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Restoring a piece of surfing history

Newport Beach studio restores oil color of Hawaiian chieftain on a classic redwood and balsa board that belonged to surfing legend Duke Kahanamoku.

By Mike Reicher



Ardenia Capannelli, a fine art conservator, shows before and after photos on the "chief" painting she restored on a wooden board once belonging to Duke Kahanamoku. (DON LEACH, Daily Pilot / February 7, 2011)

NEWPORT BEACH — From the street it looks like a gallery of European fine art, but for the last few months it has been the unlikely home to a piece of surfing history.

In this Cannery Village art conservation and restoration studio, Ardenia Capannelli has restored a painting on a board owned by Duke Kahanamoku, considered the father of modern surfing.

Wedged between a painting of French lovers from the 1800s and a Raphael-style 1600s portrait of a noble woman, the 11-foot, 6-inch redwood and balsa wood board has been revived by a woman far removed from the board's Hawaiian roots.

Capannelli honed her skills in Italy, where she studied and practiced conservation of Renaissance-era paintings. When the [Surfing Heritage Foundation](#) of San Clemente asked her to restore an oil painting of a Hawaiian chief atop a long wooden surfboard, she had no idea who Kahanamoku was.

But as soon as she propped up the board in her [Ardenia Capannelli Conservation and Restoration Studio](#), her clients — doctors, lawyers, surfers and non-surfers — marveled at it and instantly recognized Kahanamoku's name. She then realized how much he meant to surfers and others influenced the sport.

"It had a fascination because I got to work on something that represented the culture here," said Capannelli, who's intimidated by the ocean — the Pacific is not quite the Adriatic Sea.

In Italy, she touched up paintings that represented changes of human society. This project let her work on one that represented the spread of surfing from the ancient Hawaiians to the American mainland and the rest of the world.

Kahanamoku traveled the world as an Olympic swimmer and became an "ambassador" of surfing. After winning a gold medal in the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games, he performed for surfing exhibitions in Australia and the West Coast — places like Corona del Mar and others in the Los Angeles area.

In 1925, he paddled on a surfboard out where Corona del Mar State Beach is today and rescued eight people from a fishing boat that had capsized at the entrance to Newport Harbor.

Hollywood agents were taken by his striking profile and physique, and Kahanamoku soon became a supporting actor in Hollywood productions. He was typically cast as some kind of chief — Polynesian, Aztec, Indian.

Kahanamoku died in 1968.

The chief on Kahanamoku's board has a ubiquitous presence in Hawaii — his image can even be found on street signs, said Dick Metz, founder of the Surfing Heritage Foundation, who acquired the board from the Honolulu-based [Outrigger Duke Kahanamoku Foundation](#) in the late 1960s.

It was one of several boards he owned. Most of the others had carvings, but this one is special because of its painting, Metz said. Depicted is a chief wearing a mahiole, a traditional Hawaiian feather helmet.

Painted on the board when it was built in the early 1930s, the image is sealed by a heavy coat of varnish. But the finish began to chip over the years. After some of the paint began to chip off with the varnish, Metz decided to get it restored.

"We got to the point where we didn't like to move it or display it," he said.

That's when some artists friends suggested Capannelli. She has been touching up porcelain figurines, marble statues and other pieces of fine art in her Newport Beach studio since 1995. The Kahanamoku board was similar to restoring paintings on wood panels, she said.

Capannelli first sealed the colors with wax, so they wouldn't chip off further. She then mixed and applied a custom solvent to the painting to remove the varnish. After that, she filled in depressions with plaster and sanded it down to match the surface of original painting.

Once the texture matched the original painting, she created a base with watercolors, then filled in the holes with oil color.

Under the varnish, the colors were surprisingly bold, she said: "I'm used to colors that are 400 years old, dull and faded."

Because of the painting, the board made its way into commercial photo shoots at Waikiki, where Kahanamoku often surfed, Metz said. It was featured in Dole's pineapple magazine ads from that era, he said.

The board is the most valuable object in the Surfing Heritage Foundation's collection of hundreds of boards. It once fetched an offer of \$80,000, Metz said. But he turned down that bid, and plans to keep it in the foundation's collection.

Some pieces of sculpture in Capannelli's might be worth about the same.

"To me, there is no difference in a sculpture that is 400 years old, or a painting that is 80 years old," she said. "They all have a beauty and a soul of their own."