



# Capturing the art of hula in Paris

By Keaumiki Akui

Whenever Hawaiians speak of the “continent,” it is usually in reference to the U.S. mainland, where more than 150,000 expatriated Hawaiians live coast to coast. However, to much of the world, “the continent” refers to mainland Europe. While we often hear news of relatives or prominent Hawaiians on the American mainland, seldom do we have the opportunity to learn about Hawaiians living on the “original” continent.

One such expat, Sandra Kilohana Kwock-Silve, has captivated Parisians with the mana of Hawaiian culture. From her apartment on the Right Bank of the Seine River in the “City of Lights,” Silve, who originally hails from Mānoa, started her Hālau Hula ‘O Mānoa about a decade ago – sparked by her daughter Leilani’s desire to learn more of her Hawaiian heritage.

A 1970 graduate of University High School, Silve studied hula with Emma Bishop as a child and later with John Keola Lake and Ellen Castillo. Kumu Hula Uncle George Holoka’i continues to be an inspiration to Silve’s ongoing educational process. “I have been privileged,” she recalls, “to have studied with those respected kumu hula. The foundation they provided has nurtured me through my entire career.”

Silve’s pursuit of higher education initially kept her in Mānoa, as she pursued a degree in art history at the University of Hawai‘i. But like many art history majors, she dreamed of studying in Paris, and turned that dream into reality during her junior year. She eventually settled there and has been an adopted Parisian now for the last 25 years.

While pursuing a career as an art critic, Silve met and married a fellow artist, French sculptor Philippe



Parisian hula teacher Sandra Kwock-Silve beams in front of one of the works created as part of her Art of Hula project. Photo: Therese Multz

Thill, and in 1978 their daughter Leilani was born. In order to help the youngster connect with her Hawaiian heritage, Silve realized that a hālau was necessary. Soon the strains of Hawaiian music echoed from their 19th century apartment, where French students learned that hula was more than just a dance – that it is truly a way of life. Most influential to the hālau was Sandra’s second husband, Bernard Kapono Silve, an accomplished dancer and chanter himself.

The hālau has performed at numerous events, including Europe’s premier surfing event, the Biarritz Surf Festival in the southwest of France, which draws over 100,000 spectators annually. Silve says the effect of hula on French audiences varies, but it is usually one of delight, especially after they realize how different it is from the dance of Tahiti, a culture they are more familiar with. To this day, her hālau remains the only Hawaiian dance troupe in Paris.

As an art critic, Silve is internationally known, with ties to the American University of Paris, and she has

been a contributing writer for the *Paris Voice*, a magazine for English-speaking Parisians. Her love for art and her love for hula merged several years ago, when she began to put together the Art of Hula Project, which brings artists in a variety of media into the dance studio to capture the haumāna (students) in action.

The idea took shape one night during a performance by her hālau at the Russian Conservatory in Paris. Her friend Kathy Burke, an artist of renown throughout Europe, captured the performance on her sketch pad, and Silve was impressed by her rich expression of the event. Before you could say ho’omākaukau, Silve assembled fifteen international artists to interpret hula in a broad range of disciplines and styles. The project gave rise to an exhibit called “Hawai‘i in Paris: The Art of Hula,” and the creative synthesis between the artists and dancers induced a filmmaker to capture the experience for a future documentary.

It has been Silve’s dream to bring the exhibit home to the islands, and to develop a similar experience for the children of Hawai‘i through the Konishiki Learning Center Arts Program in Wai‘ānae, under the auspices of the France-Hawai‘i Association Cultural Exchange Program. An exhibit of children’s work is in fact scheduled to be shown at Honolulu Hale in the summer of 2005, with presentations in France and Japan in 2006.

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