

Dietrich Varez Our Cover Artist The Art and the Man

**By Norman Goldstein MD, Editor
Hawaii Medical Journal**



Dietrich Varez in his Euro, built by his artistic hands, in the middle of his Big Island forest. Reprinted with approval of photographer, Kirk Aeder.

Who is Dietrich Varez?

The September 2005 Editorial posed the rhetorical question **“Who is Dietrich Varez?”**¹ Readers of the Hawaii Medical Journal as well as Medical Library visitors perusing journal shelves recognize his cover art on our Journal over the past 10 years. His uniquely Hawaiian silk screened block prints can be found in offices and homes throughout our islands and the world. Varez prints have been on display at the Bishop Museum and Honolulu Academy Art Shop. Reyn’s store at the Ala Moana Shopping Center in Honolulu shows his oil paintings in addition to using his designs on their muumuis and aloha shirts.

Dietrich lives on the Big Island and his work is exhibited at the Volcano Arts Center. Former manager, Audry Forcier, said “Dietrich has done more than any other artist to share his knowledge and Aloha of Hawaii with the most people.”

Thanks to the suggestion by my wife Ramsay that I contact Dietrich Varez to discuss the possibility of using his prints for our covers, the Hawaii Medical Journal has featured his special Hawaiian art for more than a decade, and Dietrich promises to continue to supply us with his block prints and commentaries about the subjects.

When I asked Dietrich for a résumé some time ago, he replied, “I don’t have one. I’ve never gotten any awards or prizes, nor have I been in any art shows or such.” He modestly provided me with newspaper and magazine writeups about himself. But, Dietrich did not have to provide me with the most recent article published about his art in the October/November issue of Hawaiian Airlines in-flight magazine, Hana Hou! I read it on my weekly flight to Maui. The story by David Thompson “The Peoples’ Printer” with photos by Kirk Aeder shows Dietrich in his handmade furo and clearly tells of the ecstasy he feels in the middle of his Big Island forested land.

As David Thompson recounts on his visit with Dietrich, “Varez finds his muse in the isolated, wet, fiery environs surrounding the two-story home he built in this rain forest thirty years ago, using only hand tools.... If he could, Varez would not emerge from his rain forest retreat. He’s perfectly content, staying put with his wife Linda (also an artist) creating art, gardening, tending to his 15 acres and taking long soaks in the furo”².

Quoting Dietrich, “I’d rather stay here and do stuff around the house,” he says. “When I have to go, I go. But if I had my way, I’d never leave.” Dietrich did have to leave in mid-November 2005 for a show at Reyn’s in Ala Moana Center. When asked if he would stay overnight, he said, “No way, I’m going home after the signing.”

Steve Spence, a Honolulu Star-Bulletin writer, noted in “The Artist in Isolation”³ that Dietrich was the adopted son of a local man who met and married Dietrich’s mother after she fled Berlin during the Second World War. He grew up in Hawaii; attended Roosevelt High School; went on to earn a masters degree in English at the U.H. Manoa, where he met and married Linda Danneberg, a California surfer who came to Hawaii for a 1959 surf competition and stayed.



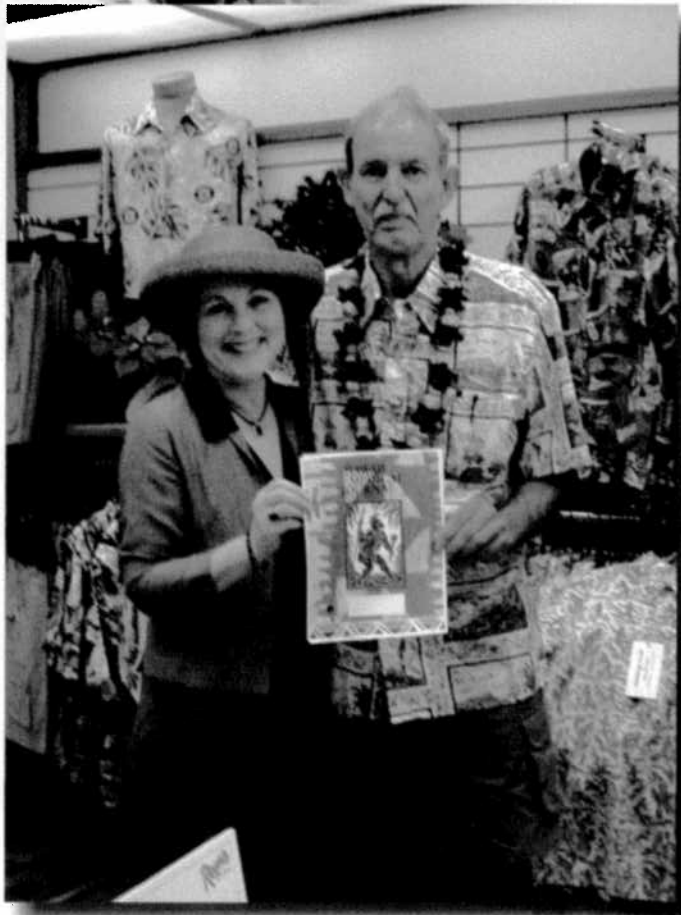
“Mighty Mo” - the dramatic, striking block print of the Battleship USS Missouri, now berthed at Pearl Harbor and visited by more than 300,000 visitors each year.

He and Linda purchased land in the Olaa Forest off Highway 11 between Hilo and the volcanoes. He built a 10 by 12 foot open-air cabin for himself, Linda and Dietrich Jr. For 10 years they lived in the cabin, trapping rainwater, cooking on butane, reading by Coleman lamp light, enjoying the “natural life.” When not working as a bartender at the Volcano House or “pulling weeds on a golf course,” he started cutting scenes of ancient Hawaiiana on blocks of linoleum.

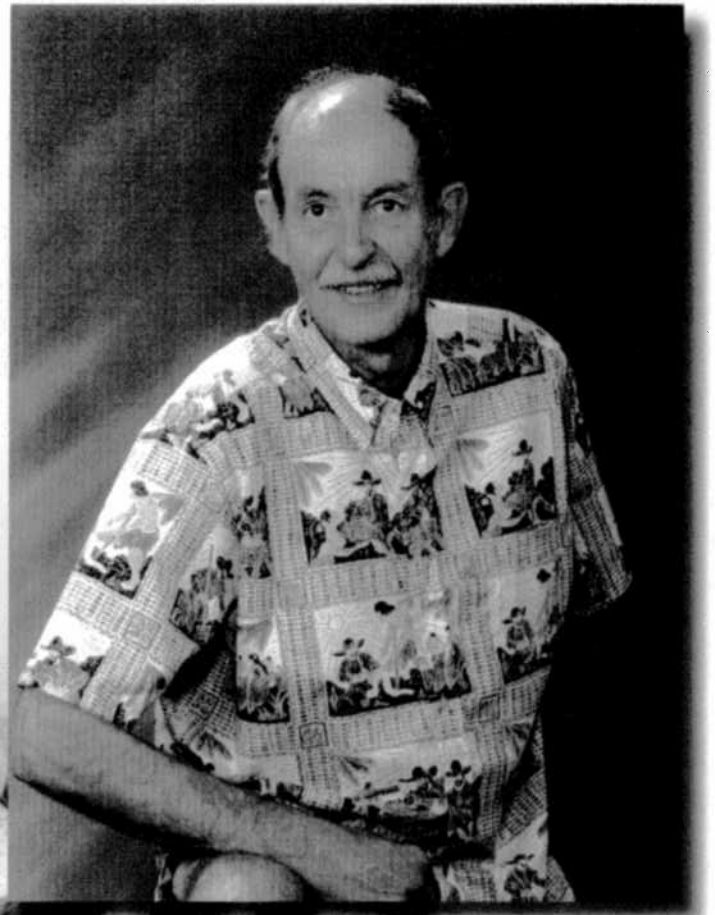
Dietrich’s first prints were in black ink but he soon felt black was “too harsh” so he started using the earthy brown color which has become his trademark. “Brown is mellower, more Hawaiian, the color of soil.” In an article by Ron Jacobs, “Prince of Prints,” Dietrich said, “I don’t care if people put the prints out with four tacks in the corners, just as long as they are up.”⁴

Varez created a striking print of the “Mighty Mo. “I can barely keep up with the orders and have run out of print paper once already,” says Dietrich. “When we were kids, we lived right on the water at the channel entrance to Pearl Harbor at Fort Kamehameha. All the ships that entered Pearl Harbor had to go right in front of our house.”⁵

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Artists, Dietrich and Ramsay — Reyn's Ala Moana at recent book signing.



The artist, modeling his Reyn Aloha Shirt, which illustrates the various services Father Damin provided to Molokai's leprosy patients, including feeding, bathing feet, and gardening.

Continued from previous page

Interestingly, it was Dietrich Varez who first suggested bringing the Mighty Mo back to Hawaii. Thanks to the efforts of Senator Dan Inouye, it was returned for its permanent home at Pearl Harbor. Senator Inouye wrote to Dietrich on September 30, 1998:

"Your print truly captures the strength and beauty of the Mighty Mo. I am pleased that your recommendation from 1990 has become a reality and that I was able to play a small part in bringing the USS MISSOURI to Hawaii." *

Dietrich, we are all lucky you live Hawaii!

Full-size sepia (brown) block prints by Dietrich are available at the Volcano Arts Center, Hawaii National Park, HI 96781 (808) 967-7511.

References

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2. Thompson, David. The People's Printer in Pele's Homeland. Hana Hou!, vol. 8, Oct/Nov/05, p 30-35
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4. Jacobs, Ron. Prince of Prints. Hawaii magazine, Feb. 1991; 40-48
5. "Staff writer" Tribute to Mo' by Volcano artist; Hawaii Tribune-Herald Jan 21, 1998
6. Inouye, Daniel, Senator. Private correspondence. Sept. 30, 1998

