

Birds of a Feather

*Following in the footsteps of her mother, master artist Mary Lou Kekuewa, **Paulette Kekuewa Kahalepuna '63** is honored by the Historic Hawai'i Foundation for helping to preserve the uniquely Hawaiian art of featherworking*

It's been called the most spectacular and distinctive art of the ancient Hawaiians.

Although a traditional part of many Polynesian cultures, Hawaiians are credited with taking the art of featherworking to the highest levels. Their fabrication of a variety of items such as feathered cloaks and capes ('ahu 'ula), feathered helmets (mahiole), feathered images (akua hulu manu), feathered standards (kähili) and feathered ornaments for the head and neck (lei) were among the most intricate and complex designs ever seen.

Most of these objects, and the process of making them, were considered sacred.

Today, there are very few practitioners of this peerless Hawaiian art.

But, thanks to the dedicated efforts of master artists such as Mary Lou Kekuewa and her daughter, **Paulette Kekuewa Kahalepuna '63**, this unique part of Hawaiian culture has not been allowed to die.

In fact, Kahalepuna was recently honored by the Historic Hawai'i Foundation for her work in helping to preserve and teach the "ancient sacred art of featherworking."

"As a student at Kamehameha in 1962, I asked my mom to teach me this featherwork because I needed to do some extra-credit work. That's when mom taught me, but she's been doing featherwork since 1956," Kahalepuna said.

Kahalepuna's mother is not just any ordinary teacher. Mary Lou Kekuewa is considered one of the most important and highly regarded featherworking artists of our time.

And she has taught her daughter well.

During her nearly 40 years of working with her mom, Kahalepuna has represented their art in conferences, museums and galleries in Europe, New Zealand, the Cook Islands, Western Samoa, Japan and on all the major Hawaiian Islands. She has demonstrated her expertise at such prestigious museums as the Peabody Museum at Harvard University and the Museum für Volke Kende in Vienna.

Feather kähili made by the Kekuewa family adorn KS' Bernice Pauahi Bishop Memorial Chapel.



Paulette displays her family's singular art.

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Paulette Kekuewa
Kahalepuna at KS in '63

She served for 12 years as a cultural resource for the Bishop Museum, and has provided educational and cultural support to the University of Hawai'i, Leeward Community College, Windward Community College, Punahou and Tolani high schools and Kamehameha Schools.

This summer, Kahalepuna will be teaching featherworking skills in Washington, D.C. October will find her in Los Angeles and the following month she will travel to Florida.

Although she has toured the world to promote her art and help keep Hawaiian culture alive, Kahalepuna said she wasn't sure the Historic Hawai'i Foundation gave its award to the right person.

"It was very humbling," Kahalepuna said. "From my viewpoint, I just thought that I wasn't worthy. Maybe that's not a good thought, but I couldn't help but think 'Why me?' when my mom is here. She is the master. I'm out there teaching it with her blessing. Together with your mother, you eat, sleep and breath it everyday.

"It was kind of hard to accept until I talked with mama and got her mana'o back on it. She was very proud that I'm being recognized for what I'm doing. And that she can in fact know that the art is going to live.

"It's very, very important to keep our culture alive. Most people say this featherworking is a dying art. We say no, we don't want it to die. To

me, this is my mom's legacy and something she has been unselfish about teaching and I've learned that from her.

"It's safe to say that mom and I have taught at least 1,000 people over the years," Kahalepuna continued. "Mom started teaching in 1970 and I started in 1974. There's a lot of people who have come to learn but who don't care to teach. There's just a handful who are teaching."

The two artists have combined forces to operate a Honolulu business that caters to the featherworking enthusiast. "Nā Lima Mili Hulu No'eau," or the "skilled hands that touch the feathers," is a Kapahulu shop that offers featherworking classes, merchandise and supplies – including goose, pheasant, peacock and any other feathers that are available on the market.

The name was given to the business by Edith Kanaka'ole.

Kahalepuna said her interest in Hawaiian culture can be traced to her Kamehameha roots. "Dr. Donald Mitchell, a former teacher at Kamehameha, was my mentor with respect to the culture and its awareness. Being a student at Kamehameha, some of the classes we had back then were in the back halls of the Bishop Museum. We got to work with Dr. Mitchell and Dr. Kenneth Emory and we didn't even realize what valuable people they were and what they were doing for us."

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“This art is quite unique to Hawai‘i.”

Kahalepuna, along with her mom and father Paul Kekuewa, created the 20 kähili that stand today in Kamehameha Schools’ Bernice Pauahi Bishop Memorial Chapel. “Since most of the birds Hawaiians used are now either extinct or protected, we used rooster, feather, peacock, pheasant, and goose feathers.”

Kahalepuna’s work graces many public buildings and is displayed in several major resorts. She is often asked to create special pieces to be given as awards and gifts to business and community leaders.

“Because my mom has done a lot for the State Foundation on the Culture and Arts and I was a lecturer at the University, we’ve been sought after,” Kahalepuna explained. “Our work is out there, and it’s admired enough that people keep coming back.”

Featherworking is something genuinely identified with Hawai‘i, Kahalepuna said. “This art is quite unique to Hawai‘i. The men with their cowboy hat with the pheasant lei – you’ll not see that anyplace else. If you were to wear feather lei on the mainland, anyone passing you who’s been to Hawai‘i will watch you and come up and say, ‘You from Hawai‘i?’ And people are amazed at the artistry of the Hawaiian people.”

Kahalepuna’s students include her own daughter, **Mele Kahalepuna Wong ‘84**. “When I go to Kaua‘i, where she lives, she teaches with me,” Paulette said. “My granddaughter Leleae Wong, who’s now 13, has done six leis. Maybe one day, when my daughter is ready, she’ll be able to come and work with me and keep it going. And then in the future, there’s my granddaughter.”

Mary Lou Kekuewa’s eyes mist when she speaks about her daughter. “This award was given to her because she is continually trying to further her knowledge. I’m so proud of what she does. You know, so many parents want their children to follow in their footsteps and they don’t. She does. And knowing that this art is going to continue brings tears to my eyes.”

“To my mother, I pledge my continual support,” Kahalepuna said. “So that she can know that this art is not going to die.”



The venerable Mary Lou Kekuewa begins by cutting all the feathers to the same size.



Paulette and mom, Mary Lou Kekuewa, with the Historic Hawai‘i Preservation award.