Traditionally a newsletter isn’t published for December. However, in recognition of December 7, 1941, I thought it fitting to address the art created by Japanese Americans who were interned in camps immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Brief Background:

Over 110,000 Japanese Americans, approximately 80% of those living in the continental United States (mostly from the west coast) were collected, processed, and relocated to internment camps within the US.

At the time of the attack, Hawaii’s Japanese population—about 158,000, more than one-third of the territory’s total population—did not face mass removal and imprisonment similar to what transpired on the mainland. Instead, the Army’s “selective” policy resulted in roughly 2,000 people of Japanese descent being taken into custody. Of that group, almost all were removed to camps on the mainland.

Over 22,000 Japanese Canadians from British Columbia were evacuated and interned in camps located in Alberta and the Great Lakes area.

A few months ago I came across a book which featured the resilience of the Japanese internees. The author, Delphine Hirasuna, is a direct descendent of an internee. She explained that her parents never discussed their internment because it stirred a sense of shame and humiliation, and the sorrow and resentment of justice denied. The impetus for her book came after her mother’s passing when she discovered a dust-covered box which contained small wooden bird pins. She learned that the small treasures were indeed carved by her mother during her internment. From discarded and indigenous raw materials, internees crafted an amazing variety of imaginative, graceful, and functional objects to pass the time, and to beautify their bleak surroundings. Doing so helped them maintain their Gaman, which is the Japanese mantra for “accept what is with patience and dignity.”

Thus the title of her book; The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts From the Japanese American Internment Camps.
PREFACE

Most of the images and stories that follow came from the afore-mentioned book. The rest I discovered via research.

Pages 3 through 7 feature the work of well know American artists who you should be familiar with, as well as Japanese American artists who, during their internment sought to document the plight of those who, through Gaman, endured internment by making the best of the conditions.

The remaining pages feature a varied selection of art created by the internees.

It is my intention to introduce some of the art which was created during the internment period. Even the simplest toy, craft, or painting permitted a distraction. The significance of these creations is made evident by the conditions endured, and the sacrifices which the internees were forced to make.

The story of their art cannot be told without being reminded of such.

Joyce Norfolk
Editor
Chiura Obata immigrated to the US in 1903 in order to study Western art. In 1927 while living in Berkley, California where he taught art at UC Berkley, he discovered the beauty of Yosemite and produced several hundred paintings for which he is best known.

In early 1942, Obata and his family were forced to close his studio, and store his artworks at UC Berkeley prior to their internment at Tanforan Detention Center, California where he created an art school which served over 900 internees.

In late 1942 he was relocated to Camp Topaz, Utah where he recreated the school and completed hundreds of watercolors and sketches reflecting his journey.

Obata also did large-scale paintings of the desert landscape surrounding Topaz. In May 1943, representatives of the Japanese American Citizens League were received at the White House by Eleanor Roosevelt. They presented her with an Obata landscape titled Moonlight Over Topaz (right), as a gift for the President. Today this painting is displayed in the FRD Presidential Library.

Although Obata remained popular with his art students, his pro-American political stance alienated a faction of dissident inmates, and in April 1943, a nighttime assault left Obata hospitalized. As a result, he received permission to leave camp, and resettled his family in St. Louis, where he worked for a commercial art firm. After the war, the Obatas returned to Berkeley where Chiura resumed his position as art Professor.

In 1953 he retired as Professor Emeritus from UCB, and the following year he became a naturalized citizen. In 1965 he received the Order of the Sacred Treasure, 5th Class, Emperor’s Award, for promoting good will and cultural understanding between the United States and Japan.

Today his art, especially his paintings of Yosemite, are highly coveted, and his works are displayed at the Smithsonian and other highly acclaimed museums and galleries.
Estelle Peck (Ishigo) a white Californian, married Arthur Ishigo, a second generation Japanese American, in 1929. Interracial marriages were illegal in the state at the time, so the two went to Mexico to marry; Estelle’s family disowned her for the act. When California’s Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps in 1942, Estelle, who had been working as an art teacher, joined them voluntarily. The War Relocation Authority (WRA) commissioned her to sketch life inside the camps, and during her nearly three year stay she did over 100 sketches. Estelle and Arthur spent the war at the Pomona Assembly Center, in California, and later at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center, in Wyoming. Her story became nationally known in the early 1990’s when filmmaker Steven Okazaki made her the subject of his Academy Award winning documentary “Days of Waiting”. A few of her camp paintings are shown below.

The two paintings below depict the camps in Southern California where Estelle and Arthur lived after the war. They worked in fish canneries while trying to find permanent work again. Estelle never painted again. Arthur died in 1957, and Estelle lived, largely in poverty, until 1991.
Before World War II, Toyo Miyatake had a photo studio in Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo. When he learned he would be interned at Manzanar, he had a carpenter build him a wooden box (right) with a hole carved out at one end to accommodate a lens. In the early days of internment, cameras were considered contraband.

He turned this box into a makeshift camera that he snuck around the camp. Fearful of being discovered, Miyatake at first took pictures only at dusk or dawn, usually without people in them. Eventually the camp director caught him, but instead of punishing him, he allowed him to take pictures openly. In three years at Manzanar he took over 1500 photos.

While at Manzanar he met and began a longtime collaboration with Ansel Adams who was documenting life in the camps. The two men later published their work in the book *TwoViews of Manzanar*. After the war, Miyatake returned to his studio in Little Tokyo in Los Angeles where he continued his work as a professional photographer. He later won critical acclaim and prizes in many exhibitions, including the 1946 London International Photography Exhibition. Today the Toyo Miyatake Studio in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles is run by his son.
Ansel Adams is primarily known for his large black and white landscapes. After Pearl Harbor Adams was angered by the forced internment of over 110,000 Japanese Americans, as a friend of his was among those relocated. When asked by the War Relocation Authority to document life in the camps he jumped at the chance. In 1942 he visited the Manzanar War Relocation Center, photographing the “life and spirit” of the people living there. Adams would later combine his photographs into a book called Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese Americans.

In 1965 Adams donated his collection of 209 prints and 242 negatives of Manzanar to the US Library of Congress.
In 1941, Dorthea Lange was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for achievement in photography. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, she gave up the prestigious award and went on assignment for the War Relocation Authority photographing the forced evacuation of Japanese Americans from the West Coast. She covered the internment of Japanese Americans and their subsequent incarceration, traveling throughout urban and rural California to photograph families preparing to leave, visiting several temporary assembly centers as they opened, and eventually highlighting Manzanar, the first of the permanent internment camps.

Much of her work focused on the waiting and uncertainty involved in the removal: piles of luggage waiting to be sorted, families wearing identification tags, and waiting for transport. To many observers, her photograph of Japanese American children pledging allegiance to the flag shortly before they were sent to camp is a haunting reminder of the US policy of detaining people without charging them with any crime.

The military commanders that reviewed her work realized that Lange’s contrary point of view was evident through her photographs, and seized them for the duration of the war. The photos were quietly deposited into the National Archives, where they remained largely unseen until 2006.
Japanese Internment Art

Some of the scraps collected around camp which internees utilized to create the art and crafts featured on the following pages.
Camp Manzanar, California. Instrumental in starting an arts program for internees, University of California art professor Chiura Obata also painted a number of watercolors and kept a sketch diary of camp life while he was at camp. He made the above Season’s Greeting card by carving the image on a piece of linoleum which covered the dirt floors, then inked and transferred the image onto paper, then added watercolor. Obata sent the holiday cards to friends on the outside.

Camp Jerome, Arkansas. The above is just one of many crocheted doilies which were made by internees. The above doily was made by the author’s mother Kiyoko Hirasuna while interned at Jerome. Her husband was serving with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team * in Italy.

Camp Topaz, Utah. Homei Iseyama carved many exquisite teapots, candy dishes, and calligraphy inkwells out of the slate stones found in the camp area. After first chipping out a rough form in the slate slab, he carved, sanded, and polished out the shape and design.

Camp Rohwer, Arkansas. An unknown artist in Rohwer crafted the above shamisen, which is a three-stringed Japanese musical instrument played with a pick.

* The 442nd Regimental Combat Team was comprised of Japanese Americans and is heralded as the most decorated unit of all times.
Camp Amache, Colorado. An indelible memory for most former internees is the sound of wooden stilt clogs, called *geta*. Every morning and evening they would hear the geta clattering toward the latrine, public baths, and laundry rooms. The abrasive sand of the desert camps, and the swampy mud of the camps in Arkansas wreaked havoc on shoes and boots, so handmade geta became essential footwear. The demand for these wooden sandals turned geta making into a cottage industry.

Camp Tule Lake, California. Internees coveted the containers that supplies came in as much as the delivered goods themselves. Crates, burlap sacks, tin cans, and barrels were of keen interest to craft makers. The above cigarette case was woven from the waxy strings of an unraveled onion sack. The cigarette case is sitting atop a keyhole-style desk which was crafted from lumber taken from a barrack wall partition. The top is embellished with an inlaid design. The desk was a wedding gift to a couple in camp who were getting married.
Camp Gila River, Arizona. The interior of the above six-sided wood vase was constructed from a crate around which the artist pieced together a mosaic of dark and light ironwood which grew prolifically in the Arizona desert.

Camp Minidoka, Idaho. The above chest was made from gathered manzanita branches which were trimmed, cleaned and sawed into 1/8 inch thick cross sections. Each piece was glued to a chest made from scrap lumber, then putty was used to fill the open spaces. Once dried it was sanded and several coats of varnish were applied.

Camp Heart Mountain, Wyoming. The identical look of the tar paper-covered barracks led to some embarrassing moments as residents accidentally entered the wrong living quarters. To remedy this, short pieces of scrap wood were used to create nameplates to nail by the door.
Japanese Internment Art

Camp Topaz, Utah. Aesthetically pleasing containers to store and display personal items were desperately sought by internees. The above basket was created by weaving twisted crepe paper around wire, which was then coated with a stiffener.

Camp Tule Lake, California. Like the Native Americans from this region, the internees at Tule Lake learned to make baskets from tule reeds. The above basket was sewn together with the string from an unraveled onion sack.

Ikebana, the traditional Japanese art of flower arranging, was a favorite activity for women in camp, despite the difficulty in securing fresh flowers and vases. At first, the women made flowers out of wrapping paper and crepe paper. For vases, they used hollowed logs, shallow trays made from fruit crates, and containers woven out of string or twisted paper. To imitate the look of the woven bamboo vases of traditional Japan, some internees wove tightly twisted crepe paper around thin wire, which they then shellacked to a hard finish. A tin can placed inside allowed the porous vase to hold water.
Wood carving of little birds was a prevalent art form in all camps. An old *National Geographic* issue that featured birds was the source of research and inspiration for many camp carvers, so much so that the magazine had a run of requests for that issue.

To create the bird, artists sketched a bird outline on flat scrap wood, then carved and sanded it to give the bird a three-dimensional form. To finish, the bird was painted with realistic colors.

The biggest challenge was the bird’s legs and feet, which had to look spindly, yet be sturdy enough to hang onto a limb. Many artists solved the problem by snipping the surplus of wire mesh screens that had been slapped over barrack windows. The wire proved to be just the right thickness and strength to look like realistic bird legs. The final touch was to glue a safety pin onto the back of the bird carving so it could be worn as a brooch.
Camp Manzanar, California. The mess hall had a run on commercial-sized mayonnaise jars. The empty jars were used for keeping pipe-cleaner floral arrangements made in camp from being crushed or getting dirty.

Camp Rohwer, Arkansas. Japanese-style display cabinet made from several varieties of scrap wood. Glue was used to bind the wood, and many coats of shellac were used to finish the cabinet. Crafted by Frank Kosugi.
Japanese Internment Art

Camp Tule Lake, California, and Topaz, Arizona. Artist Suiko Mikami painted the above landscapes depicting their desolate and lonely mood, no matter the season.
Japanese Internment Art

Camp Amache, Colorado. A Senninbari vest made of silk cloth, thread, ink, buttons and paint. There are 1,000 French-tied knots on the vest -- each tied by a different person in the camp.

Camp Jerome, Arkansas. A model ship made of wood, scrap metal, wire, thread, paint, screws and nails. Carved to scale in meticulous detail, this model of a freighter was made by an unknown artist interned in Jerome. It is believed that the ship is a replica of the boat that brought the man to America.
Japanese Internment Art

Camp Heart Mountain, Wyoming. The internees here developed a reputation for their fine embroidery, partly due to the presence of Mr. Nagahama, a master of this traditional Japanese art form. Forced into camp at age 75, Mr. Nagahama’s skill captured the imagination of fellow internees. At one point, he had more than 650 needlework students. The above floral piece was done by one of his students.

Detention Camp, Santa Fe, New Mexico. S. Kawamoto was one of the 3,000 Japanese Immigrants arrested by the FBI on December 8, 1941, in a mass round up of so-called “enemy aliens.” He was imprisoned at the detention camp in Santa Fe which operated under the provisions of the Geneva Convention. Kawamoto crafted the above piece which is a painting of the camp on carved scrap wood sitting upon pieces of old fence posts.
Japanese Internment Art

Camp Poston, Arizona. Toy train made from scrap metal, scrap wood and paint. Creator unknown.

Camp Tule Lake, The leather for the above wallet most likely came through a mail-order catalog. Eizuchi Tsujikawa, who before the war lived in Kent, Washington, personalized the wallet by beveling it with a scene of the Tule Lake guard tower and barracks. Shown with the wallet is a check for thirty-two cents issued to an internee by the Work Project Administration.
Japanese Internment Art

Camp Minidoka, Idaho. (Above) A puzzle made of wood, paint and shellac, and a beautiful painting done on scrap wood, by Kametaro Matsumoto.

Camp Tule Lake, California. (Left) A logger and railroad worker in the Tacoma area before the war, Michitaro Mochizuki carved this lion sitting atop a mountain to symbolize the spirit and energy waiting to be unleashed in the forests of the Pacific Northwest.

Camp Heart Mountain, Wyoming. (Right) Before he could carve this classical bas relief panel, Kamechi Yamaichi, like many other internees, first had to make his own tools. By heating worn down triangular files in the coal-burning potbellied stove in his barrack quarters, he was able to pound out the metal to form a chisel. Once the chisel was shaped, he used a stone to give it a sharp edge.

Camp Topaz, Utah. (Above) Ryusuke Kurosawa, who operated one of the camp boiler furnaces, collected old abandoned animal traps that he found on his frequent hikes around the camp. Using the boiler fire, he softened the metal and hammered it into knife blades, then attached handles which he made from scrap wood.
Japanese Internment Art

A poignant photograph by Dorthea Lange showing a young female internee filling her days with art.