Art in the Internment Camps: Designing the Japanese American Identity

At the heart of the bustling metropolis of downtown Los Angeles there exists a hidden place of tranquil beauty and reflection – a traditional Japanese garden in the middle of Little Tokyo. This garden, composed of customary Japanese flowers, streams, and rock carvings, is part of the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, a center for the sharing and promotion of Japanese and Japanese American cultural arts with surrounding communities. A plaque dedicated to the garden reads:

In the middle cascades, the stream divides, expressing the conflicts experienced by the second generation Nisei, who volunteered out of America’s concentration camps during World War II to prove their loyalty to the United States of America. The stream gradually becomes a gentle murmur, ending in a serene pond, symbolic of the hope for a peaceful world for the Sansei and the ensuing generations.

Reading this reminded me of my own grandparents – Nisei Japanese Americans who were interned in the Poston III, Arizona camp in 1942. Although there has been much public contention regarding the injustices and constitutional violations committed by the internment process, my grandparents never exhibited any resentment towards the American society that incarcerated them. In fact, when reflecting on her experiences in Poston, my grandmother often

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focuses on the more positive outcome of befriending many fellow Japanese Americans whom she would have never met otherwise. This contradiction provoked my personal inquiry of the daily activities of the Japanese Americans in the camps – particularly, the arts, crafts and performing arts practiced by both the Issei (first-generation Japanese immigrants) and the Nisei. Gauging from the lack of discussion about these activities in most publications regarding the camps, it is clear to me that many scholars and historians undervalue the significance of these creative endeavors. Perhaps disregarding this aspect of camp life as a trivial recreation, many scholars have overlooked the lasting influence that these arts have had on Japanese Americans of the past and of the present.

The international exchange of traditions of art between the Japanese and American cultures in the internment camps permanently affected the evacuees’ perceptions of who they were in both a personal and public sense. Externally defined and segregated by other non-Japanese American citizens, they were forced to inwardly reinterpret themselves and their surroundings. The artwork and art-related activities practiced during imprisonment reflected a significant turning point for the Japanese American community – this art became a symbol of the acculturation of histories and ideologies that shaped the hybrid identity of the Japanese American citizen. Through media of art, a cross-cultural dialogue was maintained between the older Japanese traditions of the Issei and the American-born Nisei’s modernized ways of life. The physical process of creating both Japanese and American art out of scrap materials on American soil symbolized the evacuees’ reconstruction of their unique identities resulting from this exchange. The artistic products of this process articulate the internees’ awareness of and appreciation for the duality characterizing their ethnicity. The internment camp environment provided a unique opportunity for Japanese Americans of all generations to explore and
physically redefine their identities as individuals and as a collective community through shared art.

During the period surrounding World War II, drastic changes occurred for Japanese Americans in a distrusting American society. A few months after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the U.S. government sent approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast to designated “relocation centers” for the duration of the war (Hirasuna 10). Though there was never any recorded act of sedition or rebellion among the Japanese American citizens either before or during the war, they were nonetheless stereotypically deemed “dangerous enemy aliens” (Hirasuna 10). Feigned reports of subversive schemes of Japanese Americans living on the West Coast and the Japanese navy caused immense suspicion and panic among the U.S. military forces. In January 1942, Santa Monica congressman Leland M. Ford wrote a letter to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson imploring that “all Japanese, whether citizens or not...[be] placed in inland concentration camps” since his or her willingness to go would verify true patriotism (Hirasuna 14). Consequently, on February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the forced removal of anyone of Japanese descent to one of the ten relocation camps.

The fact that these Japanese Americans were suddenly deemed unwanted enemies by American society created an overwhelming sense of confusion within their community. As their identities as righteous American citizens were thrown into question, many of their self-images became distorted and insecure. Dr. Jan Ziegler, author of The Schooling of Japanese American Children at Relocation Centers During World War II, explores the concepts of ethnicity and the psychological effects of internment on Japanese Americans, particularly the Nisei students. She argues that the extreme contradiction between the way the Japanese Americans perceived
themselves and the way American society regarded them caused a sort of “ethnic anxiety” (155); they saw themselves as American citizens deserving equal rights and liberties, yet their unconstitutional incarceration proved the opposition of their own conceived identity to the external identity prescribed by society.

Adding to this ethnic identity dilemma was the fact that, even prior to the outbreak of the war, the Japanese Americans were a “divided people” (Ziegler 18) due to the increasing generational differences between the Issei and the Nisei. Nisei Poston internee Gene Sogioka recalls in his camp narrative, “It’s not just the age gap... There are two different cultures in the camp: the Nisei, and the Issei” (qtd. in Gesenseway 153). The disparity between ancient Japan and modernized America was embodied and displayed by the contrasting values, ideologies, and lifestyles of the Issei and Nisei. The Issei, representing an “obsolete mentality,” often insisted that Japanese be spoken throughout the camp; the Nisei, however, symbolized the idealistic quest for the “American Dream” and willingly conformed to U.S. customs (Dusselier 195). The camp structure intensified the estrangement between Issei parents and their Nisei children because the youth were no longer economically dependent on their parents; by taking away any rights to income or social status, the U.S. government had usurped the position of primary caregiver, and the structure of the Japanese American family unit neared disintegration (Ziegler 136, Dusselier 194). Due to these groups’ inabilitys to understand or accept the other’s behaviors, an antagonistic relationship developed. Ted Matsuda, most likely a Nisei interned at Jerome, Arkansas, describes in his evacuation diary the frequent problems with stealing occurring in the camp (21). In his June 15th entry, he bitterly recounts, “Issei are quick to blame every fault on the Nisei” (21). Through the disunion between the Issei and Nisei, the cultural identification term “Japanese American” became fragmented by the opposing sides of its two competing ethnicities.
However, despite their great contrast in age and customs, the Issei and Nisei shared the same situation of mandatory segregation and thus experienced similar emotional, mental, and spiritual needs. Forcibly placed in foreign, unwelcoming territory without any natural human rights, the majority of the Japanese American evacuees felt deeply betrayed by the U.S. government. Speaking through a communal voice, Matsuda serves as a representative of the discontented detainees when relating his psychological anxieties in camp. He freely censures the irony of the situation when explaining, “We, Japanese, who…are firm believers in the Democracy, are…denied the privilege of fighting for our life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness”(33-34). Though Matsuda had previously detached himself from the opposing Issei, his use of the inclusive “we” reunites him with the collective group. He and his fellow evacuees, unified by both their common ancestry and current incarceration, shared similar frustrations with the present circumstances.

Possessing both individual and communal needs for a renewal of spirit, the internees turned to creativity and imagination for an emotional outlet. The Japanese Americans were able to overcome behavioral and ideological differences by uncovering a common ground projected through artistic creation. Manifesting aspects of both Japanese and American cultures, the internees’ art represented the process of internal as well as external re-creation. The solemn environment of the camps evolved into a space of transformation where the evacuees altered their senses of self and place through the production of art.

From the outset, various forms of artistic expression performed by the detainee community encompassed Japanese ideology. Art, which initially began in the camps as a way to make the desolate surroundings of the barracks more inhabitable, reflected Japanese ingenuity (Hirasuna 24). Internees utilized whatever scraps and scavenged materials they could find
around the camps to build living necessities such as furniture and curtains (Oy Wong 13). Allen Eaton, a witness of the camps and author of the 1952 book Beauty Behind Barbed Wire, argues, “The Japanese, more than any people…had a genius for making something out of almost nothing,” so the severe scarcity of resources did not in the least hinder the internees’ resolve (3). In Japanese culture, a philosophy shikataganai, literally “It can’t be helped,” teaches the Japanese to gaman, or “accept what is with patience and dignity”(Hirasuna 7). Determined to make the best out of the situation, the internees subsequently sought to beautify their environment, renovating their tar-paper barracks by planting countless gardens and flowers (Eaton 4). Eaton attributes this production of beauty in the face of adversity to the fact that “[t]he innate recognition of…the beautiful thing – even in the simplest circumstances of life – is a basic [Japanese] principle; it is…a religion (116). These spiritual traditions carried throughout the camps helped establish a sense of cultural familiarity within foreign environments. Thus, the process of integrating Japanese cultural philosophies into the American experience of confinement had begun through the initial, and somewhat unconventional, representations of art.

The function and intention of art in the camps evolved from a reflection of Japanese aesthetic to a crucial means of personal exploration and communal unity. Flo Oy Wong, author of 1942 Luggage from Home to Camp which compiles personal stories of internees, affirms that Japanese Americans in all ten relocation camps participated in some form of the arts, either as makers, teachers, performers, or “simply as admirers and supporters of the creative spirit that blossomed”(12-13). A way of coping with the mental trauma of the situation, art was employed as a means of emotional endurance, mental fortitude, and spiritual relief (Kuramitsu 637-8). Through its universal necessity, art became a mechanism for breaking the cultural and generational barrier between the Issei and Nisei. Internees of all ages discovered their human
commonalities through the social art activities that “served as webs of collectivity” (Dusselier 196). Ironically, societal alienation bonded the evacuees together – they connected through an “intensified sense of being culturally Japanese” (Ziegler 160). In particular, the Nisei, surrounded for the first time by a populace composed solely of Japanese people, felt both a desire and responsibility to become familiarized with their cultural roots (165). Their process of becoming “more ‘japanesey’” was not carried out through political or nationalistic means, but through forming relationships with others like them (165). Lili Sasaki, an art teacher in the Amache camp, claims that for the older Issei, internment was the “first time they became creative, because they had time” (qtd. in Gesenseway 104). The Issei took pride in reestablishing the essence of Japan within the American camps and it was here that both professional and vernacular Japanese cultural arts thrived more than ever before (Ziegler 160). Out of the bleak isolation of the camps blossomed the vital promotion of shared cultural traditions.

The arts and crafts associated with specifically Japanese customs helped re-assimilate the evacuees to their cultural roots. Unlike many Western civilizations that prefer the “fine arts” of painting and sculpture, the Japanese revere crafts as a vital aesthetic element of daily life (Hanamura 8). In Japan, crafts are called Mingei, or “people’s art,” viewed as achievements of the entire society and representing the culture’s “‘continuation through time,…connections with the past, [and] pride in human accomplishment” (Hanamura 8). In the camps, a variety of forms of handmade arts and crafts developed, such as wood carving (see Figure 2), miniature landscape-making or bon-kei, shell decorating, basket-making, knitting, and crocheting (Hirasuna 27-29). Probably the most prevalent craft objects produced in all of the camps were wood-carved bird pins, originated by Japanese carvers in Poston and carefully constructed using egg crates, watercolor paints, safety pins, wires, and nail polish (Hirasuna 77, Oy Wong 14). My
grandmother actually possessed three of these miniature bird pins, given to her by a fellow internee and preserved for over 60 years (see Figure 1). The painted detail and delicate carving of these birds suggests the incredible meticulousness and patience with which they were made. Studying a tangible, authentic product of an internee offered me a truer understanding of the importance of craft to the Japanese way of life and the emotional essentiality that it held for the displaced internees.

Due to material scarcity, internees invented resourceful means of sharing Japanese culture through art. A photograph described by Allen Eaton explains a collection of intricately painted stones representing Japanese folktale characters (87) (see Figure 3). Through these imaginary characters, both children and adults became familiarized with their culture’s mythological narratives. As shown by many magnified photos in Delphine Hirasuna’s The Art of Gaman, various pendants and trinkets such as cigarette cases, animal carvings, vases, geta shoes, name plates, wooden games, and Japanese dolls (see Figure 4) were also constructed (36-119). Some of the more elegant Japanese cultural arts, such as *sumi-e* brush painting, calligraphy, origami, and embroidery were likewise popular despite the lack of traditionally-used materials like silk (Hirasuna 29; Eaton 118). Very few internees, however, had any prior artistic
training, and most arts and crafts were learned informally or self-taught (Hirasuna 32). The detainees who did possess special craft skills or natural artistic talent, most often the Issei, became the instructors of these projects (Hirasuna 27). The Issei’s passion for arts and crafts became a means of escape and a strong connection to the aesthetic of their Japanese heritage (Hirasuna 23). Yet, by teaching these crafts to the Nisei, they were also able to pass on critical aspects of their ethnic heritage and reacquaint the Nisei with their cultural origins.

Although these informal lessons in arts and crafts were essential to the conveyance of Japanese culture, more formal lessons in the camp educational schools played a valuable role in promoting an ethnic exchange of Japanese and American. “Memoirs,” the 1944 Hunt High School yearbook from the Hunt, Idaho camp, provides insight to the importance of art in these schools. Nearly every page exhibits a photo of students’ artwork or of the students engaged in an art-related activity. These photos show both traditional Japanese and American forms of art being practiced; for example, in a picture entitled “Art Exhibit” that depicts the artworks of the junior class, the exhibition room contains traditional Japanese-style paintings of plants and coy fish, long, vertical scrolls of phrases in Japanese writing, and delicately carved masks of Japanese idols and gods. However, on the following page, a photograph labeled “Pencil
Sketches” presents student-drawn portraits of Caucasian women and babies, American-bred dogs, and detailed American landscapes. This contrast of cultural themes within the art reveals that both American and Japanese cultures were included in the curriculum, and that students experienced an ethnic collaboration that enabled them to explore and appreciate the uniqueness of their hybrid identities.

Art schools furthered this cultural exchange by offering classes that emphasized both Japanese and Western art forms. The Tanforan Art School, founded in May 1942 in the temporary Tanforan detention center, held 95 classes per week and offered 25 artistic disciplines (Higa 21). These included American-style figure and cartoon drawing, commercial layout, fashion design, and mural painting, as well as Japanese still life, sculpture, and art appreciation (Hirasuna 26, Higa 22). Chiura Obata, a professor at Berkeley and founder of the Tanforan Art School, advocated “the exploration of inner freedoms of vision and creativity”(Kuramitsu 635) as a way to mentally transcend the dismal camp environment, as well as to possibly discover unknown aspects of their own identities. The goal of the Topaz Art School, the permanent re-establishment of the Tanforan School, was not to train its students in one specific artistic style, but to encourage evacuees to explore many different forms of creative expression (Hibi xi). The school fused together Japanese and American artistic techniques, such as drawing, painting, art history, tailoring, crocheting, and ikebana flower arranging, into one culturally comprehensive curriculum (Hibi xi). Comprising of approximately eight hundred students ranging from five to eighty years old (Hibi xi), the Topaz School became an ideal location for self-exploration through imagination and redefinition of the collective Japanese American identity.

In art schools like Topaz, the Japanese American professional artist faculty instigated the intermixing of cultures and generational ideas – these ethnically-crossbred artists blended two
cultures together in their own work and were then able to pass this artistic synthesis on to their students. Out of all the camps, the Topaz center had the greatest concentration of professional artists, all of which had diverse training and expertise and whose work reflected varying styles and philosophies (Hibi xi). Founder Chiura Obata was a Japanese Nihonga painter, a style that blends Japanese sumi-e ink painting with Western realism and expanded color palate (Kuramitsu 631, Higa 23). The idea of cultural combination to create a more innovative, personal style became the very foundation of his artistic practice. The 16 other faculty artists that Obata hired likewise emulated this cultural dichotomy in their work (Hirasuna 26). Matsusaburo Hibi, a Japan native trained at the California School of Fine Arts, taught classes on Western and modern art (Higa 25). Believing that an artist’s purpose is to “develop culture”(Hibi xi-xii), Hibi encouraged his Nisei students to study their parents’ culture so they could “enrich…their homeland” by infusing Japanese civilization into American society (Hibi 9). Yet, unlike many of the traditional Japanese techniques introduced by Hibi, American-born Miné Okubo taught fresco and mural painting (Higa 28), perhaps influenced by her work with Mexican artist Diego Rivera. The instruction that hybrid artists like Okubo provided for their students linked the distant customs of Japan to the familiar, modern world they currently identified with.

This acculturative process became one of the founding bases for the Japanese American hybrid identity, especially for the younger Nisei students. Two-thirds of all internees were born and educated in America (Hirasuna 63, Okubo 16) and there was a constant need to “negotiate [the students’] cultural identit[ies]”(Ziegler 166). As a reflection of their keen awareness of their binary identities, students’ artwork “embodied the extremes of cultures: imperial Japanese figures in Samurai dress (see Figure 5) or 1940s…blonde, round-eyed beauties”(Ziegler 166). One of the most telling pieces of art, pictured in The Art of Gaman, is a Minnie Mouse pendant
created out of shells, thin wire, and paint (Hirasuna 114) *(see Figure 6).* Wide-eyed with delicate shell gloves and shoes, this pendant exemplifies the continuous presence of American pop culture and idols in the minds of the Japanese Americans. Images from U.S. magazines and books circulating in the camps also served as subject matter for the artists (Oy Wong 14). Two “pipe cleaner people,” made out of pipe cleaners and shells by a young student in Manzanar, is another example of the influence that American mass culture had on young internees (Hirasuna 63) *(see Figure 7).* The traditional 1940s hairstyles, clothing, and accessories on the figures suggest the artist’s attempt to imitate popular American fashions at the time. Symbolically, the making of both Japanese and American art out of American scrap materials allowed students to literally recreate their identity by fusing together basic elements of both Japan and America.

These creations of visual art were not the only evidence of cultural exchange in the camps – the *performing* art of music likewise encompassed this racial hybridity. In her personal narrative, "The Comfort of Music at Poston," former internee Lola Tanaka Abe recalls “[sitting] …in the barracks and [playing] American and Japanese tunes on an accordion and a violin”(Oy Wong 25). While her Issei mother had learned to play the *shamisen*, a three-stringed instrument used with Japanese *kabuki* dances and dramas, in Japan (25), Abe was a 17-year-old Nisei who
reflected a mixture of both Japanese and American cultures within her music. The February 1943 issue of Trek, a camp newsletter published in Topaz, advertises the Tanforan Music School’s lessons in utai, a form of song that accompanied ancient Japanese Noh dramas, as well as its conventionally American piano, voice, and violin lessons (26). The newsletter’s author asserts that “[the utai’s] sounds are…mingled with the strains of Beethoven and Bach,” two composers highly popularized in America (26). This unusual intertwining of musicians and sounds connected these two seemingly disparate cultures, especially dissimilar in regards to music. The exchange of international music genres illustrates the importance of art as a dialogue for internees familiarized with differing languages, backgrounds, and customs. Like the other visual arts, this fusion composed a product that was purely Japanese American, and it established a lasting sound that resonated with the hybridized identities of the internees themselves.

As a fourth generation yonsei, I find the effects of this Japanese and American acculturation directly pertinent to my personal ethnic identity. Displayed by the internees’ reworking of their identities through art, ethnicity is not simply an exterior classification – it is an internal perception influenced by particularized circumstances and reflected through individual means. I believe my research is not only important for understanding the Japanese American experience and the significance of art as a channel for communication, but for recognizing the universal approach that individuals of differing backgrounds employ to find commonality. To this day, the United States continues to experience conflicts over racial divisions and misinterpretations. I believe it is critical for American citizens to understand the historical complexity of the heterogeneous American identity and to appreciate the artistic beauty that is instilled within our nation’s diversity.
Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


