

## Desert Canvas:

Art as Commentary at the Tanforan and Topaz Art Schools of the Japanese American Internment, 1942-45

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**Abstract:**

The Japanese American Internment occurred in the United States from 1942–45, after Japan's First Air Fleet's bombing of Pearl Harbor. President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which ordered Japanese Americans to be evicted from their homes and re-located to the desert for purposes of national security. While there is much documented research on the historical event, there is little on the visual art that Japanese Americans produced during their confinement. This art, when previously looked at, was used to supplement documentation on the internment, and not appreciated in its own right. This paper looks at this art from an art historical perspective, ascribing equal importance to the art, the artists, and the social/historical context. The art shows a process of shaping a new identity, as Japanese Americans were caught between two cultures in a time of war. Some of the art is characterized by the use of traditional Japanese techniques, and other pieces incorporate more contemporary American styles. The art was also used as a vehicle for social commentary and personal expression during this confusing, lonely, and isolating time period. However, the art from the camps was produced by many professional and established artists of the Japanese American community, and can stand on its own as fine art. This paper looks at the work of four of these artists: Chiura Obata, Masusaboro and Hisako Hibi, and Miné Okubo. Each of these artists were teachers and leaders at art schools in the camps, and had different approaches to their own art, and how art should be taught. Their personal visions are discussed, and their art further examined in this paper.

Advisor Signature \_\_\_\_\_

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## Introduction

Somber colors, barren landscapes, and sharp details make up a collective visual memory only now coming into view after nearly sixty years. Long stored in family collections or forgotten in archives, paintings and drawings of the Japanese American Internment are now resurfacing to claim a place in American history and within the broader context of Western art history. For many Japanese Americans, art created during their World War II internment was a different way to communicate when spoken language was no longer effective. Caught in a position between Japanese ancestry and an American home, many struggled to communicate the feeling of displacement and loss of identity. Japanese American painter Hisako Hibi writes

I am a painter, a very poor talker, very poor. Otherwise I would have been a writer. I have lived more than fifty years in the U.S., but do not yet speak English very well. My Japanese is not good either. So please read between the words. We just talk with signs. When there is another painter and we have feelings, we just put colors down. I don't know what to say. You cannot say in just a few lines what it was like.<sup>1</sup>

The voices of interned Japanese Americans are in visual art being uncovered at present, ranging in form from still life compositions to autobiographical narratives. While internment living conditions were confined desert landscapes with dust on every surface, the art created in these locations is characterized by watery sweeps of color and an easy, fluid grace. Experiencing miserable and inhumane camp conditions, Japanese Americans at many different locations in the United States collectively produced a large body of artwork to narrate their experience in a visual format. Although many different artistic techniques found a place for expression in the camps, paintings and drawing emerge as the most common form of visual commentary by Japanese Americans relating to their

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<sup>1</sup> Gesensway and Roseman, 21.

internment experience. This art expressed the difficult emotional atmosphere of the situation, and used drawing and painting to articulate the need of Japanese Americans to establish a sense of integration between two cultures.

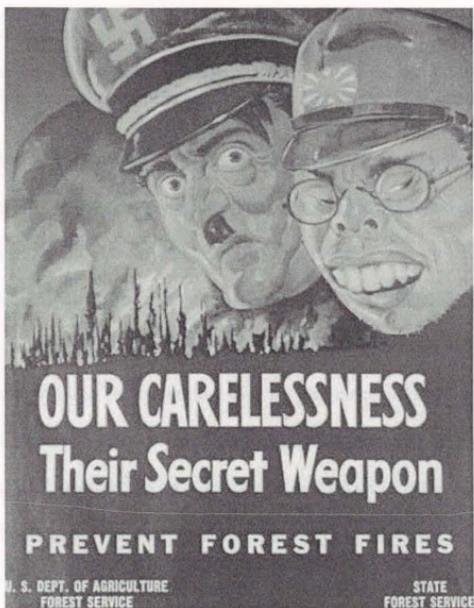
The Japanese American Internment was a result of President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, signed on February 19, 1942. Under the decree of this order, hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans were evicted from their west coast homes and relocated to internment camps in California, Arizona, Idaho, Wyoming, Arkansas, and Colorado for three years.<sup>2</sup> Although many Japanese Americans fought for the United States during World War II, and those who understood the Japanese language aided the Military Intelligence Service of the United States, many were still seen as threatening to the welfare of other Americans. The surprise bombing of a United States naval base at Pearl Harbor on the morning of Sunday, December 7, 1941 by Japan's First Air Fleet served as the dramatic turning point that reshaped American perception of Japanese Americans who had long been colleagues, neighbors, and friends. After this event, and before the issue of Executive Order 9066, Japanese Americans were forced to follow regulations on their comings and goings, including a nighttime curfew and regulations on how far they could travel from their home. When Executive Order 9066 was finally put into effect, Japanese Americans were forced to leave their homes with what they could carry, made to sell the rest of their possessions at unfair prices or leave them behind.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, faces that communicated Japanese ancestry became associated with the enemy in many American minds. "Yellow peril" and "Japanophobia" became commonly used phrases describing the American people's fear of Japanese Americans. Anti-Japanese propaganda in the form of posters was subsidized

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<sup>2</sup> Higa, 15.

by the American government and showed caricatures and unflattering portraits of Japanese military officials. This example, distributed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, shows Adolf Hitler of Nazi Germany and Hideki Tojo, the prime minister of Japan, staring menacingly out at the viewer, as a forest fire rages below them.



*Fig. 1* Wartime Poster, distributed by the United States Department of Agriculture

The phrase on the poster, “Our Carelessness: Their Secret Weapon” enforces the American idea that they must control their dealings with the enemy; otherwise, the enemy could spread, take over, and destroy the country. What did spread throughout the U.S.

was American fear of perceived and real enemies from the war. General John L. DeWitt of the Western Defense Command, a pivotal force behind President Roosevelt's signing of Executive Order 9066, argued that with Japanese Americans living freely in the United States national security was at stake. He writes

The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become "Americanized" the racial strains are undiluted...The population presented a tightly knit racial group...While it was believed that some were loyal, it was known that many were not. To complicate the situation no ready means existed for determining the loyal and the disloyal with any degree of safety.<sup>3</sup>

In reality, Japanese Americans were far from a threatening force. Most had strong reputations for being industrious workers and quiet, respectful neighbors. There were no records found of any significant crimes they had committed.

Discrimination and mistreatment based on physical and racial characteristics contributed to a strong identity crisis among Japanese Americans during 1942-45. Many Japanese American children were born in America, and their parents immigrated as young children themselves. Most people in the internment camps had never traveled or returned to Japan, and were not strongly connected to their cultural heritage. In America, many still felt like outsiders and established communities to stay close together. However, Japan was not home, or even familiar, to them either. Executive Order 9066 dramatically heightened this existing tension by further displacing Japanese Americans in the United States.

As national identity became unclear based on this act of exclusion, one important aspect of the art produced by Japanese Americans in internment camps is how it creates a visual language that connects Japanese and American culture. Using Japanese artistic

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<sup>3</sup> DeWitt, quoted in Creel, 16.

traditions versus adopting new ideas from their surrounding environment in the United States was a sensitive issue for Japanese American artists. In the camp situation, the paintings and drawings produced show a mixture of national artistic traditions resulting from this racial tension. Often, Japanese sumi-e ink methods are used alongside American ideas of portraiture, still life, and landscape. Within this environment, different Japanese American artists had different ideas of how to resolve the tension of their cultural identity by way of artistic commentary. Through the art making that took place in these camps, there is much to be learned in retrospect about the process of shaping a visual identity when caught between two cultures in a time of war.

There is currently a debate concerning how to classify these paintings and drawings. Today, the paintings and drawing of the Japanese American internment are not always recognized as "fine art," but rather categorized as "wartime documents." Most museums and scholars have used this art to supplement an exhibit or paper that emphasizes the history of the internment, rather than the art itself. Those who have even included the art in their discussion of the internment have been few and far between. Ignoring the art, or even not knowing that it exists, has been the most common response. These museums and scholars believe these paintings and drawings should not be classified as "fine art," under the premise that art was likely used as a way to record and elaborate on the experience of being interned by the United States government.

This argument is augmented by the fact that Japanese Americans living in camp conditions were strictly forbidden to have cameras or to take photographs under the authority of the WRA (Wartime Relocation Authority). However, painting and art were seen as harmless activities for internees to partake in, and so perhaps for some artists and

internees, paintbrushes acted as cameras. Many Japanese used skills they already possessed or learned at the camp to create literal, detailed, and emotionally detached images depicting their experience. As Japanese American artist Charles Mikami wrote in 1942,

I paint about three-hundred pictures of camp scenery. At that time, we couldn't take a camera, take pictures. All swords, guns, and cameras prohibited. So I think I paint like I take a picture, you know. I have to put in the detail. So just the same as if I took it with a camera, these are.<sup>4</sup>

While paintbrushes may have acted as cameras, even the more "realistic" paintings and drawings of the internment are still subject to various subtleties, such as the point of view, choice of color, what is left in, what is left out, what is emphasized and what is not. All of these are artistic and personal choices. While the scene painted may be realistic, there is room for the imagination in the selection and the method used to tell the story.

While the art of the Japanese American Internment has commonly been interpreted as "wartime documentation", another assumption was that this art would be "primitive", as most Japanese Americans living in the camps would have no experience painting or drawing. However, many visual records produced in this situation are far from tentative first attempts at art making, and serve as a form of intellectual and social commentary. Prior to the most well-known exhibition of this work, "The View From Within" from 1994 at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, curator Karin Higa expressed her expectations for the art she would uncover, saying

Through the art we would learn about the experiences of the internees and how those experiences are filtered through creativity. We expected to find a naive art that would express the trauma and incarceration and portray the daily lives and struggles of the internees. But our research revealed a far different picture...Our initial idea that the works represented only an emotional or political response to the incarceration was far too limited.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Creef, 71.

<sup>5</sup> Higa, 20.

What Higa discovered was a large number of professional artists who were already well-established and known creating and teaching art in these relocation centers. This art reflects a continuation of the artistic practices of art professionals, as well as their teaching methods and beliefs. Instead of viewing this art as a reactive measure to a hostile situation, and a simple record of experience, it should be seen as a continuing record of the lives and development of individual artists involved in and visually coming to terms with a human rights struggle involving two cultures in wartime.

The art schools inside the camps allowed systems to be created through which Japanese American artists could facilitate a new form of communication that would use art to dispel the American perception that Japanese Americans were a threat. This was a conscious aim of Japanese American artists who lead these schools. Schools inside the camps were meant to reflect a continuation of normalcy, in that Japanese Americans would be re-creating parts of the American environment they had left behind. Through setting up environments that reflected and paralleled existing American ones outside of the camps, Japanese Americans could demonstrate how they fit into an American environment. Most of the art created in the camps had a similar social aim. Through adopting American ideas about painting and drawing and incorporating them into their art, Japanese Americans meant to show that they could find a place in American society, and develop a visual language that reflected American culture.

Even though the internment camp situation was extreme, Japanese Americans had dealt with the issue of finding acceptance and integration into American society for a long time. Having schools set up inside the camps allowed the WRA (who fostered these schools), to take pictures of Japanese Americans inside these camps doing the "normal"

things that they would be doing outside the camps, and made the situation look as if the government wasn't violating the rights of Japanese Americans, but simply taking measures of precaution to ensure American public safety. Many photographers on assignment took pictures of the interns as they were painting or drawing, meaning to show the American public that even within the context of the camps, there were still amusing pastimes to be found there. There were also other activities that took place in the camps, such as playing baseball and watching movies. For the inhabitants of the camps, art was a way for the internees to present themselves as valuable American citizens. For Americans outside the camps, seeing images of these schools made the government's decision seem more humane.

Many of the art schools in the camps had teachers who had previously been well known and respected artists in America. A professor of art at UC Berkeley since 1932, Chiura Obata was steadily building a reputation of excellence for his art and mastery of Japanese painting techniques, when he and his family were interned in 1942 and relocated to Tanforan, California, and then later to Topaz, Utah. During this time Obata founded both the Tanforan and Topaz Art Schools, which taught more than twenty-six art-related subjects, with more than six hundred students. He organized and enlisted the help of sixteen other professionally trained Japanese American artists to assist him in teaching classes and running these schools.<sup>6</sup> Other art schools existed throughout the relocation centers; however the schools at Tanofran and Topaz were the most sophisticated and greatest in the scope of the material taught and covered.

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<sup>6</sup> Hill, 2.

Due to the fact that both of these relocation centers held residents primarily from the San Francisco Bay area (a home for many artists and Japanese Americans), there were many people qualified to be art teachers available at Tanofran and Topaz. In these schools, as compared to other art schools existing in other internment camps of the time, there was greater access to professional teachers, and a greater variety of art supplies. The teachers leading the art classes at these schools who had previously worked at universities or other professional settings had many contacts who were willing to supply the basic materials needed to teach a variety of different subjects, ranging from architectural drafting to watercolor painting.

At the Tanforan and Topaz Art Schools, there were four artists teaching who were the most prominent in the contemporary community of Japanese American artists. They were Chiura Obata, the school's founder, Matsusaboro and Hisako Hibi, who took over leadership of the Topaz Art School when Obata left in 1943, and Miné Okubo, who was, ironically, a well known artist working on a mural for the Federal Art Project when she was interned at Tanforan and Topaz and assumed a leadership position at the schools.<sup>7</sup> They had been close collaborators and friends in the Japanese American artistic community before the internment, and continued to work in partnership setting up exhibitions and artistic communities in the internment camps and after the internment experience. This order of artists also shows the passing of leadership authority within the school (Matsusaboro and Hisako Hibi took over leadership of the school after Chiura Obata and his family were released from Topaz), and also shows the progression of teaching styles from the most conservative to the more liberal and daring. Chiura Obata

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<sup>7</sup> Okubo, [ix].

closely followed traditional Japanese methods, was considered a master of Japanese painting, and built his reputation in the United States on his ability to teach sophisticated Japanese styles of painting. Matsusaboro and Hisako Hibi were conservative in their adherence to Japanese customs in some respects, but integrate American ideas about color and technique into their work. Miné Okubo, born and educated in the United States, and secure in her position as a U.S. citizen, created the most daring and emotionally charged work of this group.

The teachers progress from being more conservative in adherence to Japanese custom, to more innovative and liberal in integrating American ideas. Each took on a vast amount of responsibility in their roles of teachers and leaders of the school. To some degree, each had a desire and ambition to exhibit and publish their work and ideas. Each eventually did publish first-hand accounts of their experience and their work, which makes these teachers some of the most widely known and esteemed artists and advocates of the Japanese American art community.

While it is important to note the similarities between the artists, the different attitudes with which each of the selected artists decided to approach the internment experience, and how these attitudes influenced how they taught their students, is equally important. The artists discussed had diverse attitudes on how art should comment on the internment experience, and more broadly, the experience of being a Japanese American in the United States. Each had their own ideas on how art should construct a visible identity (or at least a visible struggle in defining identity). As a result of these attitudes, each artist had different ideas on how to teach artistic techniques and develop the artistic vocabulary that made up their classes.

The art produced during the Japanese American Internment often has only been written about solely in regard to its social and historical context. This is evident in how the work is presented as "wartime documentation" that is meant to enlighten the viewer about the history of the internment. However, when the art is framed only in terms of the environment within which it was produced, the importance of the art objects and individual biographies of the artists is not completely understood. This art does enlighten viewers about the experience of the internment, but more broadly was also a crucial step in coming to terms with a Japanese American identity during a time of war. By looking at the topic from an art historical perspective, and ascribing equal importance to the art objects, artists, and social/historical context, the value of the art and the ongoing development of the ideas of individual artists relating to cultural identity can be appreciated and emphasized. Through the examination of selected individual teachers at these schools, a discussion and comparison of the different teaching styles and methods will address the question of creating an identity when caught between two cultures. The new cultural values that these artists struggled with can be seen formally in their artwork, and in that of their students.



### A Matter of Tradition: The Work and Teachings of Chiura Obata

Chiura Obata was born in Sendai, Japan in 1885, to a family of artists. He began his art training at the age of seven, and apprenticed with painters of the Kano, Shijyo, and Tosa schools. He immigrated to San Francisco in 1903. With his training, Obata was well versed in traditional Japanese techniques.

In California, prior to his internment, Obata held various positions before eventually becoming an art professor at UC Berkeley. Despite the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, which prohibited any further Japanese immigration to the United States, the upper classes of San Francisco had a growing taste for the decorative arts of Japan, and coined the style "Japonism". Throughout the 1930's, political relations between Japan and America had been deteriorating, especially with the rise of Japanese militarism in the 1930's. Paradoxically, while many Japanese trying to enter the United States were prohibited from doing so, Japanese American artists did very well in business. Obata received numerous commissions, including one to work as a mural artist in certain upscale department stores, and another as a set designer for various dramatic productions in the San Francisco Area.

While doing mostly commercial work in the arts, Obata became an art instructor at UC Berkeley. He was well liked as a teacher, and his classes in Japanese art, especially *sumi-e* ink painting, became very popular. After working there for a time, Obata was acknowledged as a master of Japanese painting and became a professor. Through both working and teaching, Obata had a well-rounded background in the arts, as well as a large variety of artistic skills and understanding. Obata continued to live in California for



the majority of his adult life, and although he held fast to many of the artistic and other cultural traditions of Japan, he considered California to be his true home.

Chiura Obata had a strong desire to bridge the divide he felt between Eastern and Western traditions, and considered art an appropriate means to narrow this cultural and racial gap. Art was a peaceful, and less confrontational way of communicating sensitive ideas and positions relating to the divide between cultural groups in the diverse United States. Although the Obatas were acquaintances and friends with many Americans, (especially since Chiura Obata had such a respected position at a prestigious university), he was not blind to the fact that most of his fellow Japanese Americans and other minority racial groups "stuck together", and that there seemed to be little racial integration. Although his desire was to see more of this integration take place, he found his goal difficult, even within the artistic community of the liberal San Francisco Bay area. He writes

There was not much communication between the Americans and the Japanese, not even between artists. At least in the world of art there shouldn't be any walls between the poor East and the rich West.<sup>8</sup>

Evident that Obata recognized some of this gap as arising from economic differences and the implications this held for social standing and status, he still thought art was an effective way to comment on the racial divide he saw and felt. He and some colleagues decided to found the East West Art Society in 1921, which was a collaboration of Japanese American, Chinese, and Russian artists. Their aim was primarily to present different cultural ideas about art within the context of the West. Collected together as a group of minority cultures, they were able to take a more assertive approach to the issue.

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<sup>8</sup> Hill, 5.

This society held several exhibits at museums in the area, including the San Francisco Museum of Art.

Obata believed that part of the bridge between East and West could be formed by the mutual artistic appreciation of nature held by artists of the East and West. Obata was particularly in awe of the dramatic and diverse American landscape. The mountains, greenery, and canyon scenery he found in America was different from the natural environment of Japan, both inspiring and exciting to Obata. After a visit to Yosemite and the High Sierras, Obata's art and paintings became mainly focused on representations of nature. In a literal sense, the natural landscape was a common ground between Japanese Americans and Americans, and a common subject to represent and interpret in art. He kept this strong interest in the communal aspect of space and the natural environment. He published a book of his thoughts and paintings relating to his experience of Yosemite and the Sierras that came to be very popular. He believed that nature was the main teacher of beauty, and through observing nature the artist could be transported to a higher level of understanding and calm. Obata desired to pass on his vision of beauty to his students, saying

I always teach my students beauty. No one should pass through four years of college without being given the knowledge of beauty and the eyes with which to see it.<sup>9</sup>

From this quote it is evident that Obata had some strong and fixed ideas about what beauty was, and saw beauty as something that could be objectively taught. Passing down a tradition of beauty, as seen in nature that could be universally appreciated and thus not belonging to a racial group, was part of how Obata believed art could become a universal visual language that was able to transcend barriers. However, along with teaching what

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<sup>9</sup> Hill, 7.

he believed to be a universal concept of beauty, he articulated this belief through a distinct Japanese style. While his conception of art was that it could act as a bridge through subject, Obata did not acknowledge in his writings that perhaps style was crucial in maintaining and defining an identity, and through that also a form of distinction and dignity.

The students of Chiura Obata were receptive to his teachings. In the paintings that they created under his instruction, there are striking similarities to his work, and his conception of beauty.

Obata had a strong reliance on the natural environment for survival, both literally and symbolically. Nature acted as a neutral territory, and Obata hoped art could connect people the same way the landscape did. With this hope, he advocated any type of art that engaged the artist in nature and natural materials. At the Tanforan and Topaz Art Schools, Obata taught classes on landscape painting, but also had an interest in using natural materials found in their environment. His wife, Haruko Obata, taught a class in ikebana, which is the Japanese art of flower arrangement. Often in their Tanforan and Topaz camp situations, flowers were not readily available. However, the Obatas and their students made flowers out of other materials, such as paper, fabric, and twigs. Flower arrangements were an important part of Haruko Obata's life, and she continued to teach the art of flower arrangement after her time in the internment camp. Ikebana is an art that stresses elegance, balance, and quietude. Eventually there were some real flowers in the camps, as Japanese Americans there planted gardens, especially sunflowers, which could withstand the harsh desert sun and lack of rain. Gardens were another form of artistic expression that was an important part of Japanese tradition and culture. Although the

camps were far from ideal places to grow flowers or any type of vegetation, many Japanese found ways to create them despite the difficult circumstances. The Obatas also used wood from the surrounding area to carve various artistic items, such as vases. At some points during their internment, internees were allowed to go outside the guarded, barbed wire parameters and collect wood, fossils, and branches from the outlying area. Fossils were formed into pendants and other such items, while the branches could be used for ikebana and the wood for vases, small figures or sculptures. Despite the availability of art supplies at the camps, artists also used local materials.

While Obata was eager to embrace any method to bridge the East and West, especially through natural subject matter and materials, the techniques and artistic structures he used were very traditionally Japanese. He had built his reputation for being a master of traditional Japanese painting, and saw the traditional approach to art as his personal contribution to bring to Western minds and art. Most of his landscapes, portraits, and drawings are executed using a monotone sumi-e ink method, with delicate, sophisticated, rigorous, and detailed black ink strokes. The structures of many of his works take on forms inspired by woodblocks, a traditional Japanese art involving cutting lines and shapes into a wood block that can be painted with different colors of ink to create pictures. Typically, woodblocks were square or rectangular. There is a high degree of structure in his work, as seen in this example, an edition of the *Topaz Times*, a newspaper distributed at the Topaz Internment Camp, that Obata laid out and drew by hand.





Fig. 2 Chiura Obata, *Topaz Times New Year Issue*, 1943. Mimeograph, 14 x 8.5 in

First, the work is very compact and sequential, playing out in an exact order of how events actually transpired. It is not Obata's feelings that dictate the arrangement, rather it is arranged the way it is strictly for organizational and communication purposes. The perspective is carefully worked out, and each contour carefully considered. The drawings have an architectural quality in that sense. Space is obviously a valued commodity, as it is used efficiently and effectively, and also highly organized. The journey of the internees from their homes to their present area is narrated by breaking it down into tight compartments that depict moments defining this exit from society. In every frame, the scenes Obata depicts each involve a re-construction of minute details. These frames go

beyond being informational, and act to preserve Obata's memory of the situation.

However, in each scene there are holes of white space, that suggest empty places in his memory. In the text of the piece, Obata continually praises nature as being a sustaining source for everyone as they go through hardship after hardship. This is interesting given that nature could also turn against them, as when the dust or rainstorms occurred. Nature is simultaneously comforting and violent. Nature can act harshly towards this group, but can also connect them through their shared facing of the elements.

Despite their dramatic content, there is a lack of motion in many of the renderings. The frozen stillness that characterizes some may relate to the initial immobilizing shock of the experience. The drawings also display a very luminous quality. There is no softness in these harsh and unrelenting line drawings, where even the shading is strained. There is resistance in the artist's hand to feel forced to communicate an unimaginable event.

Obata's other work is in some ways oriented to his intended audience. As Obata was already recognized by many in the art community of San Francisco and the surrounding area, and had had many previous commissions, exhibitions, and publications before his internment experience, he was strongly connected to many important people in his community, including political figures. In his Moonlight Over Topaz, from 1942, a



Fig.3 Chiura Obata, *Moonlight Over Topaz*, 1942. Watercolor on silk, 153/4 x 20 in. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

gift for the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, traditional Japanese methods are still used; however, the painting is much softer and understated than Obata's previous work. First, there are more colors in this painting than are typical of Obata's artistic vocabulary. He uses very soft grays, creams, and lilac tones in light washes across silk to give the painting a hazy, subdued appearance. There is a haunting, ghostly, evocative quality to the painting, that suggests a level of uncertainty for what the future would hold. The painting also seems to suggest that Obata was very aware of his surroundings. There is a high degree of being in tune with the environment. However, the few lines of the painting contrast by being elongated, strict, and sharp, clearly defining the moon, landscape, and barbed wire fence.

This painting illustrates how Obata used art as a political tool. The subtle indication of a barbed wire fence in this otherwise tranquil and boundless landscape suggests a dialogue between these elements for the First Lady to intuit. Neither direct nor loud in its demands on its audience, the painting is a subtle message concerning the government's treatment of Japanese Americans. There is an overall sense of calm and vast amount of space in the painting, which contrasts with the idea of the internment as a limiting experience, especially in terms of living in the tight and restricted quarters of the barracks.

In his memoirs, Obata discusses the letter he received from Eleanor Roosevelt, thanking him for his "charming" painting. Describing a painting depicting the environment of the internment of the Japanese Americans as delightful undermines the experience, and was an initial insensitive response to the situation. It is interesting to

consider what role Obata hoped this painting would play in bridging the East and West. While on one hand, the painting is a subtle commentary on the limiting experience of the internment situation; it is still a present. It seems to act both as a silent plea and a straightforward gift, and it may have been both. Eleanor Roosevelt eventually did speak out against the internment experience, and advocated for the Japanese Americans.

Perhaps part of the reason that Obata's art remains so traditional is that art was a language of acceptance for Obata. Behind his strong desire to bridge the East and West was his own personal need to find acceptance in America. Through his art, Chiura Obata and many other Japanese American artists found employment, especially when the style of "Japonism" became overwhelmingly popular in the San Francisco area. Initially, Obata was accepted in the United States because of the style of art he had mastered in Japan, and became a well-respected professor based on his ability to teach Japanese ink painting. Likely, his strong adherence to tradition was based on the fact that it gained him recognition and acceptance in the San Francisco area, and the belonging in and ability to make a contribution to the American community was what most Japanese Americans desired.

After the internment, Obata returned to painting in commercial settings. This is the only place he, and many other Japanese American artists could find employment. Ironically Obata experienced a lot of artistic freedom in the internment situation, where he was freer to experiment with different techniques and subjects. Outside of the camps, his art became a commodity rather than a reflection of feelings and tool for advocacy. Again, art was a language for acquiring acceptance and outside approval.

## When Japan Traveled West: The Work and Teachings of Matsusaburo and Hisako

### Hibi

In 1943, Chiura Obata and his family were released from the Topaz Internment Camp after obtaining the five necessary letters of recommendation from outside American officials and political figures. When the Obata family left, Matsusaburo Hibi and his wife, Hisako, took over leadership of the Topaz Art School. Longtime friends and collaborators with Chiura and Haruko Obata, they shared ideas regarding the importance of art and education in the camp setting, but had different personal styles and ideas about what sort of visual language and elements were needed to bridge the East and West, and how these ideas should be taught to their students.

Both Matsusaburo and Hisako Hibi were born and went to school in Japan before immigrating to California with their families. Matsusaburo was born in Imura, Japan in 1886, and immigrated to the United States in 1906. A year later, in 1907, Hisako was born in a village near Kyoto, Japan, and immigrated to the United States when she was twenty. Matsusaburo entered the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), in 1919 and Hisako entered in 1920. There, they met each other while studying western style oil painting. After finishing their program, the Hibis moved to Hayward, California, and Matsusaburo found work teaching art classes and Japanese language. In his teaching he attempted to have his students come to a better understanding of cultural differences between Japan and America. Matsusaburo was proud of his Japanese language, and encouraged his Japanese American students to

understand their heritage in terms of language and culture, so that they could contribute to and enrich American society.

Unlike Chiura Obata, the Hibi's were more open and receptive to integrating American ideas into their art. Perhaps like Obata however, they found that through art they found a language of acceptance in America. However, they found their acceptance in the opposite way, by embracing and sometimes even directly copying American ideas rather than building a reputation based on the mastery of Japanese art techniques. In order for the Hibis to fit in, they tried to make their artistic abilities fit the artistic sensibilities of the West.

While equally eager to bridge the divide between artistic traditions of the East and West, the Hibis thought a better approach would be to construct a new visual language through art to accomplish this goal. Through their education in America, the Hibis were exposed to current Western ideas about painting, and to older American ideas in the Western art history courses they took. Hisako Hibi was very interested in the American Impressionists. Although visually the Hibis adopt many American traditions relating to art, such as the use of large expanses of color and wide brush strokes, their subject matter is often involved with reconstructing Japanese traditions that were not able to take place in their camp situation. It is evident that while the Hibis were trying to find a new, more American style, it was still important to remember Japanese traditions that were a part of their identity.

In one of her paintings, entitled New Year's Mochi from 1943, Hisako paints Japanese mochi (pounded sweet rice) in the style of an American still life. While the aesthetics of the painting are very American, the subject matter is not. Hisako painted the

mochi, a New Year's Japanese culinary tradition, when the ingredients needed to make it were, in reality, not available. She described the New Year as being very sad and sparse in that they were not allowed to enact certain cultural traditions due to lack of materials. In the camp situation, Hisako comforted herself and her family through imagining the tradition through a painting. Re-enactment of traditions through painting was the next best thing to the event actually taking place. However, in her painting she synthesizes the Japanese tradition with the American style of painting. A viewer of this painting notices the style before the content, which, like Hibi's other subjects, is hard to immediately distinguish, and secondary to her bold use of primary colors and thick painterly strokes that create a textured and vibrant surface. The mochi the painting's title refers to is placed inconspicuously off in the upper right hand corner underneath a glossy red apple, which could be a symbol of American culture. Other pieces of fruit appear in the in the painting's foreground, and are represented on a larger scale. This seems to indicate that the achievement of an American identity needed to be more prominently visual than indicators of Japanese heritage.

In particular, the Hibis admired and copied some of the ideas of the American Impressionists. One painting of Hisako Hibi is a direct copy of Mary Cassatt's La Toilette, from 1891, showing a mother bathing a child. It is appropriately entitled Homage to Mary Cassatt, 1943. Interestingly, Cassatt was influenced by Japanese prints and wood blocks in the 1890s. Although a more simplified version than Cassatt's original, it is still a sophisticated painting. There is a warm and inviting quality to the colors. The shapes connect to one another gracefully and smoothly, making the painting easy to visually digest. Color is broadly applied, simplifying and wiping out smaller



Fig. 4 Mary Cassatt, *La Toilete*, 1891. Oil on canvas, The Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 5 Hisako Hibi, *Homage to Mary Cassatt*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in. Estate of Hisako Hibi.

details. There is a gentle, yielding quality to this painting, in the forms and the subject of a mother washing her child, contrasted against the industrial stove in the background. The softness of the painting gives it a quiet, lyrical quality, characteristic of many paintings by Hisako Hibi. The shapes of the figures in her painting often merge together, and are of an indistinct character, relating to the experience of the loss of personal boundaries in the current social environment of the Japanese Americans. This lack of personal boundaries also relates to an intermediate stage of forming a more concrete and distinct identity in America. The mother and child also seem to blend in and out of their environment, commenting on the desire to find a sense of integration in the environment of America, while struggling to subdue the painful experience of the internment.

Another interesting aspect of this painting is not only the inspiration that Hibi took from Cassatt, but the specific painting she chose to copy. In the social context, the subject of a mother cleansing a child leads to deeper interpretations. Perhaps this mother is trying to wash away the emotional weight and damage of the experience. It could also be a washing away of memory, and a willingness to forget that place and time in their lives.

The colors she chooses in this painting are influenced by American ideas about color, and the mother and the child are far less defined than in Cassatt's painting. In La Toilette, the mother and child have very detailed dresses, and are situated in a meticulously refined environment. Hibi's painting on the other hand is more rudimentary; the mother and child's clothing is plain and simple, matching the dreary and sparse setting.

Although Hibi seeks to find acceptance through copying the subject and composition of Cassatt's painting, her style and Cassatt's are very different. Hibi's work seems to be mostly concerned with the patterning of positive and negative shapes, rather than establishing a sense of depth within the scene. Her work is also much less artistically articulate than Cassatt's. The facial features of the mother and child in Hibi's painting are muddled and obscure, blending into the surroundings. Ironically, art was a visual language that helped Japanese Americans to become invisible and camouflaged. Through creating paintings where they obscured themselves, and blended into their environments, they relayed the message that they belonged when people could no longer see them and find them offensive.

For Hisako Hibi, her paintings also explore issues of the domestic role of women, and how that role adapted to the camp situation. Being a mother, wife, and woman was a difficult circumstance simply as a Japanese American woman in the United States. Japanese American women lacked the same resources and support networks American women had access to. In the camp situation, these difficulties were heightened, as it was even harder to carry out normal ways of life. Hibi's paintings explore aspects of a woman's identity, and how these nurturing roles contrast with a hostile environment.

Another one of Hisako's paintings, entitled Fetch Coal for the Pot Belly Stove, Topaz, Utah from 1944, depicts a woman's literal and figurative struggle with her changing roles and new environments.



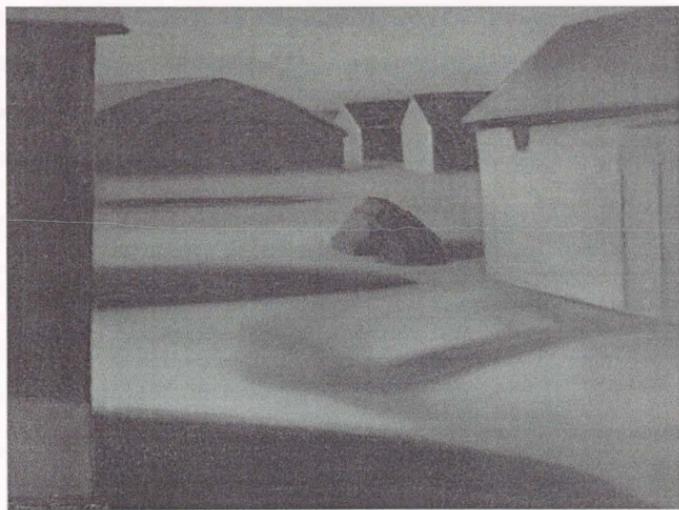
*Fig. 6* Hisako Hibi, *Fetch Coal for the Pot-belly Stove, Topaz, Utah, 1944*. Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, gift of Ibuki Hibi Lee.

In the internment camp situations, women took on roles requiring where more rigorous physical labor. The subject of the painting is a woman struggling to lift coal for her barrack's stove. The colors are dark, thick and opaque, layered in a block-like fashion. She looks downward away from the viewer and is faceless, as if Hibi is speaking about women collectively. Changing roles, and lack of a clear place in society was part of the identity crisis that both women and men faced. The physical strain of her bent position shows a literal struggle that figuratively relates to the tension of the situation. Her position also seems to indicate a loss of dignity and feeling of shame, she looks like she is hiding by merging with her environment, rather than standing tall and out in it. Her odd position makes her appear as a mountain on the landscape's horizon, as though she represents a hurdle, but strength at the same time. The shapes are soft and there is still the sense that every component of the painting merges easily into another, however, the subject is very industrial, furthering a sense of tension in the painting.

Similar to Chiura Obata, Hibi's painting is used as a form of social commentary. Painting was seen by the Hibis as a constructive way to speak, whereas complaints were seen as a waste of energy. Being productive was an important aspect of Japanese American culture in the camps, and idle time was generally not socially acceptable. Work gives people a defined role in the world, and allows one to feel they have an important contribution that impacts others. Chiura Obata noted that one of the most frustrating aspects of the internment was that Japanese Americans could not make a meaningful contribution to American society through their work. Making art in the camps was a form of work, but not a form that was recognized by other Americans as valid at the time. Along with being literally displaced, it was also dehumanizing not to have a rightful

place in American society by having sense of a clear contribution to the well-being of the country.

The students of the Hibis were responsive to their ideas regarding new artistic techniques. Matsusaboro Hibi prohibited his students from using small brushes, encouraging them to capture the “feeling” of a scene through broad strokes of color and line, rather than through the representation of minute details. The personal and emotional atmosphere was more important than a literal translation of the camp environment. Some of the paintings seem to have a lackluster and isolated emotional quality as a result. One example of this is Taneyuki Dan Harada’s painting entitled Barracks, from 1944.



*Fig 7* Taneyuki Dan Harada, *Barracks*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 22 x 28 in. The Michael Brown Collection.

Large and expansive brushstrokes depict an empty environment. There is a large emphasis on shadows, which are more of a focal point than the physical forms of the buildings. Harada uses color, but his choices are dull and flat yellows, grays, and browns, perhaps reflecting the environment he felt and saw.

In most of the paintings of Matsusaboro Hibi, and in the majority of his students' work, there are no people represented, and so the physical environment becomes more important than individuals. One example of this is Matsusaboro Hibi's painting entitled Block #9, Topaz, from 1945. Bars of dark color seem to disappear under layers of white paint. A road and windy smoke vanish in the distance. There is a disorienting feeling to the painting, as it is not clear where things begin and end. The make-shift residences of the Japanese Americans, known as the barracks, are seen in lifeless and muddled shapes. There is a silent sadness to them, as the painting feels very quiet but emotional at the same time. With everything out in an open landscape, and the encouragement to go beyond the limits of a small scale, a prominent sadness and silent vacancy emerge.



Fig. 8 Matsusaburo Hibi, *Block #9, Topaz*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 22 x 26 in. Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, gift of Ibuki Hibi Lee.

Matusaboro Hibi died shortly after being released from the internment camp in Topaz. His wife Hisako found herself in the difficult position of being a single, Japanese mother raising two children in New York City. In addition, she was a woman artist, especially a difficult position when acting as the sole support of a family. Although she worked other jobs to support her family, including sewing in a clothing factory with other immigrants, Hisako continued to paint. She visited museums, and exposed herself to new ideas in American art. Her work became larger, and more and more abstract. She was likely influenced by some of the abstract expressionists who were the avant garde artists in New York at that time. She even took to executing some of her larger paintings on the floor, an idea similar to Jackson Pollock, an American Abstract Expressionist. Hisako believed that there was no end to the freedom of expression in art, and that there was something sustaining about this lack of limitation for expression and growth. She writes

Through painting I could forget everything and go beyond everyday life, as the imaginative world of art is infinite.<sup>10</sup>

The commentary of Hisako's art is interesting, because her art is much more contemplative and responsive than politically motivated. Although she still exhibited her work, her paintings and the way she writes about painting present them as a personal endeavor that was not intended to make a huge statement. Perhaps for Hibi, art was an escape into a different world she could invent. Her roles as a woman, mother, worker, artist, teacher, and Japanese American were all things that she considered in her work, and it is this personal growth and struggle that her work primarily conveys. However, as

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<sup>10</sup> Hibi, 36.

a teacher, she was responsible for passing down American stylistic ideas to Japanese American art students.

### An Extended View: The Work and Teachings of Miné Okubo

Miné Okubo was born close to the San Francisco Bay Area, in a place called Riverside, California to Japanese American immigrant parents. Showing an early interest in art, she eventually chose that as her field of study and attended the University of California at Berkeley. After graduating, she went to Paris on a scholarship, but was forced to leave France on the outbreak of World War II. Upon her return to the United States, the Federal Arts Program employed Okubo for public art projects. She was commissioned by the United States Army to paint murals, and worked under the famous painter Diego Rivera in San Francisco during this time period.

Although never a leader of either the Tanforan or Topaz Art Schools, Miné Okubo was one of the most prominent teachers at both schools, and had a great deal of input as to how the schools should be run, and the exhibitions that took place there. She too was already a professional artist who was well known and respected throughout the San Francisco Bay area.

Okubo's work is much bolder and dynamic, and it is harder to detect a strong Asian influence, compared to the work of either the Obatas or the Hibis. This was likely in part due to her status as an American citizen, as well as her training and travels. Being an American citizen meant more than literal security in the United States, as it gave Okubo more psychological ease and therefore more personal freedom in what she felt comfortable doing artistically. Her style is highly original, conveying neither a tendency towards Japanese traditions or new American ideas and innovations. Charcoal is her medium of preference, as opposed to ink or paint. This medium lends itself to more

subtlety and nuance. It can be built up, and yet each layer is transparent. There is a lot of wit and irony in her work, and humor is one of the key ingredients she uses. Although just as rigorous and involved in this human rights struggle, perhaps her secure citizen status allowed her to distance herself more from the situation and use art to comment more objectively and originally.

Okubo's main format of representing the internment experience also differs from the Obatas and the Hibis. Rather than producing paintings that are still or artificially constructed compositions, the majority of Okubo's art takes the form of a visual autobiography. Her drawings are done in black and white ink, and are playful and spontaneous, comprised of loose and flowing contours. She utilizes her imagination in arranging the realities of the situation, and does not attempt to base her art on artificial set ups or politically motivated strategies. Her drawings are not an attempt to construct a visual language that can be copied and repeated. Her language is less about how visual elements are infused with cultural meaning, and more about how art can be used to release immediate feelings and thoughts as they arise.

Okubo, like the other artists, is also unsure of her identity, integrating herself into the internment experience while distancing herself from it at the same time. In each of the scenes she draws, she is usually a mysterious woman figure in a trench coat that never looks directly at the viewer. In one particularly intimate scene, Okubo draws and talks about the women's showering area. She describes the women as being very uncomfortable using the showers so close to each other, with only slight partitions to keep a small amount of personal space and privacy. Okubo draws the nude women



At first the women were very self-conscious and timid about using the showers.

The men's showers were in one large room but the women's showers were slightly partitioned.

*Fig 9 Miné Okubo, from Citizen 13660, pg. 75*

around her, who are in a less-than-favorable cleansing environment. Each woman has a distinct character, and is appreciated as an individual. Okubo herself however, appears fully clothed in the bottom left corner of the drawing, looking neither directly at the women or the viewer. Perhaps she distances herself because in many ways she does not relate to those around her. She could also want to protect her identity by not being displayed for public appraisal and observation. Through distancing herself, Okubo has a broader frame of reference through which she can comment more objectively on what is happening.

The fact that Okubo appears in each of her drawings is another departure from the work of the Obatas and the Hibis. She is more consciously aware of herself as a separate individual who has her own opinions and decides on her own place in the scheme of a larger social situation.

Like Hisako Hibi, who was Okubo's close friend, Okubo also explores the relationship between mothers and children in the internment camp environment. Her charcoal drawing, Mother and Children-People Were in Shock, has a particularly evocative quality. Okubo draws sweeping, gestural lines across the paper. They are direct and immediate, suggesting the confidence of the artist. The charcoal expresses a whirlwind of dust, which is apt given dust storms were a common reality in the camp environment. Her work is very abstract, though still representational. The faces of her figures are starkly defined, with prominent nose structures and large, heavy eyes that seem to assert the Japanese American presence in the United States. The lines of the faces are bold, distinct, and assertive. The figures seem to combine with their environment, into



*Fig. 10* Miné Okubo, *Mother and Children - People Were in Shock*, 1943. Charcoal on paper, 14 x 20 in. Collection of the artist.

one fluid, yet graphic image. The physical environment is reverted into geometric forms, and is less literally represented than in the work of Obata or the Hibis. Though the image as a whole is strong and graphic, it is as if the individual figures are floating, lost and adrift in the dust and their environment.

In Okubo's work, the emotions presented seem more raw and honest. The mother's forehead wrinkles, and the expression of her eyebrows suggests a longing despair. The heads of the figures are much larger than their bodies, giving them an inflated look and feeling. The hands of the figure on the left and the small child on the right seem to be searching for a place to rest, or a way to comfort and hold themselves. Their tiny hands however, and do not seem capable of fully managing the stronger, larger emotions present on their faces.

After she was released from the camp, Okubo and many other Japanese Americans went through a series of instructional classes on how to better fit into America. Such forums were entitled "How to Make Friends" and "How to Behave in the Outside World". The majority of Japanese Americans living in the camps had lived in the "outside world" without conflict before, and knew how to behave in a quiet, respectful matter. These forums added further injury to the internment experience, implying that Japanese Americans needed lessons on how to assimilate into the place they already considered home. In the part of her book that describes this experience, Okubo draws an accompanying picture. In it, she is being photographed, in preparation for returning to the outside world. Although a frame is set up around her face, she turns her head to the side, and has a distant, though yielding look in her eyes. She looks as though she is acknowledging, but trying not to be affected by the limitations of the frame and how they

are trying to affect her behavior as a human being. While a period of readjustment into the outside world was necessary, it seems completely demeaning and dehumanizing to use these forums as a transition. Upon her return to areas outside of the internment camp, Okubo immediately set to work on publishing her collection of drawings and text in her visual autobiography "Citizen 13660". She contrasts her status as a citizen with the number assigned to her during her time in the internment camp. Her position was an unusual one in the internment camp, and likely was difficult and confusing to come to terms with. She published this book in 1946, very close to the end of the Japanese American Internment, and it became the first published personal documentation of the Japanese American internment and evacuation.

After she published this work, Okubo went to work for Fortune magazine in New York City. She stayed there for the remainder of her life, continuing to make art and advocating for the Japanese American community. None of the art she created during this time period became as famous as her drawings published in "Citizen 13660", or other artistic pieces she created during the three year time period of the Japanese American Internment.

### Conclusion

The paintings and drawing of the Japanese American Internment are becoming increasingly visible, through national museum exhibitions, conferences, and book publications. "With New Eyes: Towards an Asian American Art History" from 1995 at the San Francisco State University Art Gallery, "7 lbs. 9 oz.: The Reintegration of Tradition into Contemporary Art" from 1999 at The Asian American Arts Centre, New York, NY, and "Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity 1900-2000" from 2000 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are some of the exhibitions that have brought more attention to this art. People are beginning to recognize this art as more than "wartime documentation", and giving it a newly defined place in American history and Western art history. Partly, it may be a self-corrective measure on the part of the United States, a form of apology for the injustice of the experience.

The significance of art making in the camps has been underestimated. Many Japanese Americans used art as a new language, a way of talking and finding a voice in a politically and socially isolating time period. Japanese American artists who became teachers not only made visual communication techniques available to masses of individuals who were desperate to find voices, but also had a strong influence in determining how, and in what style, a new visual identity would take shape.

At the time this art was produced, it was used as a powerful tool to re-shape the American perception of what it signified to be Japanese American. Art was used to convey a sense of loyalty to America, through the adoption of American artistic techniques, and ideas about what constituted good subject matter. Art was also used in

other cases to convey a sense of pride in Japanese culture and heritage, and used to show the American public there was more to the Japanese culture than the current political situation. In other ways, this art was used to keep Japanese traditions alive that could not take place in reality, but could be present on the canvas.

When viewed in art exhibits in well-known, prestigious museums and labeled "fine art", people view these paintings and drawings very differently than when they are simply labeled "wartime documentation" and part of an archive or personal collection. More people demonstrate their appreciation of fine art and by giving it more of their personal time and efforts at contemplation. By being labeled fine art, perhaps what is not so important is that this artwork is finding a new place in American perception, but that there is a new respect being created for the internment experience Japanese Americans underwent for three years under the American government.

Misconceptions about the level of experience of artists teaching and working in the camps, and their effect on student work, are also beginning to be re-evaluated. Members of the Japanese American community did not have many expectations of finding art of professional quality produced in the camp situations, thinking that it would be more of an emotion-based response to the immediate situation. However, many of the artists, including the ones this paper addressed in greater detail, were professionally trained and already well-known and respected. All had their own personal visions and pedagogical models for how to facilitate a visual language that would communicate a desire to be part of American culture. Within the community of Japanese American artists, there were many debates and different opinions as to how this visual language

should take form. The co-existence and diversity of these visions was not a choice, but just the nature of existing alongside others and learning to share space.

In an essay looking back on the artists of the Japanese American Internment, writer Wakako Yamauchi said

Well, they say all life is terminal. But each of us wants to leave a stone that says, "I have been here." An artist suspends a moment of his inner life – a fleeting moment of passion and longing in life and puts it on the canvas for us.

A group of Japanese Americans did not know what their future held. They arrived in the desert not knowing when they would leave, and a flat, endless landscape became the canvas for their thoughts and feelings. A whirlwind of loneliness, confusion, sadness, and hope found a place to rest in this visual art. Today, by looking back at these paintings and listening to the voices within them, the viewer acknowledges the experience of Japanese Americans, and respects their will to feel in an inhumane place.



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