

SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

ART AND HANDCRAFTED OBJECTS FROM AMERICA'S CONCENTRATION CAMPS

August 21–November 15, 2017



Marking the 75th anniversary of Executive Order 9066, *Something from Nothing: Art and Handcrafted Objects from America's Concentration Camps* presents artifacts from the National Japanese American Historical Society's permanent collection.

These objects tell the story of disrupted lives, highlighting the resourceful ways in which Japanese American incarcerated survivors created, preserved, and recreated home, tradition, and community. Two art installations by contemporary artists Barbara Horiuchi and Marlene Iyemura provide later generations' reflections on this experience.

In 1942, Executive Order 9066 led to the mass round up and imprisonment of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry living on the west coast. These citizens, two-thirds born in the United States, were forced to leave their communities to live behind barbed wire, under suspicion simply because of their ethnicity. Businesses and homes were lost, families torn apart. Some rebelled. Some remained silent for decades. All had hours and days and years to fill.

Arts and crafts were a way for inmates to keep their hands and minds busy, create beauty where there was little, and produce objects that could be used, traded, or given as gifts.

From salvaged and found materials they made furniture, ikebana vases, nameplates, corsages, landscape paintings, and brooches. Passed down through generations, these objects are a poignant record of the camp experience.



*...as President of the United States,
and Commander in Chief of the Army
and Navy, I hereby authorize and direct
the Secretary of War...to prescribe military
areas in such places and of such extent...
from which any or all persons may
be excluded...*

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, The White House
February 19, 1942



Executive Order 9066

Immediately following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the FBI arrested and detained 2,000 Issei (Japanese immigrant) community leaders in remote **Department of Justice internment camps**.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed **Executive Order 9066**, establishing the west coast as a military area and placing the fate of "enemy aliens"—persons of German, Italian, and Japanese ancestry—in the hands of the U.S. military.

Acting on decades of anti-Asian immigration policy and attitudes, the military focused its attention on only one of these ethnic groups, implementing the unjust removal of **all persons of Japanese ancestry** throughout the western United States. Families were given mere days to pack, liquidate, or lease their businesses, property, and possessions. Adjusted for inflation, an estimated six billion dollars in personal assets were lost.

People were packed into trains and taken to fairgrounds and racetracks, where they lived in stables and barracks. Most remained in these makeshift "**assembly centers**" for three months before being transferred to one of the ten **concentration camps** (War Relocation Centers) administered by the War Relocation Authority.

On December 18, 1945, the Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. government could no longer imprison loyal American citizens without cause. Following four years of incarceration, families returned to their communities to attempt to rebuild their lives. 1,862 people died and 5,918 new citizens were born in these prisons.



A Japanese American family watches as an FBI agent searches their home in San Francisco, CA. 1941.
Courtesy Library of Congress



A soldier posts a Civilian Exclusion Order on Bainbridge Island, WA, 1942.
Courtesy Library of Congress

LEFT: Soldiers stand by while people of Japanese heritage from San Pedro, CA, arrive via train at Santa Anita, CA. Clem Albers, 1942.
Courtesy Library of Congress

Handcrafts thrived in the camps out of necessity and as a way to occupy time. Depending on the availability of materials, functional objects were built, traditional art forms adapted, and new crafts created.



Arts and Crafts

Carpentry transformed scrap lumber and salvaged nails into privacy screens, tables, kitchen implements, and toys. Women shared patterns and textiles, **stitching and weaving** decorations, clothing, and quilts. Using magazine paper and discarded fabric, they wove baskets and created traditional dolls. **Shells** collected from dry lakebeds were assembled into intricate corsages and pins.

Ikebana, the art of Japanese flower arrangement, was integral to all of the camps, requiring inventive uses of the materials found in each new landscape, while the art of **kobu**, sculptures featuring polished tree burls, was created in the camps.

Government-sanctioned **classes and clubs** offered a variety of crafts. Students of all ages **carved** crates and scrap wood into plaques, animal sculptures, and delicate bird brooches. Among the most recognized of the art programs was the **Tanforan Art School**, later relocated to Topaz. Founded by U.C. Berkeley professor and painter **Chiura Obata**, the school served hundreds of students. **Landscape paintings** executed by masters and students offer lasting visual testimonies of what was once there.

A number of camp survivors went on to become well-known artists, including **Ruth Asawa**, **George Nakashima**, **Arthur Okamura**, **Miné Okubo**, and **Kay Sekimachi**.



Peggie Yorita creates intricate brooches out of shells that she gathered at Tule Lake, CA, 1943. Courtesy of the Bain Family Collection



Three women at Granada, CO, create flower pots by unraveling used onion sacks and wrapping the fibers around glass bottles. Tom Parker, 1942. Courtesy National Archives

LEFT: Artist Chiura Obata leads students in a landscape painting class at Tanforan, CA, 1942. Courtesy Library of Congress

To house detainees, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) built ten camps in remote, barren areas mostly located in the western U.S. Secured by barbed wire and overseen by armed guards, the camps functioned as prisons.

Camp Life

Barracks were crudely constructed and lined with tarpaper. The **lack of privacy** took a devastating toll on families. Up to eight people resided in each barrack unit. Thin walls separated each living space while entire blocks shared group showers and open latrines.

Families unraveled. With meals served cafeteria-style in mess halls, children and teens ate with friends rather than family members. Many men had already been separated from their families and sent to Department of Justice camps. Without their usual employment and pastimes, the men who stayed struggled to find purpose while their female counterparts labored to keep up with cleaning and childcare in challenging conditions.

Civil liberties were suspended. Prisoners were not allowed to vote, assemble, or move freely. English was required in all group settings. **Japanese traditions and religious practices were suppressed.** All of this worked to **undermine self-worth, cultural identity, and community.**

Camp residents took it upon themselves to **reconstruct a sense of community**, decorating their barracks, publishing newspapers, developing lending libraries, forming preschools, and producing entertainment for all ages. To fill time, the WRA allowed the inmates to set up Scout troops, sports and social clubs, and arts and crafts activities.



Mealtime at a Manzanar, CA mess hall.
Dorothea Lange, 1942.
Courtesy National Archives, photo no. 210-G-C888



A baseball game at Manzanar, CA.
Ansel Adams, 1943.
Courtesy Library of Congress

LEFT: Women use washboards to do their families' laundry at Santa Anita, CA, 1942.
Courtesy Library of Congress

Barbara Horiuchi

At one time in my life, I believed in the words of the Pledge of Allegiance, particularly “with liberty and justice for all.” Then around the age of nine, I learned of the incarceration of my parents and grandparents in relocation camps during WWII based solely on their ethnicity and fueled by fear. The irony of those words from the Pledge of Allegiance was not lost on me, even at a young age. Roughly 35 years later, I discovered the public records from the War Relocation Authority (WRA). Data gathered on each individual ranged from place of birth and year of birth or arrival in the United States to potential, mostly servile, occupations. Each person was also assigned an individual number as well as a file number.

The picture frames against the tar papered walls contain textual portraits of people from information gleaned from these WRA records. The information is matted with a traditional portrait mat to signify that these “numbers” are people. The archived files placed on the table document events in their lives or deaths, as well as their accomplishments and contributions during and after the camps. The whispered reading of the names of those on the wall is a reminder that these individuals have not been forgotten.

–Barbara Horiuchi, 2017

Barbara Horiuchi was born and raised in San Jose, California and currently resides in the San Francisco Bay Area. She received her BA and MFA from San Jose State University. As a third generation (Sansei) American of Japanese ancestry, her creative work is rooted in a desire to unearth her familial history while addressing the associated historical injustices and wounds West Coast Japanese experienced in the last century relating to immigration, the politics of exclusion, marginalization, loss, and resistance. The intersection of the politics of injustice and the personal experiences of her family inform her work and shape the manner in which it is conceived, constructed, and created.

Horiuchi has participated in solo and group exhibitions in San Jose, Los Angeles, Seattle, and San Francisco. Her work can be found in private and public collections, including the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts at the Legion of Honor, Monterey Museum of Art and Crocker Art Museum. Her writing can also be found at *Collecting Nisei Stories* (niseistories.wordpress.com) and her website (www.brhoriuchi.com).

Marlene Iyemura

I am an image-maker who re-contextualizes personal family photographs and cultural materials. My practice references my own experience as a mixed race person living in a white dominated society. The work contends with the Japanese incarceration of World War II and the resulting anti-Asian prejudice of its "yellow peril" propaganda. Using autobiographical materials, I endeavor to highlight a grave injustice that is consistently disregarded by western society and that has established an ongoing legacy of harm towards Asian Americans.

To All Persons transforms War Relocation Authority notices and origami balloons into a memorial for those who were confined in the U.S. government's concentration camps and detention centers during WWII. The origami forms spilling over the orders are signifiers of innocence and ingenuity while acting as stand-ins for the victims of this systemic act of cruelty and dehumanization. The origami formation does not overtake the orders in volume, but is able to disrupt their cold indifference through color and dimensionality. The piece is built around the laborious process of folding and breathing life into the paper forms. The act of making has become a way of honoring and preserving the narratives of my people.

While the exploration of trauma is a key component to my practice, it is not enough for art to chronicle historical violence. I strive to process my lived realities and cultural histories in a manner that repairs instead of re-harms. My most recent work combines the process of meditation with the visual repetition found in many of my other projects. Through multiplicity I am trying to gain a better understanding of the emotional elements of making.

–Marlene Iyemura, 2017

Marlene Iyemura is a queer Filipino-Japanese American artist currently working on restorative art practices in an effort to create an avenue for personal and communal healing.

Originally from the south bay, Iyemura now lives in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada.

Focused on facilitating a critical dialogue about historical and institutional inequity, Iyemura utilizes personal narratives for public consumption. A recent graduate of Mills College, Iyemura's work has shown at Walter Maciel Gallery, Firehouse Arts Center, and the SOMArts Cultural Center.