

Tyree, Artist of the South Pacific

CJ Cook

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Tyree's oil paintings of Polynesian models have become iconic types; Cook's collection is a fitting tribute.

Ralph Burke Tyree was the kind of artist whose work will be familiar to many who don't know him by name, as his paintings of the South Pacific exemplified the post-World War II craze for Polynesian imagery. C. J. Cook makes his *Tyree, Artist of the South Pacific* a clear labor of love, and a definitive look at the artist's life, influences, and creative output.

Tyree's art career began when he was stationed in Samoa as a private in the Marine Corps, painting portraits of the officers or their loved ones, or wall murals of Polynesian scenery. He is probably best known for his South Pacific nudes, which he began painting while in the marines and continued crafting on black velvet in the style of 1950s and 1960s tiki bars.

His oil paintings of Polynesian models have become iconic types. Still, his work beyond them was far more diverse, including an excellent series on endangered animals, vivid Polynesian landscapes, and clever wartime depictions of his future wife back home.

Tyree, Artist of the South Pacific includes dozens of well-produced examples of the artist's work, from his early and unpublished pieces to his trademark velvet paintings. The book excels in delivering additional information, including interviews with Tyree's adult children (whose own stories and artistic endeavors receive a short chapter near the end); their anecdotes and memories help flesh out the artist's biography. Family photos and other artifacts further enhance the biographical side of the work.

The book successfully puts Tyree in context, discussing how earlier Western artists and writers, from Paul Gauguin to Robert Louis Stevenson, found inspiration in the South Pacific. It briefly introduces the work of the other black-velvet artists among Tyree's contemporaries and explains the role that wartime life played in forming Tyree as a painter.

The combination of the artist's biography with his collection makes *Tyree, Artist of the South Pacific* a fitting tribute.

JEFF FLEISCHER (July/August 2017)

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