

# Japanese American Incarceration: *Seeking Truth, Healing, and Reconciliation Through Art*

Virginia Loh-Hagan and Terry Matsuoka

“Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy....” When President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote and spoke those words, he was referring to the United States being “suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.”<sup>1</sup> The bombing of Pearl Harbor shook our nation to its core and marked the U.S. entry into World War II.

The United States needed a scapegoat and saw the face of its enemy in Japanese Americans. On February 19, 1942, Roosevelt signed Executive Order (EO) 9066 which forced the incarceration of all Americans of Japanese ancestry, even those born in the United States. More than 120,000 Japanese Americans were forcefully removed from their homes on the West Coast and sent to shoddily built incarceration camps. This was done in the name of national security. None of the incarcerated Japanese Americans were found to be disloyal or to be espionage agents, as was suspected.

Many Japanese Americans found ways to fight back. Minoru Yasui, Gordon Hirabayashi, and Fred Koretmatsu filed court cases. Some of the incarcerated Japanese Americans even went to war to prove their loyalty. They fought in segregated units: the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 100th Infantry battalion. These units were made up of Japanese American soldiers. When they returned from fighting and rejoined families released from the incarceration camps, soldiers still faced prejudice and discrimination.<sup>2</sup>

Activists from the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and other groups have fought for reparations. But redress was more than just about money; they wanted the American public to “give a damn.”<sup>3</sup> Activists from JACL also fought to be remembered, so that Incarceration could never happen again. On February 19, 1978, the first Day of Remembrance in Washington State was observed.

In addition to reparations and remembrance, Japanese Americans also sought truth, healing, and reconciliation through art. Art was a way for incarcerated Japanese Americans to not only survive, but to thrive despite the conditions they were subjected to during Incarceration.

## **Making Art While Incarcerated**

Incarcerated Japanese Americans, living in crowded barracks surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers, suffered family separation, stressful interrogations, poor living conditions, subpar medical care, lack of privacy, and loss of livelihood. They also suffered many psychological effects including but not limited to shock, shame, fear, uncertainty, and feelings of helplessness.<sup>4</sup> Even after they were released, they suffered psychological effects, mostly in the form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Art proved to be a universal way for incarcerated Japanese Americans to process their trauma. The incarcerated became very resourceful and used what they found at camp to make furniture and artwork. Making furniture, which



Photo by Kevin Miyazaki. Courtesy of Wendy Maruyama

Wendy Maruyama's Tag Project (2008-2012) consists of re-created ID tags issued to 120,000 Japanese Americans forced from their homes in World War II. Ten groupings represent the 10 incarceration camps spread across the United States.

was mostly done by men, was both art and survival as they needed beds, chairs, and other furnishings. The women performed fiber arts like crocheting, sewing, and weaving. Again, this was both art and survival as they needed clothes, blankets, and rugs. But not everything they made was functional. There were many decorations, including paintings, drawings, and artificial flowers. Some women saved colorful pages from catalogs and magazines, along with other scraps, and transformed them into beautiful flower arrangements. People also created intricate carvings and sculptures out of wood and stone.

Making art at the incarceration camps could be challenging as the incarcerated were limited in art supplies. Many had to ask friends and family to send them supplies in the mail. Since most of

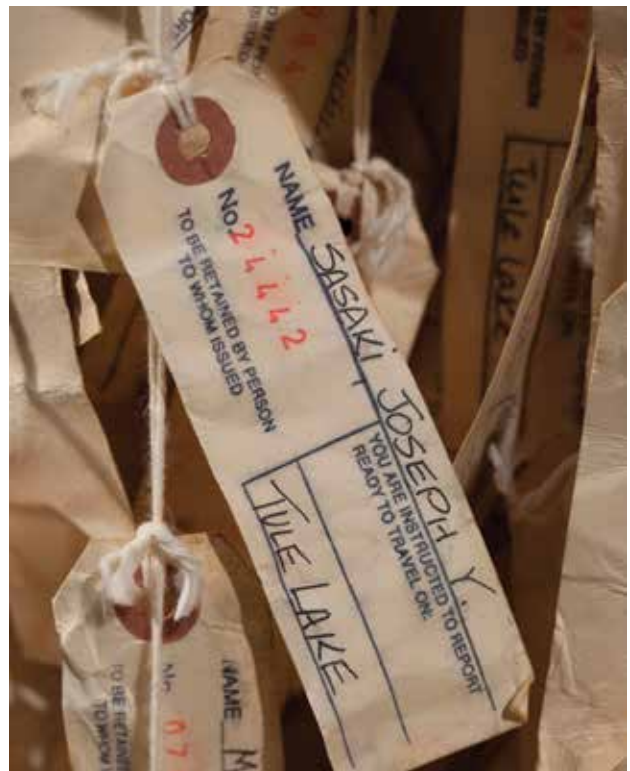


Photo by Kevin Miyazaki. Courtesy of Wendy Maruyama

Wendy Maruyama's Tag Project



Japanese American National Museum. Gift of Mine Okubo Estate, 2007.62.82

Observing camp activities from a rooftop, Tanforan Assembly Center, San Bruno, California, 1942. Drawing by Mine Okubo.

the camps were in desert areas, there was plenty of sand and dirt. As such, many people pursued the art of “bonkei,” which was essentially a landscape in a tray. There was also music, dancing, drama, and theater at the camps. Incarcerated Japanese Americans practiced both American and traditional Japanese art forms.

In making art, the incarcerated found and created community. They coordinated sewing circles and other collectives. They hosted exhibitions to showcase their art. They organized classes and workshops. Art helped them feel less isolated and more connected; it also gave them a sense of agency.<sup>5</sup> Making art served many other purposes, beyond function. Art was a way for the incarcerated to occupy their time. It kept them sane in an insane situation. It was also a vehicle

for place-making. With their artwork, incarcerated Japanese Americans created counter narratives to the bleakness of their situations. By decorating living spaces, they were attempting to create a sense of normalcy. They were also fighting against the ugliness of oppression and racism. Art empowered them and helped them survive.

Before he was incarcerated, Kango Takamura was a photo retoucher for a movie studio company in Los Angeles. He was incarcerated for selling a camera to a visiting Japanese general, which aroused suspicion.<sup>6</sup> Forbidden from taking pictures, he painted and drew his experiences instead. He also worked as a camp sign-maker and helped document the events that took place. He said, “I was afraid that I was not supposed to sketch. Maybe government doesn’t like that I sketch.... So I worked in a very funny way

purposely, made these very funny pictures." He drew sketches in watercolors and included captions in both Japanese and English.<sup>7</sup>

Mine Okubo painted and drew specifically to document her experiences. She would mail her works to friends outside of the camps in order to "tell the story of camp life."<sup>8</sup> Among her well-known drawings were her depictions of the forced removal process when Japanese Americans were kicked out of their homes; she prominently featured the numbered tags which were given out during relocation to mark belongings and to indicate the assigned camp. These tags are an example of the dehumanization of Japanese Americans, who were not seen as people, but were reduced to labels. In her drawings, Okubo depicted moments of happiness, sadness, humor, and pain. She sought to show humanity in the face of dehumanization, providing education and awareness for future generations.

David Tatsuno and Toyo Miyatake, incarcerated Japanese Americans, retained hidden cameras while incarcerated. Their footage has provided valuable visual records from the perspective of those incarcerated.

### **Making Art as Activism**

Even after release, Japanese Americans continued to grapple with the horrors and shame of Incarceration. Some turned to art as activism. They used art in a way to promote or incite political or social change. For those who made art at the camps, resistance was a byproduct or an indirect outcome. For those making art as activism (especially after release), resistance was the purpose and the direct outcome.

Wendy Maruyama, a third-generation Japanese American, is a furniture-maker and artist. At age 12, she learned that her mother's family had been incarcerated. "I remember feeling very bitter and resentful about it and didn't really want to think about it anymore," she states on her personal website.<sup>9</sup> She avoided any conversations about it, suppressing her anger and wanting to forget about it. However, in her 50s, she realized she couldn't move forward without reconciling what happened. "I decided it was time to confront this and try to understand what my family went through, and

how this event shaped the way future generations of Japanese Americans perceive themselves." In realizing that not many people in her circles knew about the Incarceration, Maruyama felt compelled to make art to educate and spread awareness.

She created an art installation called "The Tag Project." She and volunteers hand-wrote thousands of tags. "The 120,000 tags represented lost dreams, shattered lives, and displaced individuals who were singled out by 'looking like the enemy,'" her website states. In writing the names, numbers, and camp locations, Maruyama and the volunteers imagined what it was like for the incarcerated Japanese Americans. She said she thought about what each person was thinking as he or she was "being moved from the comforts of home to the spare and bare prisons placed in the foreboding deserts and wastelands of America."

Maruyama grouped the tags by individual camps, which means her installation consisted of ten 11-foot tubular sculptures hanging from the ceilings (see photos on p. 80). Each sculpture represented a camp. Maruyama hung the tags on steel rings and suspended them from the ceiling about a foot off the ground so that the tag-sculptures looked like they were cascading downwards. The tags looked like they were flowing down, like "ghostly figures that rustle and murmur as you walk by." The structures are spaced away from each other as Maruyama wanted viewers to be able "to meander among the different groupings as if they are walking through a forest of trees."<sup>10</sup> She also wanted viewers to get an idea of the huge numbers of people affected by Executive Order 9066. She wanted viewers to get a sense of the humiliation the incarcerated endured.

She also thought about her grandfather and her own family history. She said, "I replayed the stories that my mother had told me.... Some of the saddest ones were of Japanese Americans who killed their pets before they left because they had no one to care for them."<sup>11</sup> In working on the Tag Project, she was able to create an opportunity to talk to her mother and aunts about their experiences. One of the messages of her project is to break the silences and seek truth.

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## ACTIVITIES

### Primary Source: Terry Matsuoka on the Lingering Effects of Japanese American Incarceration

I am a fourth generation American. Most of what I know about my family's history comes from conversations with my grandmother.

My grandfather had a lumber business in China. So my father was actually born in China during World War II. As a result, my immediate family didn't spend time in the incarceration camps. Only my extended family were imprisoned there. But my family didn't need to be incarcerated to feel its effects. I remember hearing about it. It was not talked about openly. Yet, its silence was loud. It always lingered; I knew something bad had happened and it affected my family, and other Japanese American families, for generations.

My father eventually met my mother at one of the only Japanese restaurants in San Diego at that time. They married and later I was born. I grew up in a diverse but predominantly white neighborhood. I didn't really think about race at all until white friends would ask me what I was. As a kid, I knew what they were trying to ask me, so I would say, "Japanese." I would ask them what they were, and they would say, "American." I learned early on that I was different from them. I don't remember learning about Asia in school (besides the war with Japan). I definitely don't remember learning anything about Asian America being taught in schools.

My father wanted me to go to Japanese school on Saturday mornings to learn the language and some culture. But Saturday mornings were when my soccer and baseball games were, so the last thing I wanted to do was go to school an additional day. The main way that I kept in touch with my Japanese culture was when my parents opened one of the first sushi bars in San Diego. I would hang out in the kitchen with chefs and waitresses from Japan.

For the most part, I rejected being Asian American. I wanted to fit in and not be made fun of because of my slanted eyes. I've found Japanese Americans to be the most assimilated Asian Americans. I believe this to be a result of two things. First, Japanese culture encourages people to conform to the norms of the larger group. There is a popular expression in Japan ("Deru Kugi Wa Utareru") that says that the nail that sticks out is the one that gets hammered down. Second, the racism against Japanese Americans during World War II taught us to keep a low profile. Japanese



Terry Matsuoka

Americans worked hard to prove their allegiance to the United States. This was done by complying with being imprisoned in the camps and joining the army. In my experience, third and fourth generation Japanese Americans are the most "white-washed" Asians in the United States.

The extent of my family's involvement with the Asian American community (besides owning a Japanese restaurant) was (sometimes) attending the Japanese American Citizens League annual picnics. Ironically, aside from myself, my white step-grandfather has been the most involved with the Japanese American community. He does work with the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars), Japanese Buddhist Temple, Kiku Gardens (a retirement community) and the Japanese Friendship Garden in Balboa Park.

In my youth, I had an experience that greatly affected my understanding of racism. In the early 1980s, Japanese experienced another rise in racism because of a downturn in the American economy and the rise of the Japanese economy. Americans were angry about the popularity of companies like Sony,

Toyota, Panasonic, and Honda when American car companies like Ford and Chrysler were selling less and less cars. I was riding my bike home from baseball practice at around the age of 12. I had stopped at an intersection waiting to ride across the intersection. A car full of 20-something white males stopped at the intersection close to me. One of them asked me if I was Japanese. Shocked and scared, I just nodded my head in confirmation. He began a series of threatening comments including: “I f\*cking hate Japanese,” “You better not move or I’m going to beat the sh\*t out of you,” “I’m going to follow you home and kill you and rape your mother”...it went on like that for a while. I was petrified. I had no idea what to do. When the light turned green, I pedaled as hard as I could to get across the intersection and down the street. The white males got out of the car and began chasing me. I biked away and was so scared that I took an extra long and random route home. From that time on, I had recurring nightmares of skinheads chasing me and trying to kill me.

That moment solidified for me what it meant to be Japanese American. I will always be seen as a foreigner, as an outsider. I would always be a scapegoat. I was one national crisis away from incarceration. The fear of that experience has kept my community in check for years.

### **Activity 1: Analysis of a Primary Source**

Have students do a close reading of Terry Matsuoka’s firsthand account of being Japanese American. Then, facilitate a discussion using the following prompts:

- How did the Japanese Incarceration affect Terry and his family?
- What are the lingering effects of the Japanese Incarceration? How did it affect generations?
- Why were Japanese Americans silent about the Incarceration experience?
- How did Terry experience racism and how did it affect him?
- What is the significance of Terry’s white step-grandfather embracing Japanese American culture?
- For Terry, what does being Japanese American mean? How did he both reject and embrace his culture?

Have students create an art project based on Terry Matsuoka’s narrative. Have them pick out a significant moment to analyze and represent in art.

Have students write their own narratives about their own identity development. Encourage them to be honest and authentic.

### **Activity 2: Make Meaningful Art**

Have students learn about Japanese American Incarceration. Introduce Wendy Maruyama’s installation, “The Tag Project” and then complete the following tasks:

- Tell students that volunteers just like them helped to make the installation.
- Have students share instances in which communities worked together to make art.
- Discuss the ways in which making art as a community builds empathy and a collective memory. Discuss the potential power of such art-making.

Have students research a marginalized community that has been discriminated against and then complete the following tasks:

- Have students choose their medium (i.e., collage, painting, sculpture, installation, etc.). Challenge students to use any related materials available. Encourage them to be resourceful.
- Remind students of how Maruyama created 120,000 tags, with each tag representing a person. Encourage students to think of a symbol like a tag to represent an idea that they are trying to represent.
- Have students draw sketches of their idea of how to bring visual impact to an issue of marginalized people.
- Have students create their art.
- Host an art gallery that allows students to showcase their work.

### **Activity 3: Study an Artist**

Have students study an artist who made art about the Japanese Incarceration experience. Have them learn about their lives and their work by answering these questions:

- Why was the artist inspired to make art about the Japanese Incarceration? What was the connection to Incarceration?

- How did the artist’s art help in the process of healing, truth-making, and reconciliation?
- In what ways is art activism? (When is art activism and when is it not activism?)

Have students learn about the artist’s style and techniques. Challenge them to create their own art about a contemporary injustice by applying this artist’s art style and techniques.

The following is a partial list of artists who made art about the Japanese Incarceration experience:

- |                      |                   |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| • Kristine Yuki Aono | • Chiura Obata    |
| • Reiko Fujii        | • Henry Sugimoto  |
| • Takuichi Fujii     | • Roger Shimomura |
| • Wendy Maruyama     | • Judy Shintani   |
| • Kenjiro Nomura     | • Kango Takamura  |
| • Mine Okubo         | • Teresa Tamura   |

#### Activity 4: Analyze the Importance of Words

Write on the board: Words matter.

Facilitate a discussion using these prompts:

- What does this phrase mean?
- Do words matter all the time? When do words matter and when don’t they matter?
- Who benefits from how words are used?
- Describe a time when words mattered to you.

Tell students that there are specific words that are used to describe the Japanese American Incarceration experience. Have students work in pairs or small groups and research the following:

- Why is “Incarceration” more appropriate than “Internment” or “Imprisonment”?
- Why is “Incarcerated Japanese Americans” more appropriate than “Detainees”?
- Why is “Forced Removal” more appropriate than “Evacuation” or “Relocation”?
- Why is “Incarceration Camps” or “Prison Camps” more appropriate than “Relocation Camps” or “Detention Camps”?

Facilitate a discussion using these prompts:

- Why would the U.S. government want to use words like “relocation” instead of “forced removal”? Why would Japanese Americans want to use “forced removal” instead of “relocation”?
- Why is it important to allow incarcerated Japanese Americans to select their own words to describe their experiences? (Why do some incarcerated Japanese Americans still refer to the experience as “internment”?)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Asian American Education Project offers several lesson plans to teach students about the Japanese American Incarceration experience:

- “Japanese Americans and Aleuts Incarceration Constitutional Violations.” This lesson plan covers the forced removal process, conditions and lives in the camps, and the eventual release of prisoners.: <https://asianamericanedu.org/japanese-americans-aleuts-incarceration-constitutional-violations.html>
- “Who Defines Loyalty?: Japanese Americans During World War II.” This lesson plan covers how Japanese Americans proved their loyalty in various ways: <https://asianamericanedu.org/2.3-define-loyal-american-lesson-plan.html>
- “World War II Internment (ELA Unit.)” This unit exposes students to the life of Fred Korematsu, the history of Japanese Incarceration, and the fight for civil rights during World War II as well as after September 11, 2001: <https://asianamericanedu.org/resist-unconstitutional-order-fred-korematsu.html>
- “World War II Internment (U.S. History Grade 11).” This unit exposes students to the life and legacy of Fred Korematsu: <https://asianamericanedu.org/pretext-for-incarceration-of-japanese-americans.html>

## RECONCILIATION THROUGH ART *from page 82*

The Tag Project was a part of a bigger project called “Executive Order 9066.” This installation is a series of cabinets mounted on a wall. The cabinets contained artifacts that represented the Incarceration. For example, some artifacts included photographs, barbed wire, tar paper, and objects owned or made by those incarcerated. The exhibit also included suitcases.

### Notes

1. National Archives, “FDR’s ‘Day of Infamy’ Speech: Crafting a Call to Arms,” [www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/winter/crafting-day-of-infamy-speech.html](http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/winter/crafting-day-of-infamy-speech.html)
2. Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (Simon & Schuster, 2015).
3. Harry H.L. Kitano, “The Effects of the Evacuation on the Japanese Americans,” in *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress* (revised edition.), eds. Roger Daniels, et al. (University of Washington Press, 1991).
4. Ibid.
5. Allen H. Eaton, *Beauty Behind Barbed Wire: The Arts of the Japanese In Our War Relocations Camps* (Harper & Brothers Publications, 1952).
6. Gesensway, Deborah and Mindy Rosenman, eds. *Beyond Words: Images from America’s Concentration Camps* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987).
7. Kristine C. Kuramitsu, “Internment and Identity in Japanese American Art.” *American Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (1995), 619–658.
8. Ibid.

## Teaching Art for Racial Justice

As all teachers know, art education seems to always be under threat. Teaching art is not a frill, a luxury, or an enrichment; it is essential. Without the art made at the relocation camps and the art made to honor the experience, the history of 120,000 people would be silenced and eventually erased. Art is powerful—it is a truth and justice. It bears witness. It is the past, present, and the future. We encourage teachers to continue to teach art and make art themselves. ■

9. Personal Website of Wendy Maruyama: <https://wendymaruyama.com/section/75073-E-O-9066.html>; Kelly Bennett, “Artist Hangs ID Tags to Tell Internment Story,” *Voice of San Diego*, 2012: [www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/arts/artist-hangs-id-tags-to-tell-internment-story](http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/arts/artist-hangs-id-tags-to-tell-internment-story).
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.



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**Terry Matsuoka** is an artist and a singer-songwriter. He is a high school art and photography teacher at the Army and Navy Academy. He also teaches photography at Mira Costa College.

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