

Lynn Cook as a Special to The Advertiser wrote the following article, originally posted on Sunday, February 14, 2010.

Artist's love affair with Isles dates back 56 years

Inside the United Chinese Society building on King Street, a grand, 10-foot high, 15-foot wide mural commemorates the first three generations of the Chinese in Hawai'i. A real fresco, with pigments painted into wet plaster, it is done in the manner of the old masters.

The imagery is more than 55 years old, commissioned in 1954 as the building was nearing completion. Until about a year ago, the name of the artist who made it had been forgotten, says society president Ginny Young.

"For a time, the area was used for large storage. I came into office as they were cleaning the space," Young said. "I took one look and started searching for information."

The answer came to Young instead, when artist Beverly Willis stopped by one day to see the mural she had completed decades ago. Young was away, but Willis left her card. Young immediately made contact and started a process to honor the artist and install a plaque to commemorate the work.

Young says sometimes you are looking for one fact and suddenly you find yourself surrounded by stories, each one more amazing than the next.

"Learning about Beverly Willis is a look into a picture book of art and architecture in the country, mixed with snapshots of Hawai'i, circa 1955," Young said. "We found a multitude of treasures, not just for the society, but for all of us."

Possibly one of the most famous American women architects, Willis came to Hawai'i in 1954 to study Chinese art history and philosophy with world-renowned scholar Gustav Ecke. While in Hawai'i, Willis also apprenticed with Jean Chariot, assisting the internationally acclaimed printmaker and fresco artist with the fresco at the University of Hawai'i-Manoa's Bachman Hall.

Willis was befriended by the wealthy Louise Dillingham, wife of influential Hawai'i businessman Walter Dillingham. "Jean Chariot told them I was a genius," Willis said, "so the Dillinghams set up an account for me for \$200 to help me as a student," adding, "they made introductions."

Willis got a part-time job retouching photographs at The Honolulu Advertiser. After graduating from UH, she opened Willis Atelier, a studio housed in a garage-style building on Pi'ikoi Street.

Willis designed the sand-cast walls of the Shell Bar at Kaiser’s Hawaiian Village Hotel, made famous by ‘Hawaii Five-0.’ Henry J. Kaiser liked her work and asked her back to help with the landscaping.

As Willis tells it, only days before the hotel’s opening, Kaiser set up a table in the center of the resort. “He made calls, and every nursery on the island brought samples,” Willis recalled. “I pointed to this and that, picking fully grown trees and leaf colors like I would paint a mural. They were planted, and the resort opened the next day.”

Louise Dillingham, trustee of the Bishop Museum, suggested Willis take on filling three domed windows in the museum’s Hawaiian Hall, closed in 1956 to protect the Kalihi Room from light. Willis spent months scouring beaches and the pali volcanic stone, then spent three weeks laying the stone in a pattern called Ko’olau. High on her workman’s ladder, she became an attraction to visitors, who had never seen a woman stonemason.

In 1958, Willis left the Islands to open offices in San Francisco, notably designing the Union Street stores (1965) and the San Francisco Ballet building (1983). Adding offices in Manhattan and projects across the entire U.S., her list of accomplishments and awards in architecture runs for many pages. She set standards high and has broken many barriers for women architects.

Tomorrow, she will be honored by the United Chinese Society. This week at UH-Manoa, she will talk of her Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation and screen her documentary film, “A Girl is Fellow Here – 100 Women Architects in the Studio of Frank Lloyd Wright.”

Willis is looking forward to connecting the public with her Hawaiian art and with the Confucian saying in her United Chinese Society mural: “When drinking the water, always remember the source.”

