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**THE NATIONAL PARKS**  
**America's Best Idea**

**UNTOLD STORIES FROM  
AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS**

BY SUSAN SHUMAKER

CHURA OBATA

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## CHIURA OBATA

My aim is to create a bowl full of joy  
Clear as the sky,  
Pure as falling cherry petals,  
Without worry, without doubt;  
Then comes full energy, endless power  
And the road to art.

—Chiura Obata<sup>1</sup>

### *From Zoroku to Chiura*

Zoroku Obata was born on November 18, 1885, in Okayama prefecture, Japan, the youngest of a large family. At the age of five, Zoroku showed a natural talent for drawing, much like his older brother Rokuichi, an artist and art teacher of some renown who specialized in Western-style rendering. For this reason, and because the latter had no sons, Zoroku was adopted and raised by his older brother in the ancient city of Sendai on the island of Honshu (Lecture 4; Fujii 1; Landauer 18).

By the time he was seven, Obata began studying classical sumi (ink) painting. He apprenticed in sumi-e for seven years, later recalling that for two full years he was forced to paint lines and circles without resting his elbows. Only when he had shown absolute mastery over the brush was he allowed to prop his elbows and paint freely (Landauer 18).

Even at this early age, Obata was an individualist. Rather than take his first sumi master's name, as was customary, he chose his own: Chiura, meaning “a thousand bays”—a reference to the many pine-covered islands along the coast near Sendai (Landauer 18).

Against the young Obata's wishes, Rokuichi enrolled Chiura in a military school at the age of 14. Obata rebelled. With the help of his stepmother, he took the night train to Tokyo with dreams of making his name as an artist. From almost the moment he arrived, in the spring of 1899, Obata became involved in the modern nihonga (“Japanese painting”) movement, fusing elements of Western expression with an essentially Japanese aesthetic. Within months he was studying at the newly established Japan Fine Arts Academy, working with leading painters Tanryo Murata and Gaho Hashimoto. Obata showed much promise, winning a prestigious medal at the annual Ueno Park painting competition. He soon had more work than he could handle, painting portraits of prominent people and creating illustrations for book projects (Landauer 19–20; Fujii 2; Lecture 6).

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<sup>1</sup> Landauer 45.

*Obata Comes to America*

Obata felt more confined than flattered by the attention he was receiving.

At that time I was still very young and I was ready to challenge myself. Already some newspaper companies, like *Tohoku Shimbun* and *Oou Daily*, used a whole *page* writing favorably about my award... However I wasn't very comfortable. I was going to paint and yet I had already been applauded. I felt the world was too small for me; I wanted to see a bigger world. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 2)

Obata told his father, “The greater the view, the greater the art. The wider the travel, the broader the knowledge.” He determined to travel to America. His father reluctantly agreed and paid for his son's passage to Seattle. Obata would never see his father again (Lecture 6).

Originally, Obata had planned to spend only a short time in San Francisco; there, he would earn money before continuing to Paris, capital of the art world. Much later, in a 1965 interview, Obata gave another reason for specifically choosing the United States as his first destination: “Because I wanted to come in contact with a larger Great Nature,”<sup>2</sup> he said, “I came to America.” (Lecture 6; Fujii 2).

Obata arrived in Seattle in October of 1903, just one month before his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. He made his way south to San Francisco, where he got a job as a “house boy,” doing domestic chores as a sort of live-in servant. Obata had arrived during a groundswell of prejudice against Asian immigrants and, during his first few years in the city, was assaulted and spat on by strangers in the street (Lecture 6; Landauer 22).

Still Obata wanted to become part of American society. He learned English at every opportunity, even attending elementary school classes. He also became an avid baseball player, pitching and hitting during games at Golden Gate Park, and was one of the founders of the Fuji Club: the first Japanese-American baseball team on the mainland. After the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Obata impressed an Army officer with his unflagging willingness to assist with the clean-up. As a reward, he was granted permission to enter the ruined sections of the city and sketch scenes of the aftermath. These drawings, more than 50 total, represent very rare eyewitness artifacts of the disaster (Lecture 7).

In 1909, Obata worked as a farm laborer in the hop fields of the Sacramento Valley. The long hours Obata worked, his reverence for nature, and his wry wit are evident in a note sent home to family in Japan:

This morning we got up at dawn and right away we started to pick hops. No matter where you go, earning money is not easy. Working thirteen hours standing only makes two dollars. From tonight the gambling called *naga-imo* has begun. The people are making noise under the moonlight. This lonely mountain town has nothing but hop fields. The pure moon shines a beautiful light equally over fields, mountains, grassbeds, and gambling. —Chiura Obata (Lecture 7)

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2 Obata's customary English translation of *daishizen* (lit. nature) was “Great Nature.”

In 1910, the young woman who would become Obata's wife, Haruko Kohashi, came to San Francisco to learn Western dress-making techniques, a skill she'd planned to teach in Japan upon her return. She met Obata at a friend's house and, in 1912, the two were married. Exactly nine months later they had their first child. Haruko Kohashi was herself an artist, skilled in *ikebana*: the Japanese art of flower arranging. She was among the first *ikebana* teachers in the Bay Area and had frequent exhibitions of her arrangements including at the Panama Pacific Exposition in 1915 and a 1922 one-woman show at the San Francisco Museum of Art (Lecture 8; Fujii 15; Landauer 23).

#### *Obata's Art is Discovered*

One of the great ironies of the Asian experience in the West is that ethnic prejudice toward the Japanese people coexisted with aesthetic admiration of their cultural traditions. "Japonisme"—the appreciation and acquisition of things Japanese—became fashionable among wealthy San Franciscans in the early 1910s, and Obata was soon able to secure commissions for traditional Japanese screens and murals, in addition to on-going work as an illustrator for Japanese language newspapers (Landauer 22).

However, it was not until the 1920s that Obata's chosen style—fusing Asian and Western techniques to a modern effect—began gaining recognition within the San Francisco art community. In 1921, Obata and several other Japanese-born artists with modernist tendencies founded the East West Art Society. Based on many of the same principals that Obata had learned in Tokyo, the society called for a union of the best of the Oriental and Occidental traditions, in art, music, theater and literature. By 1922, a number of ascendant Californian artists had joined (Landauer 23).

From November in 1922 for one month, 37 Japanese, American, Chinese, and Russian painters had a joint exhibition under the name, "East West Art Association." It was the first of this kind of exchange and it left a great milestone. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 8)

Through the society, Obata was commissioned to do larger and more interesting works, including stage design for the San Francisco Grand Opera and the Japanese rooms of a number of upscale department stores. He made many contacts within the city's art community and was soon friends with established art collectors in the area. Through the Society he met Perham Nahl, a UC Berkeley professor who—in 1923–1924—invited Obata to teach classes at the University. Indeed, historians have suggested that art was one of the few exceptions to racism that Japanese Americans experienced in California (Fujii 9; Obata's Vision 48; Landauer 24).

#### *Obata in Yosemite*

In 1927, Obata was 42 years old and was at the height of his maturity as an artist. In the preceding decade, he had begun focusing on landscape studies, traveling throughout California painting coastal and interior scenes from Eureka south to Pasadena. In the summer of 1927, Obata accepted an invitation to travel through the High Sierra from Worth Ryder, an inveterate hiker

and newly appointed UC Berkeley art professor, whom he'd met through Perham Nahl.<sup>3</sup> In mid-July, the two were joined by sculptor Robert Boardman Howard, who had come to Yosemite to finish a mural for the Writing Room of the Awahnee Hotel, opening that July (Landauer 25; Hill interview).

It was during that summer in Yosemite that Obata's exceptional knowledge of Eastern and Western aesthetic traditions came together.

In June of 1927 one of my best friends and a professor of art at the University of California, Worth Ryder, and a sculptor, Robert Howard, and me, the three of us, went camping for two months in the Sierra Nevada mountains. This experience was the greatest harvest for my whole life and future in painting. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 10)

The 1927 Yosemite trip would prove to be the defining event of his professional life; with the watercolors and sketches he produced there—and the later woodblock prints upon which they were based—Obata came into his own as an artist (Landauer 25).

Obata's paintings of the park were unlike any others up to that time, which had mostly been works done in a cloyingly sentimental and outdated style of academic realism. He breathed new life into what had become an old and tiresome subject, avoiding the sweeping vistas of the valley and focusing instead on quietly majestic and unassuming views and on intimate details—a cluster of pine cones, a still lake, wildflowers in a dry ravine (Landauer 27–28).

In his work, Obata did not aim for realism. He later told his students:

Just to imitate or depict an object of some part of nature is not enough [to] bring forth any beauty or truth of humanity . . . In expressing our minds, there must not be for a moment the slightest thought of dependence or imitation. —Chiura Obata (Landauer 28)

Obata was greatly influenced by a fundamental tenet of Zen Buddhist painting known as *kiin-seido*, meaning “living moment”—the immediate, intuitive expression of the subject's essential nature. A Zen artist frequently spends many hours in solitude, clearing his mind and studying the essential nature of his subject. Michael Sullivan, a scholar of Asian art, notes, “What the [landscape] painter records is not a single confrontation, but an accumulation of experience touched off perhaps by one moment's exaltation before the beauty of nature.” This would certainly seem to be the case with Obata, whose typical working style consisted of careful study of the subject, followed by spontaneous, unhesitating execution. “I paint nature,” he said, “not as if I were a classical, or a Cubist, or an Impressionist, but simply as I see her loveliness” (Landauer 28–30; Lecture 22).

It is important to note that whenever Obata referred to the natural world, the primary subject of his paintings, he never used the word *shizen* or “nature.” It was always *dai-shizen*, or “Great Nature.” This immense respect for nature, his granddaughter Kimi Hill suggests, was the

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<sup>3</sup> Although it's not certain who suggested the trip, Ryder later spoke of his “presentation in 1927 of the Sierra to Obata and of Obata to the Sierra” (Obata's Vision 48).

spiritual inspiration for and underpinning of his work, particularly in the High Sierra. Obata himself stated that his personal theology was centered around the natural world (Lecture 27):

When I enter into the bosom of Great Nature, I believe in the blessing of Nature as a kind of God to me. I also believe in the great power of Great Nature. That's why I don't belong to either [Christianity or Buddhism]. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 16)

During the two months he spent in Yosemite, Obata was highly productive. He attributes this fruitfulness to the overwhelming influence of the scenery itself.

The various kinds of expression that Great Nature brings about is beyond measurement. Worth Ryder and Robert Howard did sketching in the mountains, but maybe just two or three pieces. During that time sometimes I worked until 2:00 in the morning and completed almost 150 pieces of detailed sketches. I could do this because every day was another impressive experience. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 10)

Throughout the journey, Obata sent hand-painted postcards depicting Yosemite scenes home to family members. Along with a sketch, the postcard would usually feature a descriptive or enigmatic text written by Obata, reminiscent of haiku (Lecture 9).

On a July 2 postcard depicting his camp—a simple canvas tent at the foot of two massive pines, under a crescent moon—Obata wrote to his son Gyo:

Gyo-chan—  
How old is the moon  
It shines  
With a beautiful face.

The night before, Obata had made another postcard for his young son, just after the moon had set:

Gyo-chan—  
The lovely moon is gone.  
It went to bed early to sleep,  
Grow big,  
And shine more.

### *The Trip, Part I: White Wolf*

Obata and Ryder traveled through the park at times on foot, accompanied by pack donkeys, at other times in a Model T Ford. The two, although of different backgrounds, made good traveling companions and shared a keen sense of humor. A 1955 *Oakland Tribune* article reported that, while descending into the valley with two pack mules,

. . . they encountered a group of school teachers. At the sound of the “Pack Train,” the teachers scattered, like vultures, and as Obata, his head tied with a white cloth, strode past with samurai gate, the awestruck teachers whispered, “Who is he? Who is he?”

Ryder, drawing up the rear with the mules, answered, “He is an emissary from the Mikado looking for the most beautiful spot on earth.” (Obata’s *Vision* 48)

Obata documented the trip, in pictures and words—primarily in the form of letters sent home—from the outset. His first sketches, scenes of Chinese Camp and Priest Grade Hill outside the park, were made on June 16. That day they left the coach and loaded up their Model T, bound for Yosemite National Park:

Today at 12:00 we arrived at Big Oak Flat Road, gateway to Yosemite. Now we are about to leave Groveland, the last station of the coach, and we’ll enter into the true High Sierra. The altitude is about 4,000 feet, the temperature about 92–93 degrees. We have a big load for a small car and the passers-by laugh. Our trip is unhurried. We take our time and sketch. —Chiura Obata, June 16, 2 PM (76)<sup>4</sup>

Ryder and Obata entered the park via the Tioga Road:

Mr. Ryder’s driving is very careful and we have not had any trouble with the car. We are driving with two beds, fourteen boxes of food, painting materials, fishing gear, two suitcases, a tent, a large saw, a large axe, a big shovel, and a big bucket of water in case of emergency. Most people smile at us, thinking we are going to the mountains to find gold. —Chiura Obata, June 20, night (78)

Later, Obata recalled one of his first impressions of the park, near Hetch Hetchy:

I recall June 17 of last year, when we were at the intersection of Tioga Pass and Hetch Hetchy Road. On the bank of the south tributary of the Tuolumne along the way to Harden Meadow was a yellow pine grove, which had been cut for about a half a mile. This ugly sight was such a contrast to the adjoining sublime scenery. It looked as if a man’s scalp had been peeled off his skull, leaving behind a part in the dark hair. Thus, the oldest forest in the Sierra was about to be obliterated by senseless human cruelty and his axe . . .

I regret that I had never met John Muir, who lived in California, nor heard in his own words his praise of nature. Within this state, as well as nationwide, he was regarded as the father of the movement to protect nature. A man of lofty personality and an untiring energy, his life ended at the age of seventy in the burning Arizona desert . . .<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Ryder told me that John Muir had headed an appeal of the patriots of this country, which led to President Roosevelt’s California visit. Guided by Mr. Tim Sullivan, he personally investigated [this] site [to] put an end to the greedy fangs of the politicians. —Chiura Obata (“In Praise” 134–135)

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<sup>4</sup> All references in this section are from “Letters from Yosemite, 1927,” unless noted otherwise.

<sup>5</sup> Taken from p. 134, earlier in this same passage.

The artists chose White Wolf as their first base camp, remaining there from the latter part of June through early July. Obata was captivated by everything around them:

Every place we go amazes and interests me, so I have been doing nothing but sketching. . . . The air in the mountains is so clean, and the trees, grass, birds, and flowers are fascinating beyond description. There are birds much like the canary. Beautiful flowers bloom in a stream of icy water. I only feel full of gratitude. I want to bring you and our friends here, and I will. —Chiura Obata, June 20, night (79)

Obata was so intent on his sketching that he would frequently risk a downpour while engaged in his work:

White clouds appeared in the clear sky from the direction of Yosemite Valley. Ryder said, “See now. Storm coming.” We collected some wood, just in case, and made preparations for the rain. At 3:00 the sky darkened, the clouds moved fast, and it started to rain. I was sketching the flowers blooming in between the rocks, but the rain made me rush back to camp. —Chiura Obata, June 26, 1927 (82)

Obata and Ryder spent their days exploring the high country and sketching. In the evenings, they would usually hike back to camp. After one such day, they returned to find a visitor:

Upon arriving at camp we found Tim Sullivan . . . . He has been living in these mountains for more than fifty years, and now he goes around the camps as a ranger of the National Forest and the National Park. He had come on his wagon pulled by donkeys and had already set up his tent by our camp. He greeted us by saying, “Steak dinner tonight.”

. . . We sat around the fire and listened to all of his stories, which you would never hear in the city. —Chiura Obata, June 29, 1927, evening (85)

Sullivan stayed with the artists for a few days. In a letter home, Obata remarked:

When Mr. Sullivan is not giving leftover food to his donkeys three times a day, he sits on a crude chair, smokes a pipe, and tells us old stories, using “God damn son of a gun!” for emphasis, and makes us laugh.—Chiura Obata, June 30, 1927 (89)

Writing for an unidentified Japanese newspaper the following year, Obata had more to say about Sullivan:

Old Tim Sullivan is a ranger working in Yosemite National Park. He is from Ireland, stands over six feet tall, and is a former boxer who fought the famous John L. Sullivan. When he was twenty years old, Tim came to the High Sierra as a soldier to fight Indians. Today he is seventy-four and for the past fifty-four years has been trekking the mountains in all directions—White Wolf Meadow today, Harden Flat tomorrow—with his two donkeys named White and Blue. Almost anyone who wanders into the Sierra will most likely come across him . . . .

According to old Tim, Yosemite National Park spreads over three hundred square miles and has more than four hundred lakes. But these are only what he knows. He told me that although he has walked through much roadless terrain over the years, he still could not say that he has covered every part. —Chiura Obata (“In Praise” 134)<sup>6</sup>

In the High Sierra, Obata discovered a serenity and stillness he endeavored to impart through his art. He also found vitality, movement, and change:

The speed of the universe is surprisingly fast. The uproar of Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight is no comparison to nature. To the grand changes of this great nature my eyes, my ears, my hands and feet, and my whole body and mind are reacting at a high speed. In San Francisco I was hardly reacting to the streetcars, automobiles, phones. I was just like a trout quivering its fin in a deep lake.

At a place where yesterday I had thought the snow was three to four feet high, a type of flower that I had never seen before is already smiling today. Even the sky deepens its blue color every day, adding infinite thoughts to the morning sunlight.

The red of the setting sun deepens even more.

The warmth of my sleeping bag increases my dreams every night.

I am trying to paint my best whether it is a tree, or a plant, or a rock.

I am painting wildflowers as much as possible. —Chiura Obata, July 2, 1927 (92)

Obata and Ryder clearly preferred the Sierra to Yosemite Valley, which, by 1927, was already considered crowded during the summer months. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Obata wrote:

Tomorrow we’ll bring the rest [of our gear] to Yosemite Creek and in a day or two I’ll go down to Yosemite [Valley]. . . . In Yosemite [Valley] there are so many automobiles and people that when I looked down from a viewpoint I did not feel like leaving the quiet mountains. But the scenery along Yosemite Creek was so good that I want to sketch it and sleep outside for a night or two. —Chiura Obata, July 4, night (95–96).

To celebrate America’s independence, the two men finished off the remainder of Obata’s sake, knowing that Robert Howard would soon be bringing a replacement bottle.

Since tonight is the Fourth of July we shared about five cups of hot sake, which I had so preciously saved. Perhaps due to the air, it was very sweet but not heavy. It was very good. Did you ask Howard-kun about the sake? Ryder-sensei was worried that Robert might drink it all on the way up, so he told him that the sake was sure to be spoiled if the cork was opened before he reached 9,000 feet. Well! —Chiura Obata, July 4, 1927, night (96)

In addition to writing letters home, Obata sent dispatches to the Japanese newspaper *Shin Sekai*, published over a period of days in 1927. Of his days at White Wolf Meadow, Obata wrote:

6 Sullivan was a friend of John Muir’s and was Roosevelt’s guide through Yosemite in 1903.

We stayed ten days at White Wolf Meadow. Here, we were able to experience the endless diversity of great nature. However, compared to the size of nature, my experience was very small, like a poppy seed.

After waking up in the morning, I wash my face in the creek. The water is made of melted snow, very cold, but it is still soft; when I dissolve Japanese paints in the water, they dissolve very gently. During the day it is very hot, by dusk it becomes cooler. At night I'm warmed by the campfire. Before 9:00 I take that warmth with me into the sleeping bag. From the base of the trees I count the stars. I go to dream to the melody of the creek and the song of the frogs in the meadow.

This experience is nothing compared to nature, but I would not exchange this unforgettable, invaluable, heartfelt memory, like shining stars among the trees. —Chiura Obata (“Sierra Trip” 126)

*The Trip, Part II: Yosemite Valley and Tuolumne*

On roughly July 5<sup>th</sup>, Ryder and Obata traveled toward the valley, camping at Yosemite Creek along the way. From there they hiked down to the valley to meet Robert Howard.

We left the tent at Yosemite Creek campground on July 7 at 9:00 in the morning. There was no one else on the trail, but by following the donkeys we would never get lost . . .

. . . With the sound of the donkeys' bells, “cha-ran, cha-ran,” we walked down the trail which looked like the edge of a saw: up and down and zigzag.

. . . For three hours we walked up and down by the river, then after another half hour we reached the origin of Yosemite Falls. We unpacked our gear and freed the donkeys to feed themselves . . . [in] a field of flowers. We prepared camp, sketched, and collected wildflowers.

I have no words to express the beauty of the wildflowers. It would take two to three years to sketch all of the flowers. Everything is so beautiful. The trees and grass are set against a background of rocks and ground: green, red, black, yellow, and reddish earth. For example, pansies blooming in three colors: Purple, white, and yellow, Sand dunes, formed of red and white broken rock, covered with the purple of clover. Indian paintbrush vivid red in between the white rocks. The three-petaled white Mariposa lily. The tiger lily with five petals in the front, five petals in the back, and five holes in the center. The heather blooming like a cloud of pink flowers on white rocks. —Chiura Obata (“Sierra Trip” 128)

They entered the valley and met Howard on July 8<sup>th</sup>:

Even though this is the same national park, Yosemite Valley is crowded with automobiles and the road is shiny with oil. There is a yellow line in the middle of the road and the donkeys refused to cross it. We waited for the cars to pass, then we pushed the donkeys across the road.

. . . Mr. Howard took us to his tent at Yosemite Lodge. The tents, and occasionally a cabin, stand in between pine and cypress trees according to their numbers. It looks like a poor village. . . . There is no grass growing around the tents. It has the appearance of camping with a tent as someone advertised, but compared to camping in the mountains it looks like living in a can. I'm glad I didn't come down here last night. —Chiura Obata (“Sierra Trip” 129)

Having spent only a handful of hours in the valley, Obata and Ryder, with Howard bringing up the rear, left again for the high country:

The road was crowded with cars; bumper to bumper like a school of sardines. Six, seven miles away from here we can enjoy camping in nature.

. . . At 3:00 I returned to the pine tree. Mr. Ryder also returned and we brought the donkey to Mr. Howard's tent. We had gifts from San Francisco and we packed these carefully. Then, with the sound of bells, we went back to our 8,000-foot home in the mountains. — Chiura Obata ("Sierra Trip" 129–130)

In January 1931, Howard was interviewed about the trip for *Art and Artists* magazine:

On the day set we met and started off up the trail behind two sturdy donkeys. Worth leading the way, Chiura next with his picturesque Japanese head gear and rucksack bulging with brushes, paint, and rice paper, myself urging on the donkeys, bringing up the rear.

Every pause for rest saw Chiura at work. That is almost the first impression he give one, either working or on his way to work; never getting ready. Just somehow always ready, at least for a brief sketch. —Robert Howard (138)

Their first night together, the threesome settled around the fire:

Camping that night beyond the head of Yosemite Falls, we sat before the friendly campfire in the cool silence of the High Sierra, and Chiura told us he must paint one hundred pictures during this month of mountain wanderings. The first one would be of Yosemite Falls, for they had spoken to him in music that afternoon on the way up out of the Valley. —Robert Howard (138)

True to his word, Obata left camp early in the morning to begin work:

Next morning he disappeared down the trail we had come, and as the sun rose high, groups of hikers began passing, telling of an artist working like mad at the foot of the first falls. As the morning wore on, more hikers passed, each with a word of wonder, till finally along came the artist himself, all fresh and smiling, with a superb painting under his arm. —Robert Howard (138)

Such mornings, Howard says, were typical for Obata: a long hike followed by hours of work in the hot sun and a beautiful painting at the end. Then, he would repeat the same thing in the afternoon.

Later during the trip there would be times when he would reach a temporary limit of producing paintings. Then he would dig out from his bag a bit of red stone or a piece of white quartz found near some deserted mine, gather a bit of moss, a willow twig, or a tiny fern and plant a Japanese garden the size of one's palm. —Robert Howard (138–141)

When he wasn't painting or hiking, Howard wrote, Obata was catching fish:

[Fishing] was a sport near to his heart. And once a week we would have dinner prepared by his hand—chop sticks, sukiyaki and rice, tasty fresh trout, strange dried fish from Japan, bean cakes and hot sake would mysteriously appear—the perfect beverage for the mountains, with the smell of pine in one's nostrils. —Robert Howard (141)

At the end of every day, the artists would gather again around the campfire:

Afterwards, before turning in for sleep, Obata would bring forth his philosophies of life. How to remain young. How to appreciate every minute of existence and time. How right it was to be happy, cheerful, and productive. How wrong to shed tears, do nothing, and waste time and strength. That to be an artist was the best of all things. —Robert Howard (141)

From the head of the falls the group continued northward to Tuolumne Meadows, the location of their new base camp. In Tuolumne they were frequently pestered by a marauding visitor:

Yesterday evening, when it was still light, while we were talking, a seven-hundred pound cinnamon bear overturned our boxes of food piled at the foot of a tree about thirty feet away. He was departing step by step with a big cheese. We all yelled out loud but he only left us about half of the cheese. Almost every night he comes slowly, slowly, so unless we are very careful he could eat all of our precious supplies. —Chiura Obata, July 12, 1927 (97)

Again, Obata wrote to his family of the beauties he beheld in the high country:

The view of the divide of Nevada to the east and California to the west could be called the essence of the Sierra and cannot at all be compared with Yosemite Valley. All the mountains are 12,000 to 13,000 feet high. There is a glacier and there is a rocky mountain of red-colored rock. Next to it is a granite mountain covered with snow. The lakes are silent and hold deep, deep tranquility.

There is a long stretch of woods where large pines had been knocked down by an avalanche. They are buried among the flowers of young, shooting weeds, their bodies lying side by side like samurai who have died on a battlefield. —Chiura Obata, July 16, 1927 (101)

Though Obata had planned to return on July 15<sup>th</sup>, he decided to extend his trip:

I was supposed to leave yesterday, July 15<sup>th</sup>, but I had made the plan in San Francisco without knowing what I would actually experience. Now, after knowing this abundant, great nature, to leave here would mean losing a great opportunity that comes only once in a thousand years. —Chiura Obata, July 16, 1927 (101)

On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, Howard and Obata were caught in a thunderstorm:

A little past 3:00 Howard-kun and I climbed onto a 200–300-foot rock across the river from camp. Rumbling thunder, lightning, and showers had just begun and we wanted to see the scene. I started to sketch the rainy view of distant Tenaya and Dana mountains. Before I could finish it, the shower, carried by swift dark clouds, wet the paper in one stroke without even giving me time to flip the sketch board.

Both of us got soaking wet. We crossed the river and came back to camp. After changing our clothes, we warmed ourselves by the campfire.

If it is sunny, we can see people fishing for trout along the river. However, when clouds move ominously in the sky, you cannot see even the shadow of a fishing rod. Everyone must be hiding in their tents. —Chiura Obata, July 22, 1927, Tuolumne Meadows (109–110)

One of the most breathtaking woodblocks made from sketches of this part of the trip is a print called *Lake Basin*. In a 1965 interview, he described his experience painting the piece, made high in the park at the base of Johnson Peak:

If you go 7-8 miles south of Tuolumne Meadows there is a very big Johnson Peak at more than 10,000 feet. At the foot of the mountain is a lake. [I painted] . . . the view of Johnson Peak in the late afternoon, as seen from the lake . . . It was a very impressive scene to me. Standing at the edge of the lake, the indigo blue color is too deep to know the bottom. And then far ahead was the perpetual snow covering all over, as if it was the skin of a big white bear.

And the strange thing was, while I was looking at the view near the lake I heard some music. I couldn't explain what it was; it sounded like the wind and it didn't sound like the wind. I didn't understand—what was this music and where did it come from? However the heart of the lake was still, not even a . . . movement; very quiet. . . . Looking ahead towards the mountain, I saw there were thousands of ten thousands of lines of the perpetual snow. That was the music. The music was the sound of the little streams created by the sun's heat melting the hard snow. . . . This was very precious. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 11)

Obata, Ryder, and Howard camped in Tuolumne from July 8<sup>th</sup> to July 26<sup>th</sup>. Leaving Yosemite, they crossed the Tioga Pass and traveled down to Mono Lake:

We didn't have time to wait for steady weather, therefore we decided to descend the 4,000-foot slope of the infamous Tioga Pass like tightrope walkers along Lee Vining Creek. —Chiura Obata, July 26, 1927 (112)

From there the three artists traveled southwest to Mammoth Lakes and then back to their base camp in Tuolumne. Obata left the High Sierra on the last day of July. In his final letter home, composed the day before, he wrote:

Howard-kun and I will probably leave here tomorrow. We . . . will go back down to Carl Inn. We'll stay there overnight and leave at 8:00 A.M. on the 1<sup>st</sup>. We'll probably arrive in Oakland around 8:00 or 9:00 at night, and I'll get home at 10:00 or a little after . . .

I am full of gratitude as I bid farewell to these Sierra Mountains. From the deep impression of experience there springs an emotion which others may not understand. I am looking forward with pleasure and hope as to how I will be able to express this precious experience on silk. —Chiura Obata, July 30, 1927, Tuolumne Meadows (125)

*Obata's Yosemite Themes and Reflections*

An ongoing theme in Obata's Sierra collection is the silence and stillness of high mountain lakes. "When faced with such serene beauty," he once said, "the soul and mind of man are lost, and the possibility of petty thought vanished." The serenity of the High Sierra lakes became a metaphor for Obata later in life.

Our mind must be as peaceful and tranquil as a calm, undisturbed lake. Let not a shadow be cast on it with the slightest thought of self-conceit or Egotism . . . Only thus can a genuine art, overflowing in deep praise and abiding inspiration, be produced. —Chiura Obata (Landauer 33)

This stillness and tranquility were most palpable to Obata in the quiet hours of night, which Obata later called "a great teacher":

In the evening, it gets very cold; the coyotes howl in the distance, in the mid sky the moon is arcing, all the trees are standing here and there, and it is very quiet. You can learn from the teachings within this quietness. . . . Some people teach by speeches, some by talking, but I think it is important that you are taught by silence.

. . . Immerse yourself in nature, listen to what nature tries to tell you in its quietness, so that you can learn and grow. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 31)

Another theme, one that would become central to Obata's work, emerged in the 1927 collection: The stamina of the storm-weathered tree, seen in the watercolor *Lee Vining Creek Trail*. The tree, Susan Landauer argues, symbolized Obata's own endurance of the painful and humiliating discrimination he—and other *Issai*—continually encountered in California (Landauer 34; Lecture 12).

Obata painted similar trees throughout Yosemite—one on the trail to Johnson Peak, another at Tioga Pass:

The old pine on the Tioga plain has borne avalanches, fought wind, rain, ice, and snow, and has suffered bitter times for several hundred years. Like a warrior at the end of his life, he embraces with his rough roots the young trees growing up and surrounding the fallen parent. —Chiura Obata ("In Praise" 137)

Later in the same piece, written a year after his return from Yosemite, Obata elaborated on nature as his source of strength:

I dedicate my paintings, first, to the grand nature<sup>7</sup> of California, which, over the long years, in sad as well as in delightful times, has always given me great lessons, comfort, and nourishment. Second, to the people who share the same thoughts, as though drawing water from one river under one tree.

My paintings, created by the humble brush of a mediocre man, are nothing but expressions of my wholehearted praise and gratitude. —Chiura Obata (“In Praise” 137)

### *San Francisco*

On July 31<sup>st</sup>, Obata returned to San Francisco. In September, he addressed Ryder’s Berkeley students, speaking on his experiences in Yosemite. Obata told the story the way he knew best: by drawing (Vision 50).

At that time there was a large hall; I think it was in the architectural building. I went there. I put up a long piece of paper—3, 4, or 5 feet wide, and on the paper I drew the High Sierra from Yosemite’s Oak Flat Road, gradually going to the top of Glacier Point, and to Tuolumne Meadows. I let my brush draw spontaneously and at the same time I went on talking and talking. It must have made an impression on the students. To tell you the truth, the students said they really wanted to learn from me and they requested a class. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 10)

Teaching at Berkeley would have to wait. On March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1928, Obata’s first one-person show in America opened at San Francisco’s East West Gallery of Fine Arts. The exhibition consisted of over 100 works, including a large selection of the sketches and silk paintings that had come from his fruitful trip into the Sierras. Local newspapers, which carried generally favorable reviews, reported that he’d made a selection from more than ten-thousand paintings produced during his lifetime (Obata’s Vision 51; Landauer 37).<sup>8</sup>

On the final day of the show, Obata learned that his father had died in Sendai:

I received a telegram asking me to return to Japan but I couldn’t go because I had some appointments for lectures here and there and for an exhibition, so I decided to return in the fall during the enthronement of the Kinjo emperor [Hirohito]. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 10)

### *Return to Sendai*

The following Fall, the Obata family returned to Japan to oversee the settlement of Rokuichi’s estate. It was there that Obata oversaw the creation of a series of breathtaking woodblock prints, based upon his Yosemite sketches.

I brought [to Japan] some sketches of the Sierra Nevada mountains. . . . I wanted to preserve this art and I thought it was a good idea to reproduce the impressions I had of the High Sierra into wood block prints. So, I tried hard to make it. It was difficult because I wanted to make a woodblock print

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7 I believe this to be a mistranslation of *dai shizen*, which Obata defined as “Great Nature.”

8 Many reporters, however, didn’t appreciate the style of painting; one called a print depicting the headwaters of the San Joaquin River “a very odd piece of work” (Lecture 10).

without losing a single brushstroke or [brush] angle of the painting. I had a lot of difficulty. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 10)

There is much evidence that Obata had always intended to travel to Japan to have these prints made. Four months before setting out for Yosemite, in February 1927, he had attended a workshop at UC Berkeley offered by Kazue Yamagishi, a master carver who'd made woodblocks of El Capitan, Mount Rainier, and the Grand Canyon for Japanese artist Hiroshi Yoshida. The following summer, Obata created his Sierra watercolors on sheets identical in dimension to the standard Japanese print size, further supporting the idea that they were conceived as models to be translated later into color woodblock images (Obata's *Vision* 46, 70 n. 34).

Eight painters, thirty-two carvers, and forty printers worked on the series of woodblocks under the direction of Kataoka, a Japanese woodblock carver of great renown. The first piece to be completed was *Lake Basin in the High Sierra*, painted by Obata at the foot of Johnson Peak:

The first piece that he completed was my painting of the High Sierra, but it had a color as if the High Sierra had gone on a trip to Japan!

I thought, "This can't be it." I asked the group out and I took them to a restaurant in Negishi [Tokyo] called *Sasa no Yuki* which served a very good tofu. I gave them a lecture on the High Sierra: "So, the life was this, and it became like this. The pine tree was like this, different from the Japanese pine. . . . The rock was as huge as 3,000 feet and stands up high." I explained different things. So, the next time it was a little better, but it was still bad. So, I gathered them again and did the same thing.

The third time, finally, it took time but it was completed. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 11)

The resulting woodblock prints—35 altogether—were breathtaking, and were unlike any others made in Japan at the time. Traditional Japanese woodblock prints are characterized by large, unvarying areas of color and a corresponding simplification of the subject. By contrast, Obata worked with the carvers and printers to emulate the precise details and subtle washes of his original watercolors. Despite the challenge of the task, Obata realized his goal: Where comparisons are available, the woodblock prints are strikingly similar to their prototypes (Obata's *Vision* 53; *From Watercolor* 67).

In order to accomplish this, dozens of blocks were carved for each completed work, and many were printed more than once. *Lake Basin in the High Sierra* was created in 107 stages with numerous blocks; others had as many as 160 states prior to completion. The complex project occupied all thirty-two carvers and forty printers for a period of eighteen months. The work was all personally financed by Obata and represented quite a change for him: Obata had previously made only one, very simple woodcut of a rabbit. (Obata's *Vision* 53–56).

400 impressions of each of the 35 final compositions were made. Of these, Obata kept only the 100 best to include in the portfolios. The remaining 10,500 "less perfect" impressions were destroyed. The survivors were packaged in sleeves bearing hand-printed plates with the title and the artist's and publisher's names, flanking an illustration of a peacock with flowers. The prints were collectively known as Obata's *World Landscape Series* (Obata's *Vision* 56).

*Returning to the West*

After spending two years in Japan, the family returned to San Francisco. Obata's prints were immediately publicized. Even as he traveled to California in late October, 1930, an exhibition of them was held at the Honolulu Academy of the Arts, where they were praised for their "decided innovations," "remarkable . . . technical skill," and "peculiar watercolor effect obtained." During Obata's forty-fifth birthday, November 18, 1930, he exhibited works from the 1827 Sierra trip at Gyosei Hall in San Francisco. The show included fifty watercolors, but its centerpiece was the thirty-five woodblock prints that had been made in Japan. A review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* included an observation about the effort required to make them: "An amount of sustained and painstaking labor almost inconceivable to the less patient Western mind has gone into the making of these ineffably colored prints" (Obata's Vision 56).

To accompany each print, Obata wrote a prose caption. With a lovely composition dominated by dark blues and beige called *Silence, Last Twilight on an Unknown Lake, Johnson Peak*, Obata wrote:

After the passing of a thunderstorm, the freshly brightened colors vanish as the evening falls. As the deep blues turn to purple, one can still hear the melody of a thousand streams. In the silence that follows, Nature reveals herself. —Chiura Obata, 1930 (106)

With a depiction of the High Sierra he called *Clouds, Upper Lyell Trail, along Lyell Fork*, Obata wrote:

A paradise for lovers of the out-of-doors is found here, a spot along the Lyell Fork, which cuts through the Tuolumne Meadows. Nameless flowers are found blooming here in profusion, and wild herbs that are delicious to eat with trout. Clouds sail lightly and joyously over the high plateau. The soul and mind of man are lost in the supreme beauty. —Chiura Obata, 1930 (109)

He described the scene at the entrance to the valley, reproduced as *Merced River, Yosemite Valley*:

Clad in a misty autumnal vapor, the high cliff at the entrance of Yosemite Valley looks sleepily down at the murmuring river that flows below, singing a cradle song. —Chiura Obata, 1930 (139)

With the dark, brooding work, *Before Thunderstorm, Tuolumne Meadows*, he wrote:

Like a sleeping lion the Lembert Dome rests unconcerned in the center of the Tuolumne Meadows, walled in by a train of high, surrounding rocky mountains. He sleeps in the midst of an approaching storm. Thunder rumbles and roars through the vast meadow, like a huge orchestra at the height of its frenzied rendition of an overture, announcing the coming of a storm. But the dome, like a lion, sleeps unconcerned. —Chiura Obata, 1930 (110)

And, with the richly colored *Evening Glow at Yosemite Falls*:

From the skies it seems to come roaring and thundering down, the Yosemite Falls. Its sound echoes and re-echoes back and forth from the high mountains in front, vibrating throughout Yosemite Valley with its marvelous and stupendous music. Upon the tips of the walls of a massive rock, which stands perpendicular beside the fall, are thrown the last brilliant rays of the setting sun. —Chiura Obata, 1930 (127)

The show drew capacity crowds and rapturous reviews. Viewers were overwhelmed by the technical virtuosity of the prints and, soon, other galleries requested the exhibit, as well. In 1930-31, the show traveled a route that included Haviland Hall at UC Berkeley, the California School of Fine Arts, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, the Courvoisier Gallery, Mills College (where gallery officials had trouble closing the show), and the Stendahl Gallery in Los Angeles (Landauer 37; Obata's Vision 58).

In Los Angeles, one reviewer wrote:

To see our native beauty spots through the eyes of a foreign artist of high rank is to find new charm in our own land and a challenge to local artists who are content—so often—to repeat themselves in uninspired terms of unseeing eyes. So deeply has been stirred the soul of Obata in the course of his years of loving observation and painting here that inspiration is rekindled in those who hear him say, “I have lived in California for twenty-six years and I have fallen in love with the beauty of its scenery. I have dwelt happily among its beauties.” —*Saturday Night* (Los Angeles), 23 May 1931 (Obata's Vision 59)

#### *After the Exhibition*

In 1932, Obata joined the faculty at UC Berkeley's art department, having been asked to lecture and teach courses in traditional Japanese painting. Berkeley thus became the first university outside of Japan to offer Japanese art as a discipline. By all accounts, Obata was a popular teacher. He taught not just a way of rendering—the traditional *sumi-e* painting style—but also a way of seeing:

I always teach my students beauty. No one should pass through four years of college without being given the knowledge of beauty and the eyes with which to see it. —Chiura Obata (Lecture 11)

He infused his classes about art with his philosophy of life:

Anything in art is like yourself. In the long run it is a way of living. Many things come. Many things happen. You make happiness, morning or evening, sunny morning or dark night. . . . If you took too short a step, next time take a longer step. Use a deeper stride. Take steps like a cow. Don't fall down so easily. —Chiura Obata (Lecture 11)

Obata taught many of his classes outdoors on the sylvan Berkeley campus and in the summertime brought groups of students to Yosemite and elsewhere. Describing his conversations with students, Obata later commented:

I said I would go to the Santa Cruz Mountains to watch the autumn moon. My students said, "If you just want to see the moon, you don't have to go that far. You can see it from here." So this is the point: You go to the Santa Cruz Mountains and in those deep mountains you wait for the sunset and you hear the sounds of the bellsinger cricket and then slowly, from behind the woods, the moon emerges. That atmosphere is beyond expression. I feel this is the blessing of Great Nature. —Chiura Obata (Lecture 11)

In addition to teaching college students, Obata devoted much time to lecturing for the public, acting—in a very self-conscious way—as an ambassador of Japanese Art for a Western audience. In all, Obata delivered more than 300 public lectures in America and in Japan (Fujii 10, 12).

Throughout the 1930s, Obata and his family returned to Yosemite each summer. There, Obata sketched, fished, and collected water from Fern Spring. The annual pilgrimage to Fern Spring was an important part of the trip, for it was here that he collected the clear Yosemite Valley water to make his paints throughout the year, mixing it with sumi ink and a variety of other materials—lapis lazuli, ground malachite, ruby dust, flower petals, and so on (Landauer 40).

The works from this period—many of which were featured in *Sumi-e*, a small booklet produced by Obata—were primarily in sumi ink and watercolor. In one of the most masterful, *Snow Storm Nearing Yosemite Government Center*, painted in 1939, Obata returned to one of his favorite subjects: an aging and bent tree:

Standing in Yosemite's Government Center, looking up to the frozen waterfall, endless cloud forms boil over the glacier-cut rocks; orchestral, whipping wind sweeps the aged pine tree which stands like an old warrior. —Chiura Obata (*Sumi-e* 59)

Another on-going activity in the Sierras was fishing, still a passion of Obata's:

Wherever there is a sea or river from California to Montana, from Iowa to Madison River, to Yellowstone Park, to Utah, to Wyoming, I have been following the trout and the salmon. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 17)

It was during this time, probably in 1932, that Obata became acquainted with photographer Ansel Adams, visiting him at his home in Yosemite and hiking with him throughout the Sierras. He continued to paint California landscapes closer to his home, as well—scenes of the UC campus, the Golden Gate Bridge, and Mt. Tamalpais from the Berkeley Hills. In May and June of 1937, he taught outdoor sketching classes in Yosemite Valley and, in 1938, presented a lecture and demonstration at the Ahwahnee Hotel. In 1939, he returned to the Ahwahnee and the Ranger's Club for more lectures and demonstrations in the park and, in 1941, at the Wawona Hotel (Hill interview; Chronology 144).

### *Japanese Internment*

At the outbreak of World War II, Obata knew he, his family, and all Japanese Americans were in danger. Immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he painted an explosive work entitled

*Landslide*. The painting shows Obata and his family “huddled together while the vortex of war swirled their foundations away from them,” as a caption for the work read in a later exhibition (*Topaz Moon* 113; Lecture 13).

Obata and his family dutifully registered with the authorities. Many fellow artists and friends at UC Berkeley wanted to help the Obata family and tried to secure a living situation for them beyond Military Area No. 1.

At that time, the provost Deutsch and chancellor [president] Gordon Sproul from the university were very concerned for us. They tried hard so I wouldn't have to go to camp. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 18)

Their solution was a unique one: Secure housing for Obata and his family within Yosemite National Park:

There was a huge compound in the middle of Yosemite belonging to Ansel Adams and they said there was a house there. Why don't we put them there? —Chiura Obata (Fujii 18)

Deutsch followed official channels, writing to John Wosky, Acting Superintendent of Yosemite. Wosky, in turn, wrote to Lieutenant General John DeWitt at the Presidio:

Because it was during the war we filed an application. [Deutsch] tried to get permission so that I wouldn't have to go to camp and I would remain free. But he was faced with rejection by General Dewitt and all the plans were gone. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 18)

The request might have been honored if it had arrived sooner. Writing for DeWitt, Asst. Adjutant General Hugh Fullerton replied to Wosky:

No reason is apparent as to why Japanese Americans should not be permitted to reside in Yosemite National Park . . .

However, since the writing of your letter, Proclamation No. 4 has been issued which prevents Japanese residents of Military Area No. 1 from crossing the eastern boundaries thereof. In other words, travel to Yosemite is not now available to Japanese. —Hugh Fullerton to John Wosky, 4/2/1942 (Obata File Yosemite)

Interestingly, this rationale seems not to have been passed along to Deutsch, who received a letter from Frank Kittredge, newly-appointed superintendent of the park, stating that they had not contacted—nor did they intend to contact—the War Department on Obata's behalf. Writing to Obata with the bad news, Deutsch quoted the heart of the letter from Kittredge:

“In war time, and especially these times when persons of the Japanese nationality are being directly handled by the War Department, we would not think of requesting permission for such persons to stay in Yosemite National Park. This is a matter entirely for the War Department and we would not

want to be in the position of even asking any favors.” —Frank Kittredge to Monroe Deutsch, quoted in Deutsch to Obata, 4/16/1942 (Obata File Yosemite)<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, Obata, a leader in San Francisco’s Japanese American community, decided to follow what he considered the most honorable course of action: He would stay with his community, wherever that may lead. In March of 1942 he was an esteemed professor of art at UC Berkeley; the following month he and his family were living in a horse stall, with straw for bedding, at Tanforan racetrack, a temporary detention camp just outside the city (Hill interview; Landauer 40).

Obata and his family departed on April 30, 1942:

[After] the war broke out, in 1942, we gathered at the First Congregational Church in Berkeley and we were sent to a stable in Tanforan. While I was waiting for the bus there was a soldier with a gun. There was a little child, 5-6 years old, not knowing anything, with childlike innocence, playing with the soldier—playing hide and seek at the edge of the street trees. At that time, it strongly hit my heart that these small children, who have to go to school and have to start learning knowledge for life, are being threatened and deprived of all these things by an impossible war.

Moreover, we were forced to leave the land where we lived and move into those stables in Tanforan. This is a kind of sin which is intolerable. From this sin, we have to bring these school children back to equality. We have to do something about it. My first thought was to open an art school and start teaching everybody. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 12)

Obata’s school, which started in Tanforan and then moved with him to Topaz, was enormously successful. At one point, 600 students, from the age of 7 to over 70, were enrolled, learning traditional Japanese painting techniques. Just a month after starting, in July 1941, the school had its first exhibit outside the camp (Landauer 70, n. 34; Lecture 14).

Obata’s art students came to visit him at Tanforan. Unable to get clearance to enter the camp, they met their former professor at the fence. His wife Haruko later recalled the scene:

Oh, they would cry, poor things. They would say, “Oh, Professor Obata, you are behind the fence!” And he would answer, “From my perspective it looks like you are behind the fence!” —Haruko Obata, as told to Kimi Hill (Lecture 14)

Throughout the experience, Obata kept his faith in Great Nature. At Topaz, he was inspired by the mountains to the east and south and the vast desert surrounding him (Fujii 13, 19).

During the evacuation I painted around 350 paintings. . . . This was my way of showing my gratitude to nature. . . . Even in that kind of environment, people with disturbed ideas in the end will return to being reasonable individuals and will do something better. I have seen that quite a lot. The reason is,

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9 Perhaps Kittredge didn’t know that Wosky had already attempted to intervene on Obata’s behalf, or didn’t want Deutsch to know of Wosky’s actions, since Kittredge would not have taken such steps himself.

in whatever camp—I've seen the report of the camps in many different places—the Japanese in those conditions created gardens, kept their houses clean, and whenever the vegetables were planted they grew beautiful daikon or turnips. This happened because our ancestors called upon the Japanese, they kept telling [them], and their call continues today, that we should live with nature. [This] teaching has been passed on, and it has always been there. —Chiura Obata (Fujii 13)

Obata passed this teaching on to the students of the Topaz art school. At an address given during a New Year's celebration, 1943, he said:

Have we noticed the beautiful mountains surrounding us that have existed for thousands of years? They show heaven and earth their greatness. They can't be moved no matter how many people try. The sun and the moon have been shining for tens of thousands of years blessing the world. The mountains, moon, and sun never try to explain. When dark clouds hide the sun, the clouds will shine with the golden color of the sunlight. At night they will be blessed by the moonlight decorating their edges with a silver line. We only hope that our art school will follow the teachings of this Great Nature and that it will strengthen itself to endure like the mountains, and like the sun and the moon, emit its own light. —Chiura Obata, 1943 (Lecture 15)

Obata's legacy of sketches and paintings from Tanforan and Topaz are a unique cultural document of the Japanese American experience during World War II, depicting the horrendous dust storms, isolation, and stripping of human rights. In a recent interview, Kimi Kodani Hill, Obata's granddaughter, commented on the importance of the collection:

People gasp in the audience [when I show the interment art]. . . . It's important to understand intellectually how constitutional rights were broken . . . but there has to be, I think, an emotional reaction . . . to really achieve any kind of wisdom. Right? You can intellectually understand something but to really have a wise understanding and be effective there has to be some emotion involved, too. The artwork is a way to do that. —Kimi Kodani Hill (Lecture 21)

### *After Topaz*

The Obata family was released from Topaz in 1943. They traveled to St. Louis, where they lived with Obata's middle son, Gyo, enrolled in architectural school there. In 1945, when the military exclusion ban was lifted, Obata was immediately reinstated as instructor in the Art Department at UC Berkeley (Lecture 15; Chronology 145).

Throughout the remainder of the 1940s and early 1950s, Obata continued his trips into the Sierras, including a number of Sierra Club outings. He spent the summers of 1947, 1948, and 1951 sketching and painting with the Sierra Club, camping in the high country of King's Canyon and Yosemite. From 1952–1953, he took numerous sketching trips to Yosemite. He taught classes at UC Berkeley until 1954, frequently taking students with him on sketching trips. A favorite destination for his classes was the beach; while his students sketched, Obata fished (Chronology 145–147; Lecture 16).

When he retired in 1954, Obata and his wife began leading groups for Orient Tours and Pan Am Airlines, taking Americans to Japan, again with the intention of exposing them to the traditional arts and culture of his homeland. He did this for fifteen years and, in 1965, received the Kungoto Zuihosho Medal from the Emperor of Japan for promoting goodwill and cultural understanding. Until his death, he concentrated on more traditional Japanese *sumi-e* paintings, most without added color. His later paintings of Yosemite, done—in large part—from memory, show his absolute mastery of this tremendously difficult art form (Lecture 16; Landauer 42–43).

A strikingly beautiful example is Obata's *Glorious Struggle*, sumi on silk, painted in 1965. In it, he returns to the theme of the powerful tree, standing up to the harsh conditions of the High Sierra. In his accompanying text, an aging Obata was not afraid to draw the parallel between the subject and his own trials as a Japanese American in the United States:

Since I came to the United States in 1903, I saw, faced, and heard many struggles among our Japanese *Issei*. The sudden burst of Pearl Harbor was as if the mother earth on which we stood was swept by the terrific force of a big wave of resentment of the American people. Our dignity and our hopes were crushed. In such times I heard the gentle but strong whisper of the Sequoia gigantean: "Hear me, you poor man. I've stood here more than three thousand and seven hundred years in rain, snow, storm, and even mountain fire still keeping my thankful attitude strongly with nature—do not cry, do not spend your time and energy worrying. You have children following. Keep up your unity; come with me." So, in the past, all such troubles moved like a cool fog. —Chiura Obata, 1965 (*Topaz Moon* 111)

Obata suffered a series of strokes in 1971 and gave up painting. On October 6, 1975, he succumbed to cancer and pneumonia. In a letter written to Jack Gyer at Yosemite, just two months later, Obata's daughter quoted him, speaking about his life. In the first passage, Obata used imagery from the Sierras to describe his life path:

I intend my path in life to be as plain, simple and definite as air and water—water as pure as dewdrops on the wild flowers of Tuolumne meadow at dawn; as melodious as the winding mountain stream in Spring; as ominously symphonic as the powerful waterfalls of Yosemite; as meandering as the brook winding in and out through hill and dale, ever uniting and reuniting while flowing onward to the sea . . . —Chiura Obata, quoted in Mrs. Eugene Kodani to Jack Gyer, 12/6/1975 (2)

In the second, he commented on his importance as an artist:

Success or failure is not my aim in life. Whether I be a flake of snow or only a drop of dew I do not care. I wish only to paint with gratitude to Nature in my heart and with sincerity in my brush. This is my future. This is my biography. —Chiura Obata, quoted in Mrs. Eugene Kodani to Jack Gyer, 12/6/1975 (2)

"The great teaching of our ancestors," Obata said, "is 'Do not disobey nature. Always go with nature, anywhere, any circumstance, with gratitude.'" With his work and throughout many

difficult events, Obata kept this credo close to his heart and followed it with dignity, intelligence, and immense talent (Fujii 12).

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