UNDER THE GUARD TOWER

THE WATERCOLORS OF CHIKAJI KAWAKAMI

The following teaching modules are designed to accompany visits to the exhibition *Under the Guard Tower: The Watercolors of Chikaji Kawakami*, curated by Senior Adjunct Professor and CCA@CCA Faculty Coordinator Lydia Nakashima Degarrod. *Under the Guard Tower: The Watercolors of Chikaji Kawakami* is on view at the CCA Campus Gallery at 1480 17th Street, Wednesday 11 am–7 pm, Thursday–Friday 11 am–1 pm, and by appointment, April 1–May 16, 2026.

Under the Guard Tower is part of the Spring 2026 Deborah and Kenneth Novack Creative Citizens Series, which includes public programming that addresses the 2026 CCA@CCA theme, Hope As Movement. How do we cultivate hope to fight the paralysis created by fear? How can we use the act of hoping to envision and create different futures?



Chikaji Kawakami, *Untitled (The Guard Tower)*, 1944

The exhibition consists of 39 paintings made by Chikaji Kawakami (1882–1949, born in Kagoshima, Japan), who created art to document his life and elevate his spirits while incarcerated at internment camps at Tanforan and Topaz during WWII. Kawakami's artwork is an example of hope as movement; instead of being paralyzed by fear, he chose to respond to his incarceration by using art to portray himself and his fellow inmates with dignity and to find beauty and peace in nature. Kawakami's response is what South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han defines as hope—not merely optimism, but the ability to imagine and move towards something more profound.

The exhibition also includes four paintings by Chiura Obata, a Japanese artist who founded and developed the art schools at Tanforan and Topaz, where Kawakami and other artists of Japanese descent taught.

These teaching modules aim to provide an understanding of life in internment camps for people of Japanese descent during WWII, and encourage reflection on the power of artwork to mobilize hope.

Each module includes a short introduction, an activity, and a set of questions to guide visitors in meaningful discussion. The modules are designed to be completed in under an hour at the gallery. Some also provide a list of suggested articles, books, and videos to further understanding of the material covered. These resources can be assigned as preparation or follow-up to a gallery visit. Some of this material can be obtained through the CCA library or interlibrary loan, or downloaded directly from journals or websites.

Summary of Contents

Modules 1–3 address issues associated with the visual representation of everyday life in the camps. To facilitate the interpretation of Kawakami's paintings and his point of view, these modules feature the artwork of camp fellow and artist Miné Okubo, offering the perspective of a young woman and a Nisei, or member of the first generation of Japanese children born and raised in the United States.

1. ***Depicting Life at the Camps***: Compare and contrast how Chikaji Kawakami and Miné Okubo depict everyday life in Japanese American internment camps, and analyze how factors such as age, gender, cultural background, and citizenship status shape artists' perspectives on shared historical experiences.

2. ***Self-Representation***: Evaluate how artists such as Chikaji Kawakami and Miné Okubo use self-representation to challenge propaganda, and examine how artistic choices can function as acts of resistance, identity formation, and testimony.

3. ***The Killing of James Wakasa***: Analyze and compare multiple artistic representations of the death of James Wakasa to understand how historical events can be interpreted differently through art, and evaluate how cultural perspective, creative style, and intended audience shape the meaning and impact of visual responses to injustice and violence.

Modules 4–5 address the representation and role of nature at the camps.

4. ***Nature and Memory***: Reflect on Chikaji Kawakami's use of landscape during incarceration and create a visual response that connects personal experience or imagination to historical context. Examine how nature, memory, and imagination function as sources of emotional resilience.

5. ***Gardening and Nourishment***: Analyze how gardening functioned as a means of physical sustenance, emotional comfort, and cultural continuity in the camps by interpreting Chikaji Kawakami's artwork and connecting historical practices of food and cultivation to personal experiences of nourishment, memory, and well-being.

Module 6 addresses the role of art schools at the camps in fostering community and healing.

6. ***The Role of Art Schools***: Analyze artworks created in Japanese American incarceration camps to understand how artistic practice can function as a form of personal agency and community-building during times of trauma.

Module *7* invites the exhibition's audience to deepen their understanding of life at the camps by listening to recordings of ex-inmates' personal narratives.

7. ***Oral Histories***: Engage with oral histories and visual artworks to deepen understanding of daily life in the Topaz incarceration camp, and to understand how lived experience, memory, and resilience are communicated through multiple forms of storytelling.

Background Information

On December 7, 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which forced the evacuation and detention of all people of Japanese descent living on the West Coast of the United States. Over 120,000 people of Japanese descent, of which two-thirds were American citizens, were relocated to ten camps in remote areas of the country for the duration of the war. Much later, Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 to recognize the illegal removal of people of Japanese ancestry from their homes during World War II.

Chikaji Kawakami, aka Nanpo, was born and raised in Japan. He emigrated to the United States in 1901. He lived for over 40 years a life restricted by his status as a non-citizen, working as a porter, motorcycle repairman, and dry cleaner. At the time of his incarceration in 1942, Kawakami lived a life of poverty. He had been widowed twice, and social services had taken his children because of his inability to provide for them. He reunited with them at the Tanforan Assembly Center.

During Kawakami's incarceration at Tanforan and at Topaz, he belonged to a group of artists who taught at art schools founded and developed by Chiura Obata (1885–1975). Chiura Obata was a well-known and influential Japanese American artist of the 20th Century. He emigrated to the United States in 1903. Before his incarceration, he was a distinguished professor of art at the University of California, Berkeley. The art schools he founded at Tanforan and Topaz were grounded in the belief that art could elevate spirits and soothe the emotional upheaval of the incarcerated.

For Further Research

🌐 $ Abe, D. K. & Imamura, A. (2019). The Destruction of Shinto Shrines in Hawaii and the West Coast during World War II: The Lingering Effects of Pearl Harbor and Japanese American Internment. *Asian Anthropology 18*(4), 266-281.

🌐 Densho. *Introduction to WWII Incarceration*.

🌐 Ishizuka, K. L. (2006). *Lost & Found: Reclaiming the Japanese American Incarceration*. University of Illinois Press.

Kamei, S. (2022). *When can we go back to America? Voices of Japanese American Incarceration during WWII*. Simon & Schuster.

Okawa, G. Y. (2020). *Remembering Our Grandfathers' Exile. US Imprisonment of Hawaii's Japanese in World War II*. University of Hawaii Press.

🌐 Taylor, S. (1993). *Jewel of the Desert: Japanese American Internment At Topaz*. University of California Press.

🌐 Toelken, B. (1990). Cultural Maintenance and Ethnic Intensification in Two Japanese-American World War II Internment Camps. *Oriens Extremus, 33*(2), 69-94.

Simpson, C. C. (2001). 'That Faint and Elusive Insinuation': Remembering Internment and the Dawn of the Postwar. In *An Absent Presence: Japanese Americans in Postwar American Culture, 1945-1960* (pp. 12-42). Duke University Press.

Uchida, Y. (1991). *The Invisible Thread*. Julian Messner.

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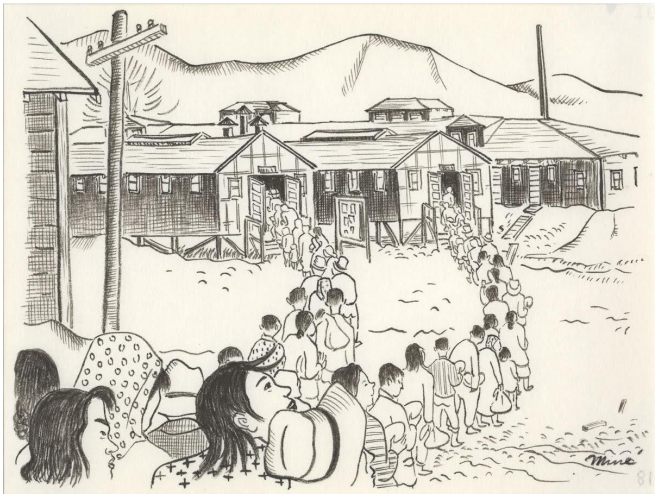
MODULE ONE

DEPICTING LIFE AT THE CAMPS

Duration: *30 minutes*

Learning Objective: *Compare and contrast how Chikaji Kawakami and Miné Okubo depict everyday life in Japanese American internment camps, and analyze how factors such as age, gender, cultural background, and citizenship status shape artists' perspectives on shared historical experiences.*



Miné Okubo, *Untitled*, 1942-1944

Like Chikaji Kawakami, Miné Okubo (1912-2001) taught at the internment art schools. She was born and raised in the United States. At the time of her incarceration, Okubo was at the beginning of a promising career as a visual artist. After completing her M.A. in Art at UC Berkeley, she received the Bertha Taussig Art Fellowship to study and paint art in Europe. The rise of WWII forced her to return to the United States without completing her fellowship. In 1946, Miné Okubo published Citizen 13660, a graphic memoir comprising 206 drawings of her experiences and observations of life at the camps. The book received the National Book Award in 1984, and in 1991, Okubo was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Women's Caucus for Art.

Okubo's drawings provide an interesting comparison to Kawakami's paintings, as both depict what they saw at the camps. The artists' viewpoints, however, are influenced by age, gender, upbringing, and citizenship status. Kawakami was an Issei, a member of the first generation of Japanese outside Japan. He was brought up according to the norms of late 19th-century Japanese society. He was an older man, in his sixties, and as a Japanese citizen, he was viewed by American society as the enemy during WWII. Okubo, on the other hand, was a young woman, a Nisei, or second-generation person of Japanese American descent born and raised in the United States. She was fluent in English and acculturated to the American way of life. She was also a United States citizen.

→ At the gallery, find six paintings by Kawakami that depict everyday activities at Tanforan and at Topaz.

→ Flip through Miné Okubo's graphic memoir *Citizen 13660*, which describes everyday life at Tanforan and Topaz.

→ In small groups, answer the following questions about Kawakami and Okubo's images:

1. **What are the main differences in the way Kawakami and Okubo portray everyday life at the camps?**
2. **What do you learn about life at the camps from each of the artists?**
3. **How might the artists' gender, age, cultural background, and citizenship status affect the choices they made?**

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MODULE TWO
SELF-REPRESENTATION

Duration: *60 minutes*

Learning Objective: *Evaluate how artists such as Chikaji Kawakami and Miné Okubo use self-representation to challenge propaganda, and examine how artistic choices can function as acts of resistance, identity formation, and testimony.*

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States launched a widespread propaganda campaign against Japan that relied heavily on racist stereotypes. Many posters and cartoons portrayed Japanese people as weak, animal-like, or subhuman to promote American superiority and unity. These images encouraged public support for the war effort but also reinforced harmful racial attitudes on the home front. Well-known figures such as Dr. Seuss contributed to this propaganda, though he later rejected these views. Meanwhile, the artists at the Japanese internment camps made careful, deliberate choices when composing self-portraits that combated this propaganda.



Chikaji Kawakami, *Self Portrait*, n.d.

→ Scan the first QR code at the bottom of the page to read an article about anti-Japanese propaganda circulated during wartime by the United States government. Printed copies are available in the gallery.

→ Find and closely observe Kawakami's self-portrait. How is he positioned? How is he dressed? What is he doing?

→ Keeping in mind the images circulating about the Japanese during WWII and the way Kawakami chose to represent himself in his portrait, answer the following questions:

1. What image do you think Kawakami wants to project of himself by making these choices?

2. Knowing that this was one of the first paintings he did after being incarcerated, and that all aspects of Japanese culture were prohibited during the war, how would you interpret this painting? Explain your reasoning.

→ Scan the lower QR code at the bottom of the page to watch a video about Miné Okubo's graphic memoir *Citizen 13660*.

→ Flip through *Citizen 13660*, and choose one panel to observe closely. Reflect on the following questions:

1. How does Okubo depict herself? How is she positioned? What is she doing?

2. Does this approach empower her voice? Does the role of being a witness strengthen or weaken her denunciation of the internment?

3. How does Okubo's approach to self-representation compare to Kawakami's?

For Further Research

Gesensway, D., & Roseman, M. (1987). Miné Okubo. In *Beyond words: Images from America's concentration camps* (pp. 66–74). Cornell University Press.

Lampert, N. (2015). The visual politics of Miné Okubo. In *A people's art history of the United States: 250 years of activist art and artists working in social justice movements* (pp. 177–187). New Press.

Miné Okubo. (2002). *Citizen 13660*. University Of Washington Press.

Robinson, G. (2008). Birth of a citizen: Miné Okubo and the politics of symbolism. In G. Robinson & E. Tajima-Creef (Eds.), *Miné Okubo: Following her own road*. University of Washington Press.

UNBOXED: Miné Okubo's masterpiece: The art of Citizen 13660 [Video]. YouTube.



Miné Okubo, *Untitled*, 1942-1944

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MODULE THREE

THE KILLING OF JAMES WAKASA

Duration: *30 minutes*

Learning Objective: *Analyze and compare multiple artistic representations of the death of James Wakasa to understand how historical events can be interpreted differently through art, and evaluate how cultural perspective, creative style, and intended audience shape the meaning and impact of visual responses to injustice and violence.*



Chikaji Kawakami, *Untitled*, n.d.

On April 11, 1943, James Wakasa, an elderly man, was shot and killed by a guard at Topaz, an event that horrified the community. Prior to the shooting, internees had expressed their fears of the guards who had exhibited strong anti-Japanese feelings towards them. The guards were soldiers who had been given a reprieve from fighting in the Pacific. Wakasa, who was semi deaf, had wandered near the fence following his dog and didn't hear the soldier's warning before the shooting. The soldier claimed that Wakasa had attempted to escape. The evidence showed, however, that Wakasa had been killed inside the fence, and the bullet had hit him from the front.

Chikaji Kawakami, Chiura Obata, and Miné Okubo documented this tragic event. Chiura Obata portrayed the actual killing, and Miné Okubo created several panels of *Citizen 13660* describing the funeral of James Wakasa and the emotional impact of this senseless killing on the lives of the internees.

Kawakami's depiction of this tragic event appears to be more subtle. Among the several paintings he did of the guard tower, this painting stands out because it was made at the time of the killing and differs dramatically from the rest of his work in style and content. He uses a traditional Japanese style known as *haiga*, consisting of a haiku illustrated with *sumi-e* (black ink) painting. Kawakami included a well-known haiku written by Matsuo Basho, a 17th-century poet. The poem is a reflection on the futility of war and the death of soldiers. In this painting, Kawakami seems to address the senseless death of Wakasa and war itself.

→ Closely observe and compare the three different representations of this tragic event.

→ In small groups, answer the following questions:

1. **What are their similarities and differences?**
2. **What are the strengths of each?**
3. **Why do you think Kawakami used a style that only Japanese people or those who knew the culture well would understand?**



Chiura Obata, *Hatsuki Wakasa Shot by M.P.*, 1943



Miné Okubo, *Untitled [Memorial service for James Wakasa, Central Utah Relocation Project, Topaz, Utah]*, 1942–1944

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MODULE FOUR
NATURE AND MEMORY

Duration: *45 minutes*

Learning Objective: *Reflect on Chikaji Kawakami's use of landscape during incarceration and create a visual response that connects personal experience or imagination to historical context. Examine how nature, memory, and imagination function as sources of emotional resilience.*



Chikaji Kawakami, *Topaz Skyline*, n.d.

Nature is a key feature of most of Kawakami's paintings at the camps. Not only did he paint the surrounding landscape, but he also painted from memory scenes from Yosemite Park in California. The Topaz camp was in an arid, harsh environment that made life miserable for the internees, exposing them to extreme temperatures in both summer and winter and to a constant wind that covered everything with dust. For Kawakami, nature was both a source of suffering and a source of beauty and peace.

→ Take a few moments to reflect on the role nature can play in emotional or physical well-being. Have you ever experienced a moment when nature helped you feel calm, grounded, or at peace during a stressful or challenging time? Have you ever expressed that feeling through drawing, painting, or another creative activity?

→ If yes, create a sketch based on that memory. Focus on the elements of nature that made the experience meaningful (light, space, weather, color, scale).

→ If you have not had a personal experience like this, imagine one. Picture a place in nature that could offer you a moment of peace during a difficult time. What does the environment look like? What details (sounds, textures, movement, atmosphere) contribute to its calming effect? Create a sketch of this imagined landscape, emphasizing the aspects that evoke calm or reflection.



Chikaji Kawakami, *Untitled*, n.d.

→ In small groups, answer the following questions:

1. Why do you think Kawakami chose to paint natural landscapes from memory while living in an environment as harsh as Topaz?

2. How might memory and imagination function as tools for resilience during confinement or hardship?

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MODULE FIVE

GARDENING AND NOURISHMENT

Duration: *30 minutes*

Learning Objective: *Analyze how gardening functioned as a means of physical sustenance, emotional comfort, and cultural continuity in the camps by interpreting Chikaji Kawakami's artwork and connecting historical practices of food and cultivation to personal experiences of nourishment, memory, and well-being.*



Chikaji Kawakami, *Untitled*, n.d.

Gardening played an important role in daily life at the incarceration camps, especially for Issei (first-generation Japanese immigrants). Before World War II, many Issei worked as gardeners or agricultural laborers; by 1940, approximately 43% were employed in gardening and 26% in agricultural work. These skills carried over into camp life, where both vegetable and ornamental gardens were created despite limited resources.

At the camps, gardens served multiple purposes. Vegetable gardens—often referred to as *victory gardens* during WWII—helped supplement camp rations and allowed internees to prepare familiar foods, offering physical nourishment and emotional comfort. Ornamental gardens, on the other hand, recreated familiar landscapes and aesthetics. Both types of gardens promoted a sense of community, pride, and healing.

→ Carefully observe Chikaji Kawakami's painting of a vegetable (victory) garden. Pay attention to details such as composition, scale, human activity, and the relationship between people and the land.

→ In small groups, reflect on the following questions:

1. How does gardening function as a form of both physical survival and emotional support for the internees?

2. What values or feelings—such as care, patience, community, or resilience—do you see represented in this image?

3. Why might gardening have been especially meaningful for Issei at the camps?

4. Have you ever relied on specific foods to feel comforted or grounded, especially during times of stress or displacement? What kinds of foods were they, and why were they important to you? Have certain plants, gardens, or natural spaces ever given you a sense of familiarity or well-being? How?

→ Write a short paragraph or create a small sketch that reflects your own experiences with food, plants, and/or community.

For Further Research

Chiang, C. Y. (2018). *Nature behind barbed wire: An environmental history of the Japanese American incarceration*. Oxford University Press.

Helphand, K. I. (2006). Stone gardens: Japanese American internment camps, 1942–45. In *Defiant gardens: Making gardens in wartime*. Trinity University Press.

Limerick, P. N. (1992). Disorientation and reorientation: The American landscape discovered from the West. *The Journal of American History, 79*(3), 1021–1049.

Matsumoto, N. (2019, May 15). Art and the creation of a resilient Japanese spirit. PBS SoCal.

Murase, M. (2009). *Through the seasons: Japanese art in nature*. Yale University Press.

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MODULE SIX

THE ROLE OF ART SCHOOLS

Duration: *45 minutes*

Learning Objective: *Analyze artworks created in Japanese American incarceration camps to understand how artistic practice can function as a form of personal agency and community-building during times of trauma.*

Chiura Obata created and directed highly successful art schools at the Tanforan and Topaz incarceration camps during World War II. He believed that art could help heal the emotional and spiritual harm caused by forced internment. Remarkably, Obata founded the first art school at Tanforan just three weeks after detainees arrived.

The schools offered classes ranging from elementary to university level and were taught daily by 17 instructors. Courses were grouped into three main areas: Fine Arts, Commercial Art, and Artistic Techniques. When internees were transferred to the Topaz camp, the art schools continued there as well.

Obata eventually left Topaz after being attacked by fellow inmates who interpreted his closeness to the camp authorities as evidence that he was a collaborator. George Hibi later became director and led the art schools until shortly before the camps closed.

Art classes and exhibitions—both inside and outside the camps—played an important role in improving morale. They gave internees opportunities for recreation, self-expression, and serious learning. Some students even went on to become professional artists after the war, including Taneyuki Harada and Kay Sekimachi.



Chiura Obata, *Mountain Landscape*, 1947

→ Select 1–3 artworks in the exhibition for close observation and reflect privately on the following questions:

1. **What mood or emotions does this artwork suggest? What visual elements give you that impression?**
2. **How does the artist depict the camp environment—harsh, calm, or something else?**
3. **What might this artwork tell us about the artist's inner life or coping strategies?**
4. **How could making this artwork have helped the artist regain a sense of control or dignity?**
5. **Do you see evidence of hope in this artwork? Where?**

→ In small groups, answer the following questions:

1. **Why do you think creating and studying art helped raise the morale of people living in the camps?**
2. **What emotions or needs might art have addressed that daily life in the camps could not?**
3. **What role can art schools or creative spaces play when communities are experiencing trauma or hardship?**
4. **Do you think it is possible to cultivate hope through making art? Why or why not?**
5. **Can you think of other examples where creativity helped people endure difficult situations?**

For Further Research

Hibi, H. (2004). *Peaceful painter: Memoirs of an Issei woman artist*. Heyday Books.

Higa, K. M. (1992). The view from within. In *The view from within: Japanese American art from the internment camps, 1942–1945*. Japanese American National Museum; UCLA Wight Art Gallery; UCLA Asian American Studies Center.

Hill, K. K. (Ed.). (2000). *Chiura Obata's Topaz moon: Art of the internment*. (T. A. Burgard, Intro.; R. Asawa, Foreword). Heyday Books.

Hirasuna, D. (2016). *All that remains: The legacy of the World War II Japanese American internment camps*.

Yamashita, K. T. (2017). *Letters to memory*. Coffee House Press Books.

Limerick, P. N. (1992). Disorientation and reorientation: The American landscape discovered from the West. *The Journal of American History, 79*(3), 1021–1049.

Matsumoto, N. (2019, May 15). Art and the creation of a resilient Japanese spirit. PBS SoCal.

Murase, M. (2009). *Through the seasons: Japanese art in nature*. Yale University Press.

Ueno, R. (2019, September 10). One spot of normalcy: Chiura Obata's art schools. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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MODULE SEVEN
ORAL HISTORIES

Duration: *30 minutes*

Learning Objective: *Engage with oral histories and visual artworks to deepen understanding of daily life in the Topaz incarceration camp, and to understand how lived experience, memory, and resilience are communicated through multiple forms of storytelling.*

Densho, meaning "to pass on to future generations," is a non-profit organization dedicated to "sharing the history of the WWII incarceration of Japanese Americans to promote equity and justice today." Densho has collected first-hand materials and oral accounts to preserve the voices and memories of people who were interned.



Chikaji Kawakami, *The Grandstands*, 1942

→ Scan the QR code at the bottom of this page to visit the Densho website and select three oral accounts from people who experienced internment at Topaz. Listen carefully, taking notes.

→ Reflect on the following questions:

1. **What new information or perspectives did you gain from these accounts?**
2. **What details felt most vivid or surprising, and why?**

→ Revisit one or more of Chikaji Kawakami's paintings in the exhibition. In small groups, answer the following questions:

1. **In what ways do Kawakami's paintings visually echo, expand upon, or contrast with the experiences described in the oral histories?**
2. **How do oral testimony and visual art work together to preserve memory and convey lived experience?**
3. **How do different forms of storytelling shape empathy, understanding, and historical memory?**