



**Media only:** Laura Baptiste (202) 633-8494

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**Media Web site:** [americanart.si.edu/pr](http://americanart.si.edu/pr)

**Media preview:** Tuesday, March 2; 3 – 5 p.m.

## **“The Art of Gaman” Opens at the Renwick Gallery March 5**

### **Exhibition Focuses on Arts and Crafts by Japanese Americans in WWII Internment Camps**

The Smithsonian American Art Museum presents “The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese American Internment Camps, 1942-1946” at its branch museum for craft and decorative arts, the Renwick Gallery, from March 5 through Jan. 30, 2011.

“The Art of Gaman” is organized by San Francisco-based author and guest curator Delphine Hirasuna with the cooperation of the San Francisco chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. It features more than 120 art objects, most of which are on loan from former internees or their families. This exhibition also presents historical context through archival photographs, artifacts and documentary films related to the internment experience.

The exhibition is presented under the honorary patronage of Norman Y. Mineta. Mineta, a former congressman, secretary of transportation and Regent of the Smithsonian, was interned as a child at Heart Mountain in Wyoming.

“‘The Art of Gaman’ is a beautiful and powerful exhibition that opens a window into a poignant aspect of the American experience,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “I am grateful to Delphine Hirasuna; Franklin Odo, former director of the Smithsonian’s Asian Pacific American Program; and Ken Hakuta, an emeritus commissioner at the museum, for encouraging the showing of this important exhibition.”

Soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, 120,000 ethnic Japanese on the West Coast—more than two-thirds of whom were American citizens by birth—were ordered to leave their homes and move to 10 inland internment camps for the duration of World War II. While in these bleak camps, the internees used scraps and found materials to make furniture and other objects to beautify their surroundings. Arts and crafts became essential for simple creature comforts and emotional survival. These objects—tools, teapots, furniture, toys and games, musical instruments,

pendants and pins, purses and ornamental displays—are manifestations of the art of “gaman,” a Japanese word that means to bear the seemingly unbearable with dignity and patience.

“This exhibition provides an amazing opportunity to put a human face on the internees who were literally reduced to a serial number while held behind barbed wire fences during World War II,” said Hirasuna. “The objects they made in camp represent a triumph of the human spirit over adversity. We can’t help looking at these beautiful things and thinking of the individuals who made them.”

At first, internees made objects as a way to furnish their living quarters. More creative pursuits soon followed as a way to fill the long days and to foster a spirit of cooperation. Each camp became known for decorative arts that were made from local materials found around the camp. Objects included in the exhibition represent stories of perseverance, from the small bird pin that belonged to Hirasuna’s mother that was the starting point for the exhibition, to a portrait of a mother whose son was serving in the U.S. Army’s 442nd Combat Team, to toys created for children.

“During a time of struggle under difficult circumstances, the impulse to create art emerged as a strong force in developing a sense of community,” said Robyn Kennedy, chief of the Renwick Gallery.

At every camp, arts and crafts were taught formally in classroom settings by internees who were professional artists, as well as informally by those who discovered they had a particular skill. The exhibition includes work by internees who did not pursue an art career after being released from the camps, as well as works by well-known artists such as Chiura Obata, Hisako Hibi and Suiko “Charles” Mikami. The presentation at the Renwick includes several additions that have not been seen publicly, including works by Ruth Asawa, Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, Isamu Noguchi, Henry Sugimoto and master woodworkers Gentaro and Shinzaburo Nishiura.

For decades, these objects remained largely forgotten. Hirasuna contacted dozens of individuals in the Japanese American community on the West Coast to gather items one by one while developing the book *The Art of Gaman*, which eventually became a traveling exhibition.

In 2006, the exhibition was shown at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art in San Francisco, the Oregon Historical Society in Portland and The William Benton Museum of Art at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, Conn.

Two 20-minute documentaries, *Voices Long Silent* (2010, Bob Matsumoto Productions) and *Art of Gaman: The Story Behind the Objects* (2010, Rick Quan Productions), will be shown in sequence in a continuous loop in the exhibition galleries.

## **Credit**

“The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese American Internment Camps, 1942-1946” is presented at the Renwick Gallery with the cooperation of the Japanese American Citizens League, San Francisco Chapter. The James Renwick Alliance, Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership, Nion McEvoy and Cary Frieze provided support for the exhibition.

## **Publication**

Hirasuna’s 2005 book *The Art of Gaman*, published by Ten Speed Press, accompanies the exhibition. It is available in the museum’s store for \$35 (hardcover).

## **Public Programs**

Several free public programs are planned in conjunction with the exhibition, including a lecture and book signing by Hirasuna and the book’s designer, Kit Hinrichs, Friday, March 5, at noon; a gallery talk with Kennedy, Wednesday, March 10, at noon; a lecture about the 10th anniversary of the National Japanese American Memorial by Karen Matsuoka, chair of the Cherry Blossom Freedom Walk, Wednesday, March 31, at noon; artist talk by Mira Nakashima and Wendy Maruyama, accomplished studio furniture makers and daughters of internees, Sunday, April 11, at 2 p.m.; and a family day Saturday, May 1, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Complete program descriptions are available online at [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu).

Additional programs will be scheduled for the summer and fall. Details will be available on the museum’s Web site.

## **About the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum**

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,500 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its branch for craft and decorative arts, the Renwick Gallery, is located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W. It is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Metrorail stations: Farragut North (Red line) and Farragut West (Blue and Orange lines). Follow the museum on Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, ArtBabble, iTunes and YouTube. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Web site: [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu).

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