



A Model Life

Konrad Juestel has found a way to cap a career in nautical antiques, selling hand-crafted models of Hawaiian canoes.

STORY BY JOHN HECKATHORN • PHOTOS BY DAVID CROXFORD



“I always wanted a gallery that turned old guys with gold American Express cards into wide-eyed 5-year-old kids,” says Konrad Juestel.

He’s succeeded. On the only corner with a stoplight in the Maui beach town of Pā‘ia stands Konrad’s Ship Gallery. Glance in the windows, and you’re drawn in. The walls and shelves are lined with incredibly detailed, hand-crafted and consequently expensive ship models—full-rigged sailing ships, famous racing yachts, speedboats. It’s as if they cast a spell. You may have never thought about ship models before; one look, and you wish you could afford one.

Should you desire, say, a 5-1/2-foot-long, koa-detailed, fully rigged model of the only boat to win the America’s Cup twice in a row, J.P. Morgan’s yacht *Columbia*, well, you’d better hurry.

Juestel is phasing out the ship models, in favor of museum-quality carvings of Hawaiian canoes. “That’s what I always wanted to do,” he says. “But when I started, there were only two full-time carvers doing the kind of quality work I wanted. Now, there are 10. We represent all of them, and some of them exclusively.”

His model-makers are each a story in themselves. Among them:

- Miles Fry, named a Smithsonian Folk Artist for the accuracy, detail and beauty of his canoe models, which are represented worldwide in museums and private collections.

- David Young, whose book, *Na Mea Makamae: Hawaiian Treasures*, is essential for any student of native Hawaiian art and artifacts.

- Brad Eaves uses tools passed down from his grandfather, who, in 1882, built ‘Iolani Palace’s koa and kamani staircase for King David Kalākaua. The tools will go to his son, Greg, who often works with his father.

ABOVE A 44-inch koa canoe sculpture by Maui artist, Carlos Vignolo, \$4,500. **BOTTOM LEFT** Konrad Juestel relaxes next to Greg Eaves’ museum-quality koa outrigger models. His ship models are being phased out in favor of Hawaiian canoes.

- LeVan Keola Sequeira, who trained under the *Hōkūle‘a*’s master builder, Wright Bowman, and carves full-size Polynesian voyaging canoes as well as models. Juestel calls him “the priest of Hawaiian canoes.”

- Francis Pimmel, whose painstaking research and meticulous models have won awards and put him on Home and Garden Television’s *Modern Masters* program.

- Dustin “Hurricane” Hesse, who became a legend in the windsurfing community for surfing during Hurricane Hugo in St. Croix.

There are a few paintings in the gallery, expressionist works by Juestel’s father, Konrad Sr., who was a protégé of the great Czech painter Oskar Kokoschka. World War II eventually displaced the family to Indiana, where the senior Konrad Juestel became an antique restorer and furniture maker. “He did that to feed us kids,” says Juestel.

Juestel set out for exotic places. “In northern Indiana the most prominent landmark is the horizon. I had to get out of there,” he says. In the ‘70s, he landed in Hawai‘i, where he apprenticed under the legendary Honolulu antique dealer Arnie Coward. From there he went on to establish the Whaling Museum in Kā’anapali, Maui, then owned a series of small Maui shops until he moved to his present “sweet corner,” as he calls it.

“I set out to deal in nautical antiques,” he says. “Then I realized that modern ship models were often better than the old ones—and they were the only newly created things taken seriously by museums and collectors.”

The canoes, of course, have great significance in Hawaiian culture, which is why accuracy is important.

“If the gallery can be of tiny benefit to the Hawaiian Renaissance, then it makes me feel that it’s a great way to end up my career.” Even though the exquisitely crafted models often sell for four figures, says Juestel, “I don’t make much money at it. But it’s a classy way to go. And no one else is doing it.” †

Konrad’s Ship Gallery

120 Hāna Highway

(808) 579-9622

www.konradships.com