



# The Print Master

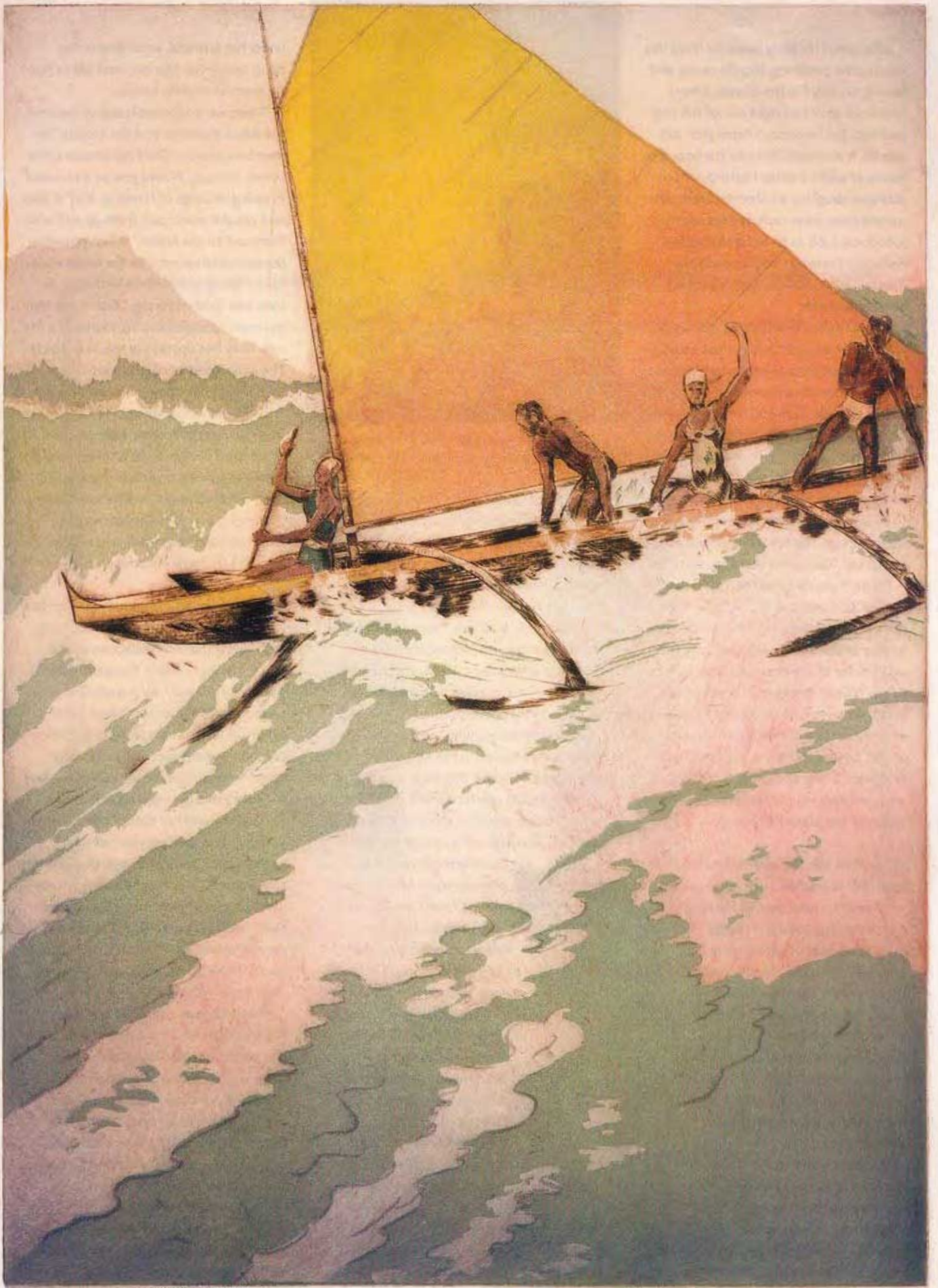
**John Kelly** was born in Arizona in 1878, a butcher's son who never finished grammar school. By the time his life ended in Honolulu eighty-four years later, he was a legend in the Island art world. He immortalized the quintessential Polynesian woman in his glowing and sublime etchings and created lyrical images of the life and people he embraced: fishermen throwing nets, lei sellers stringing flowers, dancers preparing for the hula. He captured a whole world, one only a few artists were lucky enough to live in.

by Lynn Cook

art courtesy Honolulu Academy of Arts

The Art of Living  
John Kelly's pioneering work captured an entire Island era. The print at right, *Big Surf at Waikiki*, was a menu cover done for the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in 1940; other creations included *Lei Sellers*, done in 1933 (right); *Study for Hula Dancer*, *Hawai'i* circa 1942 (above); and a self-portrait circa 1939.





• BIG SURF AT WAIKIKI - HAWAII.

John K. Kelly

John spent his early years far from this world, cow punching, bicycle racing and boxing. Luckily for the Islands, a hard knockout took him right out of the ring and into San Francisco's Parrington Art School. It also took him into the boarding house of a Mrs. Hester Harland, whose youngest daughter, a bohemian art student named Kate, soon captured his heart. John took a job as an artist at the *San Francisco Examiner*, and he and Kate lived a happy life in the city's wild art and social scene.

Hawai'i called when a friend, Charles Frazier, invited John to come out and draw a futurama of the real estate development he planned for a watermelon patch; it would be called Lanikai. It was John's first trip into the Pacific; Kate had already visited the Islands and even enjoyed an audience with Queen Lili'uokalani. (Her enjoyment of the audience ended, she later told friends, when, backing up in deference to the sovereign, she fell flat and showed the queen her "California undergarments.")

Frazier's plan was realized quickly, Lanikai sold out, and the Kelly family—John, Kate and their son John Jr.—decided to stay in the Islands. John became the art director of the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*. But in 1932, at the age of fifty-four, he quit the newspaper to devote himself entirely to his art. Starting an art career at that age seemed brave to some, foolish to others. In the end, what it really was was generous—for it has given us all a vision of the place Kelly loved.

When John left the *Star-Bulletin*, he had decided his specialty would be etching, and today he is renowned for his prints and pioneering color techniques. The Kelly family has donated many of John's prints to the Honolulu Academy of Arts; the museum now holds the pre-eminent collection of his work. And this September 8 to October 23, the Academy will present *Hawaiian Idyll: The Prints of John Kelly*, the first major exhibition of the artist's work since his death in 1962.

It is our chance to see the work that John considered totally addictive: making drawings on a copper-plate with a steel needle, wiping the plate with inks and printing the image. Kate had taken a printmaking



Leilani Paulson strikes a pose circa 1937 (below); Kelly immortalized her in *Hawaiian Decoration*.

class from University of Hawai'i professor Huc Luquiens; some say John sent her so she could teach him the abridged version of the technique. Kate herself had earlier developed a passion for sculpture and left the printmaking to her husband.

The Kellys lived near Diamond Head, in an area then considered the boonies, out past where the trolley cars stopped. They were surrounded by fishing villages and farms that were peopled by Polynesians—Polynesians who are now beautifully immortalized in the Kellys' art. Kate designed the house, including a studio for John as well as one for herself, and photographed and sculpted some of John's models. She had commissions to make

commemorative bronze plaques, some of which can still be found in Honolulu's public parks. But the Kellys struggled to make ends meet with John's printmaking. In the early years, they were befriended by Anna Rice Cooke, founder of the Honolulu Academy of Arts. "She arrived in a chauffeured limousine," wrote Kate in a letter to her mother, "arms filled with chickens and eggs because we were poor artists."

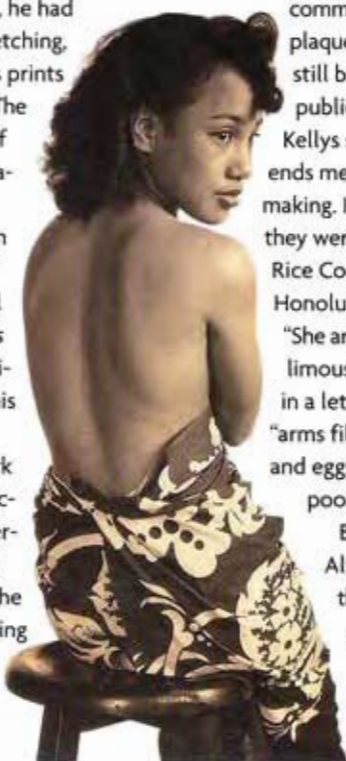
But not for long. Always an innovative thinker, Kate put a portfolio of prints

under her arm and, according to her daughter-in-law Marion, "was off to hustle them at Waikiki hotels.

"There were only two hotels at the time, the Royal Hawaiian and the Moana," remembers Marion. "She'd call people at the hotels and say, 'Would you be interested in seeing etchings of Hawaiian life?' If they said yes, she would pick them up and bring them out to the house." When potential buyers would swoon over the languorously lovely Island girl in many of the prints, John was fond of saying, "That is Marion, my most beautiful model, married to my son. They live upstairs in this very house." The Kelly guest book was soon filled with names like Shirley Temple and Ray Milland and with enthusiastic comments from fans and collectors. Kate would also often head to the docks to meet wealthy travelers arriving on cruise ships, giving them *pikake* blossom wristlets and selling them art. Soon, Kelly prints became known around the world, and a New York gallery show became a reality.

Today John's granddaughter Kathleen has taken on the task of sorting, cataloging and moving the Kelly collection to the Academy. "I get asked, frequently, how I feel about the way my grandfather portrayed women," she says. "I feel great!" When you look at the images, Kathleen says, you see the work of a man who loved women, loved people, had a reverence for Hawaiians and their lifestyle. Though she and her sister Colleen were young girls in the last years of their grandparents' lives, they saw the love the two shared. "They laughed, they joked—just being near them made you happy. Everyone who modeled for him, from the fishermen who threw nets off the rocks to the lovely Island girls, enjoyed their time with Kate and John."

Marion agrees. She talks of one Hawaiian girl who modeled often. "Each day when they finished, Kate would drive her home to Kalihi. She always went in to visit her mother, usually with a small gift in hand. The models became like family." John's and Kate's son, John Jr., remembers growing up in a home where Hawaiians were close friends. He describes a house filled with poi bowls and fishing nets and evenings filled with dancing and singing. He himself became accomplished at throwing



Kate Kelly

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A photograph of a white tray filled with various shortbread cookies, including round ones with fruit and heart-shaped ones. In the background, there is a pineapple in a clear bag and several gift boxes. The scene is set on a table with a decorative orange and red floral arrangement.

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the fishing net and bringing home dinner.

John's first Chinese model, Litheia Hall, who is now in her eighties, was prompted to model by her friendship with Marion. Marion and Li worked together at the census office, and when the two young women were on a visit to the Kelly home (in the days before Marion and John Jr. married), John senior looked into Li's beautiful face and asked if she would pose. Li's boyfriend, knowing the Kelly art, wanted to be sure that she would stay dressed. Li's own thought was, "Why not?"

"Later, I wondered what I was thinking," she recalls today. "The dress was very tight. It pinched. The chair was hard." Marion, having worn the same gown in the same pose, agrees. Looking at the prints of stiffly correct Chinese-looking girls sitting ultra-straight in an antique carved chair, she says, "We are not sure which image is Li and which one is me."

John's heavy, hand-crank printing press will also be seen in the Academy exhibition. "As any printmaker knows," Kathleen explains, "turning the handle of a press of that size, by hand, creates arm muscles far more sculpted than any modern gym." John made his own inks, created unorthodox techniques for wiping ink from the copper plates, used as many as five plates for a single print and never created a mass printing of an edition. "Only a few original etching copper plates remain," Kathleen says. "In the war years, copper was precious. He was only able to get a new plate from the newspaper by turning in the old one."

At the Kelly home today, Chinese tables hold art books, sculpted coral stones, Buddha figures, all sitting just as John left them when he passed away. Turning a corner into his studio, you see—no, feel—a shadow move outside the door. Your eyes move to the sink he used for mixing inks, to a door through which he disposed of his etching acids. The press waits, ready in the corner. It leaves rustle and a bird sings. You can feel the life force of the man who left us a vision of a time in Hawai'i, forever there for the wonderment of new generations of artists and art lovers. **HHH**

Hawaiian Idyll: The Prints of John Kelly will show at the Honolulu Academy of Arts from September 8 to October 23.