



Inside Kūali'i

*A new book
invites readers into
Sam and Mary Cooke's
historic Mānoa residence
and debuts their stunning
collection of Hawai'i-
related art*

STORY BY **LESA GRIFFITH** | PHOTOS BY **LINNY MORRIS**

Mary Moragne Cooke stands on a balcony at Kūali'i, her family's estate, dressed in a mandarin-collared floral-print mu'umu'u. "My uniform," she jokes. Behind the stately 1911 Tudor-style home in Mānoa are lush native Hawaiian plant gardens, and overlooking those is an ancient stone heiau, or temple, called Kūka'ō'ō, which the Cooke family has steadfastly preserved. Above the redbrick fireplace in the dining room hangs another Hawai'i treasure: *Hanalei Valley*, painted by D. Howard Hitchcock, the pre-eminent landscape artist of Hawai'i. It's a remarkable work: A shaft of sunlight sets the taro fields aglow, echoing the epic nineteenth-century landscapes by artists like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran. The image is so compelling, it graces the cover of a new book about the art collection amassed by Mary and her late husband, Sam Cooke, who died after a battle with cancer in 2015.

Kūali'i is Mary Cooke's private residence, but the Hawaiian plant gardens, the heiau and a new visitor center currently under construction are all part of the Mānoa Heritage Center, a gift of sorts to the



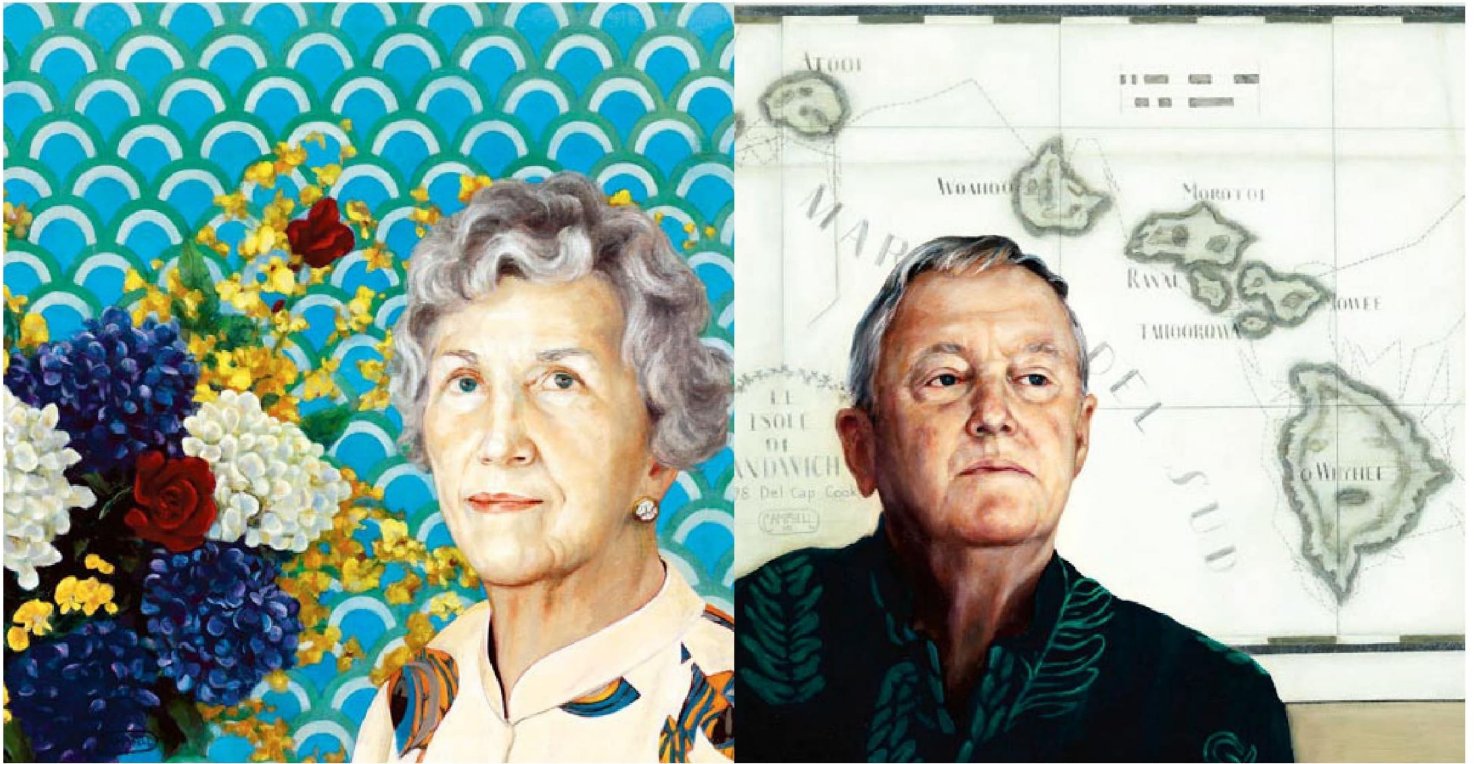
people of Hawai'i. Last December the center issued its first book, *Painting, Prints, and Drawings of Hawaii from the Sam and Mary Cooke Collection*, an intimate look inside Kūali'i and the remarkable art collection it contains—a collection that until now was exclusively private. The book not only highlights the Cookes' connoisseurship, it provides a stunning visual history of the Islands through the eyes

of Western artists from the 1770s to the twentieth century.

The Cooke family name is familiar to anyone who's spent much time in Hawai'i. In 1837, Amos Starr Cooke and wife Juliette Montague Cooke arrived in Honolulu as missionaries. In 1851, with funding for the missions dwindling, Cooke co-founded Castle & Cooke, a humble general store that grew to become one of the "big five" businesses in Hawai'i and remains one of the foremost real estate developers in the Islands. Cooke's son, Charles Montague Cooke, co-founded the Bank of Hawaii. His wife, Anna Charlotte Rice, was bitten by the collecting bug while decorating their home and became a serious art collector. She went on to create the Honolulu Academy of Arts (now called the Honolulu Museum of Art) in 1927. One of their eight children, Charles Montague Cooke Jr., was a scientist—a malacologist, to be exact—but he also inherited his mother's passion for art and amassed a superb collection of prints. Charles Jr. (Sam's grandfather) built Kūali'i on twenty green acres in Mānoa—



Mary Cooke (top) at the fireplace in Kūali'i, the Mānoa residence where she and her late husband, Sam Cooke, keep their extraordinary private collection of Hawai'i-related art. Hanging above the fireplace is D. Howard Hitchcock's *Hanalei Valley*. Clockwise from above left: Kūka'ō'ō, a heiau on the grounds of the Cooke estate that the family has preserved and restored; the exterior of Kūali'i; and Mary Cooke in the living room surrounded by some of the art.



a wedding gift from his parents—and ensured that the heiau on the property was protected.

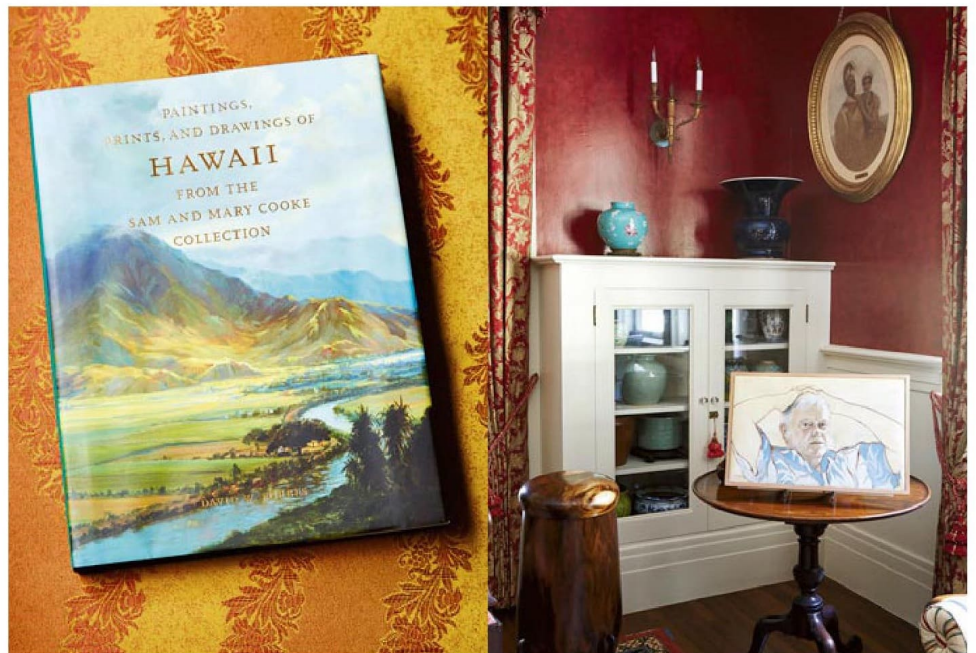
Kūka'ō'ō is the only remaining intact heiau out of sixteen known to have existed in the ahupua'a (ancient land division) of Waikīkī. It's a miracle that it still exists. It survived the violent abolition of the Hawaiian religion in 1819, when many heiau were demolished. But Charles Jr. owed his life to ancient Hawaiian knowledge. "He was born premature," explains Mary, "so his father went to Hawai'i Island to see a kahuna lā'au lapa'au," a traditional herbal healer, "renowned for keeping premature babies alive. He hired her to come and take care of the baby." Under Ka'a'aina Naihe's care, Charles Jr. survived and felt indebted to the Hawaiian people. So when the architects he hired to design Kūali'i sited the house atop the heiau to take advantage of the views, Charles Jr. objected and had them find an alternative.

When Sam's grandmother died in 1970, she divided up the estate, leaving the house to her son—Sam's father, Charles Montague Cooke II—and the garden to her daughter, Carolene Alexander Cooke. "Sam's father wanted to tear the house down, and we said, 'No, no, we want to live there,' and talked him into letting us buy it," says Mary. "I was born on Kaua'i and spent time in my grandfather's homes. I've always loved historic homes. It was very important to me to save Kūali'i because it really is extremely beautifully made." Mary oversaw the restoration of the

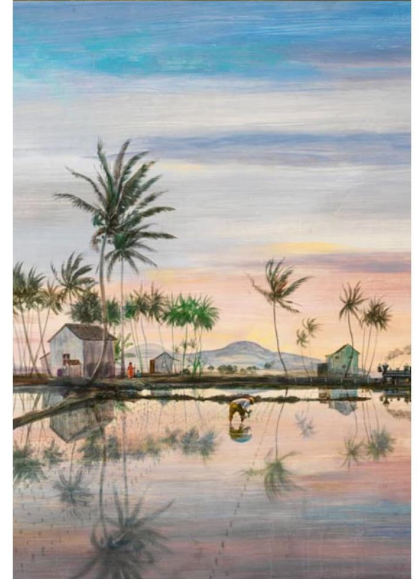
house and has assiduously maintained it for forty-six years.

Carolene's children sold the garden parcel to a developer, who sliced it up into eight lots. Again Kūka'ō'ō was under threat. "Sam said, 'We have got to buy the lot with the heiau on it.' That was more important than the house," Mary says. She and Sam purchased the heiau land as well as two additional parcels. "We said, 'Now what do we do with all of this?'" Mary recalls. They took their inspiration from another missionary family, the Wilcoxes—

who happen to belong to Sam's mother's clan. They had turned their Kaua'i home into a nonprofit museum, Grove Farm Homestead, in 1980. "That was a model for us," says Mary. But one among several: "Sam's great-grandmother Anna Rice Cooke tore down her house on Beretania Street and donated it to start the Honolulu Academy of Arts, then built herself a home in Makiki Heights, which is now Honolulu Museum of Art Spalding House. So it's a kind of family tradition, establishing a foundation to save a home."



At top, portraits of Mary and Sam Cooke by Chris Campbell. Before Sam died in 2015, he and Mary amassed a collection of 2,180 pieces of art that reflect the couple's love for Hawai'i, which the Cooke family has called home since 1837. The collection is featured in *Paintings, Prints, and Drawings of Hawaii* (above left), just published by the Mānoa Heritage Center. Above right, the den at Kūali'i.



A selection of works from the Sam and Mary Cooke collection: *Hawaiian Woman with Ilima Lei*, by Grace Carpenter Hudson (top); detail from *Iron Horse Comes to Hawaii, 1889*, by Peter Hurd (above); *Yellow-Ginger—Koolau Cliffs*, by Lloyd Sexton (facing page, top); *Haleiwa Net Fisherman*, by Lionel Walden (facing page, bottom).

“The cover choice was unanimous,” says David W. Forbes, a leading authority on Hawai‘i art, sitting in the dining room at Kūali‘i and pointing emphatically at the cover of *Paintings, Prints, and Drawings of Hawaii*, which he authored. “It is a showstopper. Everybody knows what it is. And it’s probably one of Hitchcock’s ten best paintings. If he had been able to sustain painting at that pitch, he would have been a much more famous artist.”

Forbes’ knowledge of Hawai‘i art is encyclopedic. He speaks fluently about

everything from eighteenth-century prints of Island life by Louis Choris to a contemporary oil-on-canvas view of Hanalei by Gregory Pai. It’s a passion he shared with Sam, whose own entrée to collecting was through rare books—also one of Forbes’ obsessions. Those who knew Sam well had heard the story of his first acquisition: Captain James Cook’s *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*, which he bought for \$40 in New York City. From that humble start, Sam and Mary went on to amass a collection of 2,180 prints, drawings and paintings.

The thread tying the collection together is geography—Sam’s deeply felt connection to Mānoa, Kaua‘i and Moloka‘i is clear in the rooms of Kūali‘i and in the pages of *Paintings, Prints, and Drawings of Hawaii*.

“The collection is an expression of Sam’s genuine love of the land,” says Forbes. “He didn’t just willy-nilly buy paintings. He’d been looking at paintings for a very long time. I showed him a couple things once, and he said, ‘No, I don’t want that, I don’t like that part of the island.’ There was a process going on.” Family

friend David Lee notes that Sam was “really a scholarly man, though he kind of kept it under wraps. There are lots of collectors who buy rare books as trophies. They weren’t trophies for Sam. They were books that he read and understood. He was an amazingly bright and cultured man.”

In 2013 the Hawai'i State Art Museum commissioned Forbes to write *He Makana: The Gertrude Mary Joan Damon Haig Collection of Hawaiian Art, Paintings, and Prints*, to catalog a gift it had received. Sam saw the book, Mary recalls, and said, “I want something like this for my collection.” The logical choice to write it was Forbes, who was also a close friend of Sam’s and had written the monumental four-volume *Hawaiian National Bibliography*, spearheaded by Sam and Stuart T.K. Ho.

As familiar as Forbes was with the Sam and Mary Cooke Collection, he still made discoveries during the writing of the book, such as twenty drawings by Swiss artist Paul Emmert, who arrived in Hawai'i in 1853. “I had never seen them before, and they were quite wonderful,” Forbes says.

Hanging throughout Kūali'i is a set of ten four-by-five-foot paintings depicting key events in Hawai'i history, such as Captain Cook’s arrival at Kealakekua and the election of King David Kalākaua. The one titled *Before the Whiteman Came to Hawaii* shows malo-clad warriors dancing around a beach bonfire. Mary chuckles when she recalls Sam telling her he wanted to buy them. “Where are you going to put those?” she said. Today she calls this purchase his “major accomplishment.”

The paintings were a coup for the Cookes’ collection: The now-defunct Honolulu-based company American Factors had commissioned well-known Southwest American artist Peter Hurd to create a series of paintings for its centennial in 1949. “These were first viewed locally by the public at the Honolulu Academy of Arts and later in the American Factors headquarters at the foot of Fort Street,” writes Forbes. “These proved so popular that the company continued to issue them (through their retail outfit, Liberty House) for more than twenty-five years.” Sam had to have the originals. Lee recounts that Sam “had liked those paintings, I think, since they were first done. And when Amfac was purchased by JMB Realty in 1988 and eventually fell apart, Sam approached them about buying them. But they still wouldn’t sell the paintings—they were going to put them in a lobby in a

condo on Maui.” So Sam resorted to pulling some strings. “Sam turned to Tim Johns, who had been head of the state Department of Land and Natural Resources and had done a lot of favors for Amfac. So when Tim Johns called Amfac and said, ‘You sell those paintings to Sam Cooke,’ they said, ‘OK.’”

Made with egg tempera, a medium more delicate than oil, the paintings would not have fared well in a Maui condo. Sam’s purchase was, in essence, another example of the Cooke family preserving a Hawai'i treasure.

The opening of the Mānoa Heritage Center’s new visitor center this summer will represent the culmination of twenty years of work by Mary and Sam. But the center will be more than just a museum, says executive director Jessica Welch. It will be a “living classroom that tells the story of Hawaiian culture and natural heritage.” Mary intends to open Kūali'i and its art collection—which is, according to Forbes, “unsurpassed by any other private collection in the Islands”—to the public in the future.

Sam and Mary methodically worked their way through the project over many years, starting in 1994 when they brought over Hawai'i Island stonemason Billy Fields to restore the heiau and hired architect Geoffrey Lewis to design the LEED-certified visitor center. “The remarkable thing about Sam and Mary is how much experience they had going into this,” says Lee. “Mary was on the board of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Sam was responsible for bringing The Nature Conservancy to Hawai'i. So they knew what they were getting into. And, of course, Sam was on the board of the Honolulu Museum of Art, so he knew about curatorial responsibilities.”

Welch marvels at Mary’s drive and energy in shepherding the multiple aspects of the project to completion. She personally packages books for shipping, organized a signing for Forbes in her living room and promotes the book, all while overseeing the expansion of the center. “Mary doesn’t have to do this,” Welch says. “But it’s in her DNA. I’ve learned she has always taken on big projects, like a warrior. This center has been her baby for the last twenty years. She has been fundraising for the visitor center and the heiau, overseeing the transition of the garden to a native Hawaiian plant resource—she has been working on this every single day for the people, not for herself.” **HH**