

Notable Women of Hawaii
Edited by Barbara Bennett Peterons
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Kelly, Katherine Harland (September 24, 1882 – June 17, 1964), artist-sculptress, was born in Greenville, Plumas County, California, the youngest of 3 daughters of Hester Ann (Lambert) Harland, a pioneer in the movement of women's rights, and Englishman Francis (Frank) Harland, a California mining engineer. Their father died in a mining accident when the 3 girls were children. Their mother was a tenth generation descendant of artisan immigrants to the American colonies in the mid-seventeenth century. Katherine went to grammar school in Downieville, California, and graduated from Lowell High School in San Francisco. She came to Honolulu as a young girl of sixteen, in a square-rigged sailing ship during the turbulent period following the overthrow of the monarchy. In 1898 she and her mother met Liliuokalani in a private audience.

Katherine Harland and John Melville Kelly met at San Francisco's Partington Art School, where they studied together, and were married in 1908. The two artists became widely admired for their ability to work and live in close harmony in a calling noted for individuality. Kate Kelly's artistic temperament flowered in many fields. While still in school, she concentrated on character studies in clay and won national prizes for her work. Later, in addition to her chosen profession of sculpture and drawing, she was an accomplished actress, mimic, storyteller, pianist, and singer. During the couple's early years in San Francisco, where her husband worked in the art department of the San Francisco Examiner, their lively and creative personalities and achievements earned them many friends among intellectual and Bohemian artistic circles.

The Kellys came to Hawaii in December 1923 for an assignment John had accepted with Charles R. Frazier, an advertising executive. Intending to stay a year, they fell in love with the hospitable island people, their culture, and local environment, and remained permanently. Kate Kelly, as she was known professionally and among friends, was commissioned to create a bronze plaque honoring Queen Liliuokalani as composer of "Aloha Oe." Completed in 1929, it was set in a large stone placed at the former queen's residence, "Washington Place."

John Kelly left the advertising business to become head of the art department of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin but, at the height of the Great Depression of the 1930s, terminated his responsibilities there so that he and Kate could focus their artistic interests together on Hawaiian people and themes. During those difficult years, in addition to supporting the family with her commissioned works in sculpture, Kate Kelly enrolled in the classes of fellow artist Huc Luquiens at the University of Hawaii, from whom she learned the basic techniques of etching and drypoint. These she taught to her husband, whose later renderings to the demanding medium of color etching on Hawaiian and Oriental themes knew no peers and became much sought after by connoisseurs of the arts.

Their home was one of the first built at Lae O Kupikipiki'o (stormy headland), Black Point, in 1931, then a remote, undeveloped, rocky and windswept promontory overlooking the sea. With the modest resources of self-employed artist, Kate Kelly sensitively designed the family home in the local open style allowing a flow of outdoor environmental and cultural elements into the inner space. The home was another artistic statement reflecting Kate and John Kelly's identification with the Hawaiian values of hospitality and graciousness. It soon became a gathering place for the Hawaiian fishermen, dancers, musicians, lei sellers and their families, whose appearance and spirituality were embodied in the Kelly's artwork.

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The home environment of the family, which included their only child, John Jr., born in 1919, was a blend of their own culture and that of Hawaii – a heritage of generosity and open sharing, of love of people, land and sea on the one hand, and of patrons of the arts from Western society on the other. Upon arriving in the islands in the 1920s, Kate Kelly had identified with the teaching and performance of the hula olapa (standing dance) and was the first haole (foreigner) in the hula halau (hula school) of Antone Kao'o in the Waikiki district. Later, her sculptured figurines of hula dancers and lei sellers were the first to popularize that medium in Hawaii. During the 1920s and 1930s, Tutu (grandmother) Harvest, a full-blooded Hawaiian woman with an adopted name, lived with the Kellys as a family member. Then in her seventies and eighties, Tutu accompanied the two artists and their son on most of their exploratory travels along unpaved roads to remote rural areas on Oahu and the neighbor islands. Tutu introduced them to her 'ohana (extended family), fluently translating the local mores, anecdotes, and traditions. Many of these old timers, their children, and grandchildren were memorialized in the sculptures, drawings, and art works of Kate and John Kelly. Returning the many kindnesses they received from Hawaiian friends, the Kellys often gave the originals of their art works to their models, especially to those in the most humble circumstances. The Kelly family's open home was somewhat unconventional among non-Hawaiians, but notorious among their friends. When the Second World War brought great numbers of uprooted and lonely soldiers to Hawaii, the Kellys opened their home to them, too.

Kate Kelly gave up her sculpturing career in the mid-1930s when a thyroid condition made it impossible for her to use her eyes for sustained concentrated work. She then devoted her time to promoting her husband's etchings and maintaining and decorating their home to display his work attractively. Many prominent people came into her life during this period and were taken with Kate Kelly's lively personality and her colorful stories. Ever sensitive to the needs of others, Kate Kelly was sought out as a friend and confidant by many. She developed close friendships with several well-known women artists and musicians in Hawaii and elsewhere. She also maintained a close relationship with her sister, Adeline (Harland) Frederick (1881-1977), a prominent horticulturist in Berkeley, California.

Two years after the death of her husband, Kate Kelly died at the Queen's Hospital from serum hepatitis contracted from a blood transfusion following a fall and broken hip. Her ashes and those of her husband were spread in the verdant mountains of Koolau, which they loved and frequented.

Among Kate Kelly's works in bronze are the large bas relief of King Kalakaua at the old Bethel Street police station; the Amelia Earhart plaque at the Diamond Head scenic view site, two sculpted heads of Hawaiian youths – Leilani Paulson and Joseph Kaua, Jr. – permanently displayed at the Queen Liliuokalani Children's Center; and sculpted bronze heads of Kiomo and Joseph Kaua, Sr., at the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

SOURCES: Honolulu Star Bulletin May 19, 1928, June 18, 1964; Honolulu Advertiser June 19, 1964, April 9, 1970; Oakland Tribune July 8, 1937; Life Magazine July 19, 1937; San Francisco Chronicle November 3, 1929; family files, Honolulu.

John M Kelly, Jr.