

History of the Building and its Owners

Anna Rice Cooke, widow of Charles Montague Cooke, built the Cook-Spalding residence, set on a 3.5-acre parcel in the Makiki Heights district of Honolulu, in 1925. Both Mrs. Cooke and her husband were children of missionary families that came to the islands in the 1830s. Mrs. Cooke had been a major patron of the arts, and had over the course of her married life, gathered a collection of Asian and European art that filled her home on Beretania Street. Mrs. Cook delighted in sharing her collection with the community, and she often had gatherings at her residence to display her holdings. Her enormous commitment to the arts in Hawaii is well-revealed by the donation of her home on Beretania Street for the purpose of creating a museum for the community. She engaged the architectural firm, Bertram Goodhue Associates, paid for the design and the construction costs and donated her collection to the new museum, which became the core of the present Oriental collection of HAA.

Mrs. Cooke retained Hart Wood to build her new Makiki Heights home. The design of the building was radical for its time, integrating Asian and western forms in an almost unprecedented way. Known as Nu'umealani, it was featured in several magazine and journal articles (House and Garden, Pacific Coast Architecture and Architect and Engineer, 1927) as being on the forefront of architecture blending East and Western influences.

When Mrs. Cooke died in 1934, her daughter, Alice Spalding and her husband, Philip, inherited Nu'umealani. Mrs. Spalding was also very much involved with the Honolulu artistic community, and their home was described as a "haven for artists and other members of the art community". They lived in the house until their deaths in 1968, at which time it became the property of the Honolulu Academy of Arts and was used as an annex to show their Asian art collection, including the James Michener's famous collection of Ukiyo-e prints.

In 1979 Nu'umealani was bought by a private developer, who in turn sold it to the Persis Corporation, a company owned by Thurston Twigg-Smith. Thurston, affectionately known as 'Twigg' by his friends and associates, had a long-standing interest in art. His grandfather had been a respected painter in Honolulu, and Twigg himself collected Asian antiquities. He had been the motivating factor in turning an open-air atrium at the Honolulu Advertiser Building into an art gallery, which became known as The Contemporary Art Center. The Center had an office and a director, and an active exhibition program for showing the work of local artists. Under the direction of Laila Twigg-Smith, The Center became a hub of artistic activity, and it was there that the idea of creating a museum solely dedicated to the collection and exhibition of local and mainland contemporary art was initiated. Serious planning began in 1985 when Laila gathered twenty-two friends and art patrons to her home to begin discussions on forming a the new museum. Thurston Twigg-Smith then generously gave Nu'umealani to the community as a site for The Contemporary Museum. The first pieces of art to be exhibited were pieces taken from Twigg and Laila's personal collection, with other works donated by mainland dealers who wanted to help the Twigg-Smiths realize their ambitious project. The collection has grown to about 3,000 works of art currently stored off site.

We should remember the substantial role the Cooke family and the Twigg-Smiths have played in the development of Hawaii's artistic community, and keep their contributions in mind while anticipating great plans for the future.