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Photos from top left to right shot by
Dennis Oda, Olivier Koning, Leah Ball



Opposite
"Grass House, Hawaii," drypoint circa late
1920s.

This page
"I'a Nui, Hawaii," aquatint by John M. Kelly,
dating to the early 1950s.



IDYLL IMAGERY

Artist John Melville Kelly's classic works
offer a timeless look at Hawaii's history

by NADINE KAM

Photographs courtesy of Kelly Arts Hawaii

Art historian and local gallery owner Robyn Buntin describes artist John Melville Kelly's power to enthrall with a quote Paul Klee had used to describe his work, saying Kelly "could take a line for a walk."

"It was a lyrical line," Buntin says. "It was not a line full of drama or power, but it is something we all recognize immediately, like Sinatra singing. For some reason, the rhythms, the pacing, the voice is unique."

That is why, more than 70 years after Kelly's earliest prints and drawings were created, and nearly 50 years after his death in 1962, they still resonate with

collectors, as well as those who see his works for the first time.

Kelly had played a large part in creating the idyllic image of Hawaii we've come to associate with the 1930s through '50s. Even those who don't know his name will recognize his print work, exhibited at Honolulu Academy of Arts and Hawaii State Museum, and appearing on vintage menu covers commissioned by The Royal Hawaiian hotel and Matson in the early days of Hawaii tourism.

According to Buntin, much of what attracts visi-



At top is "The Fisherman's Daughter,"
1940s aquatint.

At left, "White Ginger, Hawaii," color
aquatint, etching, 1940s.

tors to Hawaii today was established, in part, by Kelly's imagery depicting a lush, tropical paradise.

"He really represented Hawaii in the pre-war years, as one of the people who developed the romantic idea of Hawaii," Buntin says. "Many of the prints he did were of beautiful young women, and they were part of the exotic character of what Hawaii was at the time. His images really established a foundation of romance and the sensual character of Hawaii."

Kelly was born in 1878 in Oakland, Calif., and grew up on a cattle ranch in Phoenix, Ariz. His artistic aptitude led to a position as an artist at the *San Francisco Examiner* and freelance advertising work.

He came to Hawaii in 1923 at the invitation of a friend who was working for the advertising firm Charles A. Frazier Co., who

needed help with promotional illustrations for housing and golf projects in Lanikai. Kelly and his wife, Kate, also an artist, ended up staying, but not in the city. They moved out to Black Point, then remote oceanfront land populated by the *makaainana*, the Hawaiian people whose lifestyles embraced old traditions of living off the land and sea.

"There was really nothing out there," says Kelly's granddaughter Colleen. "We have letters Kate's sister sent from Berkeley, scolding them, 'Why did you have to move out to the middle of nowhere?'"

John's life changed after Kate took up printmaking at the University of Hawaii and introduced him to the process.

Colleen credits Kate with much of John Kelly's development as an artist. Kate's artistic spirit was instilled in her by her mother

and grandmother, who were Bay Area activists and suffragists who fought for women's right to vote.

"(Kate Kelly) was part of a bohemian underground and a break-the-rules person," Colleen explains. "(John Kelly) was a quiet, busy man. He was always working, and it seemed like his brain was always wondering, 'What am I going to do next?' To me, my grandmother was like his eyes and ears. She would take a Brownie camera and come home with these wonderful images of Hawaiian people. Many of his works were based on her photographs."

Colleen has come to regard his work as more than superficial beauty, instead telling the story, not of an idyll era, but of an ancient civilization transformed by a Westernized one.

Colleen says changes in **KELLY'S HAWAIIAN FIGURES WERE NOT MERELY STYLISTIC, BUT ALSO EVIDENT IN THE CHARACTER OF THE PEOPLE THEMSELVES.** In his early depictions, Hawaiians were in their element — in the water, close to shore net-fishing, so engrossed in their pursuits that they appeared not to notice the artist at work. In the 1950s, smiling faces of women in muumuu gave a sense of having learned to pose for a camera, and weathered faces gave way to what Colleen describes as "smooth, real pretty, real clear" faces with perfect eyebrows.

"You had to ask, 'What happened to the culture?' You can clearly see Western culture took over, and he documented the change all the way through. I'd

like to think he was preserving history," she says.

Colleen is grateful for the opportunity to work closely with her grandfather's creations. Art enthusiasts flocked to the Pegge Hopper Gallery in downtown Honolulu in late October and November 2009 to view a show, "Impressions of an Era: The Art of John Kelly," presented by Kelly Arts Hawaii, a family organization that was established in 2005 to focus on conservation of his work on paper and manage his legacy.

"As we go through time, we were concerned about commercialism," Colleen says. "We didn't want to see his images on T-shirts and coffee cups, and the only way to do that was to create an entity that says, 'we're art-oriented, not commercially oriented.'"

Works by John Melville Kelly can be viewed at Honolulu Academy of Arts and Hawaii State Art Museum. Both the academy and Robyn Buntin Galleries, 848 S. Beretania St., offer some of his prints for sale.

A new book, *John Melville Kelly: Hawaiian Idyll*, written by Natasha Roessler Drucker and published by Honolulu Academy of Arts, is available for \$39.95 at the museum shop.



Masterworks

From its exclusive "For You, Everything" cultural program to the traditional mele of slack-key at House Without a Key and the ivory keys of Lewers Lounge, arts of every genre have become synonymous with Halekulani.

Below, left
A photo by Kate Kelly shows John M. Kelly at work in his studio.

Below is Kelly's black-and-white etching, "Gill Net, Hawaii," dating to the 1930s.