

Beyond East and West

Introduction Artists of Asian Ancestry in America

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This publication turns a bright light on the great history of Asian American art, too long hidden in shadow. Although still far from exhaustively complete, the current volume represents the most comprehensive survey of the field to date. It looks at the period from the gold rush to the historic 1965 Immigration Act, and beyond; explores several of the hottest spots of urban cultural production in the continental United States; and exhumes the careers of more than two hundred artists—most of whom are seen here for the first time in many decades, some in more than a century.

Our title, *Asian American Art: A History, 1850–1970*, requires explanation. Although our focus for this volume is the exploration of fine art produced by persons of Asian ancestry in America, the artists active in the period being reviewed most likely would not have identified themselves as “Asian American.” Indeed, that phrase was only first coined in 1968.¹ But these two words summon forth the diverse communities that are today commonly grouped under this rubric. Use of this term has two important consequences. First, it links this study to understandings

of contemporary Asian American art and suggests myriad ties between a seemingly remote past and more recent expressions. Second, it clearly points to our focus on the study of race and ethnicity in the United States in relation to art and culture.

Race and ethnicity are now understood to be core issues in American history and studies. Certainly, race has explosive implications in many aspects of American politics, and the specificity of legislation that impacts Asian communities—including immigration, full citizenship, and civil rights—should be remembered as an important backdrop for appreciating artists’ activities discussed here. And while this book does not focus explicitly on the humiliations or violence these artists endured, an oppressive atmosphere of societal racism affected virtually every one of them.² Also important to note is that the predominant representation of persons of Chinese and Japanese ancestry and, to a lesser degree, of Filipino and Korean ancestry in this volume reflects the demographics of the time, but it does not match the far more diverse Asian American population of the United States today, which includes people of Southeast Asian and South Asian ancestry. And, while the practice is well understood within the

Tseng Yuho, *Silent Action*, 1955 (detail, fig. 175).



Miki Hayakawa, *Portrait of a Negro*, 1926.
Oil on canvas, 26 × 20 in.

discipline of Asian American studies, our grouping together diverse nationalities separated by distinct language and cultural expression does not indicate that we mean to collapse the very real differences between these communities—even though we will see that the arts became a place for interethnic association, as evident in the paired portraits by Miki Hayakawa and Yun Gee (this page and next).

Race, ethnicity, and national origin also have meaningful relationships to Asian American cultural expression in ways too numerous to detail in this brief introduction. The incredible range of stylistic explorations and participation in the broader art world defies an easy enumeration of themes, beyond underscoring that there is no “one” Asian American art or a single approach to its appreciation. We can only highlight a few of the more salient here. While many artists were engaged in Western modes

of expression, others forged a more self-consciously hybrid path. Art education, in both ideological theory and practical training, that individuals received in Asia and/or the United States impacted artistic production in complex ways. This background is compounded by one’s generational relationship to immigration,³ as some cultural priorities and understandings may be transformed and reinterpreted over time. Nevertheless, much of this work contains a sense of subtle and unexpected exploration of both the high cultures associated with Asian models and the international modernism generally associated with Europe—and everything in between. The result is a multidimensional matrix that unfortunately has become codified as a straightforward polarity of “East and West.” We can see the play of popular culture in some of these artists’ work, such as the influence of origami, *manga*, and animation. There is also rich



Yun Gee, *Artist Studio*, 1926.
Oil on paperboard, 12 × 9 in.

evidence of broader community engagement and support of the arts. This involvement is visible in the activities at alternative exhibition spaces, the formation of art clubs and schools, the support of political associations, and the dialogues about art initiated in newspapers and journals. And while distinction in printmaking, ink painting, and ceramics might be expected from artists with an interest in reflecting Asian heritage, leadership in nonobjective painting and sculpture and the developing media of photography demonstrates a commitment to contemporary innovative exploration. Distinctive in many ways from the political and visual art histories of other marginalized or minority communities, yet sharing much with both these and mainstream trajectories, this volume is meant to initiate dialogue and spark new interpretive and comparative scholarship.⁴

By beginning our chronicle in the earliest peri-

ods of artistic production during the mid-nineteenth century, our intention is to present a historic lens for the study of Asian American art. And, as Asian immigrants generally came first to the West Coast, this volume also explores the geographic emergence of artists and art production first from this region. This directional orientation stands in marked opposition to most conventional American art histories that grow out from the East Coast, reflecting European immigration to the United States.

Our project is also specifically grounded in a primary research initiative, developed over more than ten years, as a partnership between San Francisco State University and the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, Stanford University, and the University of California at Los Angeles. One intended outcome of this long-term research initiative was the reconstruction of professional biographies

for California Asian American artists active before 1965—a date deliberately selected to reflect artistic activity prior to the major change in immigration after that year.⁵ Of more than 1,000 artists who were identified during research, 159 are represented by biographies included in this publication. The names of artists whose careers are profiled in this biographical section appear in boldface the first time they are mentioned in each section of the text. An accompanying chronology that spans 1850 through 1965 places their achievements in a broader historical context. The sheer quantity of artists contradicts the stereotype that early generations of Asian immigrants were important only as laborers, as in the building of the transcontinental railroad or in agriculture. In his foreword, Gordon Chang explores the gap generated by this erroneous assumption, ironically constructed in part by Asian American scholars who have worked to document labor history at the exclusion of highlighting a cultural profile. Another outcome of the research initiative was the development of the ten interdisciplinary essays that comprise this book's principal text. These essays were developed after several colloquia hosted by Stanford University's Research Institute for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity and the Stanford Humanities Lab, involving the present authors and many other distinguished scholars.⁶

The ten essays represent both interdisciplinary and international perspectives. They draw upon American history, American studies, American art history, and Asian art history to provide a wider arena for the contextualization of these diverse artistic achievements. A reflection of the global web of transnational culture that is among the principal hallmarks of much art since the late nineteenth century, this study tackles American examples by exploring the developments in several cities where historically significant production was centered, as well as alternately focusing on media, style, gender, and historical moment.

In the first essay, this author recalls the rich Asian American cultural history in San Francisco, an epicenter of Asian immigration and artistic production from the gold rush up to World War II. In the second, Karin Higa points to the sophisticated network that connected Los Angeles's Little Tokyo to an international avant-garde during the period between the two world wars. Kazuko Nakane in the third essay chronicles several generations of artists in her survey of Seattle's Asian American art community and further demonstrates how these artists were embraced to shape that city's conception of its own artistic identity. In the fourth essay, Tom Wolf provides an exciting introduction to early Asian American artists in New York, where several artists, rivaling the preeminent figures of their day, achieved a high degree of recognition for their innovative contributions. The dramatic tear in the fabric of time that World War II produced is suggested in several essays, and the impact of the war and its cold aftermath on artists of diverse ancestry is the principal topic of Gordon Chang's essay, number five. The brilliantly pioneering and unparalleled contributions to photography by Asian American artists, including the stylistic artistry of pictorial, modern, and community-based orientations, is presented by Dennis Reed in the sixth essay. Valerie Matsumoto chronicles the uniquely difficult situations that impacted women artists in California, otherwise separated by class, generation, and family responsibilities, in the seventh essay. Mayching Kao offers a Chinese perspective in the eighth essay to help illuminate approaches that are generally unfamiliar in the West, identifying acclaimed diasporic painters and more obscure artists who participated in both mainstream and ethnic-specific artistic dialogues. In the ninth, using oral history as a guide, Paul Karlstrom reflects on California post-World War II developments to probe the specificities of an Asian American modernism. Finally, in the tenth essay, Margo Machida returns to the San Francisco Bay Area—the site of

the founding of Asian American studies—to explore the moment of the conceptualization of both an Asian American art and an Asian American identity that connects to our contemporary, postmodern understanding of the international art world.

These diverse methodologies are not meant to be prescriptive; instead, they suggest a potential range of approaches to this great wealth of material. As in any anthology, they provide only partial glimpses of the larger subject. In this case, they also reflect the West Coast bias of the research that is the foundation of this publication. Together, the essays add insight into many historical periods, complementing publications that focus on post–World War II and contemporary developments. This volume further questions the ways in which visions of our national heritage have been limited by restrictive ideas about art. At the same time that we acknowledge that in many cases first-generation immigrants served as ambassadors of Asian culture for the burgeoning curiosity here, among the most troubling themes we find is the racially essentialized notion of a fixed, foreign, and even backward Asian tradition and personality that was somehow hardwired into artists of Asian ancestry. As we remember that European training was commonly available in Asia even in the nineteenth century, and that stylistic developments in ink on paper were generally as innovative as those in oil on canvas, we can expand our appreciation of the work we encounter as international and decidedly modern.

Our research also has uncovered how the appreciation of Asian American artwork has been hindered. Wars, earthquakes, and internment were destructive forces. In addition, stories abound of entire bodies of work being lost during international transit. Legislation that curtailed immigration by women from Asia and anti-miscegenation laws created a “bachelor society” that limited the potential for the safeguarding of materials by families. The relative difficulty in locating important information

buried in Asian language journals, compounded by the transformation of language over time, further limited access. The return migration of some artists to Asia and lingering perceptions at all levels of American society that these individuals weren’t “American” also contributed to erasure. Even today, works by such artists as Ruth Asawa, Chiura Obata, and C.C. Wang—who spent their entire careers in the United States—sometimes appear in auctions of “Asian” art. We have repeatedly seen the impact of the deaccession of many works from museum collections by artists once recognized as important but subsequently viewed as out of step because of a lack of contextualization.⁷ Without such institutional context, many collections were discarded and lost. This publication joins others to help construct a framework and context for further retrieval and interpretation.

In addition to the interpretive essays, artists’ biographies, and art/history chronology, a major component of this publication is the reproduction of approximately two hundred works of art in all media created by these artists. The reproductions range from selections by artists for whom large bodies of work exist to artworks that might be the only extant examples of work by an artist; still others are reproductions of previously reproduced imagery of works whose whereabouts are unknown. Furthermore, some works reproduced here have not been cleaned or conserved. Reproduced in the biographies and chronology are approximately one hundred eighty additional images that include portraits of the artists, period photographs, and newspaper or journal illustrations. We hope these illustrations help revivify both the artists and their times.

Although dense with detail and complicated by multidisciplinary analysis, our story is still far from complete, and lacunae abound. Perhaps most glaring is the absence of an extended discussion of artists in Hawaii, which was a U.S. territory since the turn of the twentieth century before becoming a state in

1959. Certainly, artists active there in the period before statehood, including Hon Chew Hee, Toshiko Takaezu, and Isami Doi, are critical to understanding the national Asian American artistic scene.⁸ Another area not covered in this volume is the New York art scene of the 1960s, when Yoko Ono, Natvar Bhavsar, and so many others contributed to global art activity.⁹ Many other writers and artists, such as Okakura Tenshin in Boston and Takuma Kajiwara in St. Louis, warrant further study for a fuller national survey.

Artists included here were painters, sculptors, printmakers, photographers, textile artists, and ceramicists who were active for roughly a decade or more in the United States, recognizing that citizenship was denied Asian-born immigrants before the mid-twentieth century and, as a result, many artists eventually returned to their country of birth. While some may be surprised that diasporic artists who arrived after mid-century, such as Chang Dai-chien, whose work is predominantly “non-Western” appear here within the rubric of “American art,” it is important that we expand our lens and understanding to reflect their internationalism and the reciprocal influences that their work in fact reflects. We focus for the most part on the period prior to the Immigration Act of 1965, as this date marks both an explosion of the Asian population in the United States and a blossoming of a civil rights consciousness that gave rise to an Asian American political and artistic movement that transformed what came after. Our goal is to retrieve what came before.

Notes

The author wishes to thank Gordon Chang, Sharon Spain, and Paul Karlstrom for their feedback in developing this introduction.

1 The term *Asian American* is generally credited as having been coined in 1968 by Yuji Ichioka at the University of California, Berkeley, at the start of academia’s burgeoning interest in ethnic studies.

The ten-year-residence criterion we employed means that this volume omits many influential figures who participated at high levels in American art circles but who never maintained permanent residences in the United States. Examples include Long Chin-san,¹⁰ renowned for his experimental montage photographs, who traveled and exhibited in the United States for many decades and was honored by the Photographic Society of America in 1937; and Hamada Shōji, who led influential workshops throughout the West that helped revolutionize American ceramics in the 1950s. Countless accomplished others who contributed to American culture throughout their careers as floral designers (including ikebana), landscape gardeners, calligraphers, architects, filmmakers, and designers—in art forms not conventionally privileged as “fine arts”—are also missing from this account. We await further explorations with great anticipation.

Our goal is to suggest a radical reenvisioning of Asian American art to include a long view of its own history. Through ten essays, hundreds of reproductions, 159 artists’ biographies, and a detailed chronology, *Asian American Art: A History, 1850–1970* offers an array of information about and new approaches to the appreciation of art produced by artists of Asian ancestry in the United States. We hope the magnificence of the many constellations that appear within these pages provides sources for future discovery, appreciation, and dialogue as the field of Asian American art continues to expand and inspire.

2 There are too many instances of racially motivated harassment to fully enumerate and detail here. Examples can be cited from every generation. Lai Yong’s and Mary Tape’s activism points to their struggle to win social equity during the nineteenth century. Yoshio Markino’s chronicle of verbal slights and physical assaults parallels Chiura Obata’s description of being spat upon and

struck as he walked down the street around the turn of the twentieth century. Both Mitsu Yashima and Hisako Hibi encountered difficulties locating housing for rent in the mid-twentieth century. The physical assault of James Leong left him blind in one eye. Countless examples of marginalization also can be cited.

- 3 In the preface to the exhibition catalog *With New Eyes: Toward an Asian American Art History* (San Francisco: Art Department Gallery, San Francisco State University: 1995), author and cultural critic Maxine Hong Kingston argues that such commonly used Japanese terms as *Issei*, *Nisei*, and *Kibei* can be applied in a broader way across Asian American ethnicities to help understand different generations of artists' relationships to immigration and education.
- 4 This publication does not cover the vast influence of Asian artistic forms on American art; nor does it cover Caucasian American artists who lived, studied, or worked in Asia.
- 5 The "California Asian American Artists Biographical Survey," originally a project of San Francisco State University in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, is further discussed by Sharon Spain in her remarks introducing the biographies in this volume.
- 6 In addition to the authors represented in this volume, such scholars and artists as Michael Sullivan, Kuiyi Shen, Richard Vinograd, Bryan Wolf, Rae Agahari, Darlene Tong, Irene Poon Andersen, Tim Yu, Cecelia Tsu, Wei Chang, Daniell Cornell, Carlos Villa, Shelley Sang-

Hee Lee, Bruce Robertson, and Ilene Susan Fort participated in these colloquia and related discussions.

- 7 Examples include the deaccession of works by Hideo Date, Yoshida Sekido, and Walasse Ting by such museums of "Western art" as the Whitney Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Minneapolis Institute, respectively; the deaccession of work by Chang Dai-chien by Pasadena's Pacific Heritage Museum is an example from an Asian art museum.
- 8 Marcia Morse provides a partial history of developments in Hawaii relating to Japanese American artists in an essay in the catalog that accompanied the exhibition *Legacy: Facets of Island Modernism* (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2001). An extensive biographical article about Isami Doi by David Hehlke appears in the Honolulu journal *Bamboo Ridge*, no. 73 (Spring 1998).
- 9 Yoko Ono first arrived in the United States in 1935, when she joined her father in San Francisco, but she went back to Japan after a few years. She returned for another year in 1940–1941, this time to New York, and then moved in 1953 to Scarsdale, New York, where she attended Sarah Lawrence College and became active in New York City, which led to her involvement with the Fluxus group by the late 1950s. Natvar Bhavsar arrived in the United States in 1962.
- 10 Although the artist exhibited throughout the United States as Chin-san Long, he is known throughout the Chinese world as Long Chin-san. Sharon Spain explores more fully the complex issue of name order in the introduction to artists' biographies in this volume.