



## Smithsonian American Art Museum

February 2012



### *Diary: December 12, 1941*

1980

#### **Roger Shimomura**

Born: Seattle, Washington 1939

acrylic on canvas

50 1/4 x 60 in. (127.6 x 152.4 cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Gift of the artist

1991.171

Not currently on view

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

*Roger Yutaka Shimomura painted **Diary, December 12, 1941**, in response to his family's internment/incarceration in Minidoka Relocation Center in Idaho during World War II. Researcher Liz interviewed Shimomura and learned about the experience of Japanese-Americans incarcerated in camps during World War II.*

- **December 7, 1941 was the day that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. What happened on December 12th?**

December 12th refers to the dating of an entry in the personal diary of Roger Shimomura's grandmother, Toku Shimomura (1888-1968). Toku Machida Shimomura was born and raised in Japan and traveled to Seattle, Washington in 1912 as a "picture bride" in an arranged marriage to Yoshitomi Shimomura. Toku was a professional midwife and delivered her grandson, Roger, in 1939. Roger Shimomura told me that his grandmother kept fifty-six diaries but not all survive. Toku burned many of her diaries due to her fear that federal officials might find them. Because Shimomura does not read Japanese, he hired a graduate student to translate the diaries into English. His paintings in his *Diary* and *American Diary* series are based upon his grandmother's reminiscences, including Toku's entry from December 12, 1941:

I spent all day at home. Starting from today we were permitted to withdraw \$100 from the bank. This was for our sustenance of life, we who

are enemy to them. I deeply felt America's largeheartedness in dealing with us.

Toku's mention of the bank withdrawal refers to the federal government's "freezing" of the bank accounts of Japanese-Americans following the military attack by Japan at Pearl Harbor (Hawaii) on December 7, 1941. Many Japanese-Americans had been born in the United States or had lived there for decades and expressed deep loyalty to America and trust of the federal government. Nevertheless, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and other government officials wrongly concluded that Japanese-Americans posed a national security threat. By freezing bank accounts, the government limited the ability of Japanese-Americans to do business or travel. A few days following Pearl Harbor, Japanese-Americans were permitted to withdraw small amounts for living expenses.



**Sumi set belonging to Toku Shimomura, courtesy Roger Shimomura**

Shimomura sent me a photograph of the *sumi* (writing) set that belonged to his grandmother, upon which he based the set in *Diary, December 12, 1941*. The [wisteria](#) blossom on the diary's cover is based upon a Shimomura family crest. Young Roger, his parents, and his grandparents were forced to report to Puyallup Assembly Center on the Washington State fairgrounds in April 1942. Roger recalls spending his third birthday in Puyallup. In August, the Shimomuras, with other Japanese-Americans from the Seattle area, [traveled by train](#) to the [Minidoka Relocation Center](#) near [Hagerman, Idaho](#). Roger recalled in an interview with the [Denshō Foundation](#) that the harsh Idaho [winter](#) was difficult. "I never remembered ice like that, and the [flooding, how everything just turned into this quagmire.](#)" [Minidoka](#) had 9,397 inmates in 1943 and was divided into 35 residential blocks of 12 barracks in which families had sparsely-furnished [apartments](#). The camp had its own [hospital](#), [schools](#), and shops. Inmates held jobs, and Shimomura's father, pharmacist Eddie Kazuo Shimomura, worked at Minidoka's hospital. Like many heads-of-households, Eddie Shimomura left Minidoka in 1943 with the government's permission to find a job, and his family later joined him in 1944 in Chicago.

Many Japanese-American men and women volunteered for the U.S. military during World War II. The 442 Regiment composed of *Nisei* (second generation Japanese-Americans) soldiers was the most decorated of any American war. The [Honor Roll](#) at Minidoka attests to these veterans' sacrifice. You can read accounts of members of the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, such as [George Aki](#), on the website of the [Veterans History Project](#) (Library of Congress).

The last of the internment camps closed in 1946. Many Japanese-Americans returned to their hometowns, but most had lost their homes, businesses, and belongings and had to rebuild their

lives from scratch. It was not until the late 1970's-early 1980's that the Japanese-Americans internees finally received an apology from the U.S. government and in the 1990's, modest reparation payments.

Essays in the catalog of Roger Shimomura's exhibition, *Minidoka Revisited* (2005) provided me with detailed information about the Shimomuras' experience at Minidoka Relocation Center. Through the National Park Service's webpage for [Minidoka National Historic Site](#), I accessed an online book, [Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites](#) (Burton et alia, 2000). Through the Online Archive of California, I found the papers of the federal agency, the [War Relocation Authority Photographs of Japanese-American Evacuation and Resettlement, 1942-1945](#) in the Bancroft Library at UC-Berkeley. I also looked at Shimomura's papers in the [Archives of American Art](#). Our Project 100 intern Katy told me about the [Japanese American National Museum](#) in Los Angeles, which has an [extensive online collection of archival materials](#) about the camps. SAAM colleague Adrienne Gayoso also put me in touch with JAMN staff member Lynn Yamasaki.

- **What is the significance of the Superman silhouette in the painting? How does Shimomura combine the art of the comic strip with the style of Japanese *ukiyo-e*?**

In *Diary, December 12, 1941*, Shimomura has painted the silhouette of the comic book character, Superman, on the Japanese screen behind the seated figure of his grandmother. Superman is one of the most recognizable characters in American pop culture, and there are multiple ways of interpreting him. I found numerous books on Superman through the databases WorldCat and America: History & Life. Superman debuted in *Action Comics* in June 1938, the creation of Joe Schuster and Jerry Siegel, both sons of recent immigrants. In an essay titled "What Makes Superman So Darned American?" (Dooley and Engle, 1987), Gary Engle suggests that America's immigrants saw a bit of themselves in the Man of Steel. Superman, after all, was an alien from the planet Krypton who, like many immigrants, lived a "double life." Shimomura interpreted Superman differently, equating him with federal government power. He wrote that "Superman is my response to the 'large hearted American' [in Toku's December 12, 1941 diary entry]" (Shimomura Papers, AAA), the federal government whom Japanese-Americans trusted yet which imprisoned them. During World War II, Superman appeared in anti-Japan propaganda; such as a store sign advertising war bonds (drawn by Siegel) in which Superman in his cape urges Americans to "Stamp Out the Japanazis." (Daniels, 1998).

Shimomura acknowledged to me that comic books were a major influence on his painting style, and although he paints with acrylics on canvas, his paintings resemble the graphic arts of *ukiyo-e* prints and pen-and-ink comic strips. The distinct black outlines and solid color planes of comic strips reminded him of *ukiyo-e* (Japanese woodblock prints). As a child, he admired the comic strips drawn by Chester Gould (*Dick Tracy*) and Joe Siegel (*Superman*). When Shimomura began turning to *ukiyo-e* for inspiration in the 1970's, he based some of his earliest paintings in

this style upon reproductions in *A Coloring Book of Japan*. [Ukiyo-e prints from Edo Period Japan \(1603-1868\)](#), as Shimomura has pointed out, were, like comic strips, the popular art of their day, and print artists depicted many subjects, including domestic scenes of [women writing letters](#). In an interview (*Diary Series*, 1983) Shimomura acknowledged the stylistic similarities between ukiyo-e prints and comic strip art. “I realized that the only difference between Minnie Mouse and one of [Utamaro](#)’s beauties was race.”

In Shimomura’s papers in the Archives, I found an illustrated script for *Seven Kabuki Plays*. Shimomura composed this theatrical work in the mid-1980’s. Each scene corresponds to one of his grandmother’s diary entries from the war period. At the conclusion of the scene for December 12th, an actor dressed as Superman stands backlit behind a screen as Toku kneels at a desk writing in her diary. Shimomura sent me a DVD with excerpts from the performance.

### **Selected Bibliography:**

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[Collection finding aid](#).