

Bringing Kaua'i's Last King Home

by Léo Azambuja

A culturally significant project is getting close to create something that has never been done before: a larger-than-life bronze statue of King Kaumuali'i, Kaua'i's last king.

After almost a decade trying to find an image that would be the starting point for the statue – there are no known portraits of King Kaumuali'i when he was alive – the nonprofit organization Friends of King Kaumuali'i came across a painting last year that changed it all.

The painting by O'ahu artist Brook Kapukuniahi Parker became a tangible idea to fundraise for the statue, which will be tentatively placed at the Russian Fort in Waimea.

Cultural practitioner and Hawaiian language teacher Keao NeSmith, who is from Waimea and is a childhood friend of Parker, agreed to pose for the statue. Somehow, NeSmith has a striking resemblance to Parker's rendition of Kaumuali'i.

A miniature model of the larger statue is currently being sculpted in clay by Saim Caglayan at his art studio on Kaua'i's North Shore.

"This is going to be the seed that is going to germinate into the big piece," said Caglayan, who is donating his time to the project.

King Kaumuali'i is mostly remembered for reaching a deal

with King Kamehameha I more than 200 years ago, avoiding an imminent invasion and subsequent bloodshed.

"Kamehameha conquered the other islands through warfare, and there were two times when he attempted to come over to Kaua'i but never made it," said NeSmith, adding Kaumuali'i was aware Kamehameha would not give up conquering Kaua'i.

"So they struck a deal and they actually merged the two kingdoms," NeSmith said.

Despite Kaumuali'i's historical significance, it's a statue of Capt. James Cook that greets people in Waimea, the king's hometown and the island's former political center. Indeed, there is no known statue of King Kaumuali'i anywhere in the world. Paintings or drawings are scarce, and none from when he was alive.

"This will be the first representation of King Kaumuali'i," NeSmith said.

Caglayan, who studied Kaumuali'i's life to take on the project, said he learned the king was tall, handsome, wise, and business savvy, "a brilliant guy overall."

"The more I read it, it's amazing how I get to know him," Caglayan said.

He said Kaumuali'i was fearful of his life when he knew Kamehameha was coming. There was a time when he was even thinking of leaving, but what kept him here was his attachment to Kaua'i. His mother, Queen Kamakahelei, still had influence and prompted him to make peace with Kamehameha.

"There is a lot to be said about his mother, she was really behind that peace-making effort," Caglayan said.

He said he took Kaumuali'i's attitude and feelings at the time, how he was confronted with the transitional times, and put that in the expression of concern and passion, the mixed



Keao NeSmith poses for Saim Caglayan, while the North Shore artist works on the statue of King Kaumuali'i.

emotions on his face.

"It's amazing how muscles can talk," Caglayan said "I'm just trying to get under his skin, bring out the emotion."

Historians believe Kaumuali'i was born in 1778. NeSmith said he was born at Holoholoku Heiau in Wailua.

"That heiau was known all across all of the Hawaiian Islands as the most prestigious spot for a king to be born," NeSmith said. "His mana was looked at as among the highest-ranking in all of Hawaii."

Kaumuali'i became king in 1794, at only 16 years old. In 1810, he agreed to become a vassal of Kamehameha, avoiding a bloody war against a much better armed opponent. In 1821, Kamehameha II, who had succeeded Kamehameha I, took Kaumuali'i to Honolulu. He would never return to Kaua'i, and died May 26, 1824. By his own wishes, he was buried on Maui.

Caglayan said the plan is to finish the statue in clay and make a plaster mold to cast it in plaster. He'll then patina the plaster in bronze to use it as way to raise funds for the larger statue.

Depending on a series of factors, he may sculpt a larger clay statue or have the original one enlarged at a foundry on the Mainland. The final statue will be cast in bronze.

"It will last forever," Caglayan said.

Just like the legacy of King Kaumuali'i.



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