

*Stella Elkins Tyler*  
*A Legacy Born of Bronze*

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ROBERTA A. MAYER



BUCKS COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
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*Front Cover: Stella Elkins Tyler, Castalia, 1935. Photograph by Frank Pronesti, 2004.*

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ROBERTA A. MAYER      FRAN ORLANDO

\*Members of the Exhibition Committee  
\*\*Independent Study Students

## *Foreword*

THOSE OF US ASSOCIATED with Bucks County Community College have long appreciated that the College first began in the former home of George and Stella Elkins Tyler—today known as Tyler Hall. Likewise, we have recognized for many years that much of the large collection of bronze sculpture on campus was created by Stella Tyler during the time in which she lived in this Newtown residence. The overall estate has been the subject of much research through the College’s Historic Preservation program and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. However, until now, there has been relatively little scholarly work on Tyler’s sculpture.

The process of learning about Stella Elkins Tyler’s sculpture began two years ago with the commitment of several key individuals to give both form and substance to the investigations. Leading the team were Dr. Roberta Mayer, art historian, and Fran Orlando, Director of Exhibitions and Artmobile. They brought together a talented mix of individuals from across campus and beyond. This project also provided an opportunity for Frank and Millie Hopper, two independent study students, to experience the joys of primary research. This intrepid group set about the task of discovery and analysis that underpins this publication.

We are also very pleased that the completion of this monograph and the accompanying exhibition coincides with and celebrates two other important milestones—the 40th anniversary of the founding of Bucks County Community College and the 25th anniversary of the Bucks County Commissioners’ Advisory Council for Women. The College and the Council together share a commitment to discovering and celebrating the history and contributions of women to many worlds and many endeavors.

On behalf of the staff and Board of Trustees of Bucks County Community College, I would like to express our sincere thanks to all who have contributed to the success of this multifaceted project. In particular, the Bucks County Community College Committee on Cultural Programming supported the professional photography of Tyler’s sculpture. The Bucks County Community College Foundation supported research at the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C., and, together with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, provided generous funding for the graphic design and printing of this catalogue.

Scholarship confirms observation; Stella Elkins Tyler found immense satisfaction in creating sculpture. More than that, she had an unwavering commitment to arts education, resulting initially in the establishment of the Tyler School of Art at Temple University and ultimately providing both site and setting for Bucks County Community College, where her own work finds perpetual prominence. Her legacy is her art and also the legions of students who have been part of the College community for the past four decades. That art is central to the College owes much to the history of Bucks County and more to Stella Elkins Tyler.

DR. JAMES J. LINKSZ  
*President*

## *The Exhibition*

I AM ENORMOUSLY PLEASED to present “Stella Elkins Tyler: A Legacy Born of Bronze,” the first solo exhibition of Tyler’s work since her death in 1963. This project has reunited forty-six bronzes—about a third of the work that Tyler is known to have created. The exhibition is spread across the Newtown campus of Bucks County Community College—Hicks Art Center Gallery, outdoor locations, and an ancillary exhibit in the Library. It is an opportunity to re-examine a significant amount of Tyler’s *oeuvre* for the first time in almost fifty years, to reflect on her legacy, and to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the College in a meaningful way.

Hicks Art Center Gallery features many of Tyler’s bronze sketches and statuettes, as well as several major garden pieces that have been in private collections for four decades. Tyler’s *Spring Wind*, *Summer Wind*, *Fall Wind*, and *Winter Wind* are reunited. In addition, her *Cambodian Dancer*, *Finlandia*, *Prayer for Poland*, *Shooting Star*, *Flight*, and *G.O.P.* are among the privately-owned works of art on view. I am especially grateful to Molly and Duncan Ellsworth, Frank and Millie Hopper, Stella Lowry, Esther Miller, Carol Tyler Noble, Carol Tyler, and Susan White West for graciously lending their pieces for the exhibition.

Tyler’s outdoor sculptures owned by the College are on permanent display in two areas—the entrance to the Gateway Center and the gardens at Tyler Hall. These large pieces, including *Castalia*, *Death and Transfiguration*, *Sunrise*, and *Sunset*, are among the most familiar to the College community and represent some of Tyler’s most accomplished works.

The Library exhibition centers on the method of making bronze sculpture—from the clay used by the artist to the mold to the cast bronze. This process is illustrated in the context of a section of *Timeless Offerings*, a sculpture created in 2000 by John Mathews, Jon Burns, and Catia Whitmore in honor of Stella Tyler’s work. Several of Tyler’s plaster models are included as part of this display. Also on view in the Library are some of the primary documents that were uncovered during the research associated with this project, including books owned and annotated by Tyler.

Bucks County Community College recognizes the importance of the arts and arts education in the cultural life of our community. As such, it actively exhibits and advances the visual arts through two venues—Artnobile, our traveling museum serving schoolchildren and adults throughout the county, and Hicks Art Center Gallery, our campus gallery dedicated to presenting innovative art exhibitions and programs that are available and accessible to the people of our region. It is only fitting that the College reintroduce the work of Stella Elkins Tyler. I invite you to reflect on the craft, intellect, and strength of her artistic accomplishments.

FRAN ORLANDO

*Director of Exhibitions and Artnobile*

## Introduction

STELLA ELKINS TYLER (1884–1963) held her first solo exhibition of sculpture in New York City at the Grand Central Art Galleries in 1935. In 1959, the Woodmere Art Gallery in Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, hosted her third and last such show. Over the course of these two-and-a-half decades, Tyler displayed approximately one-hundred-and-fifty different sculptural designs, most relatively small, but some close to life-size. Sometimes her pieces were exhibited as plaster models, but eventually she had nearly all of her compositions cast into bronze by the Roman Bronze Works, a major foundry located in Corona, New York.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of her sculptures were single castings—in other words, her bronzes are typically one of a kind.

As we shall see, Tyler was almost fifty years old when she began to work as a serious sculptor in the early 1930s. She had always had strong connections to the cultural life of Philadelphia and New York, and, as an heiress of Gilded-Age fortune, she also had the means to pursue her interests. Her mentor was Boris Blai (1898?–1985), a former student of the famous French sculptor, Auguste Rodin.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the largest extant collection of Tyler's work—twenty-nine bronze sculptures, two intact plaster models, and several plaster fragments—survives at Bucks County Community College. This is because the College was founded in 1964 on the grounds of the Tyler estate on the outskirts of Newtown, Pennsylvania. Many of her pieces remained with the property.

Tyler's sculpture has always been a subject of curiosity at the College, but there was no formal research of her work until 1993, when her garden pieces were surveyed for the Smithsonian's *Save-Outdoor-Sculpture* program. As a result, several of her large compositions were added to the Inventory of American Sculpture maintained by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Then, in the spring of 2002, the Bucks County Commissioners' Advisory Council for Women provided their endorsement of a larger project to recover the history of Tyler's sculpture. And so began the work presented here. This project has had many supporters, and it represents the collective efforts of the College administration, faculty, staff, and students, as well as experts who volunteered their skills, members of the local community, and Tyler family descendents.

Although this project has emphasized the College's collection, it should be noted that Tyler's sculpture is also represented in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey. Likewise, a number of pieces are now owned by private collectors or by Tyler family descendents. Some of her compositions can be tied to pencil sketches that were done at the Roman Bronze Works when her plaster models were delivered to the foundry. Altogether, more than sixty of Tyler's sculptures have been discovered at the time of this writing; additional pieces will almost certainly come to light in the months and years ahead.

Tyler consistently favored the figure, whether she was working on religious pieces, war memorials, or garden statuary. Some of her allegorical and mythological subjects were drawn from sculptural tradition, an observation consistent with the fact that she had received formal

training with Blai. She also looked to popular culture, finding ideas in contemporary dance, music, film, photographs, celebrities, international exhibitions, and politics. The subjects and titles that Tyler selected for her pieces establish a wide range of influences.

In addition, some of Tyler's compositions reveal her keen awareness of the major women sculptors working in the United States in the 1930s, including Anna Coleman Watts Ladd (1878–1939), Anna Hyatt Huntington (1876–1973), Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875?–1942), Malvina Hoffman (1885–1966), Beatrice Fenton (1887–1983), Harriet Whitney Frishmuth (1880–1980), and Bessie Potter Vonnoh (1872–1955). We now know that Tyler was familiar with all of these artists and knew some of them personally. Of particular interest, a number of these sculptors were also her social peers.

Working for almost three decades, Tyler in her dedication to sculpture did not blaze new trails for women. To the contrary, some of her work emulated that of her female contemporaries. She was, however, never a simple copyist. Rather, her approach to sculpture indicated that she was willing and able to learn from those who preceded her. By making visual references to well known pieces by successful women artists, Tyler celebrated their accomplishments and considered them as role models. In turn, her homage to the best women sculptors of the early-twentieth century gave her own work a sense of legitimacy that was recognized by the art critics.

Tyler's work reflects the positive strides made by women sculptors in the early part of the twentieth century, but it also tells another poignant story, one that was largely private until Tyler's eldest son, Sidney F. Tyler, published his memoir, *A Joyful Odyssey* (ca. 1990). Sidney notes that, by the 1920s, Tyler began to experience periods of hyper-elation followed by depression. Sidney never mentions Boris Blai or his mother's sculpture, but his memoir does much to explain the circumstances that brought Tyler and Blai together as student and teacher. Thus, Stella Tyler's bronze figures also tell the story of an older woman finding new meaning in life by fully embracing the creation of art. The process of making sculpture brought contentment. Ironically, with all of her inherited wealth, this was a state of mind that she could not simply buy. She had to do the work for herself.

## Biographical Background



Figure 1  
Stella Von Tuyl Elkins, 1901.

### Early Years in Elkins Park

STELLA ELKINS TYLER (née Stella Von Tuyl Elkins) was born in 1884 to Stella E. McIntire (1861–1913) and George Washington Elkins (1856–1919) and raised in Elkins Park. This site, which became the first suburb of Philadelphia, was owned by and named after her paternal grandfather, William Lukens Elkins (1832–1903). Stella was the first daughter and second child in the family; she grew up with two brothers and one sister—William McIntire, George Washington Jr., and Louise Broomall.

The Elkins family fortune was established by William Lukens Elkins during the industrial boom of the late-nineteenth century; he was one of the original partners of Standard Oil and later a significant shareholder in Philadelphia’s street railroads. Elkins was also a major cultural figure in Philadelphia. He is still remembered for his private collection of European paintings, which was published in 1900–01 in two sumptuous folio volumes.<sup>3</sup> Today, many of these are owned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He was also one of the founders of the Philadelphia Orchestra and an avid fan of the opera.<sup>4</sup> Stella, therefore, was born into a world of wealth and privilege.

Before going further, it is important to acknowledge that we know very little about Stella’s life story from her perspective. We have only a few primary documents—several letters, foundry records, exhibition catalogues, newspaper clippings, and photographs. To knit these sources together and create a context for understanding them, we must rely on Sidney F. Tyler’s three-volume autobiography, *A Joyful Odyssey*. Sidney was Stella’s eldest son. In his text, Sidney provides only a glimpse of his mother, and his portrait is presented in broad brushstrokes, but his recollections are important.

Sidney tells us that Stella received most of her education through private tutoring at home. She focused her studies on the humanities, with an emphasis on “painting and sculpture, history, drama and, above all, music.”<sup>5</sup> It is not clear, however, if she studied painting and sculpture from an art historical perspective or if she actually took studio classes. If she did sculpt during her late-teenage years, no examples of work from this period are known. She also spent one year at the Ogontz School in Philadelphia, which may have offered some additional artistic training.<sup>6</sup>

In 1901, Stella was photographed with her guitar in hand (Fig. 1). She appears confident and accomplished. That year, Stella decided to forego the traditional coming out parties for debutantes and, instead, she went to France to complete her education. She spent two years at Dieudonne, a private school on the outskirts of Paris, where she became fluent in French language, history, and culture. Monsieur de Reiset and his American wife (originally from Washington, D.C.) were family friends who acted as her guardians in France. The de Reisets had an apartment in Paris and a country estate located about twenty miles outside of the city and known as the Château d’Osny. According to Sidney, “Her two years in France were to be

among the happiest, and most meaningful, of her life.”<sup>7</sup> Stella became very close to her second family.

On April 27, 1905, at age twenty-one, Stella married George Frederick Tyler, a Philadelphia banker of Mayflower descent.<sup>8</sup> As a wedding gift, her parents hired Horace Trumbauer’s architectural firm to design and build the couple a large colonial revival mansion called Georgian Terrace in Elkins Park (Fig. 2). The Tylers resided there for twenty-seven years and raised their three children—Sidney F., Molly Elkins, and George F., Jr.

In his memoir, Sidney recalls that, unless the family had guests or was relaxing in the outdoors, the language spoken in the Tyler household was French.<sup>9</sup> He fondly remembers his mother’s enthusiastic love for music, theater, and opera, and her dedication to the piano, which she continued to study under the direction of Luther Conradi:

By day she would practice her scales and her fingering, all strictly monitored by the imperatives of her metronome and her own unyielding sense of discipline; and in the evening she would relax and play for her own enjoyment. The melodies would float to every nook and corner of the house and become for me a sort of ritual lullaby. Her repertoire was varied and extensive, and ranged between the limpid simplicity of Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” through the dramatic tension of Chopin’s “Polonaise” to the rolling thunder of Liszt’s “Benediction,” to all of which she applied the uncompromising standards of a professional. It is no wonder that I never hear these gorgeous harmonies without instantly recalling her personality as it found expression in what the Steinway people call “the instruments of the immortals.” She comes to life again each time I hear her favorite pieces played.<sup>10</sup>

After two decades of marriage, the Tylers, like so many Americans, were drawn into the vicissitudes of World War I. George and Stella were both supporters of France and anxiously followed the reports from the field. As the war unfolded, George donated his yacht, the “Juniata,” to the United States Navy. Sidney also remembers his father nailing an eight-foot by five-foot map of Europe across the doorway of a seldom-used porch and then following the troop movements of the British, French, Belgians, Russians, Austrians, and Germans.<sup>11</sup>

In 1915, the Tylers learned that Maurice de Reiset, the only son of Stella’s French “family,” had been killed in action.<sup>12</sup> They responded by donating an ambulance to the American Field Service in France.<sup>13</sup> Stella also became involved with a variety of relief efforts including clothing and blanket drives, sewing bandages, and staging fund-raising concerts. She did not go to France during this period, but her husband did, reporting for military service in May 1917. He served as an Army major under General John J. Pershing until a kidney ailment forced his return home in October 1918. He was treated at Abington Memorial Hospital, another philanthropic landmark of the Elkins family; the hospital had been established by Stella’s father and opened in 1914.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the death of Maurice de Reiset, Stella experienced other major losses in the 1910s. As will be discussed later, her uncle and cousin died in the 1912 Titanic disaster. Her mother passed away in 1913, and her father died in 1919. The years around World War I were fraught with turmoil and sadness that Stella, like Anna Ladd and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, would later memorialize in the creation of sculpture.



Figure 2  
Georgian Terrace, Elkins Park,  
Philadelphia, built 1905.

## The Move to Newtown

AFTER THE WAR, the Tylers began to purchase small farms in the vicinity of Newtown, Pennsylvania; by 1928, they owned some 2,000 acres of land (much of which is now Tyler State Park). With the local farmers working in their hire instead of for themselves, the Tylers raised poultry, ran a dairy, maintained a riding stable, and farmed the land. They also took an interest in horticulture—collecting and growing thousands of plants and trees on their property. This agrarian enterprise was known as Neshaminy Farms.

As they acquired more and more land outside of Newtown, the Tylers began to focus their attention on creating a country retreat, which they christened Indian Council Rock, a name previously associated with a nearby rocky ledge that still has a steep and scenic overlook of the Neshaminy Creek.<sup>15</sup> Working with the Philadelphia firm of Willing, Sims, and Talbutt, they envisioned an estate nestled in the woods with all of the major buildings and walls constructed from stone. Reflecting Stella's nostalgia for her years abroad, it was inspired by the French architecture of Normandy and Brittany.

Even though the Tyler's three children no longer lived with them on a day-to-day basis, the Newtown residence boasted sixty rooms, including a large music room for Stella, who, in 1927, had represented the Philadelphia Orchestra in Vienna at the 100th anniversary of Beethoven's death.<sup>16</sup> The interior design was completed in 1932 by the well-known Boston decorator, Henry Davis Sleeper.<sup>17</sup> His specialty was an eclectic mix of "English and French Interiors—17th and 18th Century American Paneling." At Indian Council Rock, for example, the "French Oak Room" was fitted with eighteenth-century Rococo panels, some ornamented with carved emblems of music and theater.<sup>18</sup> Predictably, the authenticity of this French interior architecture, as well as the symbolism, appealed to Stella. When completed, the Tylers' new country house had its debut in the April 1934 issue of *Country Life*.<sup>19</sup> Sleeper died that same year, making Indian Council Rock one of his last projects.

The Tylers' plans also included formal gardens and an *orangerie*, a building glazed for southern exposure and designed for the winter protection of potted citrus trees. Although the Tyler's *orangerie* was more modest in scale, it was inspired by the one designed by André Le Nôtre for Versailles. A composite panoramic photograph taken during the construction captures the back of the house at the far left, the *orangerie* at the far right, and the terraced gardens leading to a swimming pool, which appears in the foreground (Fig. 3). A large greenhouse, which no longer stands, was erected adjacent to the *orangerie* (Fig. 4). A ten-car garage with living quarters and four cottages for staff housing were built approximately one half mile from the house and gardens (Figs. 5–6).

Compared with their former home in Philadelphia, the location of Indian Council Rock was exceedingly private, but the house and formal gardens were well able to accommodate large, social gatherings. Indeed, as early as 1935, the Tylers used their new home to stage a benefit art exhibition for Abington Memorial Hospital.<sup>20</sup> With over one-thousand entries, they offered an open invitation to the general public. Many local people took advantage of the opportunity not only to see the art, but to visit this grand and elegant manor.



Figure 3 (above, left)  
Construction of Indian Council Rock,  
Newtown, Pennsylvania.  
Undated composite panoramic  
photograph, ca. 1930.

Figure 4 (above, right)  
Greenhouse and *orangerie* under  
construction, Newtown, Pennsylvania.  
Undated photograph, ca. 1930.

Figure 5 (below, top)  
Garage under construction,  
Newtown, Pennsylvania.  
Undated photograph, ca. 1930.

Figure 6 (below, bottom)  
Staff cottages under construction,  
Newtown, Pennsylvania.  
Undated photograph, ca. 1930.

