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Dept. of American Studies
CARSCA application
Humanities and Fine Arts Division

**Visualizing Japanese American Internment and Beyond:
The Epic Folk Art of Henry Sugimoto**

Project Abstract:

This project examines several works by the Japanese American painter Henry Sugimoto (1900-1990). During World War II, he and 120,000 other Japanese American civilians on the West Coast were imprisoned in camps across the United States because of suspected loyalties to Japan. At this time and after the war, Sugimoto created paintings of those bleak surroundings and experiences, leaving a visual record of an important historical tragedy. Remarkably, critics have paid scant attention to this artist. Some scholarship on the Japanese American internment briefly mentions him, and only one book catalog for a museum exhibit exists on his life and work.

I plan to focus on Sugimoto's paintings produced in the late 1940s to mid 1960s. These revealed his interest in Japanese American history and culture when Japan and the U.S. attempted to restore peaceful relations during the Cold War. Through his folk art style, Sugimoto presented an epic history of the Japanese in the U.S. before, during, and after World War II. No other artist, Japanese American or otherwise, has attempted this kind of broad pictorial account on this particular topic.

I am requesting funds to visit the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, California for one week of research there. This institution houses most of Sugimoto's available works, including over 130 paintings, his correspondence, an unpublished autobiography, publicity, and exhibit reviews. I will use this material to write a chapter for a larger book project on Japanese Americans and Cold War culture in the United States.

Applicant's signature Edward Tang

Department Chair's signature Lynne M. Adrian

Project Proposal:

This project examines several works by the Japanese American painter Henry Sugimoto (1900-1990). During World War II, he and 120,000 other Japanese American civilians on the West Coast were imprisoned in camps across the United States because of suspected loyalties to Japan. At this time and continuing after the war, Sugimoto created paintings of those bleak surroundings and experiences, leaving a visual record of an important historical tragedy. His work is significant especially because many Americans wanted to forget or ignore the mass internment and how it challenged the nation's image of a liberal democracy that supposedly valued its populace regardless of race or ethnicity. Remarkably, critics have paid scant attention to this artist. Some scholarship on the incarceration of Japanese Americans briefly mentions him, and only one book catalog for a museum exhibit exists on his life and work.

Born in Japan, Sugimoto immigrated to the U.S. in 1919. He studied at several art schools in California, and in the 1920s and 30s, traveled to France and Mexico to hone his skills in landscape painting and in folk art, respectively. Sugimoto returned to California and was later imprisoned in Arkansas when hostilities commenced between Japan and the United States on December 7, 1941. While in camp, he refined his artistic sensibilities. Adapting what he learned from French landscape painting and Mexican folk art, Sugimoto created landscapes of the internment camps and the ordinary people who inhabited them. Other Japanese American artists painted what they saw and endured too, but they either stopped practicing their craft after the war, or moved into abstract expressionism. Sugimoto, however, continued to portray the wartime imprisonment long after the conflict ended, apparently still haunted by those experiences and by his need to remember them through art. He also began depicting the earlier history of Japanese immigrants in California to trace their struggles against racism there.

I plan to focus on Sugimoto's works in the late 1940s to mid 1960s. These revealed his interest in Japanese American history and culture when Japan and the U.S. attempted to restore peaceful relations during the Cold War. Once a formidable enemy, Japan became a valued ally to contain the spread of communism in the Pacific theater. In this context, venues within U.S. popular culture presented Japanese Americans as forgiving, sacrificing, and adaptable people who could help convince Japan to adopt the values and practices of a liberal democracy. Yet Japanese Americans commemorated their own wartime hardships that complicated the racially tolerant, freedom-loving image the U.S. wanted to convey about itself to the rest of the world.

This project is part of a larger book manuscript on Japanese Americans and Cold War culture in the United States. Using Hollywood films, magazines and newspapers, memoirs, novels, paintings, and children's literature, I examine how Japanese Americans asserted their cultural presence in these postwar forums. The book's significance coincides with the relatively new transnational emphasis taken up by scholars in Asian American Studies and in related disciplines, especially regarding the Cold War period. My research considers both domestic and international contexts in light of how mainstream American society began tentatively embracing once hated populations, both Japanese and Japanese American, and how this latter group responded in kind. It also challenges older models of how scholars define American culture as a process occurring only within national borders. That is, past scholarship on the Japanese American internment located it primarily within U.S. history, while work on the American postwar occupation of Japan in the mid 1940s to early 1950s framed it as a matter of international relations. My work looks at how Japanese Americans as cultural mediators between East and West contributed to the creation and complexity of American Cold War culture from a transpacific perspective. I consider Henry Sugimoto as one of these key figures.

This endeavor presents a new direction in my research. I earned tenure mainly from my work on nineteenth-century American writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Walt Whitman, and Frederick Douglass. I also published articles on twentieth-century Asian American culture, but this field remained secondary to my earlier research interests. I began thinking, however, about a book project on Japanese Americans and Cold War culture that would contribute to the new directions occurring within Asian American Studies and American Studies. I hope this work will enhance the reputation of the College of Arts and Sciences in Asian American Studies from my invited talks and conference presentations, as well as from the planned book project.

I am requesting funds to visit the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, California. This institution houses most of the available works of Henry Sugimoto, including his paintings, correspondence, an unpublished autobiography, reviews of exhibitions, and publicity material. Much of any research in Asian American Studies requires traveling to the West Coast because of its population centers and archival records. Gaining access to Sugimoto's artifacts is crucial to my work, and funding for travel and lodging would help me develop a more significant and innovative presentation. I plan to visit this location for one week of research in June 2014. The project's success will be measured by my ability to present my findings in a chapter for the book project. The chapter will be roughly 15,000-20,000 words, which I plan to write in Fall 2014. I also intend to present this material at a major conference such as the Association of Asian American Studies annual conference in April 2015. I received an NEH grant and a previous CARSCA grant in 2012 for a project on Yoshiko Uchida, a Japanese American children's author. From these funds, I traveled to two archives (at UC Berkeley and at the University of Oregon), completed a chapter draft of 17,000 words on her life and works (as part of the book), and presented my findings in a CARSCA colloquium and at a regional conference.

Budget:**Travel to the Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles, California**

Estimated schedule: June 16-23, 2014

The museum is open for archival research only on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, thus explaining my travel from Monday to Monday. In the meantime, I will use the institution's open stacks on Wednesday and Friday to continue my secondary research.

Airfare:	\$505.00
Hotel (7 nights, 119.00/night):	\$833.00
Total:	\$1338.00

Edward Tang

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Education:

New York University,
 PhD, American Studies (1996)
 MA, American Studies (1989)

Vassar College,
 AB, History (1985)

Academic Positions:

Associate Professor, University of Alabama, Dept. of American Studies (2004-present)

Assistant Professor, University of Alabama, Dept. of American Studies (1998-2004)

Selected Publications re: Asian American Studies:

“Reorienting Empires: Hanama Tasaki’s *Long the Imperial Way* and Postwar American Culture,” *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 17 (Feb. 2014): 31-59.

“From Internment to Containment: Cold War Imaginings of Japanese Americans in *Go for Broke*,” *Columbia Journal of American Studies*, 9 (Fall 2009): 84-112.

“Transpacific Worlds: Visualizing Asian America in *Chan is Missing* and *Dim Sum*,” *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies*, 27 (2002): 569-93.

Recent Conferences / Invited Talks re: Asian American Studies:

“Reorienting Empires: Hanama Tasaki’s *Long the Imperial Way* and Postwar American Culture,” Association of Asian American Studies, 2013.

“Teach Your Children Well: Yoshiko Uchida and the Cold War Origins of Remembering Japanese American Confinement,” Southern American Studies Association, 2012.

“Bridges to the Rising Sun: War Brides and Japanese Americans in Early Cold War Film,” Association of Asian American Studies, 2011.

“Remembering Japanese American Internment in U.S.-Japan Cold War Relations,”
Clinton Institute for American Studies, University College Dublin, Ireland, 2011.

Invited presenter, “Sleeping with the Frenemy: The Cold War Significance of
Japanese War Bride (1952),” Asian American Studies Institute, University of
Connecticut, 2010.

Recent Grants / Fellowships:

Clarence Mondale Faculty Fellow, Department of American Studies,
University of Alabama (2011-13)

National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend (2012)

College Academy for Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity Grant,
University of Alabama (2012)

Related Activities re: Asian American Studies:

*Presenter, “Teach Your Children Well: The Postwar Literature of Yoshiko Uchida,”
CARSCA Colloquium, College of Arts & Sciences, University of Alabama (2013)

*Presenter, “Sleeping With the Frenemy: The Cold War Significance of *Japanese War
Bride* (1952),” UA Americanist Workshop (2010)

*Presenter, “The Case of General Eric K. Shinseki,” Asian Pacific American Heritage
Month Luncheon, Columbus Air Force Base, Mississippi (2009)

*Presenter, “Turning Japanese: How Winnifred Eaton Became Onoto Watanna in
Victorian America,” Onoto Watanna Book Exhibit, Sakura Festival, UA Libraries
(2008)

*Hosted documentary filmmaker Leo Chiang, screening of *A Village Called Versailles*,
Bama Theatre (2012)

*Hosted documentary filmmaker Doan Hoang, screening of *Oh, Saigon*,
Bama Theatre (2010)

*Hosted documentary filmmaker Curtis Chin, screening of *Vincent Who?*
University of Alabama (2010)

*Program Committee, Association of Asian American Studies Annual Conference,
New Orleans, LA (2011)

*Planning Committee, Rose Gladney Lecture Series on Justice and Social Change,
Host to Prof. Leslie Bow, Dept. of English, Univ. of Wisconsin (2012)

Sample Images



“Mess Hall, Jerome” (1942)

[camp in Arkansas]



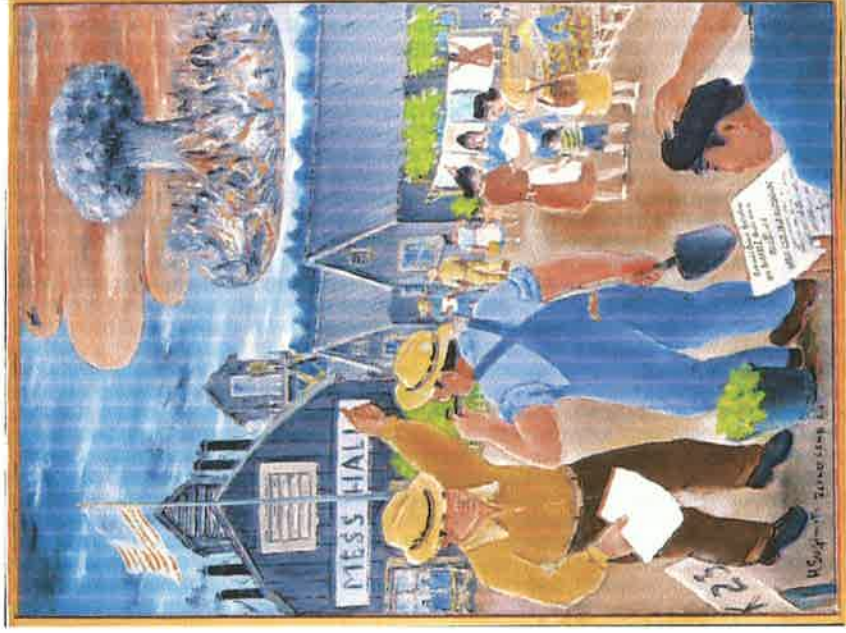
“Take Fresh Air?” (1957)

[civilians transported to internment camp]

The left image shows the camp in Jerome, Arkansas where Sugimoto was imprisoned, with its ironic placement of the American flag front and center under an overcast sky. The right image depicts Japanese Americans, under the ominous gaze and confining presence of armed guards, taking a break from their arduous journey through the Arizona desert on their way from California to Arkansas.



“News of Pearl Harbor [1941]”
(ca. 1965)

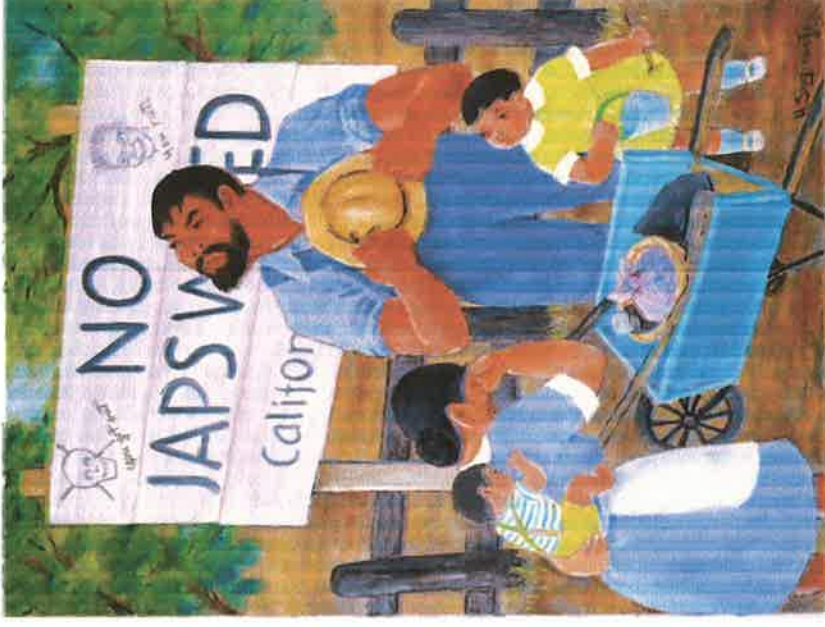


“Bombing of Relatives Homeland, 1945”
(ca. 1965)

This pair of images marks the beginning and ending of World War II for the U.S. and Japan, from the Pearl Harbor attack in Hawaii to the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. Caught between two warring nations, Japanese Americans can only express shock and ambivalence over these events, even in an internment camp (right).



“Stop Picture Bride” (ca. 1965)



“No Japs Wanted” (ca. 1965)

These images of early twentieth-century Japanese immigrants in the U.S. disclose the racial discrimination they faced through immigration restrictions (left) and intimidation (right). Here, Sugimoto traces through his epic folk art style the history and prejudiced reasoning behind the later wartime internment of Japanese Americans.