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Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Headless Horse Who Wants to Jump, 1945
Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan

Practitioner's Essay

The Challenges of Displaying “Asian American”: Curatorial Perspectives and Critical Approaches

ShiPu Wang

Abstract

This essay delineates the issues concerning AAPI art exhibitions from a curator's perspective, particularly in response to the changing racial demographics and economics of the past decades. A discussion of practical, curatorial problems offers the reader an overview of the obstacles and reasons behind the lack of exhibitions of AAPI works in the United States. It is the author's hope that by understanding the challenges particular to AAPI exhibitions, community leaders, and patrons will direct future financial support to appropriate museum operations, which in turn will encourage more exhibitions and research of the important artistic contribution of AAPI artists to American art.

Introduction

A myriad of challenges confronts curators who plan exhibitions of works by Asian American artists active in the United States in the pre-World War II decades.¹ To present an exhibition that showcases these artists' work, curators face the important but difficult task of revising American art history and expanding the canon. It requires herculean efforts to recover artworks that have been forgotten or dispersed throughout the world. Institutions need more resources, both in research and funding, to facilitate such rediscovery. This essay provides the readers of *AAPI Nexus* an overview of the difficulties of mounting exhibitions of pre-war Asian American art—hence their relatively small numbers to date. Through delineating the issues concerning Asian American art exhibitions from the curator's perspective, the author encourages policymakers, community leaders, and patrons to direct future

legislative and financial resources towards appropriate museum operations. Such multivalent support will foster more critical exhibitions that recuperate and examine the vital artistic contribution of Asian American artists to twentieth-century American art.

Diversifying Membership, Patronage, and Exhibition Programming

With the debate of multiculturalism persisting, curators and their colleagues in art and cultural museums continue to shoulder the institutional responsibility of “diversity programming.” Museums, especially those in metropolises, are expected to offer more educational and curatorial programs that serve the changing racial demographics of their communities. This is not a problem unique to museums nowadays or to Asian American communities. In 1969, for instance, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York faced the difficult task of relating its rich but predominantly Greco-Roman collections to the city’s proliferating Puerto Rican and African American population (Schwartz, 1969). Encyclopedic museums on the West Coast also have had to reckon with the rapid growth of its racially diverse constituents and their significant cultural, political, and economic presence. For example, the Latino/Hispanic American residents showed their tremendous participation in the cultural landscape of Los Angeles when Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) opened the *Diego Riviera: Art and Revolution* show in May 1999. The exhibition drew a record number of visitors who waited in long lines that encircled several city blocks. Many were Latino, first-time visitors from Los Angeles who would not have otherwise felt compelled to visit LACMA.² How to attract and connect with racially diverse communities continues to be a top challenge in various museum operations.

With the changing global economics in the past decades, diversifying museum patronage and programming has real financial ramifications. Museums have to look for new donors and financial backers to expand or in some cases revive the institution’s dwindling funding as federal and private financial support for the arts fluctuate. The Asian American population represents an attractive yet untapped source of patronage, both in membership and monetary terms. In 2004, the median income of Asian American households (or those who identify themselves as of Asian origin) was \$57,518, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, above households

of any other racial origin (U.S. Census, 2004). While the Asian American population is still one of the smaller minority groups, its potential to become an influential force in art and cultural museums, particularly in terms of private donations and board of trustee membership, is promising.³ International corporations helmed by Asian American executives, especially those involved in the burgeoning global markets, have the power to become major players in contributing a wealth of funding resources to cultural institutions. Museums seeking to supplement their waning federal subsidies will have to cultivate these new patrons with rigor and sincerity.

The difficulty, however, as many museum professionals fully acknowledge, is finding creative ways to attract these Asian American patrons to engage in various museum activities. There are certainly Asian American residents who adore and enjoy exhibitions of work by canonical figures such as Matisse, Van Gogh, Picasso, Pollock or Warhol. Invitations to related events, such as member previews, opening galas or lectures can increase Asian American attendance. But for Asian American families, particularly for first-generation immigrants, exhibitions that speak about their “home cultures”—regardless of the contemporary political situations in their native countries—can also have an added, implicit drawing power. Aside from the familiarity and nostalgia factors, such exhibitions show or at least suggest the museums’ tacit acknowledgment and acceptance of Asian American immigrants and their cultural heritage. These exhibitions offer advantageous opportunities for the museums to explore different ways to connect with their existing or potential Asian American constituents. The Bowers Museum of Cultural Art in Santa Ana, California, for example, trained local Chinese-speaking docents to lead tours for its exhibition, *Symbols of Power: Masterpieces from the Nanjing Museum* in 2002 to 2003, as a way to encourage attendance from Orange County residents of Chinese and other Asian Pacific origins. The museums can also attract Asian American visitors by promoting exhibitions on local television stations in targeted Asian languages. Through gestures of “inclusion,” museums can begin to reach out and foster a relationship with these communities, who may in turn consider (ideally) directing future donations—monetary or art collections—to these museums.

Reexamining the American Canon

For many curators, organizing exhibitions of work by Asian American artists has significance beyond attracting Asian American patronage. It is an integral part of their curatorial quest to reevaluate, challenge, and expand American art history. In the past decades, especially in the 1990s, curators and scholars reexamined the Euro-American bias in the discourse of American art and argued, quite convincingly, for a more inclusive and multicultural retelling of modern American art history. In a 1999 statement, Maxwell L. Anderson, then Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art (1998–2003) recognized that for the Whitney to stay current and a leader in the museum world, it had to embrace an “American identity in an international context.” The institution and its exhibitions needed to acknowledge and study the global exchange of arts and cultures that formed an undeniable foundation of the artistic production in the United States. In effect, he believed that American art as represented by the Whitney had to reflect and highlight the imported ideas, the immigration stories and the global influence of American culture that constituted the “American identity” (Anderson, 1999).

Among the art historians who have critically reexamined this American identity in art, Ann Eden Gibson provides a study of Abstract Expressionism’s suppressed racial and sexual components in her 1997 book, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*. She argues that beyond the canonical figures such as Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), the work of underrepresented artists—artists of color and women artists in particular—calls for more critical study. In her investigation of the “subtexts of race and gender” of Abstract Expressionism, Gibson exposes the “exclusively white, male, and heterosexual” position inherent yet uncontested in the valorization of American abstract expressionists as part of the American ideological battle in the Cold War era. Gibson also calls for a careful reevaluation of the “relation of art by Americans of Chinese, Native American, and Japanese descent to Abstract Expressionism.” In her few paragraphs on Asian American artists, Gibson points out that comprehensive studies of the abstract work of Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), Alfonso Ossorio (1916–1990), or Yun Gee (1906–1962) would best challenge the exclusivist “Eurocentricity” of Abstract Expressionism. Her project,

however, focuses on minority artists *other* than Asian Americans, who are beyond her research parameters.

Gibson does mention in her footnote that an exhibition was in the works to investigate abstract art by Asian American artists, as her book was being published. *Asian Traditions, Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists and Abstraction, 1945-1970*, organized by Jeffrey Wechsler, Senior Curator for American Art at the Zimmerli Art Museum of Rutgers, explores the fusion of Asian artistic traditions and Western abstract expressions. Through an impressive display of more than 140 pieces of artworks by more than fifty artists of Asian descent, Wechsler argues that these works represent a true synthesis of Asian and Western aesthetics that has long been overlooked. His curatorial objective is to draw attention to a "neglected undercurrent or subset of American abstract art," and to expose the insularity and exclusivity of Abstract Expressionism on the part of American critics and scholars (Wechsler, 1997). Ultimately, Wechsler aims to repudiate the notion of Abstract Expressionism as an "indigenous" American art, as well as the nationalistic terms so readily employed by critics in the discourse of Abstract Expressionism.

However, by concentrating on examining the formal (painterly expressions) relations of Asian/Asian American work to Abstract Expressionism, Wechsler bypasses the more critical investigation of the racial, gender, and national identities reflected in these works that Gibson has proposed. Wechsler listed the racial and national origins of the artists included in his show as a way to argue that "Asian" artistic qualities are discernible and shared by these artists, even though they come from heterogeneous cultures and art training. This argument inadvertently reinforces another stereotypical presumption, that artists of Asian descent inherit and naturally exhibit "Eastern sensibility" or Asian characteristics in their work. While Wechsler has demonstrated that many Asian American artists engaged in dialogues with Abstract Expressionism, his project sidesteps from a critical examination of Asian/Asian American artists' *active* positioning and negotiation vis-à-vis the expectations that come with being artists of "Asian heritage." For "Asian-ness" has long been a myth: critics and scholars often assign Asian characteristics, essentialized, and naturalized, to a work or an artist without contesting the stereotypes inherent in the American perception of the work by artists of Asian descent.

Asian American artists have had to contend with such myths and expectations, and their negotiations become an integral part, foregrounded or not, of their artistic production. In other words, artworks by Asian Americans are more than painterly creations that exude “transcendental beauty” beyond cultural boundaries. They are *discourses* because they consist of pictorial language, interpretations by artists/audiences/critics/scholars, and market and institutional endorsement, among other things. Their meaning and significance constantly shift and expand under different sociopolitical circumstances, and they do not remain incontrovertible objects or artifacts.

Recuperating the Pre-war History of Asian American Artists

Exhibitions of postwar Asian American artists have included a wider range of media and subject matter to offer a broader, more critical evaluation of Asian American art in relation to American cultural and sociopolitical history. In seminal shows such as *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* by the Asia Society in 1994, curator Margo Machida documents and examines Asian American works that grapple with issues of diaspora/immigration policies, home/dislocation, and national/racial stereotypes. Along with *Fresh Talk/Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* (2003), edited by Machida, Elaine H. Kim, and Sharon Mizota, these surveys have presented a vibrant and heterogeneous narrative of contemporary Asian American artists. They partook in (re)writing a rich history of Asian American artistic production and laid down the foundation for future scholarship to reexamine late twentieth-century American art through Asian American artists’ perspectives.⁴

For curators attempting to recuperate the history of Asian American artists in the first decades of the twentieth century, however, the immediate obstacle is often the lack of knowledge and access to such collections. Archives, exhibition catalogs, and manuscripts are some of the preliminary sources curators consult to learn more about an artist’s body of work—unless a curator happens to have intimate knowledge of a private collection of Asian American art. Wechsler’s survey is useful in pointing to the literature and collections pertinent to some Asian American artists whose career began in the pre-war era. Yet as abstraction is the exhibition’s focus, and its timeframe starts in 1945, *Asian Traditions*,

Modern Expressions is not helpful in identifying and locating figurative paintings, landscapes, or still-lives by artists active before World War II. Existing surveys that concentrate on pre-war Asian American artists are small in number. *Views from Asian California 1920–1965: An Illustrated History* (Michael D. Brown, 1992); *They Painted from Their Hearts: Pioneer Asian American Artists* (Wing Luke Asian Museum, Seattle, 1995); and *With New Eyes: Toward an Asian American Art History in the West* (San Francisco State University, 1995) serve as three seminal but preliminary documentaries of the pre-war Asian American artistic production.

Invaluable in their contribution to enrich the historical study of American art, the limited number of reproductions in these publications nevertheless curtails their usefulness for curators who wish to explore more fully the artists' oeuvre. Brown's book is essentially an inventory of his personal collection of Asian American art amassed over several decades. As one of the few American collectors who specialize in Asian American artists' work, Brown has revealed only a fraction of the wealth and range of his collection. When *With New Eyes* opened at the SFSU Fine Arts Gallery in September 1995, its curatorial team assembled 110 works by seventy-five artists; in the exhibition catalog, however, few paintings were reproduced. Along with *They Painted from Their Hearts*, both catalogs provide artists' biographies, much of which was based on the curators' original research. Yet these biographical entries are only introductory information pointing the way for future investigations.⁵ To supplement and expand the list of Asian American artists, Irene Poon, photographer and art professor at San Francisco State University, published *Leading the Way: Asian American Artists of the Older Generation* in 2001. In this book, Poon juxtaposes her photographic portraits of Asian American artists with biographical sketches that offer a more personal and in-depth introduction to these artists. However, Poon's book does not provide visual aids to curators who wish to see the artists' work or visual reproductions.

There are only a handful of Asian American artists active before World War II whose oeuvres have been exhibited more comprehensively in retrospectives and survey shows. Names such as Noguchi, Gee, Dong Kingman (1911–2000) and Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1889–1953) in recent years constitute the extent of the Asian American representation in mainstream art and cultural institu-

tions (Figure 1). In group shows or survey books of American art, however, these Asian American artists often served as the token figures to fulfill the multicultural or multiracial mandate for museums. Most of the shows that included these more well-known artists recognized their artistic quality or achievement, but appreciations or analyses of their artistic production tend to remain in the confines of biographies and formalistic appraisal. Art historian Anthony W. Lee's edited volume, *Yun Gee: Poetry, Writings, Art, Memories* (University of Washington Press, 2003), is a rare example in which the artist's profound engagement with sociopolitical concerns is foregrounded through a collection of scholarly essays and artist's writings. There has otherwise been little critical examination of the nitty-gritty of social and political messiness that many of these pre-war Asian American artists indeed attempted to address in their work.

The general neglect of the sociopolitical aspects of pre-war Asian American artistic production has to do, among other things, with the misconception that Asian American artists were not socially engaged or aware of "identity politics" (an applicable albeit "postmodern" term) in the American art scene. With the signifier "Asian" attached to these artists, their work was relegated to the space reserved for Asian art: beautiful, pleasing, transcendental, and spiritual. The fact is that even with the more "mainstream" artists like Noguchi, Gee, Kingman and Kuniyoshi, they had to negotiate, forced or voluntarily, between their "American artist" identities and their "Asian heritage" both in life and in art. As they participated and contributed as vital members to many artists' groups and movements, they had to grapple with issues concerning national and racial identities, social activism, and political stances. Some artists indeed expressively addressed in their art concerns for social problems, such as labor exploitation and racial inequality, shared by many non-Asian American artists. There are the graphics produced by Lewis Suzuki (b. 1920) and Shiro Miyazaki (1910–1940), whose work carried unwavering pro-labor, pro-equality message. Carlos Maganti Tagaroma Carvajal (1893–1973), a Filipino American artist, created paintings that unflinchingly challenged the marriage of Catholicism and European/American Imperialism, and its impact on powerless people. There were Leftist artists like Eitarō Ishigaki (1893–1958) and Hideo Noda (1908–1939), whose paintings offered powerful

depictions of the contentious race relations in the United States during the Depression. Noda consistently incorporated laborers and African Americans into his paintings. In his *Scottsboro Boys* (1933), for instance, he referred to the notorious trials that began in 1931, following two white girls' accusation of nine Black teenage boys gang-raping them on a train. Noda painted a skeletal figure in white lines in the foreground to represent Haywood Patterson, who was one of the "Scottsboro boys" sentenced to death for a second time in April 1933, only to be reprieved in June. In his signature montage-like composition, Noda's ghostly figures served as silent witnesses to an atrocious incident of racial prejudice and discrimination.

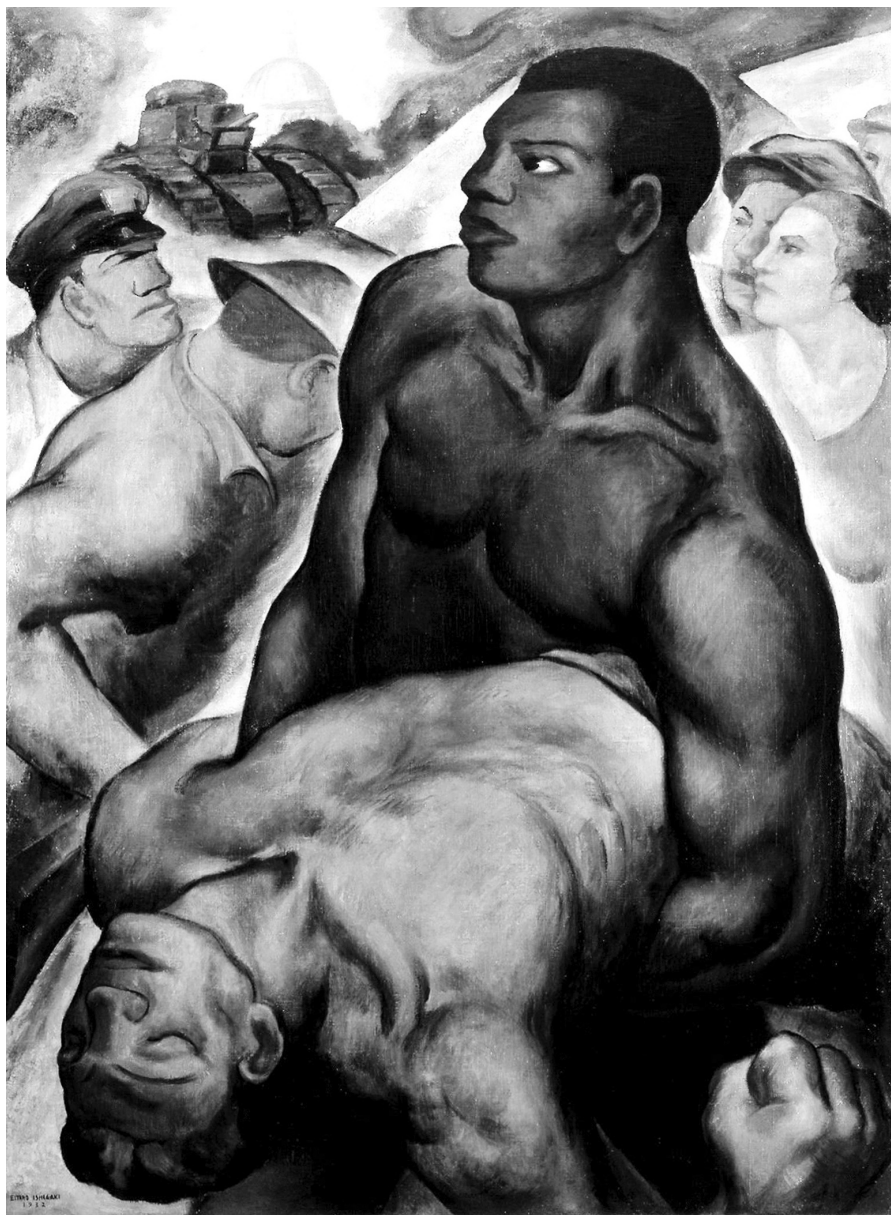
Protests against social injustice constituted the major component of the prolific repertoire of Ishigaki, who emigrated to the U.S. in 1898 but returned to Japan in 1951. His *Whipping* (1925) and *Unemployment Demonstration (American Cossacks)* (1932) depict the oppression of the labor class by the Establishment, manifested in anonymous but imposing figures straddled on menacing horses attempting to squelch any unrest or resistance of the working class. In his *Lynch* (1931) and *America South (K.K.K.)* (1937), Ishigaki confronted the ugly reality of racism, depicting a faceless crowd hanging a victim by a bonfire in the former, and a brave man striking back at white-hooded Ku Klux Klan members in the latter.⁶ In *Bonus March* (1932), a glorious painting that attests to Ishigaki's superb draftsmanship, the towering figure of an African American man becomes the pillar—compositionally, allegorically, and symbolically—of the image of American society in conflict (Figure 2).⁷ Ishigaki gave the sole Black figure a musculature that rendered him heroic in an act of rescuing a fallen, Caucasian-looking man—an unusual pictorial choice in early 1930s among non-African American artists.

Locating Asian American Art

Ishigaki was by no means an unknown artist in his time, even though he has been largely forgotten. In his artistic career of over five decades in the United States, he exhibited in New York regularly to critical acclaim. He was in fact one of the founding members of the American Artists' Congress, a collective of artists of all styles and media organized in 1936 to fight against the growing threat of fascism and of artistic and political repression abroad

and at home (Baigell and Williams, 1986). Yet, to see Ishigaki's works in person, curators and researchers now have to travel to Wakayama City, an hour south by train of the Kansai International Airport in Japan. At the Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama, there are twenty-five works by Ishigaki, including *Bonus March* and three enormous preparatory drawings, possibly for a mural Ishigaki was working on while on the Federal Art Project employment in the 1930s. Together with five other works in the collection of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, and one at the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, few if any of this American artist's work remain in the United States.⁸

Ishigaki was only one of many American artists of Asian descent whose works are no longer in American museums. Several Chinese American artists, including Tseng Yuho (b. 1924) and Chen Chi (1912–2005), in fact moved their paintings to China in recent years. A large number of works by artists such as Noda and Chuzo Tamotzu (1891–1975) are in Nagano and other collections in Japan. Most of the works by Kuniyoshi are dispersed throughout Japan, with the majority of them owned by the Fukutake collection. The Fukutake collection has four hundred and eighty-eight works by Kuniyoshi, as well as related documents and personal effects.⁹ The collection belonged to the Benesse Corporation (formerly the Fukutake Publishing Company), whose founder, Tetsuhiko Fukutake, chanced upon Kuniyoshi's works and was said to be extremely impressed by the artist's mastery of painting. His collection of Kuniyoshi's art continued to grow even after his death in 1986. His son, Soichiro Fukutake, Benesse's former president and one of the wealthiest Japanese philanthropists, bought the entire collection from Benesse for about \$18 million in 2003 (Itoi, 2003). Since 1990, Fukutake continued to acquire Kuniyoshi paintings from American museums, such as *Upside Down Table and Mask* (1940) from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and *Mr. Ace* (1952) from the Baltimore Museum of Art. The MoMA decided to sell Kuniyoshi's *Upside-down Table and Mask* in 1992, for an undisclosed amount of money, in order to buy a newly discovered study of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1907). The Baltimore Museum of Art sold *Mr. Ace* to Fukutake in 1989 for a reported \$3 million, plus commission. Three other American museums also sold or traded Kuniyoshi's works to Fukutake in the past decade (Wallis, 1992).



Eitaro Ishigaki, Bonus March, 1932
The Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama, Japan

Japan's restitution of their "cultural exports," as these artists are perceived in Japan, began most markedly in 1970s with the reintroduction of Kuniyoshi to the Japanese public. In 1974, Yoshio Ozawa, a historian of American art, published *Hyôden, Yasuo Kuniyoshi (Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Biography)*, a book that is still regarded by Japanese scholars as the definitive Kuniyoshi biography to date. Ozawa's publication came on the heels of Kuniyoshi's art thrusting into the international spotlight, courtesy of a fierce bidding war at the Sotheby Parke-Bernet auction house in New York in 1973. On March 14 and 15, 1973, Sotheby's held a special auction of the impressive collection of the late Edith G. Halpert, owner of the Downtown Gallery and one of Kuniyoshi's longtime patrons and friends.¹⁰ The star of that evening turned out to be Kuniyoshi's *Little Joe with Cow* (1923), a painting depicting a triangular-shaped cow behind a boy. The painting sold for \$220,000, a new auction record at the time for any American artist's work. It was the result of two Japanese dealers' bidding competition and the Nanteshi Gallery in Tokyo walked away the winner (Norman, 1973). In fact, together with *Little Joe with Cow*, Kuniyoshi's eleven works in this auction fetched a total of \$678,500.¹¹ This auction marked the beginning of Japanese collectors' aggressive acquisition of Kuniyoshi's art. Ozawa's timely publication provided the Japanese public a source from which they could learn more about this "overnight international sensation" who bore a Japanese name. With Fukutake carving out his niche as a Kuniyoshi specialist, Japanese collectors pursued other American artists of Japanese descent.

The curious trend of exporting works by Asian American artists on the part of American museums is not limited to Kuniyoshi's art, and this trend merits a separate study. Certainly, the global economy and supply-and-demand factored into this exportation, as the Japanese collectors' financial prowess and tenacity facilitated transactions that American museums deemed beneficial for their financial well-being. The fact that the MoMA chose Picasso's sketch over an important work by Kuniyoshi is nevertheless indicative of the marginalized status of Asian American artists in American institutions in the past decades. Major Japanese museums, on the other hand, have organized several large-scale exhibitions to showcase the works in their collections by artists of Japanese descent active in the pre-war United States. For instance, there have been two Kuniyoshi retrospectives in Japan in the past fifteen

years and another retrospective opened at the Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art in March 2006. There are exhibition catalogs in Japanese that offer comprehensive views of the life and work of artists whose names are rarely mentioned in books on American art: *Japanese Artists Who Studied in the U.S.A. and the American Scene* (1982), *Japanese and Japanese American Painters in the United States: A Half Century of Hope and Suffering, 1896–1945* (1995), and *Japan in America: Eitaro Ishigaki and Other Japanese Artists in the Pre-World War II United States* (1997). While the Asian American works acquired by Japanese collectors may have been treated as commodities or investments in monetary terms, they indeed received better care, exposure, and respect compared to those that remain in the storage of American museums.

Due to persistent neglect on American museums' part and the obscurity of Asian American collections, curators who wish to organize exhibitions of pre-war Asian American artists need extra time, funding, and tenacity than would otherwise be required to curate a show of other canonical American painters. Securing loans from museums in Japan and Asia is a costly and time-consuming undertaking, and the insurance and shipping costs associated with the loans of artworks increase as well. Furthermore, museums also have to allocate sufficient funds for conservation, an aspect that has to be factored into exhibition planning. Works in Japanese museums are generally in good condition, unless the artworks' original state was already beyond repair. Most of the Ishigaki paintings in Wakayama, Kyoto, and Tokyo, for example, have been carefully restored and preserved in relatively pristine condition. But not all works have received similar care in Japan or in the United States. In fact, conservation is perhaps the thorniest issue for curators to deal with when considering Asian American works from a variety of collections. Smaller and "ethnic-specific" museums, such as the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, may receive donations of Asian American artists' works, as these artists' families feel such institutions are more appropriate places to preserve their artworks. What the families do not know is that these smaller museums tend to lack the proper storage space and conservation budgets to properly care for donated works. The process of appropriating sufficient funding for professional conservatory care can take years. Due to the poor condition of many works, curators sometimes have to accept the unfortunate reality

and seek alternatives, however crucial a certain piece of artwork is in an Asian American artist's career.

For works in the United States, curators' main obstacle, before even considering conservation issues, is to *locate* these works. The road to rediscovery of forgotten Asian American artists is more challenging than most people can imagine. Often Asian American artists' estates are difficult to access, since many of them are not documented in public archives. Curators and researchers often have to begin their search elsewhere. In her decades of research on Asian American artists, Marian Yoshiki-Kovinick, a longtime archivist at the San Marino office of the Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution, has had to go through census records, old newspapers, and other miscellaneous sources to locate works. She often had to go through *Rafu Shimpō*, a newspaper serving the Japanese community in Los Angeles since 1903, page by page to identify artists who have been referenced elsewhere without any information other than the mention of their names.¹² The romanization of names in Asian languages, particularly Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, can be widely inconsistent. Many émigré Japanese who were interned during World War II moved away from their homes on the West Coast. Many also changed to new Anglo-Saxon names that differed greatly from their original names when they were exhibiting in various U.S. cities before the war. Identifying them, not to mention finding their families, becomes a daunting task.

Locating the artists or their estates poses its own challenges. In addition to the inconsistency or change of names, many Asian American artists actually stopped making art decades ago. For many Japanese Issei and Nisei, the Japanese American Internment marked the end of their artistic careers. As the internees were released from the internment camps and moved to cities throughout the United States, many had to support themselves in professions other than art—the closest thing to “art making,” in some cases, was to paint commercial signs and billboards. It was common to find that many artists left their artworks behind when they were forced to relocate and did not return to art making. Without their continuing artistic production after the war, it is particularly challenging for curators to reconstruct these artists' entire repertoire and see the breadth of their creativity. Some survived: Benji Okubo (1905–1975) left his works at his family farm in Riverside before leaving for the camp, and they were undisturbed when he

returned.¹³ The works of Hideo Date (1907–2005) were left in the care of his friend and the Japanese American National Museum received and exhibited his full body of work in its 2001 to 2002 show, *Living in Color: The Art of Hideo Date*. Their stories are, unfortunately, the exceptions.

Another obstacle that curators face is locating the surviving family members of the Asian American artists, and in some cases, convincing the estates to lend the works. These artists' estates sometimes have no knowledge of the value or even existence of the artists in their families. For instance, when the granddaughters of Michi Yoshida Hashimoto (1887–1972) discovered that there were curators interested in the paintings hanging on the walls of their living room, they were surprised. Hashimoto was one of the earliest female artists who received critical recognition in Los Angeles in 1910s and 1920s. Most of her works were lost in a fire in Japan, however, and only three are in her granddaughters' possession.¹⁴ In other cases, the artists' families have lost contact with each other, leaving in question the whereabouts of the surviving artworks. To track down and corroborate information from disparate family members, curators sometimes have to first reunite the family.¹⁵ Conflicts between family members can also keep the artist's works in an inaccessible limbo, and financial and personal troubles prohibit full access to collections of Asian American artists. The Ossorio Foundation, which owns an impressive collection of works by Alfonso Ossorio, a Filipino-American painter and collector, has been in an inoperable state for some time. While the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York serves as the exclusive representative of the estate of Ossorio and the Ossorio Foundation and is very willing to assist curators interested in Ossorio's works, internal problems within the Foundation make access and communication difficult.

Looking to the Future

Fortunately, there are a burgeoning number of curators, scholars, and institutions who are determined to overcome these difficulties, and they have devoted themselves to organizing exhibitions and publishing books that address this neglect of Asian American artists in American art history. With its reopening in 2005, the de Young Museum in San Francisco has taken the first steps towards integrating Asian American artists into the museum's main narrative, prominently displaying work by influential artists, such as

Chiura Obata (1885–1975) and Ruth Asawa (b. 1926). In the same year, LACMA acquired several important works by Asian American artists, including paintings by Victor Duena (1888–1966), Hisako Hibi (1907–1991), Miki Hayakawa (1904–1953), and Yun Gee. The public can finally begin to appreciate and study some of these works within the context of American art history as presented by the curators. Marian Yoshiki-Kovinick and Julia Armstrong-Totten have been co-curating a show, entitled *A Seed of Modernism: The Art Students' League of Los Angeles*, to resurrect the unknown history of the Art Students' League (unrelated to the one in New York), one of the first in Los Angeles to start teaching modernism in 1906. Benji Okubo and Hideo Date, along with many non-Asian American artists, received their art education at the League, whose instructors, such as Stanton Macdonald-Wright, incorporated Asian philosophy in their teaching. The curators retrace the footsteps of artists who were trained at the League, before it was interrupted by Pearl Harbor. The curators highlight the works by students who studied at the Art Students' League inside the internment camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, which was established by Okubo and Date. The exhibition is scheduled to open at the Pasadena Museum of California Art in September 2007.

The de Young Museum also plans to open a major exhibition of Asian American artists in October 2008. With its timeframe spanning seven decades since the turn of the late nineteenth century, curators Daniell Cornell at the de Young and Mark Johnson of San Francisco State University will present a rich collection of works by Asian American artists in a wide range of media, styles, and subject matter. This exhibition serves as a companion show to a major publication, entitled *Asian American Art: A History 1850–1970*, to be published by Stanford University Press in 2007. With biographies of 160 California artists and many color reproductions of their works, this book will provide a long overdue research reference for curators and scholars to conduct further, more critical research of Asian American art. The book is a culmination of a NEH-sponsored California Asian American Artists Biographical Survey (CAAABS) project, to which Mark Johnson has served as project director since 1996. The book includes ten essays by authors who have dedicated their research and scholarship to the art and issues of Asian American communities: Gordon Chang, Karin Higa, Mark Johnson, Mayching Kao, Paul Karlstrom, Margo Machida,

Valerie Matsumoto, Kazuko Nakane, Dennis Reed, and Tom Wolf. The book focuses on artists active in California, but it will hopefully encourage future projects that excavate the work and history of Asian American artists throughout the United States. Wolf's essay, "The Tip of the Iceberg: Asian American Artists in New York Before 1950," for example, provides a comprehensive survey of many artists who came through California and established themselves in New York. With his original research, Wolf offers a much-needed study of the vital artistic production of émigré artists of Asian descent in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁶

Both Johnson and Yoshiki-Kovinick acknowledge that the goal of organizing these exhibitions is to rediscover as many previously unknown artists as possible and to introduce their art to the American public. Raised awareness and heightened interest will likely encourage the public to "look into their attics," so to speak, and come forth with more works by Asian American artists that have been forgotten. This is only the first step, however, towards a more comprehensive and critical representation of Asian American artists in American museums. Curators and museums must maintain a sustained commitment to changing their exhibitory practices and strategic planning. They also need the help of policy makers who recognize the importance of recuperating and preserving pre-war Asian American art that is a crucial part of American cultural heritage. With an integrated approach that appropriately and critically incorporates Asian American artists—and other minority artists—into their curatorial narratives, curators will be able to put forth exhibitions that represent the truly multicultural history of American art.

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Notes

1. The broad term "Asian American" used throughout this essay refers to artists of Asian/Pacific descent who are/were active in the United States, regardless of their length of stay or citizenship. Many of the issues discussed in this essay are applicable to other ethnic minority communities in the United States. The definition of "Asian American art" has its advantages and inherent problems that are beyond the scope of this discussion. For an analysis of the issues concerning an "Asian American art," please see the author's essay, "Swinging on Hyphenation: An Inquiry into the Construct of an Asian American Art," in *Yishu-Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* (Winter 2003): 41-51.
2. The exhibition was organized by the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes through the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Mexico, and the Cleveland Museum of Art, in partnership with the Ohio Arts Council. Lynn Zelevansky, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, was LACMA's coordinating curator.

3. The Census Bureau statistics should not be taken to mean, however, that problems of poverty and homelessness are nonexistent in the Asian American communities. A quick search in the research materials compiled by organizations such as the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development or the Asian American Federation of New York reveals that the high median income of Asian households does not include those who continue to struggle with economic hardship throughout the country.
4. There have been other exhibitions of contemporary Asian American artists in the past decade, but their focus was more regional than national: *Green Light: Twenty Young Korean Artists in New York* (New York, NY: Gallery Korea, Korean Cultural Service, 2004); *Shifting Perceptions: Contemporary L.A. Visions* (Pasadena, CA: Pacific Asia Museum, 2000); *Object Lessons: Six Asian American Artists from Chicago* (Chicago, IL: DePaul University, 1994); and *Traditions Transformed: Contemporary Works by Asian American Artists in California* (Oakland, CA: Oakland Museum, Art Dept., 1984) to name a few.
5. The curatorial team consisted of professors at the SFSU Art Department: Irene Poon, Dawn Nakanishi, Diane Tani, and Mark Johnson, Professor of Art and Director of the SFSU Fine Arts Gallery. Authors for *They Painted from Their Hearts* include Mayumi Tsutakawa, Alan Chong, Lau and Kazuko Nakane.
6. The alternative title of *K.K.K.* is *South U.S.A.* This painting accompanied a report of a Klan meeting in Atlanta in 1936 in the February issue of *New Masses*. Ishigaki regularly contributed paintings to *New Masses* throughout the 1930s.
7. The *Bonus March* is Ishigaki's representation of the march of jobless veterans in Washington D.C. in the summer of 1932. Ishigaki was particularly sympathetic to the marchers not only because of his pro-labor stance, but also because the U.S. government intervened by sending in Army troops to "clear" the marchers out of the capital area, as ordered by President Hoover.
8. My gratitude goes to Mr. Yasuhiko Okumura, Associate Curator at the Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama, for his generous assistance during my research visit in 2005 and for providing the reproduction of *Bonus March*. Mr. Okumura indicated that these works were donated to the Museum after the Ishigakis brought them to Japan when they left the U.S. Many of them were restored over the years to appear in various exhibitions.
9. Specifically, they own forty-two paintings, ninety-six drawings, fifty-nine studies, ninety-five prints, and 196 photographs by Kuniyoshi. For several years, the collection was on view at the Yasuo Kuniyoshi Museum in Okayama, Japan, which closed in March 2003, and is now deposited at the Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art.
10. Halpert's Downtown Gallery represented some of the best works by

American artists and played an instrumental part in promoting both established and young artists and the market value of their art. For a study of Halpert's role in American art, see: Tepfer, Diane. 1989. "Edith Gregor Halpert and The Downtown Gallery, 1926–1940: A Study in American Art Patronage." Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan.

11. Stuart Davis's vibrant *Hot Still-Scape for 6 Colors* (1940) was the second highest sale of the evening, at a distant \$175,000, with Lyonel Feininger's *Church (Zirchow II)* from 1913 and Kuniyoshi's undated *Circus Girl, Resting* rounding out the top four with each sold at \$160,000. For the complete list of works in that auction, see Sotheby's *Highly Important 19th and 20th Century American Paintings, Drawings, Watercolors and Sculpture* from March 14, 1973.
12. All of the statements made by Mrs. Yoshiki-Kovinick come from the author's interview with her on January 10, 2006.
13. The Japanese American National Museum now owns Benji Okubo's paintings and the Museum was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant (\$15,000) in 2005 to restore and conserve their Okubo paintings.
14. Thanks to Mrs. Yoshiki-Kovinick's contact and introduction, the author was able to view the works in person in 2005.
15. For example, Mark Johnson recalls that through curating *With New Eyes*, he and his colleagues brought together the family members of Mary Tape, a photographer and political activist active in San Francisco in the late nineteenth century. Thanks to Mark Johnson for providing information regarding his many important projects.
16. Tom Wolf is an art historian and professor at Bard College. His publications include *Yasuo Kuniyoshi's Women* (Petaluma: Pomegranate Press, 1993); *The Shores of a Dream: Yasuo Kuniyoshi's Early Work in America* (Fort Worth: The Amon Carter Museum, 1996); and *The Founders of the Woodstock Artists Association* (Woodstock: The Woodstock Artists Association, 2001).

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