

# Archiving for Reckoning

## Chiura Obata's Wartime Work

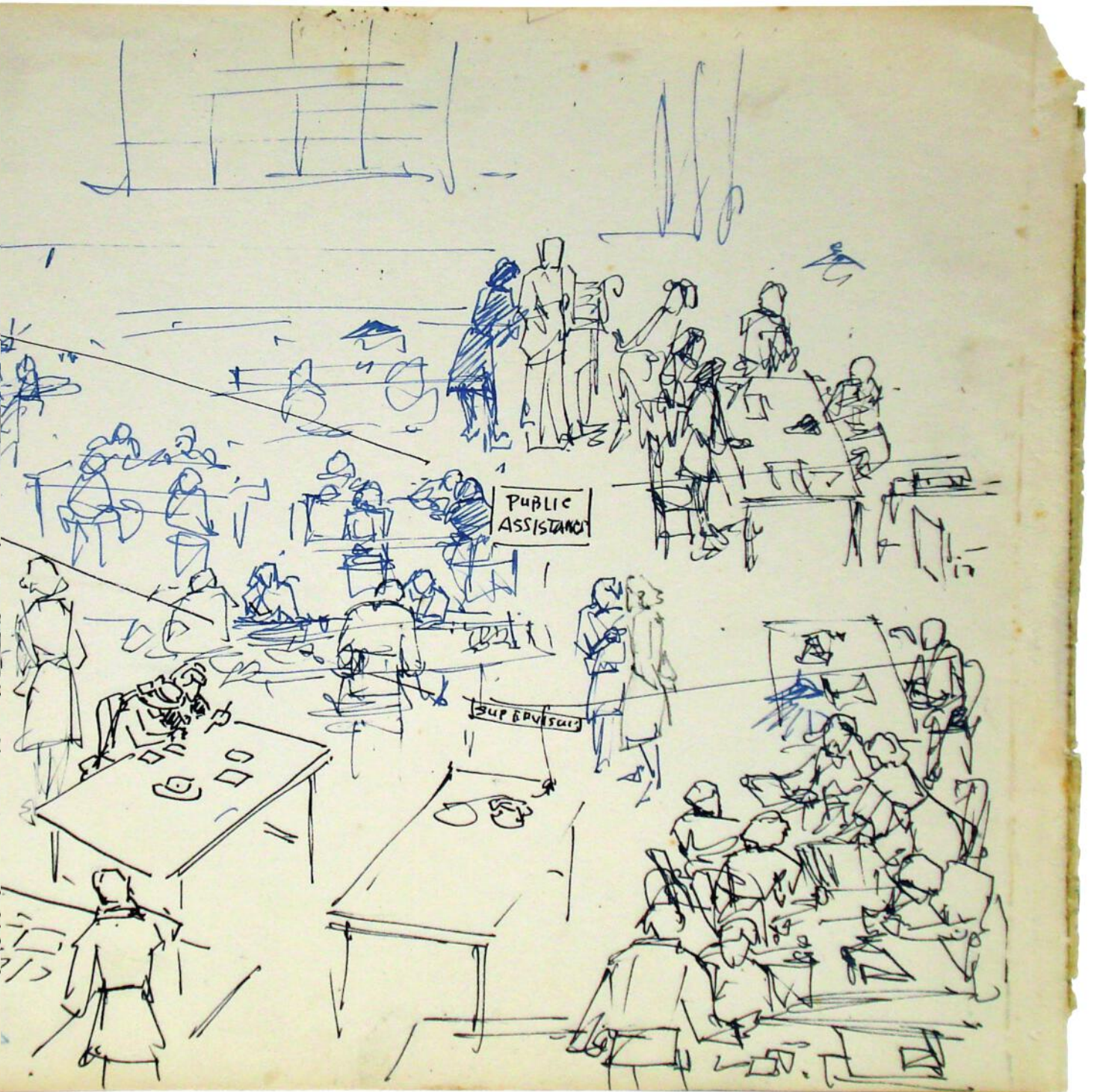
ShiPu Wang

**BETWEEN APRIL 1942 AND MAY 1943**, Chiura Obata produced more than one hundred drawings and paintings chronicling the United States' unprecedented removal of nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans from their homes on the West Coast (*frontispiece*).<sup>1</sup> President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, issued on February 19, 1942, compelled US residents of Japanese ancestry, many of whom were American citizens, to either leave the so-called Western Defense Command or move into detention centers and eventually incarceration camps.<sup>2</sup> Obata's pictures, often rendered in his signature medium of *sumi-e* (monochromatic ink painting), track his family's involuntary journey from Berkeley—where he lived and was teaching art at the University of California—to the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno, California, and then to the Topaz Relocation Center in Delta, Utah.<sup>3</sup> One sees in this body of work Obata's incorporation of the dates and occasionally times of the scenes he depicted—a continuation of his prewar practice and a means of producing a real-time eyewitness account of the impact of EO9066 on the lives of his people.<sup>4</sup> This corpus is indeed one of the most comprehensive first-person, painterly records of the Japanese American incarceration during World War II.<sup>5</sup>

As historic and powerful as Obata's pictures are, the visuals alone provide little information about the fraught circumstances under which he created the work. A close look at the artist's papers, which entered the







*frontispiece*

Chiura Obata, *First Congregation*, April 25, 1942. Pen on paper, 11 x 14 ½ in. Private collection. Photograph by ShiPu Wang.

*fig. 1 (opposite)*

Obata to Mr. and Mrs. Harry Kingman, September 28, 1942. Japanese American Research Project (Yuji Ichioka) collection of material about Japanese in the United States (Collection 2010). Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

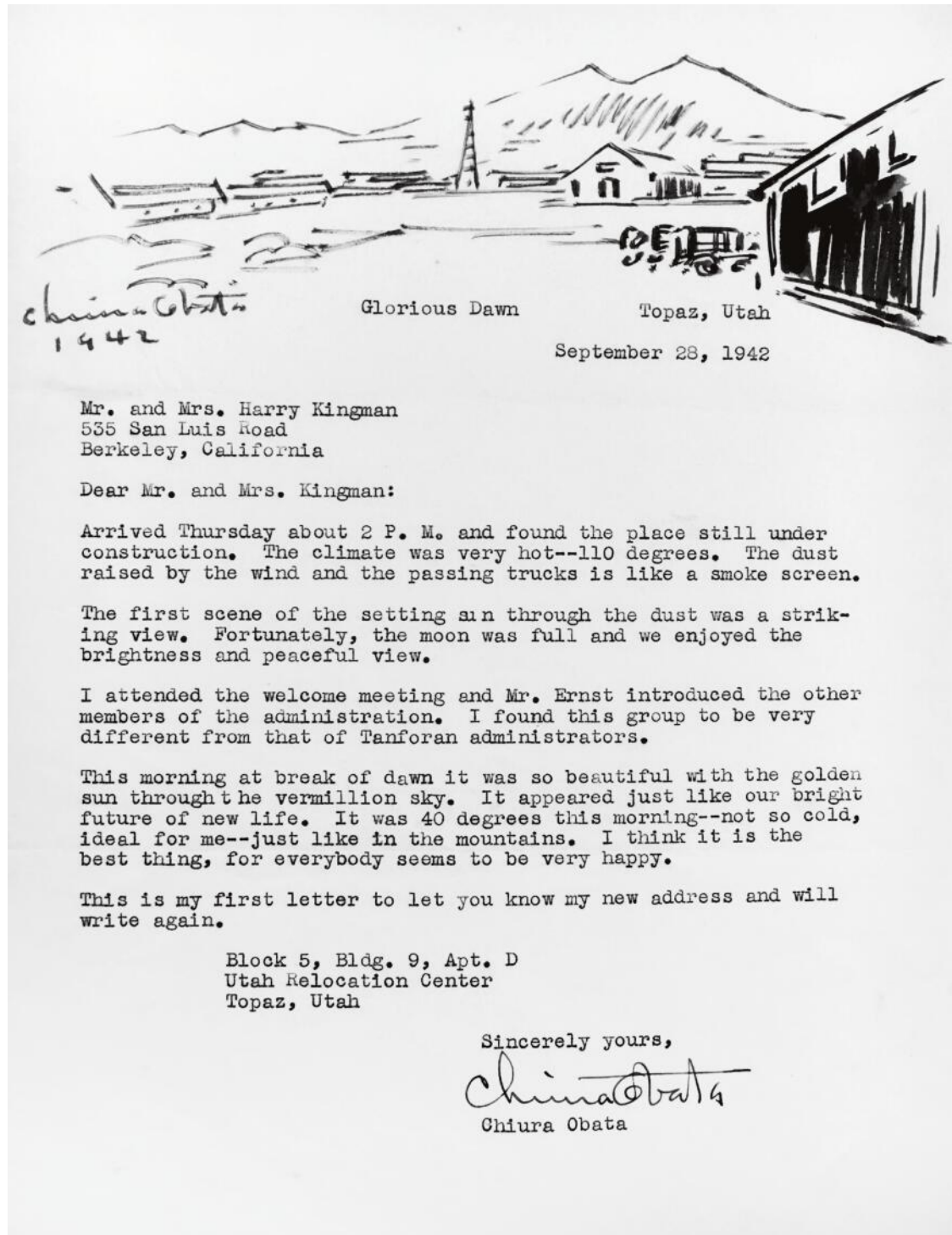
collection of the Archives of American Art in 2018, offers new insights into the broader social and political conditions that shaped his pictorial strategies. The papers also reveal connections between Japanese Americans and their non-Japanese American friends that construct a more nuanced picture of the traumatic wartime period. This essay leverages the textual archive to activate a deeper understanding of Obata's determined visual records, which were produced with a prescient grasp of the historic magnitude of the unfolding events as well as a sense of defiance and resistance. You can take away my home and liberty, Obata seemed to insist, but you cannot take away my brush, my art, and my humanity. Together, his wartime imagery and words assume an archival and advocacy value, created with an eye toward future reckoning of a historic wrong.<sup>6</sup>

**O**n September 28, 1942, four days after completing his 800-mile forced relocation from California to Utah, Obata sent a letter to his friends Harry and Ruth Kingman back home in Berkeley updating them on his whereabouts and well-being. A signed ink drawing of Topaz illustrates the typewritten dispatch, which provides the artist's new location (*fig. 1*). Obata's dry brushstrokes sketch out a barren landscape with a few barracks still under construction when the first prisoners arrived. "The climate was very hot—110 degrees," Obata wrote, and "the dust raised by the wind and the passing trucks is like a smoke screen." Deploying his keen powers of observation, he offered a colorful written description of his environs: "The first scene of the setting sun through the dust was a striking view. Fortunately, the moon was full and we enjoyed the brightness and peaceful view. . . . This morning at break of dawn it was so beautiful with the golden sun through the vermillion sky."<sup>7</sup> The passage carries a great deal of personal significance and reference that a casual reader may not discern without a fuller picture of Obata's oeuvre.

A painter renowned for landscapes of what he called "Great Nature" (*dai shizen* in Japanese), Obata chose to highlight Topaz's natural beauty after briefly acknowledging the challenging conditions on the ground.<sup>8</sup> His employment of the modifier "fortunately" projects a sense of relief in seeing the reliable moon, which Obata had depicted in many prewar artworks and which brought about some calm amidst the onslaught of dust and heat. The golden sun, peaceful moon, and vermillion sky all indicate not only his looking upward (and away from) the chaos around him, but also an insistence on continuing his practice as a thoughtful interpreter of the natural world. Consider, for example, his iconic hanging scroll *Setting Sun of Sacramento Valley* (*fig. 2*), which depicts a dramatic sky at dusk engulfed in flaming clouds, as well as his woodblock print *Full Moon, Pasadena, California* (1930), in which a moon appears to dangle from the iconic Colorado Street Bridge.<sup>9</sup> *Full Moon in the Desert* (*fig. 3*), which the artist painted en route to Topaz, illustrates his enduring dedication to this theme.

Obata turned to celestial subject matter time and again, but the same pictorial motifs took on added poignancy in the wartime context. In his *Sunset, Water Tower* (*fig. 4*), for instance, Obata revisited the same brilliant sunset he had represented in his 1922 scroll (and the 1930 woodblock print). As Haruko Kohashi Obata, a respected *ikebana* (flower arrangement) artist and teacher and Obata's wife, recalled in a 1986 oral history interview with her

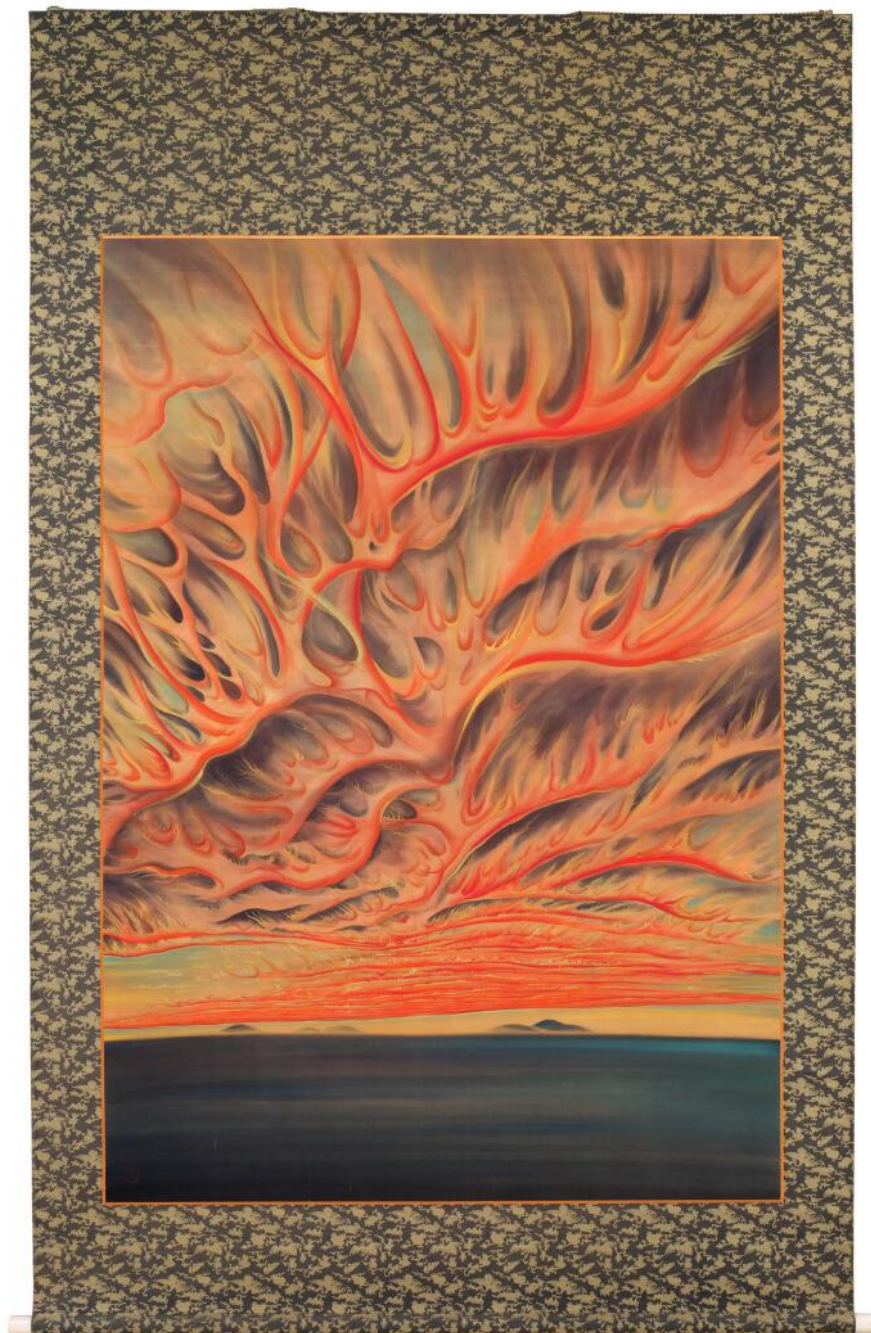




granddaughter, Kimi Kodani Hill, Obata ("Papa") would sometimes be so taken by the beautiful sunset at dinnertime that he wanted to continue to paint.<sup>10</sup> Haruko had to rush to the mess hall (only open for dinner between six and seven o'clock), fill two plates with food, and hurry back to Obata's side to "help him with the colors"—her "duty" since they married in 1912.<sup>11</sup> In Obata's

*fig. 2*

Chiura Obata, *Setting Sun of Sacramento Valley*, 1922. Hanging scroll: ink and color on silk, image: 80  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 56  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.; scroll: 111  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 72  $\frac{7}{8}$  in. Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Gyo Obata, 187:2011. © Heirs of Gyo Obata.



wartime depiction, the dramatic sunset served as more than an appreciation of natural wonder. The sun motif, with its symbolism of life and hope, also became a marker of lost time and a reminder of the indeterminate state in which the incarcerated found themselves.

Obata's September 28, 1942, letter to the Kingmans offers another curious passage indicative of what he chose to share with his friends. The artist observed that the brilliant sunrise "appeared just like our bright future of new life. It was 40 degrees this morning—not so cold, ideal for me—just like in the mountains. I think it is the best thing, for everybody seems to be





fig. 3  
Chiura Obata, *Full Moon  
in the Desert, 7:30,  
September 23, 1942.*  
Watercolor on paper,  
9 x 11 ½ in. Private  
collection. Photograph  
by ShiPu Wang.

fig. 4  
Chiura Obata, *Sunset,  
Water Tower, March 10,  
1943.* Ink, color, and mica  
on paper, 15 ¼ x 20 ½ in.  
Fine Arts Museum of  
San Francisco, Museum  
purchase, Gift of the  
Graphic Arts Council,  
2001.28.1.



fig. 5  
Chiura Obata, *Silence, Last Twilight on an Unknown Lake, Johnson Peak*, 1930. Color woodcut on paper, 11 x 16 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Obata Family, 2000.76.18. © 1989 Lillian Yuri Kodani.

fig. 6 (opposite)  
Chiura Obata, *A Sad Plight*, October 8, 1942. Ink over graphite on paper, 11 x 15 3/4 in. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Museum purchase, Gift of the Graphic Arts Council, 2001.28.3.

very happy.”<sup>12</sup> Obata’s supposed appreciation of the mountain chill recalled his enthusiasm for hiking in the High Sierra and other California mountain ranges, an activity that had inspired much splendid imagery (fig. 5).<sup>13</sup> His use of the word “ideal” appears to be an attempt to minimize the challenges posed by his new environment, implying that he was already used to, and in fact preferred, the cold. Assigning an upbeat symbolism to the sunrise also seems to be Obata’s way of offering an ostensibly cheerful portrayal of his and his fellow prisoners’ emotional state, perhaps to ease his friends’ concern and showcase his community’s resilience. There is no direct evidence to suggest that Obata’s expressed positivity was based on fears of government surveillance. Yet describing the incarcerated as “very happy” certainly is an exaggeration on his part, for being forced into a foreign and desolate environment must have deeply affected an artist whose prewar landscapes celebrated nature’s grandeur, and, by extension, the freedom represented by American democratic ideals.<sup>14</sup>



On October 8, 1942, ten days after writing to the Kingmans, Obata created one of his most poignant portraits, *A Sad Plight* (fig. 6), which directly contradicts his projection of a “bright future” for “happy” internees. Employing lyrical lines in ink and graphite, Obata depicted a family of recent arrivals huddled in their bleak room, with two beds for five adults and two children. Wrapped in a shared blanket, the central figure’s expression is that of a weary adult returning the concerned gaze of a child. The surrounding hunched bodies and bowed heads reinforce a sense of exhaustion and despair. A poem is scrawled across the barrack’s wall:

No roof  
No electric lights  
No stove  
On a plateau where the ground is frozen  
The cold pierces the skin every night  
And not enough bedding  
Sleet is falling all night  
Held in captivity and forced to travel far  
Broken in mind and body  
Are these people from Santa Ana.  
October 8th, 1942 <sup>15</sup>

The “ideal” coldness that reminded Obata of his past adventures in the mountains now assaults the worn bodies of the Californians who were confronted with a severely ill-equipped new “home” for their indeterminate





future. The artist's harrowing characterization of Topaz resembles Haruko Obata's 1986 recollection of their own family's arrival at Tanforan:

When we arrived at Tanforan it was raining; it was so sad and depressing. They gave us a horse stable the size of our dining room with a divided door where the horse put his head out—that was our sleeping quarters. There were two beds made of wood, bunk beds, and another bed on the opposite wall. . . . There was nothing else, nothing. That one time I cried so much. That was the only time I cried; it was awful.<sup>16</sup>

In this regard, *A Sad Plight* serves as both specific documentation of the new arrivals and a broader representation of all those incarcerated, including the Obatas, who were “broken in mind and body.”

A pen sketch for *A Sad Plight* at the Archives suggests a possible adjustment in Obata's approach to painting due to his wartime limitations (fig. 7). Drawing on a small piece of paper approximately half the size of the final work, the artist first used pencil to outline some of the figures, as well as the poem, before employing pen to finish the sketch. The composition is more compact, framing the figures within a tight space that shows little of their environment. Its fragmented and tentative lines differ from the long, fluid strokes in the painting. This preparatory work gives us an unusual glimpse into Obata's ink painting technique, as he is known for a confident approach to handling an unforgiving medium. “If you drag the brush you can't paint. I still tell my friends that when you paint . . . make your posture correct, keep your mind very calm, imagine in your mind what you want,” Obata instructed.

fig. 7

Chiura Obata, sketch for *A Sad Plight*, 1942. Pen on paper, 5 ½ x 9 in. Chiura Obata Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.





“If you breathe out in the middle, your brush will die halfway; it will be like the tail of a dog recovering from an illness.”<sup>17</sup> It is possible that he did not have immediate access to ink and brush at the moment he saw this family or when the subject emerged in his mind. But the sketch could also point to the artist’s recognition of the gravitas of his chosen subject matter, a scene of profound emotional relevance that required special care. In either case, the archival image provides new insight into Obata’s creative processes.

The upbeat tone in the Kingman letter becomes even more ironic, and poignant, when one reads Obata’s letter written a few months later to Eleanor D. Breed, an ally from the First Congregational Church of Berkeley, who helped many Japanese Americans in the local area.<sup>18</sup> Breed had reached out to Obata expressing concern about an injury he sustained at Topaz: he was attacked on the evening of April 4, 1943, while walking back from the communal bath to his barrack. Someone struck the artist on the forehead with a blunt metal instrument, an aggression that resulted in ten stitches over his left eye and a nineteen-day hospitalization.<sup>19</sup> Continuing his practice of capturing everyday moments, Obata drew a detailed and deceptively peaceful view of his hospital room only two days after the incident (*fig. 8*). He used such steady lines that one would not suspect the artist could not feel anything around his left eye and that “the doctors . . . refused to let [him] do any more” letter writing and sketching, as he told Breed.<sup>20</sup> It was unclear who assaulted Obata, or why. But he speculated that it was likely a misguided response from a fellow internee to his rumored connection to the FBI. “Many people thought Papa was like a spy,” Haruko recalled—a misperception in part resulting from Obata’s

*fig. 8*

Chiura Obata, *At Topaz Hospital*, April 6, 1943. Pen on paper, 11 3/4 x 17 3/4 in. Private collection. Photograph by ShiPu Wang.



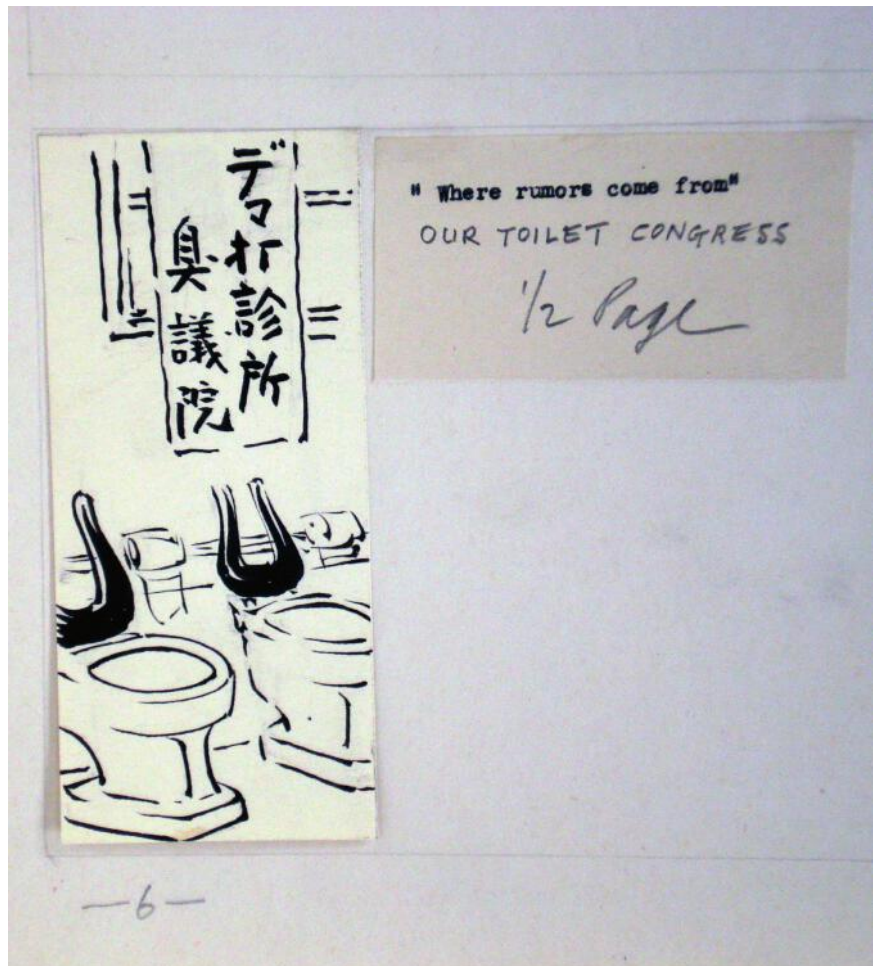
working with camp officials to establish art schools at Tanforan and Topaz.<sup>21</sup> A reference to hearsay also appeared later in a small but uncharacteristically pointed Obata illustration captioned “Where Rumors Come From: Our Toilet Congress” (*fig. 9*). “Toilet Congress” is a curious term that provokes multiple interpretations. It could be a sarcastic name for those who congregated in the latrine to gossip and breed rumors.<sup>22</sup> In a broader sense, “Toilet Congress” could also point to the government’s role in sowing suspicion and discontent among the incarcerated.

Yet Obata appeared to blame his attack on the larger tragedy of forced relocation, which caused an unidentified assailant to resort to violence. Gone is the sanguine outlook in his letter to the Kingmans six months prior. To Breed, he wrote, “In this Relocation Center the general colorless scenery—the whitish gray of the barracks, no green vegetation growing—can cause even a person in a splendid state of mind to weaken to rumors which are constantly present. . . . This abnormal state of life can contribute to such dreadful acts.” In other words, Obata’s assailant also fell victim to the greater trauma that the US government inflicted on this group of people. “I feel sorry for the attacker,” Obata empathized, “for his attempt to kill or hurt me will not better his life.”<sup>23</sup>

The artist’s letter to Breed, written on the day of his release to Salt Lake City for his recovery and his family’s safety, marked a critical shift in

*fig. 9*

Chiura Obata, Topaz newspaper mockup, “Where Rumors Come From: Our Toilet Congress,” ca. 1943. Ink on paper, 4 ¾ x 2 ¼ in. Private collection. Photograph by ShiPu Wang.



his creative production under imprisonment.<sup>24</sup> Before the assault Obata had painted daily, sometimes producing multiple works on the same day, even in transit. And he had depicted beauty in a harsh environment, as seen in his moonscapes as well as in the brilliant sky in *Sunset, Water Tower* (see fig. 4) and the energetic consternation of wind and dust in *Dust Storm, Topaz* (private collection), both painted a month before his attack.<sup>25</sup> Following the incident, Obata made only a few small but biting works about the camp, such as the “Toilet Congress” sketch and the uncharacteristically critical *Hatsuki Wakasa Shot by M. P.* (fig. 10). Painting from his hospital bed, the artist portrayed sixty-three-year-old James Hatsuki Wakasa having been gunned down by a Topaz camp sentry for walking with his dog too close to the fence. Obata chose to represent the moment of impact—as Wakasa collapses forward after the bullet entered his body—from a frontal perspective, as if he were an eyewitness. He rendered the barking dog in swift brushstrokes that echo the flurry of light ink comprising the desolate landscape in the background. The straightforward way Obata inserted himself and, by extension, the viewer, into the scene adds to the chilling effect of an image created by an artist who, at age fifty-eight and fresh off his own violent attack, could relate to Wakasa’s misfortune in a visceral way. Contemporaneous reports indicate that Wakasa was hard of hearing and thus likely did not register the camp watchman’s warning. This and subsequent violent incidents prompted internees to organize peaceful protests against the guards’ use of guns, eventually leading the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to revise its approach to camp security.<sup>26</sup> Obata’s painting stands as one of the few contemporary representations of a death among the incarcerated that led to changes in the US government’s treatment of Japanese Americans.

fig. 10

Chiura Obata, *Hatsuki Wakasa Shot by M. P.*, April 11, 1943. Sumi on paper, 11 x 15 ¾ in. Smithsonian Museum of American History, Washington, DC.





The Breed letter and related images from the final months of Obata's time at Topaz draw a grim picture of hardship and tragedy. They contribute to narratives that have rightly foregrounded the racism-fueled injustice that this community of marginalized Americans suffered. Yet correspondence and imagery in the Obata Papers also add a new dimension to our understanding of the relationships between incarcerated Japanese Americans and their allies on the outside before, during, and after World War II. Archival documents enable us to see the ambivalence and guilt of the friends of Japanese Americans (stemming from not being politically mobilized enough to stop the mass roundup, for instance) and subsequent remedial efforts that add nuance to this shameful chapter in US history.

Take Ruth Kingman as an example. She served as the executive secretary of the Pacific Coast Committee on American Principles and Fair Play, an advocacy group focused on protecting and preserving the constitutional rights of American citizens and persons of Japanese ancestry forced to evacuate West Coast communities. The committee did not publicly oppose Roosevelt's EO9066, but it did work with the government to help lessen the trauma of forced removal and lobbied for the policy change that eventually facilitated the formation of the highly decorated 442nd Infantry Regiment of the US Army, composed of Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) men drafted from the concentration camps.<sup>27</sup> In September 1942, at Obata's request, Kingman wrote a letter introducing the artist to Charles F. Ernst, director of the Topaz Relocation Center (then known as the Abraham Relocation Center), ahead of Obata's arrival.<sup>28</sup> She began her communication by stating, "It is with a feeling of personal loss that I send you this letter." And, after describing the success of the art school Obata had established at Tanforan, Kingman concluded wistfully, "Never more truly could we say that our loss is your great gain."<sup>29</sup>

Obata had indeed applied to open an art school shortly after arriving at Tanforan at the end of April in 1942. Despite a general lack of funding support from the WRA, he was able to offer a robust arts curriculum at the school thanks to the participation of friends and colleagues such as George Matsusaburo Hibi.<sup>30</sup> His allies on the outside, including Kingman and colleagues from the San Francisco Museum of Art, Flax's Artist Materials, and Duncan Vail Art Supply Company, contributed various art supplies.<sup>31</sup> Dorothea Lange ("Mrs. Paul Taylor," as Obata called her), who was employed by the WRA and visited Tanforan to photograph various classes in June 1942, sent art materials on behalf of artist Ray Strong. "Be of good cheer," she told Obata. "You are not forgotten—and let us know if there is anything we could do to help. Sincerely your friend, Dorothea Lange Taylor."<sup>32</sup>

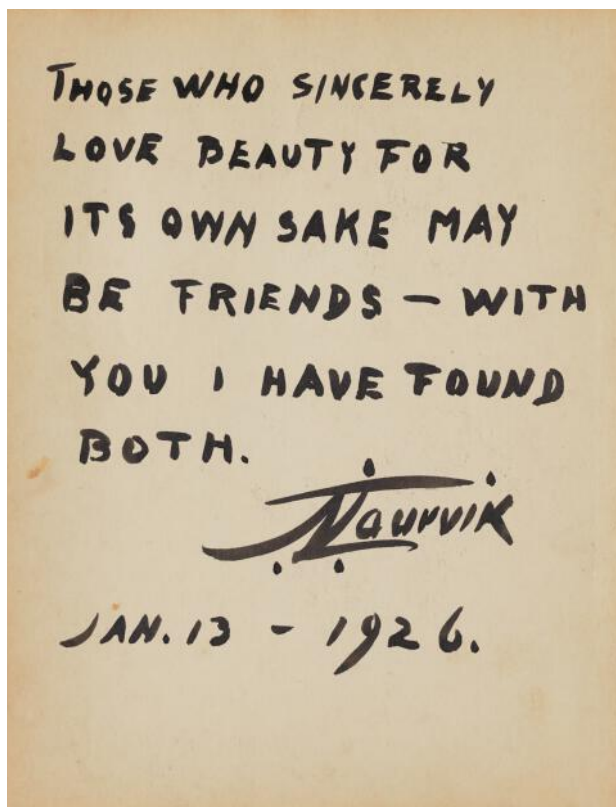
Lange was not the only one of Obata's colleagues and friends to visually document the Japanese American evacuation and incarceration. Lange began photographing the forced removal of various communities throughout California as early as March 1942, visiting assembly centers and the Manzanar Relocation Center in California's Owens Valley.<sup>33</sup> Photographer Ansel Adams initiated an independent project creating portraits of the imprisoned at Manzanar, a selection of which appeared in his 1944 photo essay "Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese Americans."<sup>34</sup> Together with Toyo Miyatake, a Los Angeles-based photographer who smuggled in a few pieces of equipment to document his incarceration experience, Adams created the groundbreaking publication *Two Views of Manzanar: An Exhibition of Photographs*, which offered insightful, comparative views of wartime incarceration.<sup>35</sup>

A longtime active member of the San Francisco/East Bay art communities, Obata had built strong relationships with friends and colleagues that withstood wartime challenges. As an immigrant, Obata worked beyond ethnically exclusive enclaves and took on diverse projects, including creating decorations for San Francisco's Portola Festival at Union Square in 1913, illustrations for George T. Marsh's and Ronald Temple's *The Lords of Dawn: A Novel* (1916), and the set design for the San Francisco Opera's *Madame Butterfly* in 1924, to name only a few.<sup>36</sup> Obata and Hibi cofounded the short-lived East West Art Society, which engaged local artists of diverse backgrounds. The group's 1922 exhibition, for instance, featured dozens of works by artists of heterogeneous styles, media, ethnicities, and nationalities. And the show took place at the Palace of Fine Arts, a highly visible venue with multiethnic patronage.<sup>37</sup> Documents in the Obata Papers show that J. Nilsen Laurvik, the San Francisco Museum of Art's director at the time, was a fan of the Obatas' work. In addition to writing an official museum letter to Haruko conveying his profuse admiration for her ikebana display at the 1922 East West Art Society exhibition, Laurvik contributed to a 1926–27 memory book in which Chiura's friends and colleagues left visual and textual mementos of their happy times with the artist (fig. 11).<sup>38</sup>

Incidentally, the Obata portrait on the page opposite Laurvik's 1926 text is a pencil drawing by Miki Hayakawa, an unfamiliar name that one might overlook among the more famous signatures in the memory book. Hayakawa was, however, one of a small group of Japanese woman artists who attained critical recognition in prewar San Francisco, winning prizes and participating in major exhibitions alongside her better-known male colleagues. Exhibition records

fig. 11

Chiura Obata memory book entries by J. Nilsen Laurvik (January 13, 1927) and Miki Hayakawa (1927). Chiura Obata Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.





indicate that Hayawaka was the only female Japanese artist in the inaugural exhibition of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1935) and was a regular contributor to the San Francisco Art Association's annual shows, appearing in at least three exhibitions in which Obata also participated (in 1927, 1931, and 1932). They also both took part in the displays staged by the San Francisco Japanese Artists Association, spearheaded by Hibi. The association's first show, in 1929, featured 132 works in a wide range of media by thirty-five artists of Japanese descent. Obata submitted three paintings; Hayakawa presented eight.<sup>39</sup> Obata's book of mementos points to these and other previously unexplored artistic connections, vibrantly illustrating the diverse milieu in which Obata built cross-cultural friendships that continued during and after the war.

In a report on the Tanforan Art School (active May–September 1942) in the Obata Papers, one learns about Obata's founding objectives, which echo his established view of art's transcendental and transcultural purposes. The goal of the art school, according to the report, "was not confined only to teaching students technical art training but was also designed for the purpose of helping the morale of the people in general in this center." Art was "one of the most constructive forms of education," the report asserted, for artmaking requires concentration and concentration develops calmness of the mind, which helps form "good judgment for normalcy in any circumstances."<sup>40</sup> Obata's supporters appear to have approved of and applauded his efforts. For example, in reviewing the 1942 Tanforan Art School exhibition at Mills College, facilitated by Breed, the art critic for the *Oakland Tribune* reproduced the entirety of Obata's statement on the art school's objectives. The writer's only critical intervention was the inclusion of an image caption stating "Their Art Is American," which omitted the usual identifier "Japanese" to underscore the unjust incarceration of his fellow citizens.<sup>41</sup>

Breed embraced the opportunity to arrange the Mills College exhibition, a project into which she poured so much effort that she joked, "I hope the Trustees of the [First Congregational] Church don't discover how much good church time I've spent on this extra-curricular activity that I find so absorbing!"<sup>42</sup> She later elaborated on her motivation and mixed emotions:

I deserve no thanks at all. . . everything I have done in connection with evacuees has been from a selfish angle—from a feeling of guilt that a thing like evacuation should have happened in this country of ours and that if all of us had worked harder at making democracy work, it wouldn't have—and from a hope that if I should someday find myself penned in behind a fence, under armed guard, there might be someone who would help a bit from the outside.

Breed's honest assessment exemplifies the shared view of many friends of Japanese Americans, who felt that they should have done more to prevent the displacement and mass incarceration. Looking on the bright side of things, however, Breed mused that, in a time so "askew" and through something so "unjust," she found herself making some "grand friends." "Just doesn't make sense, does it?" she wrote.<sup>43</sup>

The Topaz Art School (active October 1942–October 1945) continued Obata's mission of providing the incarcerated with a vibrant art training program. Emulating the public reach of the Mills College show, artworks produced inside Topaz also traveled to locations beyond the barbed-wire fence to enable other Americans to learn about those in the camps in a more

personal way. For instance, the Friends Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, staged a *Relocation Center Art Exhibit* in May 1943. A review of the show in *Asia and the Americas* highlighted the juxtaposition of aesthetic merits and harsh realities one observed in the incarcerated's works: "[The artworks on view] revealed the bleakness, the sense of being apart and uprooted, but often, too, they discovered a certain beauty in the very austerity of the surroundings." Topaz artist Frank Taira, whose portrait won a special prize at the exhibition, universalized the significance of his artmaking in an interview in the *Topaz Times*: "To me it depicts not only the sad feeling of the people in the camps, but of people all over the world. It is the thing that all of us who stop to think feel when we ask ourselves—How long?"<sup>44</sup>

The specific yet universal despair evoked by Taira's statement echoes the visual strategy in Obata's *New Moon* (fig. 12), a silk painting that won first prize and best landscape in the Friends Center exhibition. Representing a barren corner of the Topaz camp perimeter from a hovering or all-seeing perspective, Obata's moonscape exhibits a mixture of eerie desolation and calm detachment. Based on the timeline established by Obata's letters, this painting was likely finished shortly before the artist's April 3, 1943, attack. Just as the crimson clouds in *Sunset*, *Water Tower* look like an ominous portent

fig. 12

Chiura Obata, *New Moon*, 1943. Color ink on silk, 16 x 19 ½ in. Topaz Museum, Delta, Utah. Photography by Chad Kirkland.



in retrospect, the stillness of the night in *New Moon* belies the unseen anger and discontent that would manifest in physical harm to Obata not long after completion of the painting.<sup>45</sup>

Another work featuring Obata's recurring moon motif—*Moonlight Over Topaz* (fig. 13)—also had a reach that extended far beyond the incarceration camp. The Obata Papers document how *Moonlight Over Topaz* ended up in the collection of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. It was one of two paintings of Topaz commissioned from Obata by the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) in 1942, with the intention of gifting them to President Roosevelt and Dillon Seymour Myer, the WRA's director from 1942 to 1946. Guyo Tajiri, coeditor (with her husband, Larry Tajiri) of JACL's official publication, *The Pacific Citizen*, facilitated the commission, which Obata promptly accepted. The artist wanted to use "expensive powdered jewel pigments" to paint on two pieces of silk measuring approximately sixteen-by-twenty inches each, indicating the perceived importance of the commission. He asked the league to cover the cost of materials and JACL obliged, with Tajiri sending a check for expenses within three days. Obata's paintings traveled to New York for framing and then to Mike Masaru Masaoka, JACL's national secretary, in Washington, DC.<sup>46</sup>

The league ended up presenting one of the paintings to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in May 1943. It was a token of appreciation, from "loyal Americans of Japanese ancestry," for Mrs. Roosevelt's role as a steadfast ally

fig. 13  
Chiura Obata,  
*Moonlight Over Topaz*,  
December 22, 1942.  
Watercolor on silk,  
15 ¼ x 20 in. Franklin  
D. Roosevelt  
Presidential Library  
and Museum, Hyde  
Park, NY.





in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor and EO9066.<sup>47</sup> She advocated for respectful treatment of these law-abiding people, for instance, using *photo ops* such as her April 1943 visit to the Gila River War Relocation Center in Arizona to help persuade Congress to support the WRA's revised policy of permitting vetted internees to leave for free resettlement in areas away from their West Coast homes.<sup>48</sup> The day after receiving *Moonlight Over Topaz*, Mrs. Roosevelt gave a speech in New York in which she extolled the virtue of "equality for all." While she called for "equal justice before the law for all races," among other rights, she did not directly challenge the injustice of Japanese American incarceration and instead promoted a universalizing notion of "American communities" as a means of eliminating racial prejudice.<sup>49</sup> In a June 1943 letter in the Archives' collection, Mrs. Roosevelt thanks Obata for the painting—"It is very charming and I am delighted to have it"—and she is known to have displayed the work in her New York City home until her death in 1962.<sup>50</sup>

Mrs. Roosevelt's use of the word "charming" is arguably too benign to convey the historical gravitas of an image that is simultaneously universal and specific. Obata's signature style illustrates the transcendental beauty of nature, an appeal to a kind of universal aesthetic that one sees throughout his body of work. Yet as a commissioned piece created during wartime, the artist also relied on his intended viewer's knowledge of the depicted subject to register an understanding of the injustice on display. That combination renders the image a haunting indictment of a government's wrong and a potent history lesson for generations to come. The Obata Papers enable us to see *Moonlight Over Topaz* as a landscape with an agenda somewhat different from the artist's other wartime works or earlier landscapes. The archived correspondence concerning his pictorial choices for this historic commission underscores the complexity and ambivalence of the traumatic internment experience.

Viewed against the backdrop of unjust actions taken by the government of his adopted home, Obata's large corpus of wartime imagery and writings emerges as invaluable documentation of, and determined grappling with, the forced removal and incarceration of the artist and his fellow Americans. With material covering a seven-decade career, the Obata Papers will hopefully engender new studies that offer a deeper, more critical understanding of not only the artist's tremendous oeuvre, but also the intersections between art, race, and social-historical memories in twentieth-century America.

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## Notes

*I must express my deep gratitude to the Obata family for their generosity in granting me access to their collections and archives over the past decade. It was a privilege to examine, catalogue, and photograph Obata's works alongside the artist's grandchildren—Mia and Kimi, in particular—and to share his art with nearly half a million international visitors who saw the Obata retrospective at five museums in the US and Japan.*

1 This image depicts Japanese Americans assembling at the First Congregational Church in Berkeley, California, the designated registration and departure center for individuals being forcibly removed from their homes. For a comprehensive historical account of the incarceration, see, among many others, Gary Y. Okihiro, ed., *Encyclopedia of Japanese American Internment* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2013).

2 While “internment,” “evacuation,” and “relocation” are used in this essay, scholars and community members have argued that these words naturalize and even neutralize the injustice and trauma caused by the US government. My text also includes terms such as “incarceration,” “imprisonment,” “concentration camp,” and “forced displacement,” to acknowledge this critique. On terminology, see *Power of Words Handbook: A Guide to Language about Japanese Americans in World War II* (San Francisco: National Japanese American Citizens League Power of Words II Committee, 2013); and Yoshinori H. T. Himel, “Americans’ Misuse of ‘Internment,’” *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* 14, no. 3 (Spring 2016), <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol14/iss3/12>.

3 Kimi Kodani Hill, ed., *Topaz Moon: Chiura Obata's Art of the Internment* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2000), xiv–xv.

4 For other paintings with documentary notation, see ShiPu Wang, ed., *Chiura Obata: An American Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

5 Miné Okubo's graphic memoir *Citizen 13660* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946) was the first published first-person visual documentary of the American concentration camp experience. Another artist with a comparable body of work is Estelle Peck Ishigo, the Caucasian wife of Arthur Ishigo, a Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) who visually chronicled the couple's life at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Park County, Wyoming. Landmark studies of the arts and crafts produced in the camps include Allen H. Eaton, *Beauty Behind Barbed Wire: The Arts of the Japanese in Our War Relocation Camps* (New York: Harper, 1952); Karin M. Higa, ed., *The View from Within: Japanese American Art from the Internment Camps, 1942–1945* (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, UCLA Wight Art Gallery, and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1992); and Delphine Hirasuna, et al., *The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese American Internment Camps, 1942–1946* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2005).

6 I first explored this idea in my “Moonlight Over Topaz: Picturing Displacement in the Japanese American Internment,” in *Chiura Obata: An American Modern*, 32–42.

7 Obata to Mrs. and Mrs. Harry Kingman, September 28, 1942. Ruth W. Kingman Papers Related to the Pacific Coast Committee on American Principles and Fair Play, Japanese American Research Project (Collection 2010). Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles (hereafter Kingman Papers).

8 Two major Obata surveys predate *Chiura Obata: An American Modern*: The Oakland Museum's *Chiura Obata: A California Journey* (1977), and the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum's *Great Nature: The Transcendent Landscapes of*

*Chiura Obata* (2000). Both produced short exhibition pamphlets. The most extensively illustrated book on Obata's landscapes is Janice T. Driesbach and Susan Landauer, *Obata's Yosemite: The Art and Letters of Chiura Obata from His Trip to the High Sierra in 1927* (Yosemite National Park, CA: Yosemite Association, 1993).

9 There are examples of this print in the collections of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (1963.30.3126.34) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (2015.24).

10 Hill is the family historian and author of *Topaz Moon: Chiura Obata's Art of the Internment*, which introduced Obata's wartime imagery and life story to the public.

11 Her job involved preparing *sumi*, handing her husband the correct brushes, and washing used ones. “I did half the work,” she half-jokingly proclaimed about Obata's big paintings. Hill, “Excerpts from Haruko Obata's Oral History Conducted When She Was 94 Years Old, 1986,” 2, Chiura Obata Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter Obata Papers).

12 Obata to Mr. and Mrs. Harry Kingman, September 28, 1942, Obata Papers.

13 See Obata's letters detailing his hiking and camping trips in Driesbach and Landauer, *Obata's Yosemite*.

14 On the existence of government apparatus for the surveillance and censorship of internment camp correspondence, see Louis Fiset, “Return to Sender: US Censorship of Enemy Alien Mail in World War II,” *Prologue* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 21–35; and “Censored!: US Censors and Internment Camp Mail in World War II,” in *Guilt by Association: Essays on Japanese Settlement, Internment, and Relocation in the Rocky Mountain West*, ed. Mike Mackey (Powell, WY: Western History Publications, 2001), 69–100.

15 Revised translation by Asako Katsura; an earlier translation appears in Hill, *Topaz Moon*, 68. Obata might have made a mistake: he wrote Santa “Ana” (アナ) in the ink painting, whereas in the sketch he had “Anita” (ア二タ), which would have been the correct reference to the Santa Anita Detention Center that sent evacuees to Topaz. Special thanks to Katsura for discovering this discrepancy.

16 “Excerpts from Haruko Obata's Oral History,” 3.

17 “Excerpt of an Oral History Interview with Chiura Obata, 1965,” conducted by Masuji Fujii and translated by Kimi Kodani Hill and Akiko Shibagaki, in Wang, *Chiura Obata: An American Modern*, 139.

18 For an account of the church's and Breed's involvement assisting Japanese Americans in 1942, see Shirley Q. Henderson's research and interviews with Breed (and Haruko Obata, among others) in *Files Relating to the Evacuation of Japanese and Japanese Americans: Berkeley, Calif., 1942–1975* (Berkeley, CA: First Congregational Church of Berkeley, 1975).

19 Obata to Breed, April 23, 1943, Obata Papers; and Hill, *Topaz Moon*, 93–95.

20 Obata to Breed, April 23, 1943.

21 Hill, *Topaz Moon*, 91.

22 I thank Kimi Kodani Hill for her insight.

23 Obata to Breed, April 23, 1943.

24 Hill, *Topaz Moon*, 95. In May 1942, Obata, his wife, and their youngest daughter, Yuri, moved to Missouri to join their son, Gyo, who was studying architecture at Washington University in St. Louis. See *Topaz Moon*, 99.

25 For a reproduction of *Dust Storm, Topaz*, see Wang, *Chiura Obata: An American Modern*, 108.

- 26 "Funeral Held for the Late J. Wakasa," *Topaz Times*, April 20, 1943, 1. For more on the Wakasa shooting, see Okihiro, *Encyclopedia of Japanese American Internment*, 274–75; and Sandra C. Taylor, *Jewel of the Desert: Japanese American Internment at Topaz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 136–47.
- 27 "Ruth W. Kingman, the Fair Play Committee and Citizen Participation, an Interview Conducted by Rosemary Levenson," in the Earl Warren Oral History Project, University of California, Berkeley, accessed August 24, 2020, <https://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/12011/>. See additional documents in "Citizenship in a Democracy: Oral History Transcript and Related Material, 1971–1973," BANC MSS 74/97 c; Phonotape 823 A, and "Pacific Coast Committee on American Principles and Fair Play Records," BANC MSS C-A 171, Bancroft Library Archives, University of California, Berkeley.
- 28 Obata to Kingman, September 15, 1942. Obata depicted Ernst in *Welcome Speech by Mr. Ernst for the Newcomers*, 8 p.m., September 24, 1942. A reproduction appears in Hill, *Topaz Moon*, 62. Obata's request for an introduction to Ernst suggests that perhaps he learned from the difficulty of setting up the Tanforan Art School and wanted to foster better cooperation from the Topaz camp administration.
- 29 Kingman to Ernst, September 17, 1942, Kingman Papers.
- 30 Like Obata, Hibi spent time at both Tanforan and Topaz. He took over as director of the art school that Obata established at Topaz when Obata was discharged in 1943. For archives concerning Hibi's Topaz Art School activities, as well as his life and career, see Matsusaburo Hibi Papers, 1893–1972, Japanese American Research Project (Collection 2010). Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
- 31 For more on the school's operations, see Hill, *Topaz Moon*, 35–52; and "Survey of Obata Art Project," Obata Papers.
- 32 Lange to Obata, December 15, 1942, Obata Papers.
- 33 For studies of Lange's camp photographs, see: *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment*, ed. Linda Gordon and Gary Y. Okihiro (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006); and Richard Cahan and Michael Williams, *Un-American: The Incarceration of Japanese Americans During World War II: Images by Dorothea Lange, Ansel Adams, and Other Government Photographers* (Chicago: CityFiles Press, 2016).
- 34 Adams, *Born Free and Equal: Photographs of the Loyal Japanese-Americans at Manzanar Relocation Center, Inyo County, California* (New York: US Camera, 1944). Best's Studio (now the Ansel Adams Gallery) in Yosemite National Park displayed and sold Obata's artwork in the 1930s. Studies of camp photographs include Karin Higa and Tim B. Wride, "Manzanar Inside and Out: Photo Documentation of the Japanese Wartime Incarceration," in *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900–2000*, ed. Stephanie Barron, Sheri Bernstein, and Ilene Susan Fort (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 314–37; Gerald H. Robinson, *Elusive Truth: Four Photographers at Manzanar* (Nevada City, CA: Carl Mautz Publishing, 2002); and Jasmine Alinder, *Moving Images: Photography and the Japanese American Incarceration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).
- 35 *Two Views of Manzanar* was on display at UCLA's Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery from November 21, 1978, to January 14, 1979. For critiques of camp photographs failing to show the bleak conditions under incarceration, see Karin Becker Ohrn, "What You See Is What You Get: Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams at Manzanar," *Journalism History* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 14–22, 32; and Judith Fryer Davidov, "'The Color of My Skin, the Shape of My Eyes': Photographs of the Japanese-American Internment by Dorothea Lange, Ansel Adams, and Toyo Miyatake," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 223–44.
- 36 "Selected Chronology," in Wang, *Chiura Obata: An American Modern*, 147–48. Obata was acutely cognizant of the rampant racism and exclusionary laws that shaped his existence in the US. He recalled racially motivated incidents he witnessed in "Excerpt of an Oral History Interview with Chiura Obata, 1965," in *Chiura Obata: An American Modern*, 134, 137.
- 37 Wang, "Introduction," in *Chiura Obata: An American Modern*, 12.
- 38 Laurvik to Mrs. Obata, March 8, 1922, Obata Papers.
- 39 The same year, Hayakawa staged her first solo show with an impressive display of more than 150 paintings that garnered significant critical acclaim. For a study of Hayakawa's work and life, see Wang, *The Other American Moderns: Matsura, Ishigaki, Noda, Hayakawa* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 97–126.
- 40 "Survey of Obata Art Project," 2, 5. The school offered some eighty-eight classes weekly, in subjects comparable to those in an established art department. The faculty included Hibi and Miné Okubo.
- 41 H. L. Dungan, "500 Students in Tanforan Art School," *Oakland Tribune*, July 12, 1942, Obata Papers.
- 42 Breed to Obata, June 29, 1942, Obata Papers.
- 43 Breed to Obata, September 29, 1942, Obata Papers.
- 44 "Art Reflects Life in Relocation Camps," *Asia and the Americas* 43 (October 1943): 584–85; and "Topaz Artists Given Awards," *Topaz Times*, May 29, 1943, 3. Both articles are in the California Asian American Artists Biographical Survey Records (SC0929), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California.
- 45 This work was long considered lost but resurfaced in recent years. It is now in the collection of the Topaz Museum, which opened in July 2017. Thanks to Jane Beckwith, director and president of the Topaz Museum Board, for granting access to the painting.
- 46 Obata to Guyo Tajiri, December 4, 1942; and Tajiri to Obata, December 7, 1942, Obata Papers. For a history of the Tajiris, see Greg Robinson, *Pacific Citizens: Larry and Guyo Tajiri and Japanese American Journalism in the World War II Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).
- 47 Handwritten copy of the text from "Mrs. Roosevelt Receives Obata Painting from JACL, Expresses Concern for Problems of Nisei," *Pacific Citizen*, May 27, 1943, 3, Obata Papers. The whereabouts of the other Obata painting awaits rediscovery.
- 48 Tajiri, "Eleanor Roosevelt and the Nisei," *Pacific Citizen*, November 16, 1962, 3, Obata Papers.
- 49 "Mrs. Roosevelt Receives Obata Painting from JACL," 3.
- 50 Roosevelt to Obata, June 16, 1943, Obata Papers. Thanks to Herman R. Eberhardt of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum for providing information concerning the display of this work.