

LOOK TOWARD THE MOUNTAIN, EPISODE 9, THE ARTISTS TRANSCRIPT

ROB BUSCHER: Welcome to *Look Toward the Mountain: Stories from Heart Mountain Incarceration Camp*, a podcast series about life inside the Heart Mountain Japanese American Relocation Center in northwestern Wyoming during World War II. I'm your host, Rob Buscher. This podcast is presented by the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation and is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

ROB BUSCHER: The ninth episode titled "The Artists" will examine the dozens of professional and amateur artists who emerged from Heart Mountain with compelling bodies of work that informed their later careers. And almost 75 years after the end of the incarceration, a fight over the future of art made in camp would help define a new wave of Japanese American activism.

INTRO THEME

ROB BUSCHER: Like most diasporic ethnic communities in the United States, Japanese Americans practiced a wide array of traditional cultural arts in the densely populated Japanese communities of the West Coast.

ROB BUSCHER: Traditional performing arts like theater and music were enjoyed by many of the Issei immigrants, who often attended Kabuki or Noh theater performances in crowded Japantown theaters. For others living in more rural areas, traveling performance troupes would perform on makeshift stages a few

times each year for eager patrons, starved for a connection to their Japanese culture.

ROB BUSCHER: Visual arts were also practiced by Issei ceramic artists, painters, woodworkers, and other craftsmen who brought their unique techniques and aesthetics with them from Japan. The minimalist nature of many traditional Japanese decorative arts imbued Japantowns with a distinctly Japanese aesthetic, making Issei feel more at home in their foreign surroundings, but also creating a physical demarcation between Japanese American enclaves and the other urban neighborhoods in their midst.

ROB BUSCHER: Although most Nisei were encouraged by their immigrant parents to train for more practical careers in science, engineering, and medicine, a number of them took the creative approach to their careers - especially those living in Los Angeles, the cultural capital of the United States in that era.

ROB BUSCHER: Although artistic pursuits were a common practice within all 10 WRA camps, Heart Mountain was unique because of its high concentration of commercial artists.

ROB BUSCHER: The majority of Heart Mountain incarceratedees came from Los Angeles, where Hollywood movie studios had developed a thriving business producing cartoons. In this time before computer animation, each frame was drawn completely by hand, requiring dozens of animators to work on even a

single short cartoon. Animators were also tasked with designing the opening credit sequences for most live action films in this first golden age of Hollywood.

ROB BUSCHER: Commercial artists also found steady work designing movie posters that almost always featured hand drawn illustrations in this era. This kept them busy with the dozens of films that were being released weekly by Hollywood studios. Commercial artists were also employed to design the handbills, lobby cards, and other printed materials that studios provided to theaters to help market their new release films. On the production side, artists were employed to draw storyboards for live action films that helped guide the camera operator on how to shoot each scene.

ROB BUSCHER: Aside from their commercial pursuits, several of the leading artists at Heart Mountain either emerged from the Los Angeles art scene or were current students at the Chouinard Art Institute and Otis College of Art and Design.

ROB BUSCHER: Japanese American artists became the heart of the adult education department in camp, where they made use of their skills to teach other incarcerated about art. Many of the artifacts from life at Heart Mountain that endure today were created by amateur artists studying in this program.

ROB BUSCHER: Delphine Hirasuna is the daughter of incarceration survivors and author of the book *Art of Gaman*, a groundbreaking text about the art objects created in camp.

DELPHINE HIRASUNA INTERVIEW: Heart Mountain had the LA Arts Students League and those are people who aspired to be professional artists and were very good. But then, when you see people who started out going to art school and you know, with the intention of becoming a professional artist and then, when they get out of Camp they couldn't find a job, they became you know domestic workers they became gardeners they... And so that seems to be more the rule. I wonder for every person who became famous how many didn't, you know, how many went into other professions. The number of people who really became world famous are few.

ROB BUSCHER: Hideo Date was an Issei who immigrated to the US at age 15 to join his mother and brothers who were already working in California. After graduating from Los Angeles' Polytechnic High School. He received a scholarship to Otis in 1928 where Date befriended fellow artists Benji Okubo and Tyrus Wong. Date left after a year to study scroll painting brushwork techniques at the Kawabata Gakko in Japan and returned in 1930. It was at this time that he joined the city's Arts Students League and became an established figure in the city's arts community.

ROB BUSCHER: The Art Students League functioned as an art school, but also provided a place for professional artists and art students alike to interact and learn from one another. For a brief while, Date and other students falling under hardship during the Great Depression even lived there. In a brochure designed by League student Val Costello, the school's objective is described as:

VAL COSTELLO VOICE OVER: To give all the advantages of academic training in drawing and painting, while still leaving to the student that freedom which makes for individual development.

ROB BUSCHER: Although many other institutions remained closed to Japanese Americans, the LA arts education community was relatively accepting of Japanese and other Asian American students. Reflecting their liberal attitudes towards membership, the Art Students League advertised in the *Kashu Mainichi*, a daily Japanese newspaper, in an effort to attract more Japanese American students to their school.

ROB BUSCHER: At one point the Japanese American members of the League were so numerous that they organized their own dedicated exhibitions. One exhibit of 24 Japanese American artists held at the offices of newspaper *Rafu Nichi-bei* in 1929 elicited the following comments from renowned LA Times art critic Arthur Millier.

ARTHUR MILLIER VOICE OVER: There is very little specifically Japanese, in any traditional sense about the works showing. They had completely embraced the modern occidental attitude toward life and art, dropped their old painting tradition founded on rhythmic line, yet were presenting us with works of real vitality, entirely lacking the hybrid feeling we might expect from such a revolutionary change...While our painters turn to Africa and the Orient for new stimulus, the Japanese look entirely to the western world.

ROB BUSCHER: Hideo Date and other Japanese American members of the Arts Students League were mentored by the league's director, modernist painter Stanton MacDonald-Wright. Having himself studied at the Sorbonne and Academies Julian in Paris known as the birthplace of Modern Art, MacDonald-Wright also took interest in Japanese and other Asian art. Thus, although some of the Japanese American artists were purposely trying to distance themselves from the traditional art forms, they found it among the many stylistic influences in their education at the League. Hideo Date remembered:

HIDEO DATE VOICE OVER: During the late 1920s and 1930s, we were influenced by Orient across the Pacific just as New York was influenced by Europe across the Atlantic. We called ours Linear-composition whether it's from Japan, China or Persian miniature paintings and I believe we were influenced by Mr. Macdonald-Wright.

ROB BUSCHER: Japanese American artists like Date and his contemporaries were on the cutting edge of modern art, recognized for their synthesis of techniques taught by MacDonald-Wright they also brought with them their own perspectives into the work. Commenting on Date's paintings in a 1933 exhibition at the Palos Verdes Community Arts Association, Hammond Sadler, Chairman of Art Exhibitions, said:

HAMMOND SADLER VOICE OVER: Hideo Date is primarily interested in linear movement and color. Combining these elements in a manner never attempted by the older Japanese painters, he has scorned the strictly traditional for "Datean."

Particular note of his work in watercolor must be made. The finish, developed by him, is unsurpassed in its jewel-like surface.

ROB BUSCHER: Stanton MacDonald-Wright would play another part in Date's career when he became a leader in the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. There he commissioned Date to paint a mural at Terminal Island, which was home to hundreds of Japanese American families working in the fishing industry.

ROB BUSCHER: Date was working on his mural when the attack on Pearl Harbor forced him to abandon the project, as Terminal Island was one of the first locations where Japanese Americans were ousted from their homes in early 1942.

ROB BUSCHER: Date's unfinished mural disappeared forever, along with all other traces of the once bustling Japanese American community. Soon he was on his way to the assembly center at Santa Anita race track and from there, to Heart Mountain.

ROB BUSCHER: Nisei Benji Okubo was one of Date's frequent collaborators. Born and raised in Riverside, California, Okubo was one of seven children. His immigrant parents supported their family by working in a candy factory and as a landscape architect - although his mother was a trained artist herself, having studied painting and calligraphy at Tokyo Art Institute.

ROB BUSCHER: Okubo moved to Los Angeles in 1927 to attend the Otis Art Institute, where he first met Date and other Japanese American artists. In 1930, Okubo began attending the Art Students League and soon joined the ranks of up-and-coming Asian American artists in the LA art scene. Okubo's work showed in exhibitions alongside Date and Chinese American artist luminaries Tyrus Wong and Keye Luke as part of the Los Angeles Oriental Artists' Group. In a review of one such exhibit for the Rafu Shimpo, Roy Takeno gave his impressions of Okubo's work.

ROY TAKENO VOICE OVER: Okubo is bold in his brush points and quite unusual in his choice of color combinations that almost suggests the macabre. The artist in Okubo, however, restrains him from becoming grotesque. On the contrary his work has lithe suppleness of lines. For instance, he titles one of his works with an entrancing title, "Valley of the Golden Mist." From it, one would not unlikely imagine a poetic conception of some near-heaven scene, but not so Okubo. His subject is a head of a bewitching young mistress, a siren.

ROB BUSCHER: Okubo also frequented the Dragon's Den restaurant in Los Angeles Chinatown, a popular hangout for Hollywood actors and artists alike. Eddy See, the restaurant owner, commissioned Okubo and Tyrus Wong to paint a mural of the Eight Immortals and a dancing dragon in the restaurant. By this time Okubo was a thriving artist in the dynamic multi-ethnic Los Angeles arts community.

ROB BUSCHER: In 1940, Okubo became the League's director, which in itself was not a lucrative career. Okubo worked with his father as a landscape designer during the day, teaching classes at night, and sometimes dipping into his own personal funds to continue supporting the school.

ROB BUSCHER: Unfortunately, Okubo's professional art career would be placed on a permanent hiatus from which it would never recover after he was forced from his home and sent to Pomona Assembly Center and later, Heart Mountain.

ROB BUSCHER: As we explored in episode 3, the War Relocation Authority tried to establish a sense of normalcy in camp by providing the adult incarcerated with routines through the adult education program. In addition to the basic skill building courses in English for Issei immigrants not yet proficient in the language, many used this sudden reprieve from work and other pre-war responsibilities as an opportunity to explore their creative talents.

ROB BUSCHER: Hideo Date and Benji Okubo reestablished the Arts Students League at Heart Mountain, as a semi-autonomous part of the adult education program during the Fall of 1942, where they would teach art to hundreds of incarcerated until the camp closed three years later. Although the vast majority of the students were amateur artists with little intention of establishing a professional arts career after camp, some like Gompers Saijo used this opportunity to find their calling in life.

ROB BUSCHER: As discussed in episode 7, Gompers worked in the poster shop at Heart Mountain where he helped to design and print Navy propaganda posters. Fujiye Fujikawa and several of his other colleagues at the poster shop who were already members of the League encouraged Gompers to join. Although he would become a mentor to him, Gompers remembered his first impressions of Benji Okubo as somewhat intimidating.

GOMPERS SAIJO VOICE OVER: He looks and is dressed like some buccaneer character straight off a Hollywood set....his hair is black straight and combed back down to his shoulders and he has large penetrating eyes that would scare little kids shitless. A pencil-thin moustache and another thin line of hair from lower lip down to his chin. On his left ear is a thin gold earring. If not a buccaneer from the Bounty, is he Geronimo's brother?

ROB BUSCHER: Despite his gruff appearance, Okubo was a generous teacher and well liked by his many students. In the early days of camp when art supplies were not readily available, Okubo cut butcher paper from the mess hall into drawing sized sheets for their classes. He then bought oil painting materials with his own money from the mail order catalogues for the students to use. Another challenge they faced was finding subjects for their sketch classes, since the League typically relied on live models for their figure studies. In the November 21, 1942 issue of the Sentinel, the League ran an article titled "Models Sought to Pose for Adult Evening Art Class" that made the following plea.

SENTINEL VOICE OVER: Colonists willing to pose as subjects in night school drawing, painting, and sculpting classes are being sought by instructors and students of these classes, Harold R. Bottrell adult education director, announced.

ROB BUSCHER: Later in the article, Bottrell goes on to praise the art instructors and their students.

HAROLD BOTTRELL VOICE OVER: Through their abilities to portray and interpret life at Heart Mountain, those with artistic talents will make a real contribution to our community. Also in providing opportunities for the training of those interested in art, the drawing, painting and sculpting classes are considered a very valuable element in our program of adult education.

ROB BUSCHER: The article was successful in attracting models for the classes from a variety of backgrounds. Gompers Saijo remembered one model in particular.

GOMPERS SAIJO VOICE OVER: Among those who first came around was an aspiring wrestler or boxer who soon offered to be our model. He turned out to be a godsend, as he posed for us in the nude. He had a Michelangelo-esque kind of figure - or is this analogy associative since Benji would often take Michelangelo figure drawings and paintings to illustrate his points.

ROB BUSCHER: In addition to Date and Okubo, the Art Students League benefited from the instruction of several other professional artists who came from a variety of creative fields prior to camp.

ROB BUSCHER: Bob Kuwahara was an Issei, who like Date, had immigrated at a young age, moving to California with his family when he was just nine years old. While studying at Polytechnic High School in Los Angeles, Kuwahara became the editor and cartoonist for his school newspaper. He later attended Otis and went on to sell his work in a high profile gallery at the Olympic Hotel in Los Angeles.

ROB BUSCHER: In the 1930s, Kuwahara worked as an animator for Walt Disney Studios, contributing to the backgrounds for the cartoon classics *Snow White*, *Fantasia*, and *Bambi*. Incidentally, at Disney Kuwahara would work alongside another Asian American artist, Tyrus Wong who had earlier exhibited with Okubo and Date. Wong's stylistic watercolor storyboards helped shape the overall aesthetic of *Bambi*, which was widely acclaimed for its moody and lyrical atmosphere.

ROB BUSCHER: By December 1941, Kuwahara had built a thriving career as an animator. That did not protect him from the forced removal and incarceration, and as an immigrant, he had even fewer rights than his Nisei colleagues. Kuwahara was sent to Santa Anita where he first taught art classes, and then to Heart Mountain where he joined the faculty of the Art Students League.

ROB BUSCHER: In another region of California, brothers Shingo and Gentaro Nishiura were renowned artisans in San Jose's Buddhist community. They designed buildings, particularly Buddhist churches, and mastered the art of Japanese woodworking. Their buildings were marvels of the creative use of wood, following the traditional style of using interlocking wood pieces rather than nails to hold their works together. They were first sent to Santa Anita and then Heart Mountain.

ROB BUSCHER: The Nishiura brothers worked with the Buddhist priests in camp to build *butsudan* altars for the temples that were placed in various barracks, collaborating with Zen priest Nyogen Senzaki and other Buddhist leaders.

ROB BUSCHER: Buddhist scholar Duncan Ryuken Williams offers his take on the Nishiura brothers' role at Heart Mountain.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS INTERVIEW: These two brothers, they sometimes called the Nishiura brothers. They had built the San Jose Buddhist temple before the war. They were known to be master carpenters, they had participated in building some of the Japanese pavilion in one of the expos prior to the war. So they were kind of well known as master woodworkers.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS INTERVIEW: And they built at Heart Mountain a beautiful Buddhist altar that went into the officially recognized Buddhist temple or what they called the Buddhist Church, the barrack Church. They actually made several of them. The Nishiura brothers were very skilled and they produced with many

other fellow carpenters and amateur carpenters multiple beautiful altars.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS INTERVIEW: So, some of them ended up after the war in places like Gilroy, California some in Chicago, Illinois. There's one of those altars - beautiful one that went to Japan, but these were these beautiful things that are very specific to Heart Mountain and not every camp had master carpenters that they could rely on.

ROB BUSCHER: Shingo Nishiura was also an accomplished painter who shared his talents as an instructor at the Art Students League. While the Nishiura brothers are better known for their large scale wooden sculptures at camp, Shingo produced many exceptional paintings of Heart Mountain's landscape and wildflowers of Wyoming.

ROB BUSCHER: The Heart Mountain Arts Students League started off with introductory classes for amateur artists to acquire basic drawing and painting skills, but as the incarcerated students became more serious in their study Okubo began offering advanced theory and art history courses. The expanded offerings echoed many of the teachings that Stanton MacDonald-Wright had imparted on his students with the intent of providing students with a strong intellectual and spiritual foundation for their art.

ROB BUSCHER: Gompers Saijo remembered the different techniques they were taught, some of which were far more abstract than he was used to.

GOMPERS SAIJO VOICE OVER: Benji began teaching appropriate techniques with lots of emphasis on color. In time he introduced us to the Synchrony movement of Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Morgan Russell, expounding their ideas and theory and giving us a brief demonstration of its application....It was composed of prismatic colors almost straight from the tube. This was my first encounter with purely abstract work. My lack of instant embrace of analytical conceptual painting might have been due in part to Benji himself, who by then wasn't much animated by this purely abstract Synchronist approach. I recall Benji ever was wont to say, "When you paint you got to forget all this analytical stuff."

GOMPERS SAIJO VOICE OVER: At this period Benji and Date's style of paintings was more internal, more Asian in vision. They painted in a style more native to their cultural inheritance and at the same time very modern. Their modernity was their use of color. The colors were at once brilliantly tonal and subtly subdued. They exuded inimitable tonalities of pearlescent opulence. Their spatial tonal compositional qualities were very Chinese, open and closed spaces, tonal distribution and balance...Over this underlayment of basically Chinese concepts, they added their own unusual modern color sensibilities.

ROB BUSCHER: It didn't take long for the League to produce enough work to fill their first exhibition, which was hosted in December 1942. The December 12 issue of the Sentinel announced:

SENTINEL VOICE OVER: First exhibit of the Art Students League is now being held at 28-26. The exhibit, which ends Sunday night, is open from 10am to 9pm. Work

of Hideo Date, Bob Kuwahara, Shingo Nishiura, Benji Okubo, and their pupils is on display.

ROB BUSCHER: In another article after the exhibition closed, the Sentinel wrote:

SENTINEL VOICE OVER: The art which attracted more than 3,000 persons was held not in a salon nor in the spacious colonnaded halls of a metropolitan museum, but in the crowded recreation hall of Heart Mountain.

ROB BUSCHER: Among the members of the Heart Mountain Art Students League was Estelle Ishigo, a woman who stood out for both her talent and the fact she was a tall white woman with strawberry blonde hair. Married to Nisei Arthur Ishigo, Estelle voluntarily went to camp with her Japanese American husband.

ROB BUSCHER: Estelle's family had disowned her after their 1929 wedding, which was held in Tijuana, Mexico, to circumvent anti-miscegenation laws that forbid interracial marriage in many parts of the United States. Back in Los Angeles, Arthur worked in the film industry, while Estelle practiced and taught art.

ROB BUSCHER: When the Japanese Empire bombed Pearl Harbor, Arthur was fired and so was Estelle, just for the crime of having the last name "Ishigo." They faced a choice when they received their relocation notice: Arthur could go alone, or Estelle could join him. Although it would result in innumerable hardships both during the war years and later in her life, Estelle gathered her art supplies and boarded the bus to the assembly center, where she made an immediate

impression.

ROB BUSCHER: Estelle began sketching the train ride to Heart Mountain, in which she captured the huddled Japanese Americans peering out the window toward the mountain. This would be the first of many drawings and paintings that Estelle did in camp, capturing daily life at Heart Mountain in an almost documentary perspective.

ROB BUSCHER: An incarcerated of her own volition, Estelle was subject to the same restrictions as the Japanese Americans. She did however receive special permission to work for the WRA camp administration, but spent much of her free time with the Arts Student League. Although Okubo was the heart and soul of the League, the administration put the League under Estelle's supervision.

ROB BUSCHER: Bill Shishima was a teenager when he and his family were first sent to Heart Mountain. He never forgot Estelle.

BILL SHISHIMA RECORDING FROM DENSHO: In fact, she made a request, that she said she wanted to stay with her husband, since her husband was required to go in. So there, she felt, gee, she didn't get prejudice even though she has a Caucasian face and sort of a tannish, brownish hair, they welcomed her. And she was able to play the violin in a Japanese band, so she performed for many activities or entertainment in a Japanese band, and she stood out like a sore thumb because all the Japanese have dark black hair and she had a brownish tan color hair. But she was accepted there.

BILL SHISHIMA RECORDING FROM DENSHO: Being an artist, she recorded lots of pictures of Heart Mountain camp, whether it's waiting in line to go see the movie, waiting in line to go eat, or waiting in line to see a performance, she did all those. She took, sketched pictures of the latrines and the shower room, the mess halls, so she really recorded life in camp.

ROB BUSCHER: The Art Students League under Estelle's leadership became well known in camp. A Sentinel article in early 1943 said the league put "a bit of Paris in Heart Mountain."

SENTINEL VOICE OVER: There is a bit of Los Angeles and, yes, a bit of Paris at 28-26-N, Heart Mountain. The Art Students League of Heart Mountain is a branch of the Los Angeles league which is a direct 'import' from the Art Students League of Paris, France. Poor in everything but talent, and in its modest surroundings, the center group is a far cry from their pretentious parent leagues. Basing all phases of art from the standpoint of culture and fine art, the league under the direction of Estelle Ishigo has various departments, including painting, pencil sketching and music. It is independent of the recreation and education departments.

ROB BUSCHER: Not all of the professional artists at Heart Mountain were involved with the League. Born on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, Sadamitsu Neil Fujita was a student at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles when the war cut his studies short. He was sent to Pomona and then Heart Mountain, where he became art director for the Heart Mountain Sentinel newspaper.

ROB BUSCHER: There, Fujita helped create the layout, and sourced photographs and other images that were occasionally printed on the front page, although he is best known for illustrating the paper's iconic masthead design featuring the namesake Heart Mountain.

ROB BUSCHER: By the middle of 1943 some of the camp's leading artists began to leave, including Fujita who voluntarily enlisted in the Army during Heart Mountain's recruitment drive.

ROB BUSCHER: Bob Kuwahara left in August 1943 for a job in Chicago, where he exhibited a collection of watercolors at the city's branch of the American Friends Service Committee. He would later move to New York and continue his career.

ROB BUSCHER: Hideo Date and Benji Okubo remained at Heart Mountain until the end of the war. Although Date would withdraw from his role in the Art Students League, Okubo continued teaching and holding exhibitions until the camp finally closed in 1945, when he returned to Los Angeles.

ROB BUSCHER: Shingo Nishiura moved back to Santa Clara County after the war and resumed his woodworking.

ROB BUSCHER: Besides the rigorous classes of the Art Students League that were mainly filled by aspiring Nisei artists, a much larger group of Issei incarcerated students engaged in craft arts activities offered through the adult education program such as the embroidery classes taught by master embroiderer Isaburo

Nagahama.

ROB BUSCHER: Delphine Hirasuna offers her thoughts on why so many of the Issei were drawn to craft arts at this time.

DELPHINE HIRASUNA INTERVIEW: I think when most of the artwork seemed to come from the Issei. And part of it is they were older, they weren't going to school. I think if there was something positive about the camps, it's that they, for the first time in their life, were able to sort of explore the arts. Because they didn't have a job they couldn't leave the camps or they had a job in the camps and they couldn't leave. So you'd see people who had no experience in the arts taking up woodworking, taking up embroidery, taking up all of those things and doing pretty amazing work.

ROB BUSCHER: Introduced in episode 3 of this series, Nagahama had mastered his craft over 40 years, having studied with French embroidery artists in New York, where he taught at the prestigious Emma Willard School of Art. Thought to be more of a feminine art, the vast majority of his students were women.

ROB BUSCHER: Although the relations between the Japanese American incarcerated and local Wyoming residents were tense at times, Nagahama's students were invited to exhibit their works in December 1942 by the Library Club of nearby Powell. The January 9, 1943 edition of the Sentinel details the event:

SENTINEL VOICE OVER: One of the first steps toward establishing closer, friendlier relationships with those on the outside was taken on Tuesday, Dec. 29, when, in response to an invitation, over 125 pieces of exquisite embroidery work by the students of Isaburo Nagahama were put on exhibit before the Library club of Powell. Both Nagahama and those who accompanied him to Powell were gratified at the admiring response accorded their works by the club members. With over 40 years of embroidering experience behind him, he still enjoys making all the designs for his 400 students. Although the war has curtailed his supply of thread and linen from Europe, all the work in his classes is being done now by single threads imported from England.

ROB BUSCHER: The Sentinel describes a later exhibit of embroidery work from Nagahama's students, this time held in camp. The September 30, 1944 issue of the Sentinel described the exhibit's success.

SENTINEL VOICE OVER: The two-day embroidery exhibit of Isaburo Nagahama's classes in the high school study hall last Saturday and Sunday was attended by approximately 5,000 residents, according to Rosie Fukumoto, secretary to Walter Schlosser, vocational guidance supervisor.

ROB BUSCHER: Others incarcerated took up wood sculpting, after studying in classes taught by woodworker Mary Shige Homma.

ROB BUSCHER: Another traditional art class taught by a Buddhist priest led to one

of Heart Mountain's most enduring mysteries. Duncan Williams shares details about the Heart Mountain sutra stones and their likely creator.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS INTERVIEW: There was a Buddhist priest of the Nichiren Buddhist tradition, his name is Reverend Nichikan Murakita. In Heart Mountain he was well known as a calligraphy teacher and instructor. He held and organized several of the main calligraphy exhibitions. Fairly typical thing for a Buddhist priest who often were the leaders of many types of Japanese arts like flower arrangement, tea ceremony, calligraphy. But anyway, he is the person who we believe is most likely responsible for these kanji characters on stones that were buried in an oil can underneath the ground adjacent to the Heart Mountain cemetery.

ROB BUSCHER: Williams explains how the stones were found after being buried for many years.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS INTERVIEW: That can and the stones were discovered after the war by the Bureau of Land Management. By accident kind of cut into the ground and I think the initial worry was that it was somebody's casket and it disturbed that. But it was an oil drum full of these stones with each stone having one kanji character calligraphized on it. And for many years it was called the "Heart Mountain mystery stones" because nobody knew, it was mysterious. The homesteader, the Bovey family, had it in their property, and people would come by and query what the stones were. Nobody knew what they represented.

ROB BUSCHER: Eventually the Bovey family decided to donate their collection to the Japanese American National Museum. There an overseas researcher from Japan had a hunch about what the stones might be.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS INTERVIEW: A Buddhist studies scholar from Aichi Gakuin, Professor Mori took a look at them and somehow felt that they seemed like the wording, the stones, if you combine them in a certain way - of a Buddhist sutra or scripture. And eventually he worked with a professor at University Tokyo called Professor Minowa. He was able to run the characters of this on the stones through his algorithm to basically get almost a perfect match with a section of the Lotus Sutra, and the Lotus Sutra is of course the most important Buddhist scripture in the Nichiren Buddhist tradition. And so putting two and two together, as it were, we're assuming that it was most likely Reverend Nichikan Murakita, the only Nichiren Buddhist priest at Heart Mountain.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS INTERVIEW: Part of why it became a mystery was unlike other Buddhist priests like Nyogen Senzaki who went back to LA, Reverend Murakita went on the Gripsholm as part of the civilian prisoner exchange ships back to Japan. And so nobody ever heard of him in the United States again.

ROB BUSCHER: With his knowledge of Japanese Buddhist history, Williams explains how the final piece of the puzzle fell into place.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS INTERVIEW: A tradition that actually goes all the way back to the 12th and 13th century in Japan called *kyozuka* or sutra burial mounds.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS INTERVIEW: Basically back in that period in Japan, where there's so much war and famine and fires, they felt like the world was coming to an end. They had this theory back then called *Mappo* of this kind of end time where a new Buddha would come. And so they would write out Buddhist scriptures, bury them in the ground in these sutra burial mounds in anticipation of Maitreya - the name of the future Buddha after Shakyamuni Buddha. The next Buddha was called Maitreya the *miroku bosatsu* or Maitreya Buddha would come.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS INTERVIEW: And you'd bury the Scriptures, so that the teachings would be kind of contained and preserved for a time when all of this warring, and ravages, and famines would come to an end. Reverend Murakita of course is very familiar with that tradition, being part of the Nichiren tradition, part of burying Lotus scriptures underneath the ground.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS INTERVIEW: And in this case, not because it was the medieval Warring States of Japan, but because they were in an American concentration camp, and it was a moment when the *Dharma*, or the Buddhist teachings weren't able to be as freely practice as normal. But with this prayer and a hope that there would be a future time where Buddhism could flourish again. And so, to me, the writing out of a Buddhist Scripture is not only the transmission of teaching, but a prayer for a better moment.

ROB BUSCHER: Reverend Murakita lived a successful life in Japan during the postwar era, and made no attempts to return to the United States. Unfortunately, since most of his students were Issei none remain today who can verify this story.

ROB BUSCHER: Differing greatly from the professional artists who aspired to continue their creative pursuits in a career setting after the war, many Issei saw art as an outlet to process the difficult experience of forced removal and incarceration, but had no further ambitions for art after camp. Delphine Hirasuna remembers her initial surprise when learning how prolific Issei craft artists were at Heart Mountain and elsewhere.

DELPHINE HIRASUNA INTERVIEW: What blew me away when I first started researching the book was that these were people without any formal training. What surprised me was they were saying, “well I don't think it's good enough for your book, we have something you know, maybe in the shed.” And when they brought it out, I was really blown away, because most of the people who I gathered these materials from were farmers, and they never went back to their craft afterwards.

DELPHINE HIRASUNA INTERVIEW: They came back, and you know they just had to make a living. They started a family, and so they they didn't see themselves as having any real skill. And I remember when I asked people if I could borrow it to take a photograph they said, “well if you don't like it if you don't think it's good enough for your book just throw it away.”

ROB BUSCHER: Following the success of the book, *The Art of Gaman* would go on to become a traveling exhibition. Hirasuna details some of her experiences with the exhibit, and how it ultimately led to a more widespread appreciation for the artifacts by families of incarcerated and collectors alike.

DELPHINE HIRASUNA INTERVIEW: I was doing some interviews and someone heard me on the radio and that's when the folk art museum called me and said, "we'd like to do an exhibit." And then it went from there, 15 exhibits later. It went to Oregon, and then it went to Connecticut, and then it went to the Smithsonian. You know I thought, "well if it would just go to one museum," but then when the Smithsonian called that was the big thing. And then it went to Japan, so it was seen in five different museums there and by the Emperor of Japan. I got an invitation to come and show it to him, which was pretty amazing. But I think more than the quality of the work there's something very heartwarming and there's a human story there, that I think that's what people respond to.

ROB BUSCHER: While Art of Gaman was a groundbreaking exhibit, and the first Japanese American led endeavor to highlight the importance of camp artifacts in telling our collective history from the community perspective, an earlier study by art historian and collector Allen Hendershott Eaton, noted the artistic merit of incarcerated created art during the war years.

ROB BUSCHER: Shortly after the camps opened, Eaton wrote to Dillon Myer who was his longtime friend, to ask whether he could organize an exhibit of art created by the prisoners for display around the country.

ALLEN EATON VOICE OVER: The Japanese, more than any people I knew, had a genius for making something out of nothing, so scarcity of materials need not be considered a deterrent.

ROB BUSCHER: Myer said the WRA did not have the resources, but he would support an exhibit if Eaton found another way to pay for it. Eaton approached his employer, the New York–based Russell Sage Foundation, which also lacked funds to support the project.

ROB BUSCHER: Eaton shelved his idea, but stayed in touch with individual prisoners who either sold or donated their camp art to him. By 1945, Eaton had accumulated enough vacation time to allow him to visit Heart Mountain and four other camps in person.

ROB BUSCHER: There he saw bird pins carved out of whatever wood the artists could scavenge in a camp with few trees. He saw the minimalist furniture incarcerated had built from scrap lumber, and the beautiful watercolors painted by Estelle Ishigo, with whom he struck up a friendship.

ROB BUSCHER: Eventually Ishigo became Eaton's art adviser at Heart Mountain and a regular correspondent, as he depended on her to identify pieces for the exhibit he hoped to acquire. In one letter to her, Eaton expresses his gratitude.

ALLEN EATON VOICE OVER: I am glad to tell you that on the whole the record is going very well, and yet I feel I ought to say that there is nothing more interesting in all the places I have been than the work of the artists and craftsmen which you have uncovered for me.

ROB BUSCHER: One of the paintings Estelle sent to Eaton was her own, depicting Heart Mountain prisoners scavenging for coal dumped in the snow as the wind and snow whipped up around them. Eaton complimented Estelle for the art she sent him and her letters, which detailed the hardships of life inside Heart Mountain. In return, Estelle hoped that Eaton could help her and Arthur regain their footing, since they had no employment offers and nowhere to live.

ROB BUSCHER: Arthur Ishigo had started looking for work almost immediately after President Roosevelt lifted the exclusion order, writing to his former employer at Paramount Pictures to see if the company would take him back. Unfortunately he had no luck.

ROB BUSCHER: Estelle desperately wanted Eaton's help, but he could not provide any job leads. Estelle and Arthur stayed in camp until the last day it was open – November 10, 1945 – when they boarded the final train for Los Angeles. There, they lived in a trailer outside of town and barely scraped out a living.

ROB BUSCHER: After the war, S. Neil Fujita returned to the United States and found a job at an advertising agency in Philadelphia. His work attracted attention after winning several advertising awards, leading to a phone call that changed his life.

S. NEIL FUJITA VOICE OVER: I worked at Ayer for around three years, and while I was there I got a gold medal from the Art Directors Club for designing an ad for the Container Corporation of America. That must have gotten people talking

because, shortly after I left Ayer, I got a call from Bill Golden who says he is recommending me to run the art department at Columbia Records.

S. NEIL FUJITA VOICE OVER: He said that I would be starting from the ground up by building an internal graphic design staff. He also said, “Neil, if you do this, you'll be taking work and income away from the two studios that have been working with us for many years, so you're going to meet up with a lot of crap. First of all, you're Japanese and you're going to be called all sorts of names, from Nip to Jap and everything else. Do you still want to do it?”

ROB BUSCHER: Fujita said yes. At Columbia, he designed some of the most iconic album cover art of the 1950s and 1960s. Albums he designed for jazz musicians Dave Brubeck, Charles Mingus, and Miles Davis, which all featured abstract color compositions painted in a style not dissimilar to the synchromist paintings of the Art Students League. Fujita later designed some of the most distinctive book covers of the 1960s, including those for Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, the latter was reused in the film trilogy of the same name.

ROB BUSCHER: Bob Kuwahara also ended up in New York. There he created his own comic strip called Miki, which he illustrated for five years under the pseudonym Bob Kay. Although it was ultimately canceled due to low readership, his strip won a Freedoms Foundation award in 1951. In the last phase of his career, Kuwahara returned to animation at CBS subsidiary Terrytoons in New Rochelle, where he created and directed a series of fourteen cartoon shorts

starring *Hashimoto Mouse*, about a Japanese family of mice.

HASHIMOTO MOUSE AUDIO SAMPLE: My name is Hashimoto. I am Japanese house mouse.

ROB BUSCHER: He also directed a few episodes of popular cartoon *Deputy Dawg*.

DEPUTY DAWG AUDIO SAMPLE: Here it comes, the Deputy Dawg Show!

ROB BUSCHER: While the artists who moved East found success, life back in Los Angeles provided little comfort to Arthur and Estelle Ishigo. Although Allen Eaton's dream of an exhibition never materialized, the art he collected with Estelle Ishigo's help to create the 1952 book, *Beauty Behind Barbed Wire*. The book showed the creativity and resourcefulness of the Japanese American incarcerated, and did include the painting titled "Winter" that Estelle gave to him.

ROB BUSCHER: Unfortunately that did nothing for Estelle, who remained in the trailer park with her husband. In 1948, a new law aimed at providing some compensation to Japanese Americans who were incarcerated gave the Ishigos some hope. Estelle submitted a claim for \$506.50. The government responded that it would pay only one quarter of that. Their reasoning was that as a white woman, Estelle could have avoided many of her losses by remaining at home and not going to camp. Going to Heart Mountain, according to the government's reasoning, was her choice.

ROB BUSCHER: But Estelle didn't give up. In 1952, she wrote Cecil King, her representative, to express her sense of injustice.

ESTELLE ISHIGO VOICE OVER: The law has distinguished us by ancestry & disregards loss of the family as a unit creating a barrier of discrimination & a loss of faith & confidence in justice here in the country for which we stand.

ROB BUSCHER: Estelle received her final rejection from the government in 1953. A lawyer from Minnesota named Warren Burger was the head of the Justice Department's civil rights division, who wrote,

WARREN BURGER VOICE OVER: The enforced separation of husband and wife . . . is a normal consequence of war and, although very hard, was the lot of many.

ROB BUSCHER: Like Ishigo, the other artists from Heart Mountain who returned to California never succeeded in reestablishing their former careers as working artists in the postwar era.

ROB BUSCHER: Okubo provided for his family as a landscape architect and continued painting as a hobby, occasionally lecturing at the Los Angeles Art Students League until it closed in 1953. Only Gompers Saijo succeeded in becoming a commercial artist in LA, where he found work as a sign painter, and continued his studies at the Art Students League under Okubo's recommendation.

ROB BUSCHER: Eventually Gompers would relocate to San Francisco where during the late 60s he began illustrating and printing psychedelic posters for the Haight Ashbury music scene, and later illustrating adult coloring books for the hippie audience.

ROB BUSCHER: Sadly, Estelle Ishigo's prospects did not improve and after her beloved husband Arthur died of cancer in 1957, she remained isolated from public life and alone. Estelle surfaced briefly when several of her camp works were shown in the 1972 exhibition *Months of Waiting*. Later in the same year she published a memoir with the help of the Hollywood Chapter of JACL titled *Lone Heart Mountain* that featured her artwork. In the decade to come she again faded into obscurity, until an unlikely rescuer found her.

ROB BUSCHER: Bacon Sakatani was twelve years old when he and his family were incarcerated at Heart Mountain. Like many of the children incarcerated, Bacon knew little about the reasons for their incarceration until 1982, when he agreed to help organize the first reunion of Heart Mountain survivors. Inspired by the reunion, Bacon became one of the most dedicated and vocal advocates of the former incarcerated.

ROB BUSCHER: A couple years later he received a request from the Bureau of Reclamation who wanted to use one of Estelle Ishigo's drawings for a plaque at the site of the Heart Mountain camp.

BACON SAKATANI RECORDING FROM DENSHO: Around 1985 the Bureau of Reclamation in Montana contacted me and asked me to find Estelle Ishigo because they wanted to use one of her drawings for the plaque at Heart Mountain. So I asked around Los Angeles and I found Estelle. She was living in a broken-down apartment, basement apartment, some of the windows in her room was cracked. She had both of her legs amputated, she was in a wheelchair, she was penniless.

BACON SAKATANI RECORDING FROM DENSHO: So I had a talk with her and I left her a twenty dollar bill; she picked it up and looked at it like she'd never seen money before. Well, so we became friends, so I went to see her and she wanted her book republished. So anyway, I got my classmates again and we raised the money to republish her book, and then we put on a fundraiser for her. We put on a small reunion, got friends over and raised some money for her.

ROB BUSCHER: Although the fundraiser was a modest success, and the book was ultimately republished, Estelle's mounting medical bills kept her living in poverty for her remaining days. Shortly before her death, Estelle's story was immortalized in an Academy Award winning short documentary by Japanese American filmmaker Steven Okazaki called *Days of Waiting*. Bacon remembers his final visit with Estelle, just before the film was released.

BACON SAKATANI RECORDING FROM DENSHO: I remember I went to see her, she didn't know who I was. And the next day, I think, she passed away. Yeah, that woman. [Laughs] Yeah, she was a part of my life at that, one time. She had no friends, no one to turn to.

BACON SAKATANI RECORDING FROM DENSHO: Oh yea I was just talking to her and I asked, “do you want me to dump your ashes over the Heart Mountain?” She says, “yea.” So one year we had a hike to the top of Heart Mountain and I spread her ashes. Yea, turned out to be a pretty good gesture. So I'm glad I did what I did.

ROB BUSCHER: After her death, Estelle and her work would play another role in the Heart Mountain story. Much of her work was scattered in private collections outside of Heart Mountain, including the estate of Allen Eaton. It was the discovery of a plan to sell it, along with hundreds of pieces created by other incarcerated, that launched a new wave of activism for descendants of Heart Mountain and the broader Japanese American community.

ROB BUSCHER: Shirley Ann Higuchi is a lawyer based in Washington DC who chairs the board of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation. Her parents met in Heart Mountain as children. In March 2015, Higuchi read an article in the New York Times that a collection of about 450 Japanese American artifacts were coming up for public auction. These were the pieces collected by Allen Hendershott Eaton at the end of the war, much of it through the help of Estelle Ishigo.

SHIRLEY HIGUCHI INTERVIEW: Reading the New York Times article about the art auction, made me think about our moral and ethical obligation to advocate, resist, and fight for what we believe in. In this case it means recognizing the significance of a public sale of camp artifacts crafted out of the talent, suffering, and hope of a population that was wrongly incarcerated during WWII.

ROB BUSCHER: In Shirley's perspective, it appeared that the owner of the art and the Rago auction house of New Jersey did not fully appreciate the personal, emotional, and even spiritual meaning that these objects had for many in the Japanese American community.

ROB BUSCHER: Japanese American artists entrusted their work to Eaton in the hopes that he would show it to the world, educating more people about the grave injustice that befell them during the war years. They did not believe he would sell it for profit, which he never did. Neither did his daughter, Martha, who inherited the art after her father's death.

ROB BUSCHER: But when she died in 1990, the art went to Thomas Ryan, a contractor in Yonkers, New York, who had repaired Martha Eaton's house after a fire. After Thomas Ryan died, his son John inherited the collection, now devoid of emotional connection and the context of relationships that led to the works being donated in the first place.

ROB BUSCHER: Shirley Higuchi and the Heart Mountain board of directors knew none of this at the time, but when they learned of the auction, became resolved to fight it.

ROB BUSCHER: Separately, another member of the Japanese American activist community Nancy Ukai began a Facebook page called Not for Sale that publicized the unfairness of the auction.

NANCY UKAI INTERVIEW: And I remember at the time of the auction run up and Satsuki Ina wrote on our Facebook page Japanese American History, Not for Sale, which, to our surprise, went viral in a week. This is in 2015. I can imagine some Issei person who's very humble and surprised that this white person wants their thing and so gave it to them, not to sell. And he knew that, and he said that. But I think that's very telling. And you can imagine that people were thinking, well, I kind of made this while I was passing time.

NANCY UKAI INTERVIEW: But interestingly, again, Estelle Ishigo has in her notebook, "Homma Chair \$2." It looks like he might have gotten paid \$2 for it. But people are desperate - they're poor, they have no money. So to me it's really a scavenger coming in and kind of picking stuff up. Of course, it's really good that these things have been preserved, and Alan Eaton did go beyond that. He kept records, in many cases he names people, and that's very helpful. I mean, he respected the makers to the point, because he really was sympathetic to folk art and immigrant art so he did write down the names of people, what camp they did, what materials they used - so that's an invaluable record.

ROB BUSCHER: The Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation joined with Ukai and other Japanese American organizations to agree on where the artifacts could be preserved, housed and exhibited. They reached out through the auction house to the seller, whom they knew only as John Doe, to stop the auction. That failed. Although the art was only valued at \$26,900, Shirley Higuchi and the foundation raised \$50,000 to buy the art for Heart Mountain.

SHIRLEY HIGUCHI INTERVIEW: The legal theory that we used was that the work was entrusted to Allan Eaton for public interest and educational purposes, and not private financial gain. So by offering more than the estimated value, and their refusal to accept that offer demonstrated bad faith on their part. And this was part of our larger legal strategy to prove that these folks were not working in the best interest of the public, or the Japanese American community.

ROB BUSCHER: Despite the more than generous offer, the seller, whose provenance of the collection seemed dubious, refused to sell. Heart Mountain hired a New Jersey law firm to file an injunction on the basis of the legal theory that the Japanese Americans had entrusted their work to Eaton for public interest purposes and not for private gain. They rallied Japanese American activists to continue to protest, including poet Janice Mirikitani.

JANICE MIRIKITANI VOICE OVER: I was shocked and appalled, to say the least, in seeing my cousin, Jimmy Tsutomo Mirikitani's photo up for sale in the auction. Jimmy has endured more adversity than most human beings could imagine, not only with the injustice of our incarceration in American concentration camps, but also his struggle for validation as an American citizen.

ROB BUSCHER: Nancy Ukai's Not For Sale Facebook page quickly gained more than 7,700 followers. In addition to issues of provenance, one of the most contentious points surrounding the sale were the ethics of Eaton's claim to the items in the first place. Nancy Ukai elaborates.

NANCY UKAI INTERVIEW: What we definitely do have is Eaton in his book saying, “they gave me things to the point of embarrassment, but not to sell them.” At the same time, I don't think that the Issei necessarily had this idea of colonialists coming in and taking their stuff, and feeling outraged. I mean, maybe there were, because actually there's a record where he hired - he commissioned a photographer, and the photographer took all the film and disappeared. So, you know, things happen.

ROB BUSCHER: Under mounting public pressure and threat of a lawsuit, John Ryan identified himself as the owner of the art and called off the auction.

JOHN RYAN VOICE OVER: We have tried to be good stewards of this material and protect it over the years. We weren't trying to extort money from anyone.

ROB BUSCHER: Ryan instead sold the art for \$50,000 to the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. The Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation worked with them to find the best ways of sharing the artifacts with a wider audience. In 2018, many of Estelle Ishigo's drawings and paintings finally found their way back to where they were created, and were shown in a special exhibit at the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center.

SHIRLEY HIGUCHI INTERVIEW: Estelle Ishigo suffered at Heart Mountain and she was an artist that depicted the suffering and the hardship of the Japanese Americans. She wanted her ashes spread after she died on Heart Mountain, and I

think we all know that if she had a choice, she would want her precious artwork and her life exhibited at the place where she suffered during 1942.

ROB BUSCHER: Ultimately, the fight over the art created by incarcerated at Heart Mountain and the other camps inspired a new unity among Japanese American groups. In 2016, Shirley Higuchi and Heart Mountain led the creation of the Japanese American Confinement Sites Consortium, which lobbies for mutual funding and shared resources to restore confinement sites around the country. Higuchi, Nancy Ukai and Clement Hanami of the Japanese American National Museum have traveled around the country to talk about the value of the incarcerated artwork and the importance of having it on display.

ROB BUSCHER: Although many of the pieces remain unattributed because the artists did not sign them, they remain as a lasting testament to the incarcerated who endured the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity. Some day in the near future when the last incarceration survivors are gone, the art they made at Heart Mountain will live on to tell their stories for generations to come.

ROB BUSCHER: *Look Toward the Mountain* is presented by the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation and is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Written by Ray Locker and Rob Buscher. Produced, Edited, and Hosted by Rob Buscher. Voice overs sourced by Darrell Kunitomi. Special thanks to Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project. Many of the oral histories used in this podcast series were provided by Densho. Visit the Heart Mountain website for a full list of credits. Join us for the next episode titled, Sports and Leisure.