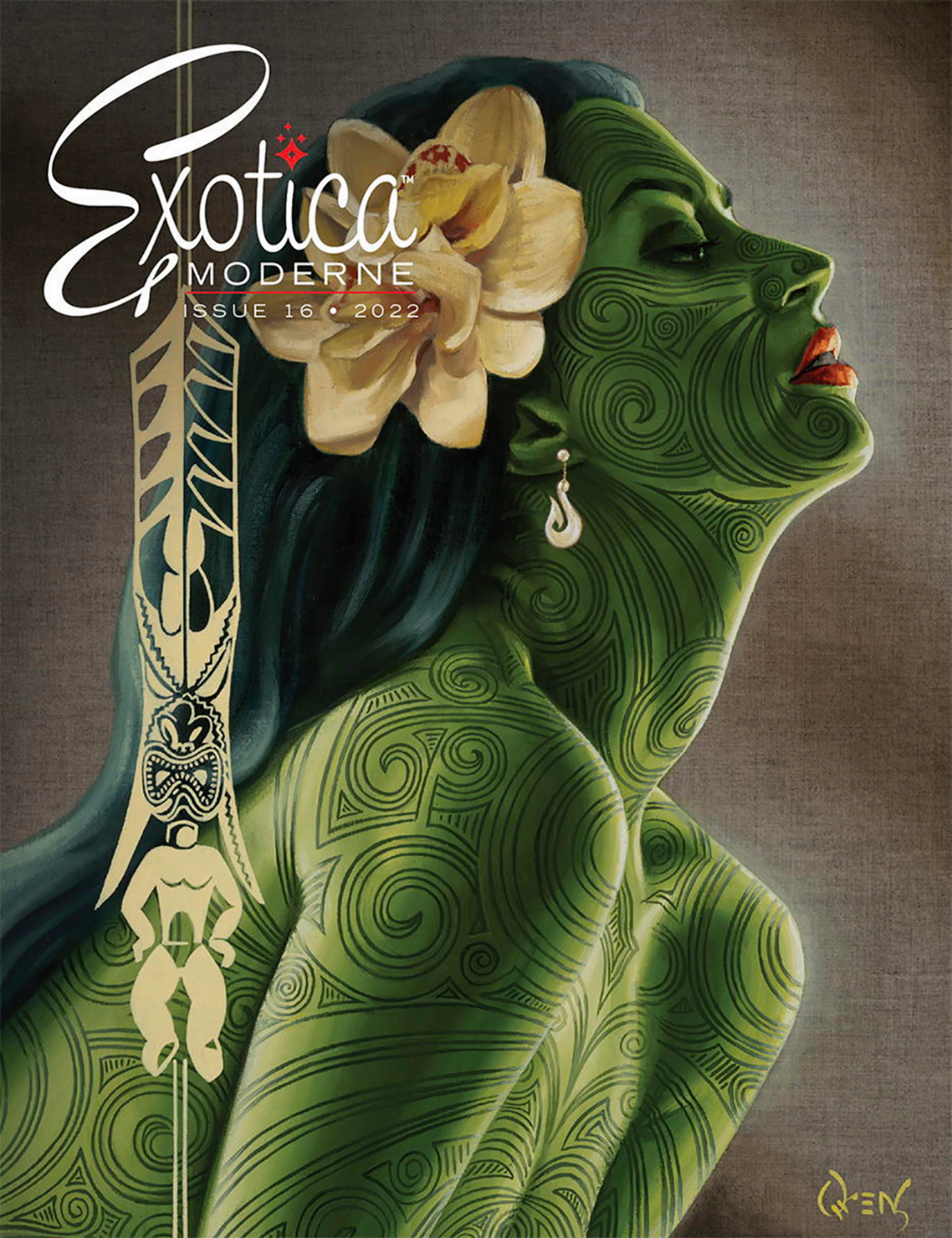
Exotica™ MODERNE

ISSUE 16 • 2022



Oils on Velvet

THE ART TRACY RUGE-FOLKS

A resident of Palm Springs, California, Tracy Ruge-Folks admits that living there has always been an inspiration for her art.

Tracy explains, "With its mid-century modern and Tiki culture existing together during its hey-day in the 1950s and 1960s, Palm Springs is still a mecca for retro mid-century architecture and design, retro vibe, music and art, and all things fun!"

Tracy continues, "I grew up in Southern California, and when I was young there were many famous Tiki bars and restaurants, which were popular getaways that everyone went to for special occasions. The famed Luau and Trader Vic's, Don the Beachcomber, Bahooka, Tonga Hut, Damon's Steakhouse, and Trader Sam's, to name a few. My love for Tiki and Tiki culture grew out of these tropical dining palaces, and at the same time there was a surge of surf, beach, and island movies coming out of Hollywood. It was heaven to me! It was life as it should be. Tiki culture became a life-long inspiration."

Tracy has been painting with oils since she was 5. Her parents bought her a paint-by-number set because of her intense interest in drawing, but when she was painting her second paint-by-numbers piece, she vividly recalls thinking: "Why can't I go outside of the numbered lines? Wouldn't it be easier if I could just blend the paint and choose my own colors?"

Tracy persuaded her parents to purchase plain canvas and oil paints, and she then proceeded to create her first solo artwork, inspired by old masterworks she had seen at museums. With that first painting, she won her first blue ribbon for her age group at a local county fair.

"I have little training other than a handful of life drawing classes and a single painting class at junior college. In my twenties, I focused my spare time on large-scale canvas paintings and used to exhibit at outdoor art shows. At the time, I painted a lot of multi-cultural portraits and tropical art," she says.

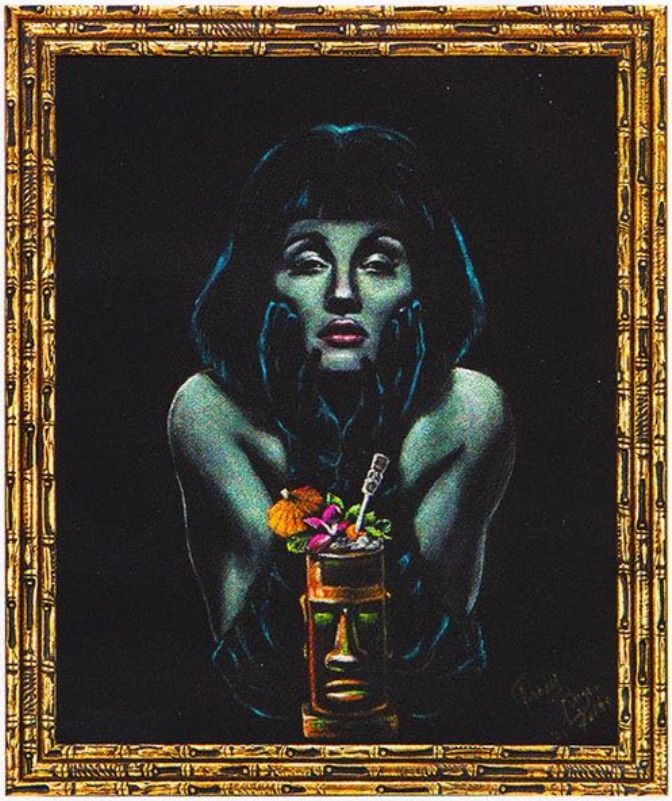
Soon, Tracy's art focus was replaced by a linchpin on her career. For many years, she put all her energy into two main career paths. She had a long stint as an undergraduate advisor at UCSB and later worked in the corporate sector in advertising – both in New York City and Los Angeles. Those career paths provided her with valuable experience, and she learned what she needed from those jobs to transition into new adventures.

Like many, the arrival of COVID-19 upended the world around us, and Tracy's personal world changed drastically. The result of her loss of employment coupled with her personal right timing, Tracy was ready for a life change.

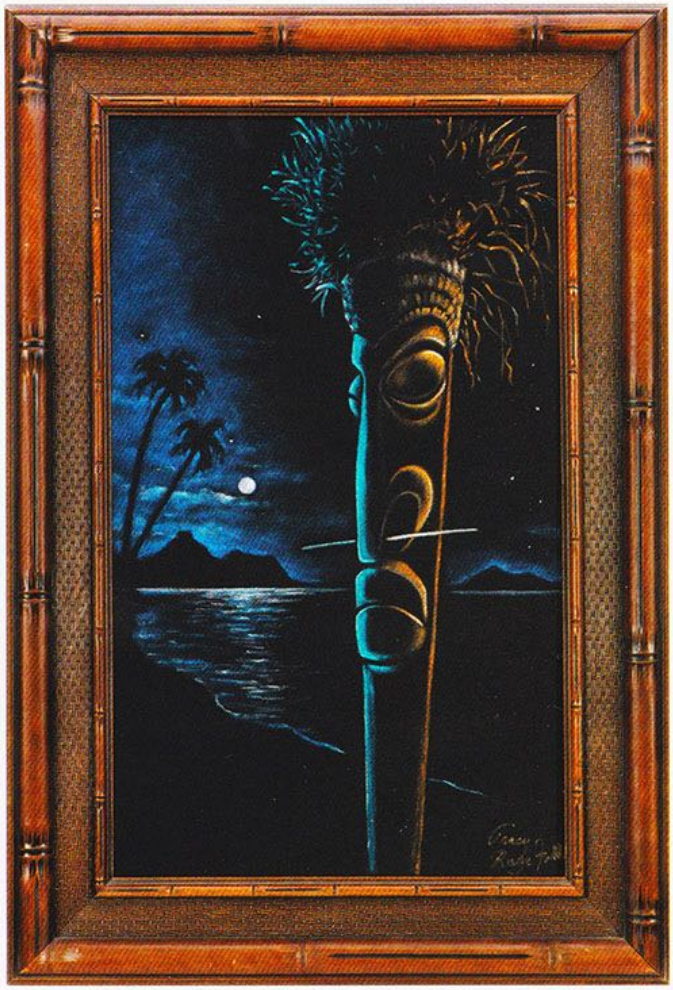
"I now had a lot of time to think about what I really wanted to do with my life, my time, and energy. I decided that going forward, the best path for me is being creative, and one of my greatest inspirations is art. Fortunately for me, I had a friend who shares the same passions and who was also at a transitional point in her life, so we decided to combine our artistic talents and start MidMod Design. Our focus is on creating original artworks and interior design with a focus on mid-century modern. Our husbands are also great supporters and play both active and collaborative roles in our misadventures," Tracy states.

"My business partner, Cindra Stolk, advised me to make some Tiki paintings for the Spring 2021, Alohana Marketplace where she wanted to feature her artwork, which focuses on dynamic multimedia pieces. I loved Tiki, but I hadn't dabbled in this cultural art form yet, and I didn't want to engage in it unless I could create something artistically different from what was already out there.

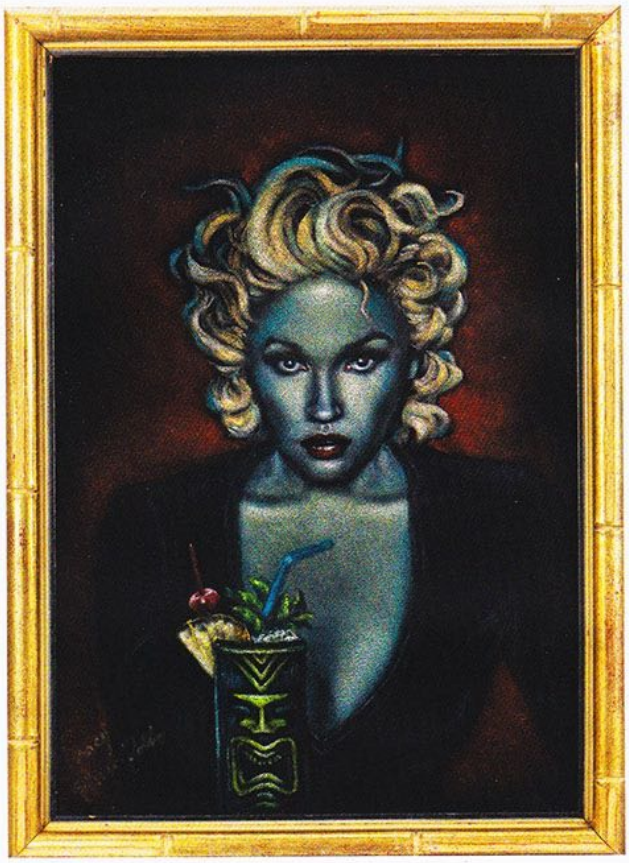
After some consideration, I remembered the velvet paintings of the '50s, '60s, and '70s. Sure, it was low-brow art, but that is the point, isn't it? Of course, people made fun of it in the '80s and '90s, but maybe I could bump up the genre? Why not? Tiki is supposed to be about fun and exotic fantasies, so why not give it a shot?" She continues.

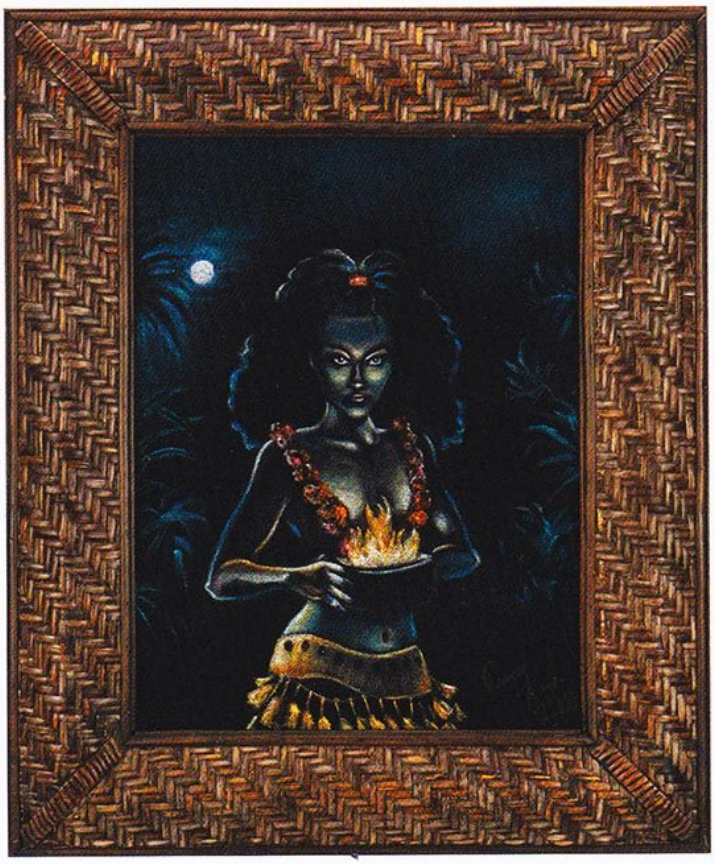


Above: The Painkiller • Below: Bali Hai



Left: Blue Hawaiian





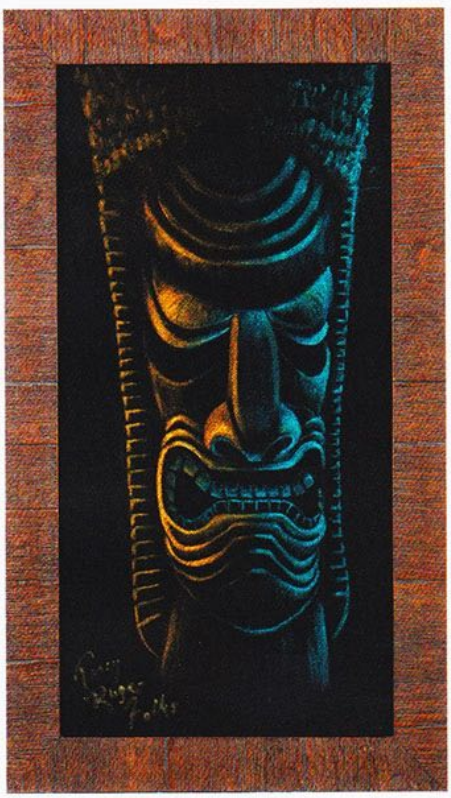
Left: Vivian • Right: Priestess

"Of course, I didn't know what I was doing, and there wasn't not a lot to be learned from internet regarding how to paint on velvet or what kind of velvet or paint works best, so I had to dive in headfirst and give it a go without instruction. "

Tracy started small and was amazed at the dynamic quality the paint had on the velvet.

"It is such a moody medium, and I liked that. Depending on the light source and where you stand, the picture takes on different qualities. However, it's not easy to paint on thick, nappy fabric. It is a process that takes time and precision, and if you mess it up, you may as well throw it away. That hasn't happened for me yet, but I've come close. Another challenge is that you are painting on negative space, so you are only interested in painting the highlights. Also, only bright, higher-range colors work well, and you need to let them dry first and layer them as much as possible so they stand out against the black background."

After the Spring Alohana show 2021, a woman named Tracy Turco approached MidMod Design to provide all the original art for a new boutique Tiki Hotel in Palm Springs. Being a great opportunity to get some needed exposure, they agreed to take on the project. After some recent events at the hotel, Tracy was taken aback by the intense interest in her velvet paintings, and it really took her by surprise.



Bahooka

Tracy says, "I soon discovered that there is a keen interest in vintage velvets by Edgar Leeteg (1904-1953), who was also known as the "Velvet Gaugin" because he addressed his -inspired work like fine art. I didn't even know who he was until people started mentioning it in conjunction with my art. It's great to know there is a new generation interested in velvet art, which I understand is exceedingly hard to come by now. It appears my timing in adopting this genre has been fortuitous. Who knew? But I am enjoying the medium, so I am now trying to keep up my painting with all the ideas I have in my head. Right now, I am focusing on a series of velvets called 'Film Noir Meets Tiki Bar.'"

Tracy Ruge-Folks is an inspiration for us all to follow our passion by taking a leap of faith. From the tender age of 5, Tracy understood that coloring within the lines is not for everyone, and she embraced taking a risk of creating art differently and keeping her authenticity at the frontline as an artist.

@tracyrugefolksart