



A Hālau in Paris

IN BRINGING HULA TO PARIS, SANDRA SILVE HAS ALSO BROUGHT HAWAIIAN CULTURE TO THE EUROPEAN ART WORLD. *By Chris Alper*

SANDRA KWOCK SILVE'S HIGH-CEILINGED, 19TH-CENTURY apartment on the Rue de Turin serves as a sort of informal Hawaiian embassy in Paris. There, Silve hosts visiting musicians, dancers, writers and artists, and passing locals of all kinds. When Makana, the rising slack key star, toured Europe with Sting, he stopped by. He was so happy with his welcome, Silve's potted palm tree, the local food and the aloha, that he stayed up playing until 2 a.m.

Though she grew up in Mānoa, Sandra Silve has lived in Paris for 25 years. She is the leader of Paris' only hula hālau and the founder of the Art of Hula Project—a groundbreaking effort to capture the grace of a hālau in motion by inviting artists into the dance studio to create works as they observe the dancers. As far as Silve knows, this is the first time this has ever been attempted.

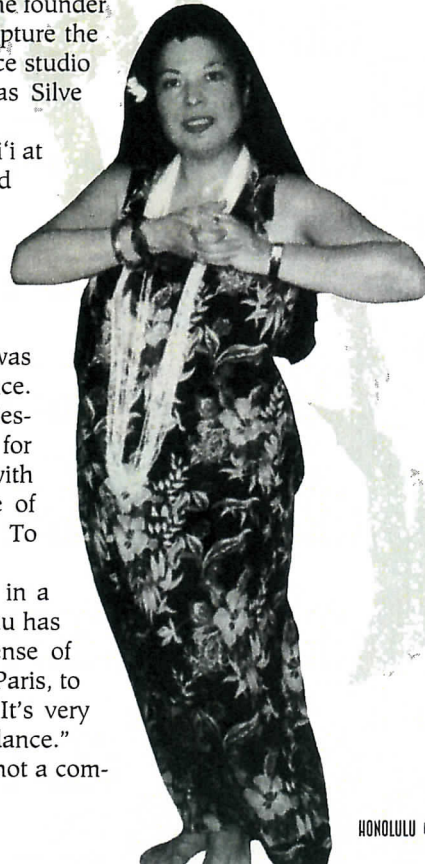
While an art history student at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Silve spent her junior year abroad in France, and the richness of her life and the vibrant art community there inspired her to return after she had completed her degree in 1976. While in France, she met and married a French sculptor, Philippe Thill. A daughter, Leilani, was born in 1978.

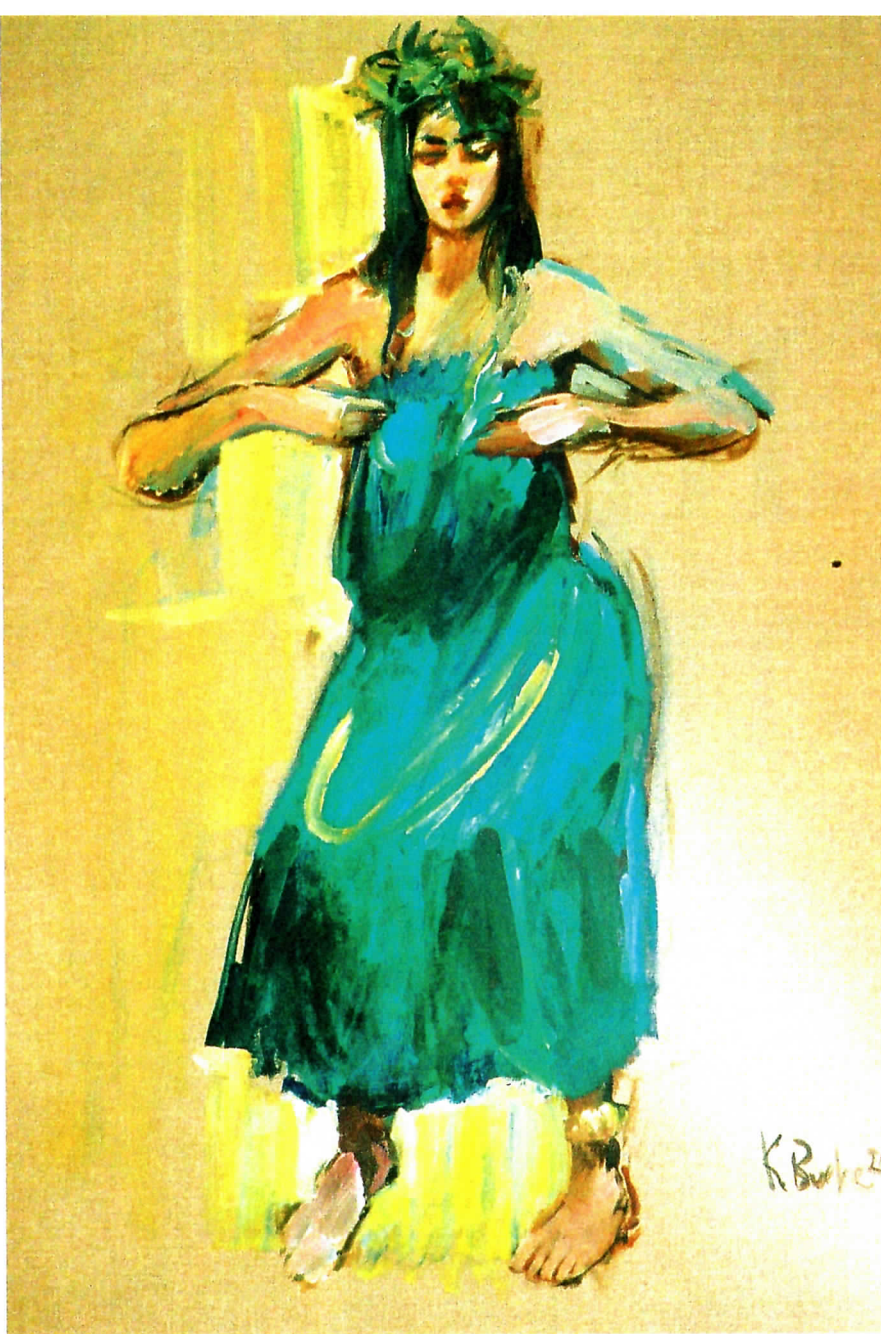
In France, Silve pursued a career as an art critic. It was her daughter who brought her back to her roots in dance. Silve wanted to teach her daughter hula, but just a few lessons at home seemed inadequate to provide a real outlet for Leilani's interest in Hawaiian culture. Says Silve, "Alone with her mother, Leilani would probably learn just a couple of dances between the living room and the kitchen table. To bring it to life, we needed a hālau."

That is how Hālau Hula O Mānoa came to be born in a Paris apartment. In the 10 years of its existence, the hālau has become a foundation of Silve's life. "It gives you a sense of always being in touch with nature, even in the middle of Paris, to do a dance describing the sea or the rain," she says. "It's very grounding. Some people do yoga or tai chi or run, but I dance."

The hālau has never numbered more than 30, and is not a com-

Opposite: Detail of an oil painting by Kathy Burke of the hula "E Ho'i Ke Aloha i Ni'ihau" Below: Sandra Kilohana Silve, teaching hula in her Paris apartment Photo credit: Lilian Laporte





Left: "The Hula Dancer," oil painting by Kathy Burke. Bottom Left: "Hula Noho with Uli'uli," painting by Betsy Demez-Castleman

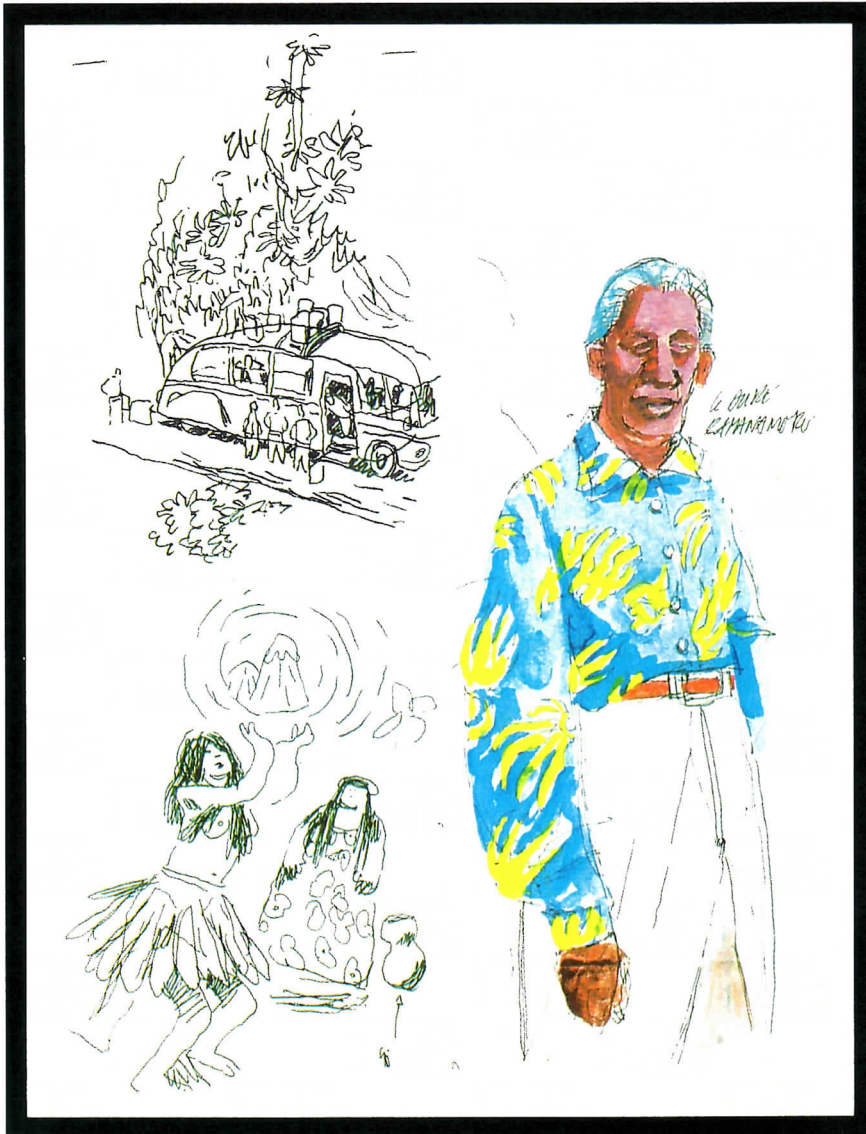
mercial venture. Some of her French students have been with her for many years, and Hawaiian culture has entered their lives and homes in many forms—the names of their children, their artwork, even as ti leaves, grown for the lei and decorations of the hālau. "Luckily, some of my students have a green thumb," Silve laughs.

In a cosmopolitan city like Paris, many residents are people often just spending a year or two, so Silve starts all her students with "Kawika," a hula honoring King David Kalākaua. "Even if people leave, they have acquired a sense of the movement, basic steps, some gestures, and have also been introduced to Hawaiian traditions."

Silve treats Hawaiian tradition with great respect. "The spiritual legacy is an important aspect of the culture, and is lived as a religion by some people today," she says. She expects her students to be able to understand what they are dancing. Certain pieces, Pele dances, for example, she doesn't teach to students until they have danced at least three years. "I want them to be truly ready," Silve says.

Hawai'i residents who have seen the hālau are surprised by the quality of dance Hula Hālau O Mānoa performs, and, transplanted back home, it would be like any serious hālau in Hawai'i. Silve works hard to keep her hālau in harmony with home. Though she describes herself as a student of hula,





she is actually a veteran dancer and choreographer, with roots in the art going back to childhood studies under kumu Emma Bishop. Her current kumu is Ellen Castillo, with whom she is in frequent contact, even from 8,000 miles away. Kumu hula Lika Moon from Lānaʻi is a friend of the hālau, and Silve frequently draws on the counsel of Hawaiian language experts like Puakea Nogelmeier, Carol Silva, Ipolani Vaughan and Milton Keʻaulana Holt to help in her research and choreography.

The Hula Hālau O Mānoa dancers are veterans of numerous public performances in theaters, at cultural exhibitions, even at the Biarritz pro surfing contest. Once, at Biarritz, flat surf forced a postponement of the heats, and desperate meet officials convinced Silve to give mass lessons on the main stage. "We must have taught 5,000 people a little hula that day," she laughs.

Hula is not as well known in France as Tahitian dance. "When people hear the terms hula or Hawaiian dance, they are expecting us to come out with coconut shell bras, and when they see what we really do they're amazed," she says.

A chance event inspired Silve to combine hula with the talents of Paris-based artists. About three years ago, Nola Nāhulu, director of the Hawaiʻi

Above: A portrait of Duke Kahanamoku
Right: Sketches by Sylvain Lefebvre





Above: "Ke A'o Nani: A Dancer's Universe," painting by Kathy Burke. Right: Sketch by Sylvain Lefebvre

Youth Opera Choir at Kawaiaha'o Church, brought a group of young singers to Paris. Together, the singers and the hālau performed at the Russian conservatory. A friend of Silve's in the audience, American artist and Paris resident Kathy Burke, was moved to sketch the show as it happened. Burke showed her work to Silve, and the seed for the Art of Hula idea was sown.

A few months later, Silve, her advanced students and a group of 15 internationally known sculptors, painters, photographers and other artists began meeting once a month at Burke's studio. Together, their hands, hearts and perceptions have created an unusual body of work. "It's the first time live hula and art created in a single sitting have ever been combined," Silve says.

The artists observed the hālau onsite, capturing the group's vibrancy and visual power, often completing their initial work within the span of the rehearsal. Dancers came in appropriate costume, wearing turquoise blue shells for a piece about the sea; or for a Pele dance, in red, fern leaves and feather leis. The artists channeled different aspects of the dance—legend, movement or particular imagery—into their own work.

"It was exciting for everyone: the artists became very involved in what we were doing as dancers, and we as





Left: "Aia Lā 'o Pele I Hawai'i," painting by Sylvain Lefebvre

Below: From a series of pen and watercolor studies of Pele dances by Betsy Demez-Castleman



dancers became part of their creative process," Silve says.

Burke calls it evolutionary. "There were times when I would rather have been dancing than painting, and times when I felt there was no difference between the two," she says.

Burke's paintings, sketched quickly, then filled in ablaze with color, are just one example of the product of this collaboration. Another artist, Betsy Demez-Castleman, recreated Hawaiian landscapes, using the hālau and the world-building imagery of the kumulipo for inspiration for her paintings. In a further twist, the artist-dancer synergy of the Art of Hula sessions was captured by a French filmmaker, and will eventually become a documentary.

Silve will continue her outreach through an Art of Hula exhibition, and has selected pieces for a show highlighting the best of the collaboration. This effort follows in the footsteps of others she has organized, including a 1989 show in Paris showcasing modern Hawaiian artists on the 100th anniversary of the Paris Universal Exposition. Though the Art of Hula was delayed by French-American tensions related to the Iraq war, Hawai'i's Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism has expressed interest in bringing the art from the project to the Islands for an exhibition in the future.

In Paris' art world, with her hālau, and in her unique efforts to combine the two worlds, Silve continues to act as a catalyst who brings diverse worlds together.

Chris Alper grew up in Waialua, and is a freelance writer based in Paris.

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