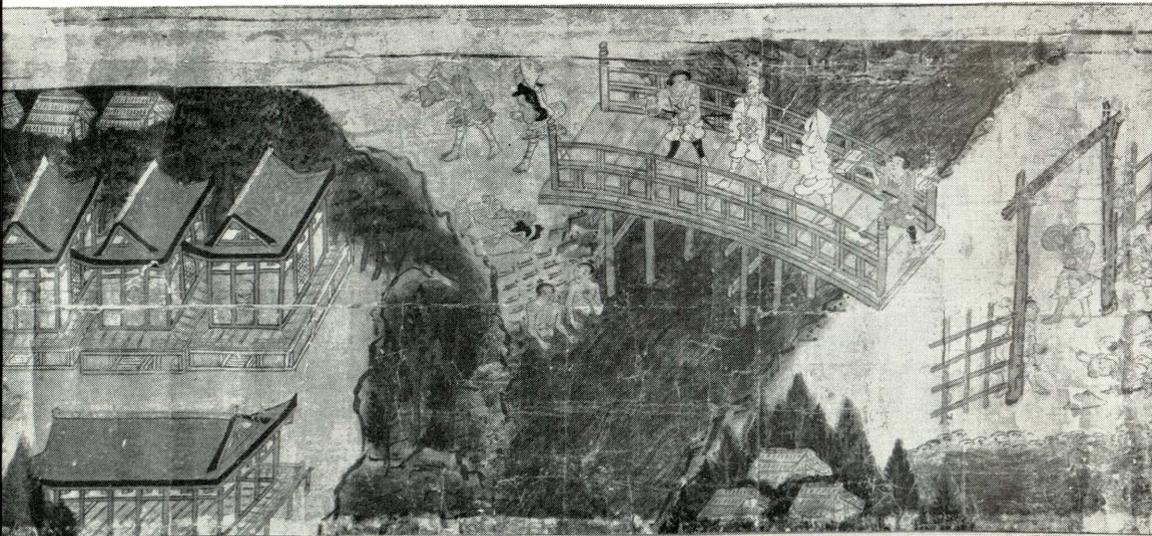
The right side of the lower illustration follows directly after the left side of the upper illustration. The end of the picture is at the lower left.



The illustrations on pages 6 and 7 show two continuous sections of the Kumano Shrine scroll, beginning on the upper right-hand margin of page 7 and continuing to the left across page 6.



Oriental handscroll pictures are read from right to left. The right side of the lower illustration follows directly after the left side of the upper illustration as indicated by arrows.



The right side of the lower illustration follows the left side of the upper illustration. The beginning of the picture is at the upper right.

expression and as a story, and is completely without affectation of any kind. It must have served its purpose well when it was painted; it serves that purpose just as well today.

The painter of the Kumano scroll may be thought of as one of the many early progenitors of the craftsmen-painters of Otsu, the village near Kyoto through which travellers to that ancient capital had to pass on visits to and from the court. At Otsu there developed, apparently early in the seventeenth century, a school of painters who, trained in traditional subject matter which was at first purely Buddhist in inspiration, offered their wares for sale to peasants for an infinitesimal sum. As time went on, the subjects of the Otsu paintings were expanded to include historical personages, demons, and moral figures, each of which told a story which the peasant purchaser could understand and appreciate. By the nineteenth century, the craft had so degenerated that the Otsu paintings had become "mere charms, sold to the superstitious."⁴

Our exhibition includes nine prints made on the basis of this late degeneration, and four paintings of earlier date: *Shomen Kongo*, a Buddhist deity; *Oni No Nembutsu*, or the devil dressed as an itinerant holy man striking a gong and asking alms; *Tsurigane Benkei* (figure 5) shown carrying the bronze bell of Miidera Temple up to Mt. Hiei; and *Wakashu*, an upper class youth.⁵ In addition to the Otsu paintings, several examples of the *ema*, or devotional picture offered by way of a prayer to be hung in a temple or shrine, may be seen in the exhibition (figure 4).

As Dr. Sôetsu Yanagi, director of Tokyo's Folk Art Museum, has pointed out

(4) Soetsu Yanagi, "The peasant paintings of Otsu, Japan," *Eastern Art*, Vol. II, 1930, pp. 5-36.

(5) The four paintings were recently given to the Academy by Mr. John Gregg.

in his study of the subject,⁶ the Otsu paintings "represent folk art in its purest form." Quickly and incisively drawn in ink and color on paper, they are the work of artisans who like their fellow carvers in wood (*cover illustration*) so little considered themselves to be artists that none of their work is signed. Completely unself-conscious, their art was the result of repetitive labor rather than of inspiration.

Just as the peasant paintings of Otsu were once commonplace, so too were the now rarely found and beautiful oil dishes (*abura-sara*) used at the base of the *andon* or paper shaded oil lamp of the peasant house. Some two dozen of these dishes, together with kitchen plates, from Oribe (figure 2), Shigaraki, Shino, Banko, and Seto, are included in the exhibition. So many were manufactured at Seto (figure 1) that the term *Seto-mono* came to stand for pottery itself.⁷ The designs found on these dishes include birds, flowers, plants, stencilled decorations, and even landscapes, exquisitely drawn in a freehand manner "within the strait limits of essential fashioning" which Mr. Warner has characterized as typical of the best folk art ornament. Similar designs decorate the textiles — the printed or woven bed

(6) Yanagi, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

(7) S. Yamanaka, "Japanese pottery oil dishes," *Eastern Art*, Vol. I, No. 3, January 1929, pp. 145-152.

figure 4



Japanese Doll-Making

On Wednesday, January 28, at 10:30 a.m., Miss Emy Matsushige will give a lecture-demonstration on "The Art of Japanese Doll-Making." An exhibition of dolls will be on view at this time.

January and February Activities

JANUARY

Public Programs:

- 15—8:00 p.m.—"Japanese Folk Art," lecture by Robert P. Griffing, Jr.
22—8:00 p.m.—Piano recital by Robert Vetlesen.
25—4:00 p.m.—Vocal recital by Jan Eaton Burress, soprano.
29—4:00 to 6:00 p.m.—Reception honoring Dr. Sôetsu Yanagi, Mr. Shoji Hamada and Mr. Bernard Leach.
29—8:00 p.m.—Lecture by Dr. Sôetsu Yanagi on "A Re-evaluation of the Japanese Tea Ceremony."

For Members Only:

- 14—10:30 a.m.—"Japanese Folk Art," lecture by Robert P. Griffing, Jr.
21—10:30 a.m.—"New Plants and Their Propagation," talk by Wilbert Choi.
28—10:30 a.m.—"The Art of Japanese Doll-Making," lecture-demonstration by Miss Emy Matsushige.

FEBRUARY

Public Programs:

- 5—8:00 p.m.—"Prints by Goya," lecture by Jean Charlot.
20—8:00 p.m.—"Architectural Prints by Piranesi," lecture by Dr. Gustav Ecke.

January and February Exhibitions

- Jan. 6 to 29—The Ancient World.
Jan. 6 to Feb. 1—Japanese Prints.
Jan. 8 to Feb. 1—Japanese Folk Art.
Feb. 3 to 18—Prints by Goya.
Feb. 4 to Mar. 4—The Indians of The Americas.
Feb. 19 to Mar. 15—Architectural Prints by Piranesi and His Followers.

HOURS OF ADMISSION—Free at all times: *Open Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Thursday from 10 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Sunday from 3 to 6 p.m.* EDUCATIONAL DEPARTMENT—*The lending collection of objects, framed color reproductions and slides, is available to all teachers. Schools wishing appointments for visiting the Academy for talks by staff members may make them by calling the Educational Office.* PRINT ROOM, REFERENCE LIBRARY AND MEMBERSHIP OFFICE—*Open during Academy hours. Mrs. Arthur E. Restarick, Membership Secretary.*
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HONOLULU ACADEMY OF ARTS

900 SOUTH BERETANIA STREET, HONOLULU 14, HAWAII

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