



Materials left by late artist provide look into Japanese-American experience

10:38 PM PDT on Tuesday, July 14, 2009

By SEAN NEALON
The Press-Enterprise

CORRECTION:

In a previous version of this story, the Riverside Community College District's plans to apply for a National Endowment for the Humanities grant were described incorrectly.

CORRECTION:

An earlier version of this story contained incomplete information about the authors of a play about Mine Okubo. The corrected information is below.



Photo Gallery: Images from Mine Okubo's "Citizen 13660"

Miné Okubo never forgot Riverside City College.

Okubo, best known for writing and illustrating "Citizen 13660," the first account of life

in World War II Japanese-American internment camps, was born in Riverside in 1912 and graduated from Poly High School and Riverside Junior College, as it was then known. The book, published in 1946, is still used at colleges today.

In 1974, she returned to the college -- by then an artist whose work had been shown from New York City to San Francisco -- for an exhibition of her paintings and the alumna of the year award.

Story continues below



Special to The Press-
Enterprise

Miné Okubo is best
known for writing and
illustrating "Citizen
13660."

When she died in 2001 in New York City, she left Riverside Community College District -- which has campuses in Riverside, Moreno Valley and Norco -- 50 boxes of her art, letters, photos, clippings and personal effects that had filled her New York City apartment.

Scholars believe the Okubo archive might be the largest and most complete collection of mid-20th century Japanese-American history. Most material was destroyed or lost when the Japanese were interned.

"For a historian, it's an absolute dream because the woman was a paper pack rat," said Elena Tajima Creef, an associate professor at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, who co-edited the book "Miné Okubo: Following Her Own Road." "There is simply nothing like this that exists."

Today, district officials are sorting the material -- which includes everything from a manuscript typed by Langston Hughes to letters documenting Okubo's fight to keep her rent-controlled apartment -- so it can be studied by scholars such as Creef, a

Riverside native who got to know Okubo the last eight years of her life.

Grants totaling \$25,000 from the California Civil Liberties Public Education Program have allowed the district to hire an archivist to catalog Okubo's art and written materials. The district will apply for a \$250,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant if an initial \$6,000 seed grant applied for by the district in May is awarded.

The district wants to present a retrospective of Okubo's work in 2012, the 100th anniversary of her birth, said Mark Takano, a district trustee who grew up knowing the Okubo family and called her "Auntie Miné."

Story continues below



Stan Lim/The Press Enterprise

Joyce Davis, adjunct librarian and part-time archivist for Riverside City College, puts away boxes of letters, paintings and drawings of Riverside-born artist Miné Okubo, who died in 2001.

Riverside to New York

Okubo grew up one of seven children at 11th and Kansas streets in Riverside. Her mother was a calligrapher, and her father was a scholar in Japan who became a gardener in Riverside. They came to United States in the early 1900s.

Okubo enrolled at Riverside Junior College in 1930 and graduated several years later. She maintained an affinity for the college because the instructors strengthened her reading and writing skills and encouraged her to apply to UC Berkeley to continue studying art, said Mary Curtin, a former English professor at the college.

Curtain got to know Okubo in 2000. Salvatore Rotella, then president of the college,

dispatched her to New York City to collect Okubo's oral history. Curtin collected 20 hours of tape. Since then, she and Theresa Larkin co-wrote a play about Okubo. Now, Curtin is writing a biography.

After Okubo graduated from Riverside Junior College, she went on to earn her bachelor's and master's degrees in art at Berkeley.

She remained in the Bay Area after graduating and started exhibiting her watercolors and gouaches, an opaque watercolor. In 1938, she was awarded a fellowship from Berkeley that let her study art in Europe.

After World War II began, she returned to the United States. She continued exhibiting her work and, employed by the federally supported Works Progress Administration, assisted Mexican artist Diego Rivera while he painted murals in San Francisco.

In 1942, a year after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Okubo, along with 110,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans in the western states were forced to leave their homes and sent to internment camps.

Okubo -- assigned the number 13660 -- was sent to Tanforan assembly center in San Bruno and then to a relocation camp in Topaz, Utah.

At the camps, Okubo completed 2,000 sketches, which chronicled everything from the lack of privacy in the bathrooms to the Caucasian police searching for contraband.

She sent a sketch to an art contest in San Francisco. It caught the attention of Fortune magazine, which hired Okubo to illustrate a special issue on Japan. With the offer of work, she was allowed her leave the internment camp for New York City.

She included some of the internment camp sketches in Fortune. They attracted more attention, which led to the publication of "Citizen 13660" in 1946. It included about 200 sketches and Okubo's accompanying text.

The text is free of opinion or commentary and heavy on description.

She writes about the stench of stagnant sewage and being outnumbered by spiders, mice and rats. She writes about Americanization classes and sumo matches. She writes about making \$16 a month as an art teacher.

Story continues below



Okubo created drawings of her life in an internment camp during World War II, collected in the book "Citizen 13660."

Finding Her Place

After working for Fortune, Okubo, still living in New York City, spent the next couple of decades doing illustrations for books, magazines and newspapers, including Life and The New York Times. Eventually, she left commercial art to focus exclusively on painting.

She never married or had children. She lived more than 50 years in the same Greenwich Village apartment, sleeping in the living room because her art filled her bedroom.

Several people who visited Okubo in her later years said she was initially guarded and cantankerous. However, once beyond that, they said she was warm and welcoming, with a feisty, independent streak.

She infrequently visited Southern California, where much of her family remains, friends and family said. However, she did send handmade Christmas cards and stayed in touch through letters and phone calls.

Over decades, Okubo's works transitioned from impressionistic to abstract, and she began using more vivid colors in her work.

Karin Higa, adjunct curator of the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, said Okubo is one of the leading and most important World War II-era artists.

However, it's difficult to rank her post-World War II work, much of which is at Riverside City College, because Okubo didn't want to be categorized and kept most of her work in her apartment or in the hands of a few private collectors, Higa said.

"The problem is people haven't had the opportunity to study the stuff," said Higa, who knew Okubo the last 10 years of her life. "It wasn't out there. That's what's great about RCC making it accessible."

Okubo's art and written materials arrived at the college last year. It's stored in a former library copy room. The library is just down the street from the street the college named after Okubo in 2006.

Story continues below



Stan Lim/The Press Enterprise
Those who handle the pictures, letters and other materials must wear gloves to protect them.

Seiko Buckingham, Okubo's niece who lives in Fallbrook and is the executor of her will, is glad the college is archiving her aunt's papers and art and said her aunt would be pleased.

Late last year, with an initial \$5,000 grant, the district hired Joyce Davis, a part-time district librarian, and a student, Wesleyanne Silva, to archive the Okubo art and written materials.

To avoid damaging the material, they wear white, thin gloves or make sure to wash their hands frequently.

Silva processed about 1,800 paintings, measuring each one, describing the subject matter and noting the year it was created and whether it was signed. Davis sorted five of the 28 boxes of written materials and personal items, ranging from jewelry to paintbrushes.

Items are grouped by names, dates and topics and stored in acid-free envelopes, folders and boxes.

Davis and Silva then create identifying information about each object and in which envelope, folder and box it's located. Eventually, that list could be searched electronically.

Davis has stopped archiving the items until the district receives the \$20,000 it was recently awarded. Meanwhile, she has tried to volunteer her own time, but been told by her bosses to wait until the grant is received.

Her goal is to sort the remaining boxes by January so everything can be searched by name or date. The next step would be to further classify the items so, for example, the content of a letter could be searched.

"Once it's in order, it's usable," Davis said. "It's like taking a book off the shelf."

Reach Sean Nealon at 951-368-9458 or snealon@PE.com
