

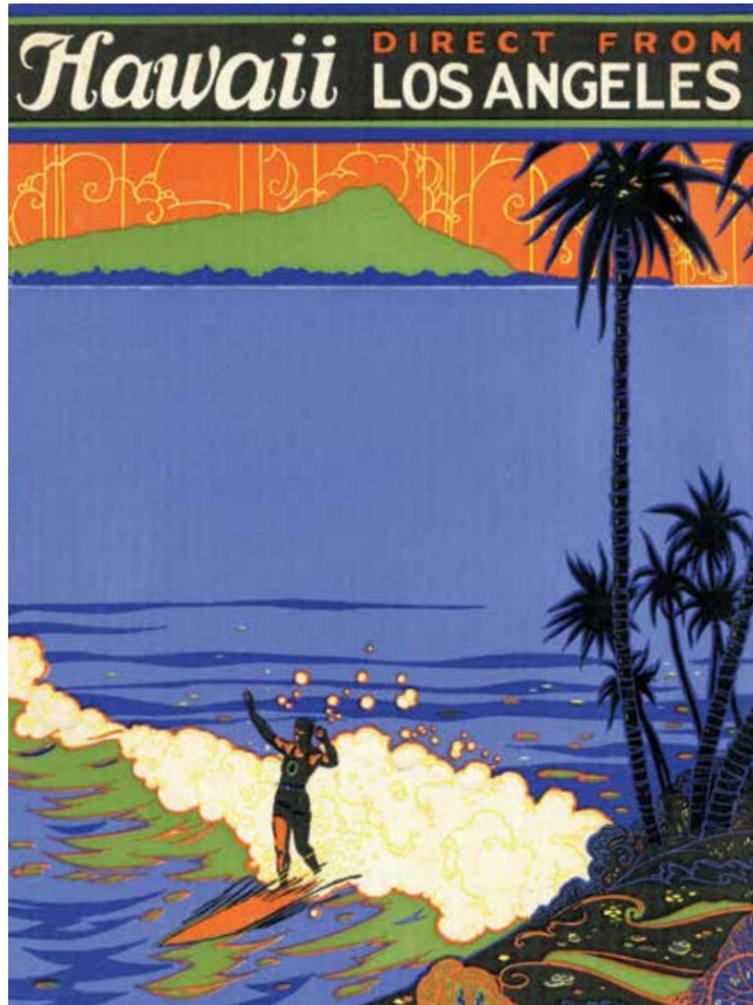


The Art of Ephemera

Prewar Hawai'i, à la Art Deco posters

Text by **ILIMA LOOMIS**





Take a lei-draped hula girl, add one bathing beauty lounging on pristine white sand, mix with a well-toned surfer contemplating the possibilities and you have the recipe for the perfect prewar Hawai'i travel poster.

The vintage Matson advertisement from the golden era of Hawai'i tourism checks off all the boxes: exoticism, natural beauty, sport and just a hint of sex.

Starting in the 1920s and continuing through statehood, Hawai'i tourism agencies and private travel companies, such as Dole, Matson, Pan American and United Airlines, produced a treasure trove of illustrated posters and other ephemera that may have served as promotional materials at the time. Today they are collected and celebrated as works of art produced by artistic luminaries of prewar America. Painters and sculptors such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Isamu Noguchi and Joseph Feher were among those who created posters and advertisements that embodied the Art Deco aesthetic of their time. They also laid

the foundation for how Hawai'i would be perceived by the world through the 20th century and beyond: as an eternal playground of colorful flowers, exotic culture, outdoor adventure and romance.

"This is how the idea of what Hawai'i was was disseminated to the world," says Theresa Papanikolas, curator of European and American art at the Honolulu Museum of Art.

The posters spoke the international visual language of Art Deco, a style that had emerged in France after World War I and which was quickly popularized and adapted around the world. Borrowing the strong lines, bold colors and stylized imagery of high modernism, Art Deco backed away from the more extreme abstraction of its predecessor for a more representational approach. Historical themes, storytelling elements and recognizable figures made Art Deco works even more accessible to a general audience, and the style found a natural home in the world of advertising and design. "I like to describe Art Deco as a friendly form of modernism," says Papanikolas.

Its populist nature and internationalism also made Art Deco a bit of an aesthetic chameleon, with a style that was strongly influenced by its sense of place. In Hawai'i, that translated to a brighter, floral-inspired color palette and a focus on images of natural beauty and the exotic culture of the Islands. "You see a lot of references to living antiquity," she says.

Those characteristics might be epitomized in Eugene Savage's iconic series of paintings for Matson in 1940. The images depict bright and stylized historical scenes of Hawaiian celebration, complete with seductive

WAVE RIDERS

(Previous spread) "Bathing Beauties" by Gill, the popular 1930s airbrush artist.

(This page) The back cover of a promotional advertising booklet, courtesy of the DeSoto Brown collection.



HULA GIRLS

American artist Ted Mundorff, a Pennsylvania native and graduate of Honolulu's Punahou School, painted "Aloha Nui Loa from Hawaii," a brochure cover from the 1930s.

COME TO HAWAII

Matson Navigation used original art to promote Hawai'i from the 1890s on (as in this work, c. 1916). Matson opened the Moana and Royal Hawaiian hotels and had a vested interest in the Islands.



SEE HAWAII

MATSON NAVIGATION CO.
SAN FRANCISCO — HONOLULU
DIRECT TO VOLCANO

Hawai'i was no longer this distant paradise.

hula dancers, chiefs bedecked in royal finery, merrily feasting villagers and a lush mountain backdrop. The murals, which famously adorned the menu covers on Matson's Hawai'i-bound ocean liners, were the highlight of the Honolulu Museum of Art's recent "Art Deco Hawai'i" exhibit, where they were displayed publicly for the first time.

"In Hawai'i, the Art Deco style tends to be very happy and often whimsical," notes Alan Dickar, owner of the Lahaina gallery Vintage European Posters. That's a distinct departure from American and European styles, which reflected "the full range of emotions," including some works that were somber or even severe. "The Hawaiian version tended to be relaxed and fun, and almost universally happy—and that makes sense," Dickar says.

It's also around this time that the image of the Islands shifts from that of a distant, exotic fantasyland, out-of-reach for all but the most intrepid travelers, to that of a once-in-a-lifetime adventure destination accessible to wealthy Americans. That spirit is embodied in many airline posters of the time depicting carefree tourists in the waves of Waikiki. Dickar says the international acclaim of Duke Kahanamoku, waterman and Olympian of the 1920s and '30s, contributed to the mainlanders' fascination with Hawai'i and inspired much of the surfing, paddling and other sports-related imagery that proliferated on travel posters of the day.

"All of a sudden there was this exoticism of Hawai'i that went even beyond the paradise aspect," he says. At the same time, new ocean liners like the Lurline were making it easier than ever to travel to the islands. "Especially in the '30s, Hawai'i was no longer this distant paradise that very few people could ever get to. Now it was accessible, and there was even more reason to come."

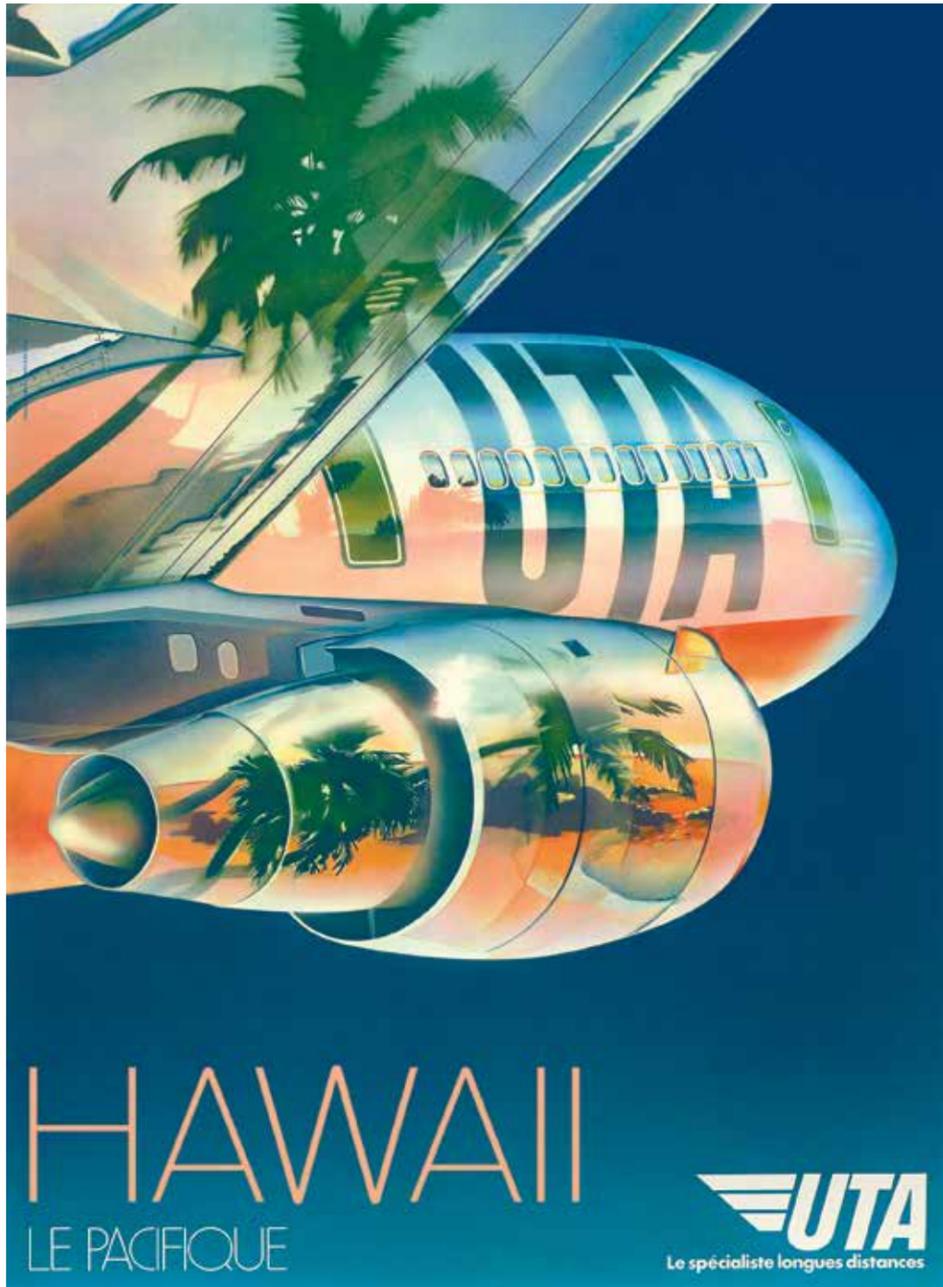
With Honolulu the primary destination for most visitors, there are hardly any prewar travel posters that featured Maui or the other neighbor islands, notes DeSoto Brown, historian and archivist for the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. The neighbor island ephemera from this time period, adds Dickar, are more likely to consist of small advertisements or leaflets for local events. Likely printed by hand on cheap paper in extremely small runs, then handed out to local businesses who threw them away when they were out of date, few survive today.

Even the better-known travel posters created by Matson, United Airlines and Pan Am can be hard to find. Most were mailed directly to stores and businesses on the mainland "so the average person never owned any," Brown notes. "Furthermore, they were often damaged when they were displayed—by glue or with holes put in them—or were exposed to sunlight that faded them, or to outdoor weather that ruined them. And when they were outdated, they were intentionally thrown out or destroyed."



LAND AND SEA

Pan Am was the only airline flying to Hawai'i for more than a decade. Artist Mark von Arenburg made many posters for the airline, including this one from the 1940s.



AIRBORNE AT LAST

Union de Transports Aériens, which also traveled to Tahiti, featured this 1960s poster. The airline merged with Air France in the early 1990s.

They're beautiful, and they're a piece of history.

While the prewar years may have been a kind of golden age for Hawai'i travel, it was still a small market. For more than a decade, Pan Am was the only airline flying to Hawai'i. According to Brown, posters and advertising increased dramatically when the federal government authorized other airlines to begin making the trip in 1947. "Not only were more passengers coming here, but the trip was shorter, too," he says. "So there were more locations to display posters, such as an increased number of travel agencies." The launch of jet travel in 1959 caused an even bigger explosion in visitor counts and promotional campaigns. As photographic advertising began to dominate during this period, the golden era of artistic illustration began to wane.

The rareness and beauty of illustrated prewar Hawai'i travel posters make them extremely collectible today, Dickar notes. The most famous of Paul George Lawler's Pan Am Clipper posters of the 1930s—depicting a Polynesian woman reclining under a tree while, in the background, a seaplane descends for a landing—is now an iconic collectible. That poster routinely sells for around \$35,000 today, he says. But other posters are more accessible to collectors, with many from the period selling for under \$2,000 and more modern ephemera, from the 1950s to '80s, available for a few hundred dollars.

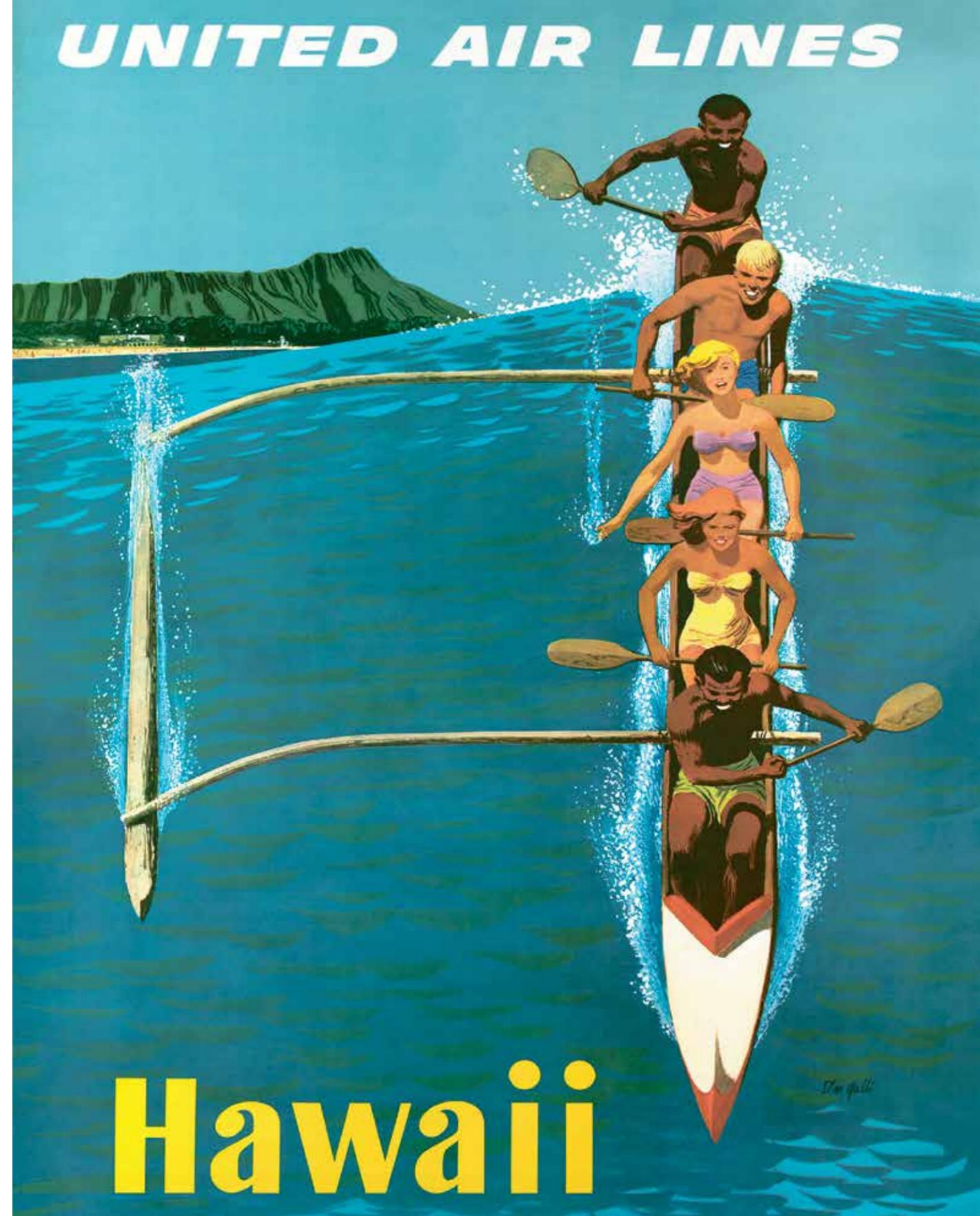
Modern collectors were not the only ones who viewed the posters as works of art.

As Papanikolas notes, the line between fine and

commercial art was especially blurry during the Art Deco period because so many of the era's artistic greats moved freely between both realms. "In that time there wasn't really a gallery scene, so they had to support themselves doing commercial work," she says. "There's a distinction, but it's all part of the same visual culture."

That is one advantage of collecting posters, says Dickar. Most people can't afford to own great works of art, but they can buy an original poster created by a great artist and have a piece that will, in time, hold its value or grow.

"People can actually own something famous that's real, and that's unusual because it's so accessible," he says. "They're beautiful, and they're a piece of history." 🌺



THE PERFECT RIDE

Artist Stan Galli's United Airlines poster, circa 1960 (when United still spelled "Airlines" in two words), was one of many the illustrator designed. He also designed 26 U.S. postage stamps.

Except for the image on page 38, courtesy of the DeSoto Brown Collection, vintage posters in this story are from Bernard M. Lassalle of Pacifica Island Art, Inc.; 800.222.7327; www.classicvintageposters.com. Alan Dickar's collection numbers nearly 100,000 at Vintage European Posters, 744 Front St., Ste. 2, Lahaina; 808.662.8688; www.europe-anposters.com.