

## Leeteg: Babes, Bars, Beaches, and Black Velvet Art

**C. J. Cook**

**Michael Ashley**

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*Leeteg is the fascinating biography of an artist who captured Tahitian life at an appealing time in its history.*

C. J. Cook's biography *Leeteg* is set in Tahiti prior to World War II; it addresses the art of painting on velvet via the epic life of artist Edgar Leeteg.

Born in St. Louis in 1904, Leeteg struggled to help his mother after his father's death. He was unskilled at his father's trade, though, so he turned to his true, albeit underpaid passion and found work as a commercial illustrator. As the Great Depression deepened, his wages became inadequate to support the family, though. He and his mother moved to Tahiti, and he was never a permanent resident of the US again.

Cook reveals Tahiti as a relaxed, interesting, and inexpensive outpost between the world wars, and describes Leeteg as a man who was suited to its environment by nature. Overjoyed to be in Tahiti, even as he was forced to camp in ditches and yards, he found that fresh fruit, fish, and vegetables were cheap and delicious. Indeed, Tahiti had yet to be discovered by tourists. In this environment, gregarious Leeteg was quick to make friends. Quotes from those who knew him are used to reveal his quick-witted, congenial personality.

Women, including both Leeteg's wives and lovers, came to form a large body of his most collectible art, so much so that people often think of him as an illustrator of calendar-style beauties. Yet both the book's text and illustrations show that his output included portraits of Tahitian men, scenes of Tahitian daily life, flora, and landscapes. Leeteg painted many semi-nude women because it was common dress for them, Cook says, and because nudes fetched more money from Americans and Europeans.

Leeteg's success was not without its dark sides: as prices rose with the demand for art for tiki-themed bars and restaurants, Leeteg featured more full nudes, idealized and interchangeable. Cook follows along as Leeteg's high-spirited activities and drinking led him into alcoholism. His two marriages to Tahitian beauties are also recorded—as is the fact that Leeteg was careless of their feelings, not even bothering to conceal his affairs. His mother, who never saw much value in his art, proves to be the one woman who sticks with him, and the one woman he remained devoted to.

Cook's work is entertaining and knowledgeable. The breadth of its featured cast, quotes, and remembrances make this biography lively. Tahiti, its people, roistering ex-pats, and luminous landscapes vibrate like personal memories. Leeteg's landscapes appear alongside Paul Gauguin's questions about the fine and arbitrary line that separates "popular" art from work acclaimed "great."

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SUSAN WAGGONER (June 3, 2021)

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