

Velvet's Exotic Allure

A NEW LOOK AT THE ART OF TRACY RUGE-FOLKS

Exotica Moderne first featured Tracy's art in issue 16 So we decided to catch up with her and her recent works.

By Ken Holewczynski



When Tracy was a young child, her parents took her family to museums, and she was so enamored with classic realism and impressionism that she would linger back while the rest of the group moved on to other works. "I would stand up close to art to study the details of the brush strokes and differences between light and dark," she says.



Island Girl

“*At its best, velvet artwork is exotic, intoxicating, and sexy or humorous. Velvet pulls the viewer in deeply and has the ability to act as a portal, temporarily transporting you to another world.*”

Recognizing my interest in art, her parents purchased a paint-by-numbers set for her when she was five, and by the time I received her second paint-by-numbers set, she began to question why she had to paint within the lines.

“I recall thinking, why do I have to stay within the lines with this particular color? Why can't I blend colors and go outside of the lines? So I did,” Tracy states.

After the paint-by-numbers sets, Tracy quickly asked her parents for paints and canvas and began her artistic journey. Her first painting at the age of six won a blue ribbon for children in the age group six to ten at the Orange County Fair.

Self-taught, early influences included John Singer Sargent's portrait work and Van Gogh for his use of bold colors and energetic flow of brush strokes.

Her journey from oil painting to Tiki and beyond that, velvet painting, has been one of surprise and wonder.

“Playing with colors of varying values between light and dark is akin to a musician making music, a cook experimenting with spices, or a writer searching for the perfect words that bring forth magic on the written page,” Tracy states.

Initially, Tracy began working on velvet when she received a request from the owner of a Tiki-themed hotel in Palm Springs, called simply enough, the Tiki Hotel, to create artwork to adorn the walls. Wanting to do something different from her previous works, Tracy decided to approach the project by painting on velvet. She had done paintings on traditional canvas, but velvet was a chance to distinguish herself from fellow Tiki artists.

“I was in no way new to Tiki culture, but at that time I was unaware of current artists painting on velvet. I was under the impression that the art form had died a sad death after the 70s, and justifiably so since the art form had become degraded due to mass production for the tourist trade. Of course, since then I have since learned of a handful of new velvet artists – such as the marvelously talented Gwen Rosewater – who are creating masterful works. Hey to Gwen!”

Taking on the hotel project, Tracy taught herself how to paint on velvet and proceeded to create twenty-nine original velvet paintings for the hotel in various sizes and themes. The grand opening was covered by local press, so she received some initial exposure to her velvet paintings in Palm Springs. Unfortunately, the Tiki Hotel closed its doors after only two years, and two velvet paintings were stolen



Tiki de Lamarr



Tarita

in the process. With the doors closing on that enterprise, she packed up her remaining artwork and stuck it in a closet for a few years and returned to painting on canvas.

In January 2025, as she looked in her garage at all the fantastic vintage bamboo frames her husband and partner in crime had collected – sitting there useless and lonely – her thoughts returned to the velvet potential. As she considered reanimating her velvet ambitions, she realized she did not have enough storage room for new art without selling her existing works. She looked to social media to market her art for the first time ever.

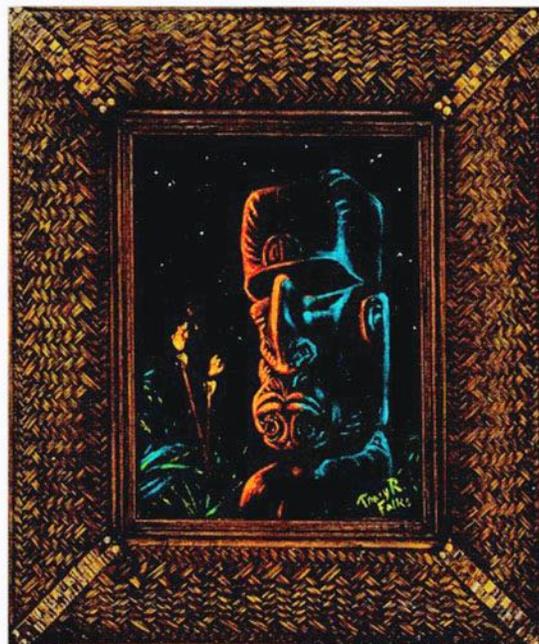
“I was producing a lot of content, so when I launched my website, my husband suggested I begin posting on the Facebook group This Is Tiki (love you guys!) and a few similar sites. And WOW! Sales and commission requests manifested almost immediately, and inquiries from the Tiki community came in from around the country, which is awesome. I now have a few collectors, and I am making many new friends in the process,” Tracy exclaims.

“It is great to know that velvet is still alive and finding a new audience in this day and age!”

Commercial success aside, Tracy aspires to paint to the level of velvet masters of yesterday, such as Edgar Lecetg & Tyree, who are never far from her thoughts. When she begins a new piece, she works hard to live up to the high standards of those noted velvet artists. She hopes her works elevate the artform, along with her other contemporary velvet comrades, and create new works that inspire.

And what makes velvet art stand out from other mediums of artistic expression?

“At its best, velvet artwork is exotic, intoxicating, and sexy or humorous. Velvet pulls the viewer in deeply and has the ability to act as a portal, temporarily transporting you to another world. Taking you to a place where exotic music plays on balmy nights, where the moonlight glistens on water, and where the scent of plumeria fills the air. A place where tropical beverages flow in the dim glow of tiki bars, and carved Tikis stand as silent



Mamao



Marina

yet powerful guardians over the tropical paradise of your dreams. I paint in the hope that I can manifest the best of those dreams.”

Ever-looking ahead, Tracy plans to exhibit at more Tiki events, such as the Circa Caliente in Palm Springs, where she recently featured her velvets in October 2025. Ever thankful, Tracy says, “A call-out



Trouble

to Rory Schneider for creating so many memorable events over the years at my go-to Tiki bar, The Reef.”

Velvets fit into Tracy’s philosophy that art should be affordable and accessible to everyone, not just for the wealthier among us, which is often the case. As such, she works with clients to produce pieces according to their needs without sacrificing artistic quality.

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