

GUEST: PEGGE HOPPER

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So, I've always felt like I had the pressure to push myself to keep doing better and better work. But I always felt like I could, 'cause I always knew that it meant a lot to me to do good work.

Hawaii artist, Pegge Hopper, and her celebrated paintings of island women, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. Artist Pegge Hopper's distinctive Hawaiian women are a familiar sight in island hotels, offices, and homes. She's been creating them since the 1970s, and they've become iconic figures. Her success has allowed her to buy the entire building where her gallery is housed, in Downtown Honolulu's Chinatown. Pegge has also held one-person art shows in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Seattle. In her Honolulu gallery, she showcases her original paintings and drawings. Her work is also represented in numerous private and public collections. Margaret, or Pegge, Millar Hopper was born in 1935, and grew up in Southern California with her brother and parents. She excelled in art, and attended Pasadena's prestigious Art Center College of Design. Pegge remembers herself as a socially awkward kid, with few friends. Her childhood hobby became her lifelong pursuit.**

I think it was because it was the only thing I was good at. I wasn't good at sports, I wasn't particularly an academic, but I loved to draw, and I loved fantasy. I loved to look at the illustrations in McCall's and Saturday Evening Post, and Ladies Home Journal, and I loved all the stuff. I loved the pastels, and the artist drawing board, and the lights, and it seemed like it was sort of important.

And what did you draw?

[CHUCKLE]

A range of things, or ...

I drew horses, and fairy godmothers, and then I started to draw fashion. In the 40s and 50s, those were the days of the great fashion illustrations. And they were always wonderful illustrations for stories in the magazines. And I even

remember just looking at those drawings, and thinking, they sort of took you into another world. And that's what I wanted to be.

Were you discouraged at all by people saying, You can't make money as an artist, very few people can really do that?

My father, a little bit, I think, was worried that he might have to take care of me. But, my dear mother, when I did decide to go to art school instead of going to college, first of all, I think she was very disappointed that I wasn't going to a wonderful college. But the minute I got to Art Center, it was like, Oh, my god, this is where I belong. The story of The Ugly Duckling who—I mean, I just like slipped in there, and I just I can't tell you. My life began when I went to Art Center.

What did your dad say about your art schooling?

[CHUCKLE] My dad, when I left Art Center, he went to talk to one of my teachers to make sure that I wasn't gonna go to New York and starve.

He sounds like he was kind of a tough man.

[SIGH] Very, very tough, and very very critical, very funny, very smart, and very kind of at odds with himself. But he did teach me to be skeptical, and not to be too naïve about things. Don't be too flaky. I think when I was going to art school, and you would see—it was just at the beginning of the whole thing where the Beats were coming in, and to be a bohemian, and you looked like an artist, you wore—

What did you wear? I was gonna ask you.

Oh.

You were interested in fashion.

I wore the most uptight little black dresses, and perfect shoes, and I figured that art was serious, and I wanted to be taken seriously.

Pegge Hopper spent a semester away from classes at the Art Center College of Design to care for her mother, who was then battling cancer. She recalls her mother's death as one of the saddest, and most profound events of her life. In 1956, with some of life's lessons learned, she left school and packed up her art portfolio to accompany two school friends to New York City. She was twenty-one years old.

I got a job with a man named Raymond Loewy, who was the father of industrial design. He designed the Studebaker, he designed all the NASA. In department stores, there would be a section above the department would be, like, Infants, and it would have little rattles, and bunnies, and things, or it would be Sportswear, and it would have tennis racquets. And I did these small, little drawings that were then sent to department stores like Bullock's, and May Companies, and Filene's, and all these, and they would take them and grid them up, and paint them large over these different departments.

So your art was everywhere—

Well—

—in retail.

Yeah. And Leslie, in those days, there was never a question that I wasn't gonna get a job.

Really? It wasn't the tough city that—

No. No.

What did it seem like? I mean, carrying your portfolio, among all those high rises.

I did a lot of interviews. I met some very interesting people. Push Pin Studios with Seymour Chwast, and all these people that are such—I mean, they're icons today. Lou Danziger, who was with Esquire Magazine. It was an absolutely fabulous time in New York. And I knew that I had the skills that could fit in. I knew that I was a good worker, and coming from a really good school. Art Center had—still does have a wonderful reputation.

Was there a preference for male art employees?

No.

No?

I was in the one field where the only thing that mattered was what was in that portfolio. And the world was my oyster. Because it wasn't a crowded field. America, I think, from the time I was born until probably just about now, were the halcyon days in this country, in the United States. You knew that if you had gone to school, gotten some training, you could get a job, there was a job waiting for you. Everything was opening up in this country, right after the second world war.

And you were ready.

And I was ready.

In 1957, Pegge Hopper married graphic designer, Bruce Hopper, who had also worked for Raymond Loewy. They left New York for San Francisco, where Bruce owned his own business. Pegge later moved with her husband to Connecticut, when he went to work with famed industrial designer, Eliot Noyes. In 1961, a life-changing adventure began with a jaunt to Europe.

We bought a van, and lived in our van for about six months, and drove all over Europe. We had a Volkswagen van with no headliner, a bed in the back, a little hole in the floor. It was wonderful.

The hole in the floor would be—

It was for—

—intentional?

[CHUCKLE]

Oh, I get it.

So when we parked at night. [CHUCKLE] And we just drove everywhere. All the way from Southern Italy up to Norway. And then, we got to Milan, and it got cold. This was like, probably in late fall. And I remember we would wake up in the morning, and there would be condensation on it, because we had no headliner, dripping on us. So, we thought we should get jobs. And Bruce had

his portfolio, and I had my portfolio, and he secured a job for us at La Rinascente. I got a job, Leslie, that changed my life.

What was that? Now, that was a department store chain.

It was a department store. This was like well, fifteen years after the end of the second world war. And they were very much enamored with Americans. So we came in looking for work, and we were hired. They didn't do merchandising at Rinascente. They did more of sort of an institutional feeling. Like, when you went into their store, you were buying a feeling. You were buying an attitude. You were buying an identity.

What was that identity and attitude?

It was international. So they would turn over one whole floor to everything from Spain, or then they would turn it over to everything from China, or Japan. And they'd have Japanese food, and Japanese clothes, and Japanese furniture.

Oh, how fun. [CHUCKLE]

Ikebana, and it was amazing. And this wasn't just a store in the Duomo in Milan. This was in Rome. They had about five or six different stores all over Italy, and it was the only department store. It was like Bloomingdale's, in a way, but very high end. So what I was given the job to do were these posters that were giant. I mean, huge posters. And so here's little me, who really, I'd had very little artistic experience. And the person whose job I took, she was Swiss; her name was Laura Lamb, and she was an inspiration for me. Helvetica, which is a typeface, had just been invented. And the Swiss were very, very influential in Europe at that time, and very clean, very crisp. So, what I did was, I did these posters, very small. I would cut out paper, and do drawings on them, and then we'd take them to the printer and they would come out this big. And it was quite wonderful. And to see those big posters coming off of this giant eight-color press. I mean, this thing was as big as an airplane hangar. And you're walking along the ramp of it, and they feed in—you do the little—it's final art, but they photograph it and they blow it way up. So all of your wonderful washes and everything, you can see the textures, and—

And you had to plan it so that you knew it was gonna be blown up, so that—

Oh, yes.

—affected how you did it.

Oh, yes; yes, yes. And I did that intentionally, because I liked the freshness of when it was blown up. But everything had to be done perfectly on that. And Bruce did all the type and everything.

What were they for? For the—

They were for—

For backdrops?

No; well, they were for in-store displays, they were for kiosks all over the city. So I'd walk around the city and see my artwork all over the place, and in the windows, and I mean, it was daunting. Because I remember that my face would break out from the stress, but it was, like, I knew that I could do it. And so, I've always felt like I had the pressure to push myself to keep doing better and

better work. But I always felt like I could 'cause I always knew that it meant a lot to me to do good work. And I wa—

So—

And I wasn't gonna fake it. I wasn't gonna fake it.

After living in Europe for two years, Pegge Hopper and her husband moved back to California, with plans to start a family. They determined that L.A. was not for them, and in 1963, the couple and their six-week-old daughter left on a Pan Am clipper bound for Hawaii. They'd never set foot here before. Pegge reestablished herself as a freelance artist, and along with some friends, helped form the environmental advocacy group, Life of the Land in the mid-1960s. She eventually went to work at one of Honolulu's leading advertising agencies.

At that time, I was working as an art director at Starr Seigle, at Lennen and Newell. So I relate to the program Mad Men pretty well. [CHUCKLE]

That's what it was like?

That's what it was like. Honest to God.

How did that environment suit you?

I learned so much. It was a small agency, and I got to do a lot of my own work, you know. I got to do work for McInerney, and I did illustration for Liberty House on a freelance basis, and I learned a lot about—[CHUCKLE]—about how the agencies think of their clients. We used to have many funny meetings on Friday afternoon around this big table, poking fun at the client. Oh, they'll like that design. Oh, they'll love that packaging. [CHUCKLE] And I was there for two years. It got to be very stifling after a while. My first year, I was very interested. Second year, it got a little humdrum. And I did get fired, because I was pushing to be my own account executive. I said, Look I even talk to the clients, I know what they want, I do the designs. Why don't you let me go and try to sell this design to the client? But you had to pass it on to an account executive, who then went to the client. And I really am very grateful to Jack Seigle for firing me, be—

What were the grounds?

I can't remember, downsizing, or something. But it was perfect timing. Because I had taken one weekend off to start painting again. Because acrylic paints had just been invented, and we had just bought a house up in Nuuanu, and I had no furniture. And I set up an easel, and I hadn't painted for, what, ten years. And I started to paint. And I went to the archives and started looking at the old photographs. Now, this is still when I was working. And I was looking at these old photographs of the Hawaiian women lying on the beach, playing their ukuleles, and greeting the boats. And I started doing these paintings of these Hawaiian women. And they sort of reminded me of El Greco, because I also painted people in tunics or muumuus back in Art Center. And so I took a lot of these photographs home, and started doing this in my spare time. And then when I was fired, and of course I was incensed. Why should they fire me? I had

won more awards for the agency than anybody. But it was a gift. So I'm at home now in my house we had just—the old house we bought up in Nuuanu, and I have two little kids. One was three, and the other was five. I remember painting to a Tom Jones song. [CHUCKLE] And my friend, Mary Philpotts, lived around the corner from us. And she came over one day, and she said, So what are you doing now that you're not working anymore? And I said, Well I'm staining some shutters for the windows, and I'm doing some experimenting with some acrylic paints. And she said, Oh, can I see those? And I said, Yeah. And they were just like sketchy things, small, twenty-four by thirty. And she said, Hm, could you do me like thirty or twenty of those for the Kona Village? She was renovating the Kona Village. Ho, can I do you twenty of those for the Kona Village? [CHUCKLE] You betchya. So that was my first big—thanks to Mary, my first big commission. And it's kind of like I've been kind of like so lucky. I mean, at the right place, at the right time. And in Honolulu, there weren't a lot of people doing what I was doing.

Did Mary tell you later what exactly she liked about it?

I think they matched the bedspreads. [CHUCKLE] And then, I had a show at The Foundry, which was, you remember the Foundry—

M-hm, the old ironworks.

—down in Kakaako?

Yes.

Yeah. And people started getting interested in my work, and would commission me to do things, or buy. I was kind of obsessive about my work. Well, because I had these images in my head, too. And it's not like I was a painter. It was more like I was an illustrator or designer, is what I was doing. I was designing these paintings. And I just would work all the time. I mean, I didn't like to play tennis, or Bridge, or golf, or ...

Did you put the kids to bed, and then go back to work?

No, I would take 'em to school [CHUCKLE] and work all day. And I had the energy, and I had something that I needed to prove to myself, I guess, and maybe to my father. There was something that I think is kind of old fashioned, that people used to think. You've got to make something of yourself. I wish that my mother had lived long enough, 'cause she was the one that encouraged me to go to Art Center and although, once she did say to me [CLEARS THROAT], when I started wearing black, because of course, all artists wear black, and I would stay in the garage and work. This was when I was going to Art Center. And she'd say, Oh, okay, it's all right with me, you can just stay in the garage and wear black. [CHUCKLE] 'Cause, she was from the South, and I think she thought I should be going to proms and balls, and debutante balls, and have dates, and go to teas.

Did your father ever think you were, quote, good enough?

Well, he lived long enough to see that I was getting some recognition. And I think that meant a lot to him.

Did he tell you that?

After he'd had a couple of drinks, he would tell me. [CHUCKLE] My father wasn't very demonstrative, or I mean, I always heard it secondhand that, Gee, your father's so proud of you.

Pegge Hopper's distinctive Hawaiian women are not the ones featured in visitor brochures. They're not greeting you with a bright smile, they're not talking and laughing. Most seem to be looking inward. Others look directly at you with an even unreadable expression. Pegge Hopper enjoys working with the color, design, and composition. Many of her original creations have been reproduced as posters and prints, and featured in books and other publications.

When I look at your distinctive island women, I wonder if you're thinking of faces you know. Were all these women from the Bishop Museum archives?

No, not really. I often am looking at people's faces when I'm driving around, or you know, wherever I go. I will see something that I just etch in my mind. Well, first of all, I think of it as sort of an androgynous face. I don't think of it as a typically female face. I think of it as more of an iconic face. I don't think of it as a portraiture.

Are you painting the same face every time?

Maybe. Maybe.

And we never see teeth, and full smiles.

[CHUCKLE]

We might see a hint of a smile.

Yeah.

But we don't see teeth.

No.

We don't see—

You don't see teeth.

—happy smiley. Why is that?

No. Because I want you to take them seriously too, I guess. Yeah. No, that's interesting. I never really thought about that.

Your distinctive women in muumuu never wear floral muu's. They don't have prints; it's always a solid color.

[CHUCKLE] Well, some of them do. Some of them do. But I don't know why I don't do florals. I don't know. It's funny; sometimes you don't know why you—you don't really question. I think this is why I'm not a good teacher, too, is because when I'm working, I'm not consciously thinking, Why don't do I do this, or Why do I do that, or it just kind of—you start out with a composition, which I do small, and then I transfer it with on charcoal onto a canvas. And then I start painting, and then something happens, and it starts to just become what it's going to become. And sometimes I'm very disappointed, and sometimes I'm moderately pleased, and sometimes—very seldom am I really pleased.

What are your women thinking about?

Oh, gosh, Leslie they're thinking about whatever you want them to be thinking about. Some people say to me, Oh, they look so peaceful, I really like them being peaceful. That's fine. I don't think of them as peaceful. Like I say, I just think of them as an image. It's design, I hope it's good design, and I hope it's good drawing, and because that's how I was taught. I wasn't taught to have a lot of deep, existential meaning behind this, like they teach you in art school today.

How successful do you describe yourself as?

I'll tell you what. I describe myself as more successful than I ever, ever imagined I was going to be. I mean, what's success? Success is being able to put food on the table, just enough work to keep you busy, and moving ahead, and if your kids need something, you can help them. That, to me, is success. But, everything I've ever dreamed of has come true. Now it's come true slowly. It's kind of nice to have things come to you slowly, to work for them. Because as you get older, you appreciate things more, and more, and more. An artist doesn't retire. They're just always neurotic and paranoid, and thinking, Oh, my god, the next one's gonna be great. The ones before have been, Oh, okay, but oh, the next one's gonna be great.

Do you still feel that way?

I hope so. I mean, if you don't feel that way, what's the point of getting up in the morning?

In 2011, the year of this production, Pegge Hopper is well past conventional retirement age. She's seventy-five years old, and she's still looking forward to creating tomorrow's artwork. She envisions a new major effort that won't incorporate any figures or Hawaiiiana. We look forward to seeing Pegge's new works of art. Mahalo piha, Pegge Hopper, for sharing your Long Story Short. And thank you for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit pbshawaii.org.

What was the dress code like for you in those advertising days in Honolulu?

You had to wear pantyhose, you had to wear high heels, you had to wear dresses every day, except on Friday you could wear a muumuu. And I didn't even see the public, Leslie. I was in a little cubbyhole, way in the back. All through the 50s, when I was in New York looking for a job, you always had on your white gloves, and your garter belt and, your stockings, and your high heels, and your suit. Yes, we all wore suits.

No pant suits; no, no, no.

No, no. Oh, gosh, no.