

## WOLFGANG WOLFF | 1909 - 1994

(written by Goetz Wolff)

Wolfgang Wolff, postimpressionist artist, was born September 30, 1909 in St. Louis, Alsace Lorraine, at which time the territory was part of Germany. Wolff and his wife fled Nazi oppression with a daring escape to Tahiti, leaving behind family home, country, and most of their worldly possessions. With the commencement of World War II, he was imprisoned in a prison camp by the French on Tahiti because of his German birth. His wife smuggled art supplies and finished works in and out of the prison in their baby's diapers during visits which allowed Wolfgang to continue working during his internment. The artwork was sold to tourists to help support the family. Wolfgang's work depicts every day life and addresses social justice issues subtly through the lives of their subjects.

He was an administrative law judge when the Nazi government required all civil servants to join the volunteer army or lose their jobs or other dire consequences. Drills were required of all "volunteers" during lunch hours and on Sundays (there was a mandatory 6 day work week with the 7th day set aside for learning and practicing the military goose-step march). Wolfgang continuously stepped on the heels of the volunteer in the row preceding him, causing a domino effect on the entire formation resulting in total pandemonium of the exercises. Years later when asked, if his stepping on the person ahead of him was an accident, he would respond with a twinkle in his eye, "Yes, the first time". As punishment, and to keep him away from the other marchers, he was forced to continuously run around the perimeter of the courtyard. However, Wolfgang enjoyed running and preferred the punishment to the military maneuvers.

The Nazi government attempted to press him into military service, but upon his physical exam, a mysterious heart murmur/arrhythmia was discovered. He had never had prior heart difficulties and amazingly, no heart difficulties afterwards. In later years, he told his only son that he believed it was mind over matter and that he willed the irregular heart beat.

Exit visas from Germany were hard to come by. With three other people, he planned an escape to Tahiti. One accomplice, Hildegard, the daughter of a doctor, was an x-ray nurse from Saar. Wolfgang married Hildegard, who had the unusual nickname of Max, for the two of them to use a cover story of a honeymoon in Tahiti. Max would remain his wife until her death over 60 years later. A key element to their successful escape was one of their accomplices was French and thus provided additional cover and access to basic resources like French currency, which was more difficult for three Germans to obtain. Leaving family, friends, homeland and most of their possessions, they left Germany in 1934, packed for a two week honeymoon, via Marseilles, stopped in Martinique and through the Panama Canal to Tahiti.

Wolfgang hoped to start a vanilla Plantation in one of the outer Society Islands, but the French created obstacles. His artistic talent was recognized while in Tahiti and had an early art show in Papeete at the Bougainville that led him to have confidence to pursue an art career—although he never had any art training.

He was interned by the French, beginning immediately after the commencement of WWII in 1939 and remained incarcerated until 1945. Originally, he was interned in jail with Max, but she was released while he was imprisoned in the Fort Taravao in the swampy isthmus part of Tahiti.

At Fort Taravao, the "impressed into service Tahitian native soldier/guards at one point offered him all their guns while the French commanding officers were away in Papeete. The soldiers hoped for an uprising to throw out the colonialist French from Tahiti. Wolfgang declined, trying to explain to them the realities of geopolitics of the war.

By 1942, he and other "enemies" were interned on the island of Motu Uta in the harbor/bay of Papeete (the island no longer exists – it became part of the international airport runway) until 1945. The island was without any facilities, including fresh water, and dependent on deliveries of food and water and the prisoners had to

build their own housing. The island also had attached an obsolescent French amphibious plan which was to attract Japanese attack bombers, should they reach that far in the Pacific.

After the war he was under house arrest (since the war was not officially resolved by a peace treaty) at the family home in Punauuia even after Allies victory in Europe. Thus even trips to the dentist in Papeete had to be formally approved.

Wolfgang, Max and their only child came to the U.S. in 1948, thanks to U.S. citizen sponsors whom Wolfgang met in Tahiti before the war one had been in service with the OSS (the precursor to the CIA), which helped no doubt.

Wolfgang had exhibits before the war in Australia, Argentina and the US. His artwork was included in a book by Al Kassel, "I Went Native" and it was reviewed in the New York Times (which included one of his half tone drawings from the book) in 1939.

A significant number of his art pieces were sold over the years, beginning in Tahiti. After coming to the U.S., he had several exhibits; among the first was one at the Long Beach Pacific Coast Club, in California, during 1948. He had a few more before turning to commercial art textile designs.

In the late 1980's and early 1990's his son promoted him and he had several exhibits including a one man show at Cal State L.A. He was an award winner at an Erotic Art Exhibit at a West Hollywood art gallery, and also received an award for an outstanding piece at the L.A. City Seniors in Art Exhibit.

Wolfgang died in Los Angeles in 1994.

Permission to publish this biography provided by the kind permission of the artist's son and author, G. Wolff