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Event Review: E Hō Mai Ka ‘Ike: Celebrating the Launch of the Edith Kanaka‘ole Quarter, Hilo, Hawai‘i, May 5–6, 2023

Abstract

In 2022, Edith Kekuhikuhipu‘uoneonāali‘iōkohala Kenao Kanaka‘ole (1913–1979) was selected to be featured on a U.S. quarter as part of the American Women Quarters program, a collaboration between the United States Mint, the Smithsonian’s American Women’s History Museum (AWHM), the National Women’s History Museum, and the Congressional Bipartisan Women’s Caucus that celebrates the accomplishments and contributions of American Women to a variety of fields. In 2023, the United States Mint and the AWHM partnered with Hawai‘i Community College, the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, and the Edith Kanaka‘ole Foundation to organize a celebration of the quarter’s release. Collectively titled E Hō Mai Ka ‘Ike: Celebrating the Launch of the Edith Kanaka‘ole Quarter, the two-day event (May 5–6, 2023) showcased the vitality and innovative forms of contemporary Native Hawaiian visual and performing arts—a testament to Auntie Edith’s enduring legacy as it continues on through her descendants and students today.

Keywords: *Edith Kanaka‘ole, Hawaiian arts, Indigenous arts, Hawai‘i, hula, American Women Quarters, United States Mint, Smithsonian Institution, American Women’s History Museum, National Women’s History Museum, Congressional Bipartisan Women’s Caucus, currency, popular culture*

In 2022, Edith Kekuhikuhipu‘uoneonāali‘iōkohala Kenao Kanaka‘ole (1913–1979), a beloved Hawai‘i Island community member whose career as an educator, performer, and recording artist was deeply rooted in hula and other Hawaiian cultural beliefs, practices, and values that were central to her upbringing, was selected to be featured on a United States quarter as part of the American Women Quarters program (Fig. 1). A collaboration between the United States Mint, the Smithsonian’s American Women’s History Museum (AWHM), the National Women’s History Museum, and the Congressional Bipartisan Women’s Caucus, the four-year program “celebrates the accomplishments and contributions made

by women of the United States.”¹ Kanaka'ole's quarter was the seventh in the series to be released; the six previously minted quarters honor Maya Angelou, Dr. Sally Ride, Wilma Mankiller, Nina Otero-Warren, Anna May Wong, and Bessie Coleman. In 2023, the United States Mint and the AWHM partnered with Hawai'i Community College, the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, and the Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation (EKF), to organize a two-day celebration in Hilo in honor of the quarter's release.² Collectively titled E Hō Mai Ka 'Ike: Celebrating the Launch of the Edith Kanaka'ole Quarter, the events showcased the vitality and innovative forms of contemporary Native Hawaiian performing and visual arts—a testament to the enduring legacy of Kanaka'ole, fondly referred to as “Aunty Edith,” as it continues through her descendants and students today.



Figure 1. Reverse image of the Edith Kanaka'ole quarter, 2022. Designed by Emily Damstra. Courtesy of the United States Mint

The first day of events (May 5, 2023) was a full-day workshop attended by approximately 120 students from Keaukaha Elementary School (KES), Ka 'Umeke Kā'eo Public Charter School (KUK), and Ke Ana La'ahana Public Charter School (KAL). The three public schools are located in the Hawaiian Home Land community of Keaukaha where, in 1924, Aunty Edith's mother was one of the first homesteaders. It was at KES that Aunty Edith developed Hālau O Ka 'Ōlelo Hawai'i, a Hawaiian language and cultural enrichment program for Hawaiian youth that served as one of the models for the Hawai'i Department of Education's Hawaiian Studies Kupuna Program. Thus, a student-centered day in Keaukaha, honoring Aunty Edith's love for children and commitment to passing down her knowledge to future generations, was an appropriate way to honor and witness her legacy.



Figure 2. Students from three public schools in Keaukaha perform oli (chants) and hula (dances) in honor of Aunty Edith. Keaukaha, Hilo, Hawai'i, May 5, 2023. Photograph by Jill Westeyn. Courtesy of the United States Mint

The student event was held on the EKF-KUK campus and took place in various outdoor classrooms and the rehearsal studio of Hālau o Kekuhi, the hula school founded by Aunty Edith. The day began with a kīpaipai wehena (opening ceremony) in which students performed a series of oli (chants) and hula, including many of Aunty Edith's original compositions and choreography such as "E Hō Mai," "Kokolo Au I Hilo Hanakahi," "Noho Ana I Hilo," and "Ka Uluwehi O Ke Kai" (Fig. 2).

Some of the hula also featured students using implements such as the pe'ahi (fan), pū'ili (bamboo rattles), and pūniu (small knee drum), while the ho'opa'a (chanters) utilized the ipu (gourd drum) and pahu (wooden drum) consistently throughout each number. Following the performances, students were treated to a series of rotating workshops where they learned information about Keaukaha's wahi pana (famed places), the choreography for one of Aunty Edith's original compositions, and the arts of hei (Hawaiian string figures), lauhala weaving, and pala'ie (loop and ball game made with coconut leaves and balls of cloth). The United States Mint and AWHM facilitated coloring activities for the youngest students. Kawehipua Mahi-Roberts, a visual artist from Keaukaha, produced a coloring book commissioned by EKF. The book, inspired by Aunty Edith's composition "Nā Pana Kaulana o Keaukaha" (The Famed Places of Keaukaha) illustrates each of the wahi pana mentioned in the song with digitally drawn black-and-white illustrations, offering an excellent example of place-based Hawaiian arts curriculum (Figs. 3–4). The day ended with a hō'ike (exhibition), where the students performed some of the hula, songs, chants, and games that they had learned.

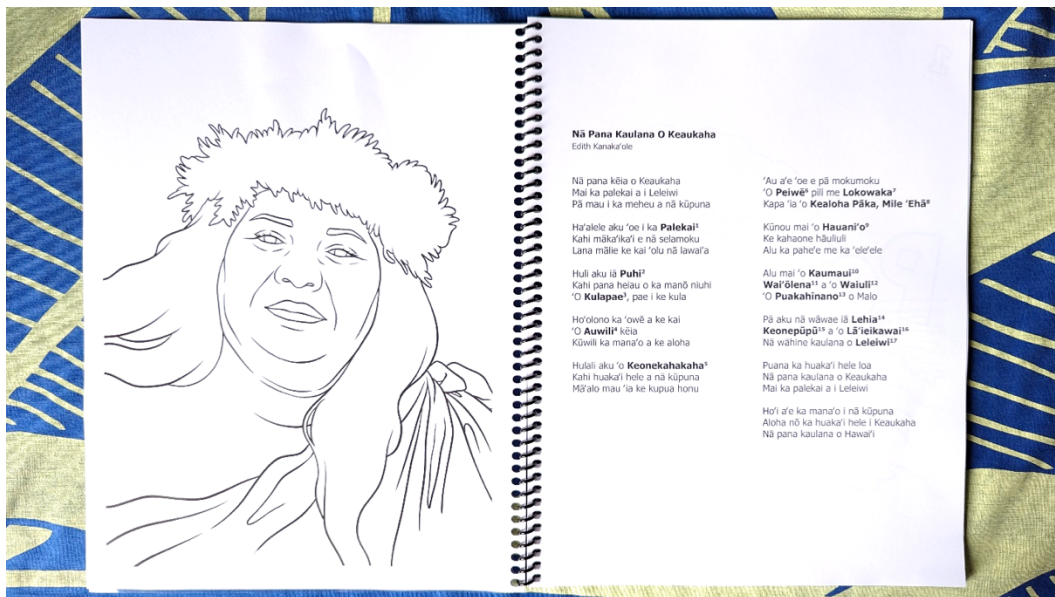


Figure 3. Pages from *Nā Pana Kaulana o Keaukaha*, a coloring book illustrated by Keaukaha visual artist Kawehipua Mahi-Roberts. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation

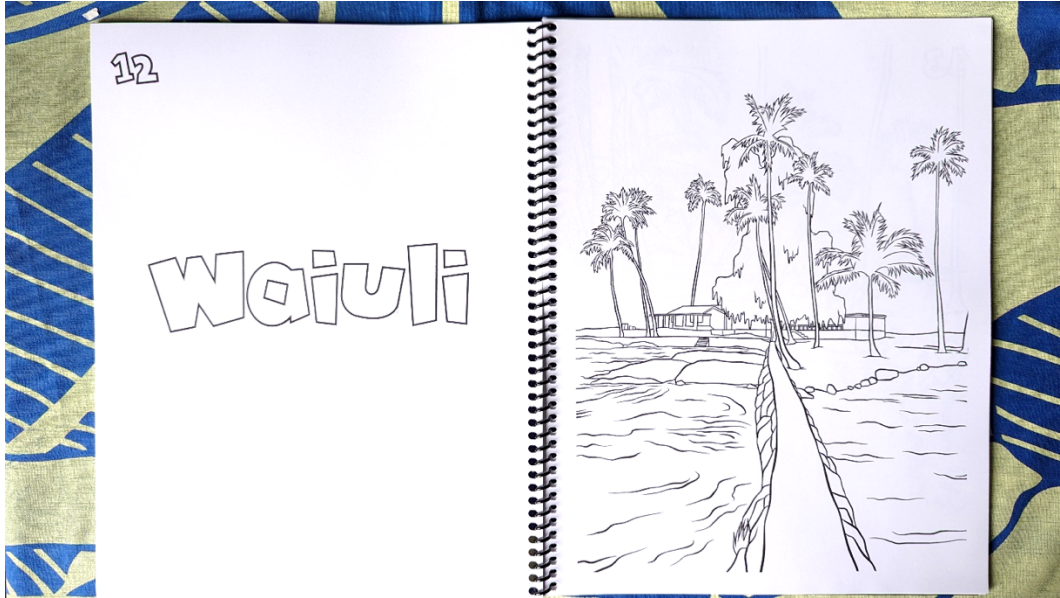


Figure 4. Example of a wahi pana (famed places) illustration in the *Nā Pana Kaulana O Keaukaha* coloring book. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation

The second day of the celebration, held on May 6 at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, served as the official public launch of the quarter. It began with a formal program held in the UH Hilo Performing Arts Center. As event attendees entered the center, they were greeted by a painting of Aunty Edith from Dr. Kanahale Kanaka'ole's personal collection draped in a large lei made of fragrant laua'e leaves atop a moena lauhala (mat made of lauhala leaves). Surrounding the painting were the various declarations read during the formal program, as well as an array of plant arrangements made from kukui, ti-leaf, plumeria, and laua'e (Fig. 5). The display was an excellent use of locally gathered greenery to decorate an event space while alluding to Aunty Edith's deep love of the natural world. Once the audience was seated, the program began with an introductory speech that Aunty Edith had recorded for her award-winning album, *Ha'aku'i Pele I Hawai'i!* (1978). A kīpaipai wehena was then led by Aunty Edith's granddaughter, Kekuhi Keali'ikanaka'ole, and her husband, Dr. Taupōuri Tangarō, followed by recognition of family members and other dignitaries and numerous speeches. The speeches included the official declaration of May 6, 2023, as Edith Kanaka'ole Day in Hawai'i, as well as the posthumous awarding of an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree to Aunty Edith by the University of Hawai'i Board of Regents.



Figure 5. Edith Kanaka'ole's portrait surrounded by greenery and written accolades that were read during the May 6, 2023 opening ceremony of E Hō Mai Ka 'Ike, UH Hilo Performing Arts Center. Photograph courtesy of the author

Once the formal program was completed, attendees made their way from the Performing Arts Center to Edith Kanaka'ole Hall where they each received an Edith Kanaka'ole quarter from the United States Mint. Additionally, an array of community-produced pop-up exhibitions were set up in various classrooms, providing event attendees with an opportunity to learn about Aunty Edith's life. As participants approached the hall, they were greeted by a collaborative mural by the artists Kamea Hadar and Kūha'o Zane, Aunty Edith's grandson (Fig. 6). Much like Hadar's other works that adorn building facades throughout Hawai'i, the mural depicts Aunty Edith vibrantly and larger than life. As she does on the quarter, she wears a lei po'o (lei worn on the head) made of feathery palapalai fern leaves and a yellow kīhei, a rectangular garment made from cloth that is thrown over one shoulder and tied in a knot. The mural includes the phrase "o nā mea huna no'eau o nā mele ē" ("every little bit of wisdom contained in song") from one of Aunty Edith's most well-known compositions "E Hō Mai," accented by geometric, nature-inspired patterns that are emblematic of designs by Zane and his father through their Hilo-based Hawaiian apparel and design company, Sig Zane Designs.



Figure 6. Mural honoring Edith Kanaka'ole by Kamea Hadar and Kūha'o Zane. Edith Kanaka'ole Hall, University of Hawai'i at Hilo. Photograph courtesy of the author

From the mural, event participants were directed toward performances of a number of Aunty Edith's original compositions and other hula at the other end of the building. The performers were dancers from Unulau, a hula school under the direction of Pele Kaio that continues the 'ai ha'a hula tradition that Aunty Edith and her family perpetuated for generations. Kaio and his dancers utilized the ipu, pū'ili, and 'ulī'ulī (gourd rattle) in some of their performances. During a break in their set, a group of older women stood near the microphones and began to sing "Nā 'Ono O Ka 'Āina" as a ho'okupu (offering) to Aunty Edith and her family. The song, which Aunty Edith performed for her second album, *Hi'ipoi i ka 'Āina Aloha* (1979), was composed by Kalani Meinecke and George Kahumoku Jr. in honor of Kanaka'ole and her favorite varieties of taro. A curated space was set up near Unulau's performance area for attendees to leave offerings they had brought that day (Fig. 7). Much like the display in the Performing Arts Center, the ho'okupu area was decked with greenery and included another image of Aunty Edith—a photograph by Franco Salmoiraghi of her in a lei po'o and kīhei.



Figure 7. Place for ho'okupu (offerings), featuring a photograph of Aunty Edith by Franco Salmoiraghi, Edith Kanaka'ole Hall, University of Hawai'i at Hilo, May 6, 2023. Photograph courtesy of the author

Overall, the two days of events were successful and well attended. Although many of Aunty Edith's original compositions and choreography were performed repeatedly over the two days—by students, her family members, and dancers connected to her through their hula lineage—there was never a point where the dances became mundane. Rather, each performance differed in terms of the garb and accoutrements that were used, as well as the performers themselves. These performances visually and aurally conveyed to the audience the living legacy of Aunty Edith's hula, traditions that she worked to preserve in her lifetime. Complementing them were the numerous images of Aunty Edith that appeared throughout the venues: the new quarter, painted portraits, photographs, and newly commissioned works like those of Mahi-Roberts, Hadar, and Zane. In considering these hula and art works alongside other artistic elements of the program—namely, the use of particular plant species to decorate event spaces—I would argue that the events provided an excellent example of Native Hawaiian art and aesthetics in praxis. More specifically, Aunty Edith's love and reverence for the natural world, as well as her dedication to the art forms she perpetuated, were evident throughout the festivities and artworks.

To conclude this review, I want to briefly discuss and acknowledge the political tensions surrounding the launch of this quarter. Given Hawai'i's political history and other contemporary issues such as militarization and settler colonialism, there are legitimate questions and critiques arising from our communities on the choice to commemorate a Hawaiian woman on a piece of US currency. Rather than shy away from these concerns, I think of them as opportunities for dialogue, chances to reckon with the contradictory and complex sociopolitical realities of many Native Hawaiians today. In the case of the quarter, we can name and discuss the moral and political implications of this coin alongside other facts, including that the Edith Kanaka'ole coin is the highest-selling quarter in the American Womens Quarter Program to date.³ Although Aunty Edith was already a well-known and beloved community member on Hawai'i Island prior to the release of the quarter, the national circulation of the coin means that millions more people will now know who she is. Perhaps through Aunty Edith's quarter and life story, we can develop further avenues for educating the broader American public regarding our islands' unique history and culture while celebrating a Hawaiian leader. A young girl who attended the public event at UH Hilo summarized the significance of the quarter aptly: "I think it's good that they finally put a Native Hawaiian person on a US currency—that they recognize our culture."⁴

Halena Kapuni-Reynolds (Kanaka 'Ōiwi/Native Hawaiian) is the associate curator of Native Hawaiian history and culture at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian. He is a haku mele (composer) and scholar whose work reflects his commitment to serving his community, Hawai'i's museum profession, and the fields of Hawaiian history, museum anthropology, and Indigenous studies. He is an alumnus of the University of Hawai'i at Hilo and the University of Denver, and a PhD candidate in the Department of American Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Notes

¹ "American Women Quarters™ Program," United States Mint, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.usmint.gov/learn/coin-and-medal-programs/american-women-quarters>.

² The Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation was founded in 1990 by Aunty Edith's daughter, Dr. Pualani Kanahale Kanaka'ole. It is currently directed by her daughter, Dr. Huihui Kanahale-Mossman.

³ Mike Unser, "US Mint Sales: Edith Kanaka'ole Quarters Pop," CoinNews.net, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.coinnews.net/2023/05/17/us-mint-sales-edith-kanaka%ca%bbole-quarters-pop/>.

⁴ Opuā Kern, appearing in "Hundreds Celebrate Edith Kanaka'ole at UH Hilo," University of Hawai'i News, May 9, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qG789H2Bg3Y>.