



NIKKEI VOICE

ARTIFACTS CONTAIN OUR CULTURAL HISTORY — THAT'S WHY WE HAVE TO PRESERVE THEM

By Gil Asakawa

Compared to crimes against humanity like the destruction of ancient relics by ISIS, some people might think that the auction of a personal collection of artifacts from the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II must be a minor controversy.

But the auction, which was to be held April 17, was canceled two days before, following an ad-hoc social media and mainstream media campaign that was sparked by outraged Japanese Americans. A Facebook page named "Japanese American History: NOT for Sale" gained almost 7,000 followers after it was created on April 9. A Change.org online petition created just a few days before the auction got almost 8,000 people signed on.

Critics called the auction unethical and immoral, and almost everyone wanted the collection donated to a museum.

I don't think the family was greedy. I think they thought they owned some old things of value, and they needed the money. And let's face it, history is bought and sold every day at auctions and via private transactions — American Indian artifacts, Asian artifacts, the flotsam and jetsam of

wartime, rise and falls of civilizations, the inexorable march of progress. But this history is different. The family and auction house miscalculated the actual value of these items.

They're the containers for entire families' history, identity and decades of unspoken emotions. They tell stories about the America of seven decades past. And the auction would have been an unfortunate story about America of today.

Though the media coverage may pass for now, the auction is still on my mind because I just visited the Japanese American National Museum in L.A. and enjoyed the pop-culture richness of its supersuccessful Hello Kitty exhibit. The collection of cuteness has drawn a huge number of people who wouldn't normally step in a JA museum because Hello Kitty is so lovable across all cultures.

And JANM did a brilliant thing with the show. Old and young, no matter what ethnicity, you walk through the collection of Hello Kitty stuff, then are herded upstairs to the gallery where an amazing exhibit of artwork is on display featuring Hello Kitty interpretations by contemporary artists. And when you've seen all the cool art, you're led right into . . . JANM's signature permanent

exhibit about the Japanese American concentration camps. What a powerful way to educate people who may not know anything about our community's WWII experience!

The auction is also still in my head because I'm one of the volunteer JAs writing a small caption for an artifact from Amache, the concentration camp in southeast Colorado, that will be included in an exhibit next month. A group of archeology students from Denver University has been digging there for a year now and has catalogued a fascinating collection of items — not necessarily arts and crafts made by prisoners, but bits and pieces of their daily lives, like Log Cabin pancake syrup tins, soda pop bottles, pieces of crockery, plates, lots of ephemera that reveal there was once a city of 9,000 people who lived in a desolate windswept corner of the state.

I'm working with a student who is writing a factual description of a tiny artifact we've been assigned: a piece of a man on a horse with parts broken off. The DU team has already done a lot of research and figured out from the shape and the metal alloy that the piece is made of, that it was a toy inside a box of Cracker Jack.

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It was found in front of the entrance to the Yokoyama family's single-room barrack. The family had a mom and dad, two daughters and a son. It's easy to imagine the son eating a box of Cracker Jack and eagerly opening the packet with the man on a horse. He played with it in the dirt in front of the family's room at the prison camp and tried to make his life as normal as possible, like the other prisoners. Somewhere along the line, it got lost, or dropped, or maybe it chipped from playing, and was left behind.

This tiny fragment of a mass-produced toy is a key to an entire life, and yet it matters and resonates with history.

Of course the handmade arts and crafts of camp life matters. Of course people would protest if you tried to auction off the

collection of such artifacts to the highest bidder. What were they thinking?

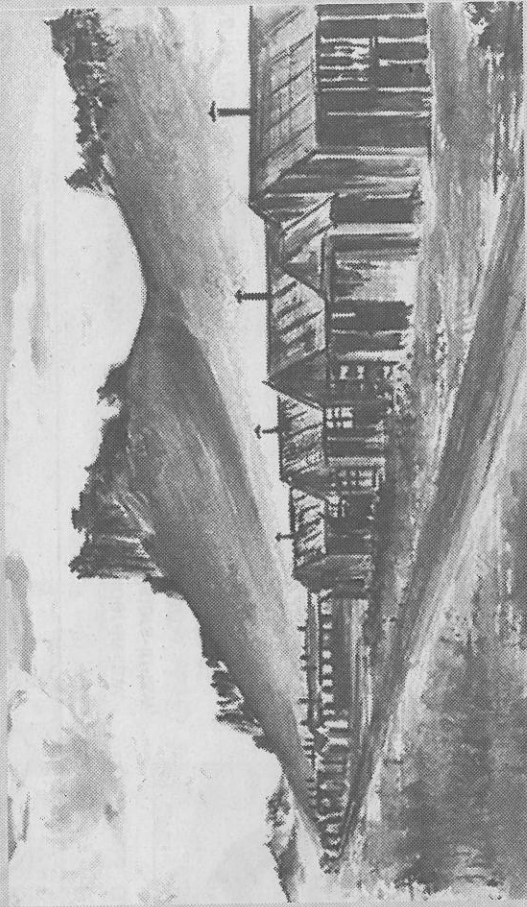
UPDATE: On Saturday, May 2, the Japanese American National Museum announced that, with George Takei's help, it has acquired the Eaton collection of concentration camp artifacts. It's great news for not just the JA community but also Asian Americans who had protested the proposed auction.

Gil Asakawa is a P.C. Editorial Board member and former Board Chair. He is AARP's AAPI Marketing Communications Consultant and blogs at www.nikkeiview.com. A new revised edition of his book "Being Japanese American" will be published in June by Stone Bridge Press.



An aerial view of Camp Amache

LETTER TO THE EDITOR



Estelle Ishigo's watercolor art work from Heart Mountain during WWII was part of the Rago Auction collection.

Dear Editor,

The April 17-30 issue of the *Pacific Citizen* shows a watercolor by Estelle Ishigo on page 7.

Mrs. Ishigo studied at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, and while at Heart Mountain she drew and painted activities at the camp. She also played violin in the camp band.

What I consider most wonderful about Estelle Ishigo was that, as a Caucasian, she chose to follow her husband, Arthur Shigeru Ishigo, to camp.

Sincerely,

*Betty Kikumi Meltzer
Beaumont, Calif.*

VISA