I dedicate my paintings, first, to the grand nature 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.

—Chiura Obata, “In Praise of Nature,” 1928

Chiura Obata (1885–1975) ranks among the most significant California-based artists and Japanese American cultural leaders of the last century. Born in Okayama, Japan, Obata received formal training in classical Japanese sumi-e ink painting in Tokyo. By the time he immigrated to San Francisco in 1903, he was integrating Western practices into his art-making, and he continued experimenting with new styles and methods throughout his seven-decade career.

Today Obata is best known for majestic views of the American West, sketches based on hiking trips to capture what he called “Great Nature.” He also produced ink and watercolor paintings of animals, flowers—often arrangements by his wife, Haruko, a noted ikebana master—and campus life at the University of California, Berkeley, where he taught art from 1932 to 1954. Every work is grounded in close observation, rendered with calligraphic brushstrokes and washes of color.

Teaching and community engagement are Obata’s second legacy for American art. As a professor and a founder of the East West Art Society, a Bay Area artists’ collective, he facilitated cross-cultural dialogue, despite widespread prejudice against Asian Americans. In 1942, when World War II fears and Executive Order 9066 forced Obata and more than one hundred thousand West Coast Japanese Americans into incarceration camps scattered across the western United States, he created art schools in the camps to help fellow prisoners cope with their displacement and loss.

After the war, Obata returned to his callings as a painter, teacher, and cultural ambassador with scars that brought new emotional force to his work. The works in this retrospective take us on an epic journey in which peaks, valleys, storms, and sunlight may reflect universal challenges to becoming a successful artist as well as the particular struggles and dreams of America’s minority and immigrant communities.

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Artistic Beginnings

Son Chiura Obata Reading

about 1890s
pencil on paper

Rokuichi Obata
born Japan 1863; died Sendai, Japan 1928

Zoroku Sato was born on November 18, 1885, in Okayama, Japan. In 1890 he moved to Sendai, Japan, to be raised by his older brother Rokuichi Obata, an accomplished professional artist. Rokuichi adopted the boy and gave him the Obata family name, as well as his earliest lessons in painting and drawing. Following a common practice among Japanese art students, Zoroku chose a new first name—Chiura—which means “thousand bays” and recalls the coastal landscape of the Sendai region.

Private collection

Teenage practice book
1890s
color ink on paper

Obata’s childhood sketchbooks demonstrate his early mastery of brush painting with watercolor and ink. Despite these talents, his father expected him to pursue a career in the military, prompting the blossoming artist to run away to Tokyo in 1899, at age fourteen. In those years the capital hosted a cosmopolitan artistic community in which many embraced European styles such as impressionism, and painted images of contemporary life. Obata instead trained in the conservative nihonga (Japanese-style painting) movement, which revived traditional techniques and preferred subjects such as flowers, animals, landscapes, and scenes from history and the theater.

Private collection

Maiden of Northern Japan
1931
mineral pigments on silk

After immigrating to California in 1903, Obata did not return to Japan until his father’s funeral in 1928. With this large-scale painting of a young woman wearing a silk kimono, begun on this trip, he also returned to the Japanese styles and subjects he had studied as a teenager at Tokyo’s elite Nihon Bijutsuin (Japan Fine Arts Academy). Although much of Obata’s adult work is eclectic and personal in its artistic voice, that traditional academic training provided rare skills that made him a valuable teacher in the United States. He completed this painting in 1931 in San Francisco during a series of public art demonstrations.

Obata relied on employment within the Japanese American community during his early years as a professional artist in the United States. Beginning around 1918, he created paintings for use as covers and interior illustrations for JAPAN, a travel magazine published by Toyo Kisen Kaisha (Oriental Steamship Company) for its American audiences and customers. Since 1912, Obata had also worked regularly as an illustrator for San Francisco’s two Japanese-language newspapers, Shin Sekai (New World) and Nichibei Shim bun (Japanese American News).

Japantown after Earthquake, Near California Street, Morning
May 18, 1906
watercolor and graphite on paper

On April 18, 1906, a 7.9-magnitude earthquake struck San Francisco, where Obata had been living since his arrival in the United States in 1903. The quake and subsequent fires killed more than three thousand people and destroyed 80 percent of the city. Obata later recalled making firsthand drawings of the traumatic event:

The Great Earthquake happened a little after 5:00 a.m. My chimney came down and dropped into the room. After that I knew something really serious had happened. I also knew by then that you have to face anything Nature gives with your whole body and spirit. So . . . I grabbed as many sketchbooks as possible, and I walked in the direction of the downtown to see what was the situation. . . . I wanted to describe, as a third person, how the earthquake affected people.
Ikebana

An Artistic Family

In 1912, Obata married Haruko Kohashi, and the first of their four children was born later that year. Like her husband, Haruko was both an artist and a teacher—she was a master of ikebana, the Japanese practice of arranging flowers according to a visual grammar in which lines and layers convey moods and poetic messages. In 1940 she published an ikebana instruction manual, which Chiura Obata illustrated. Haruko’s floral arrangements were a favorite subject for her husband’s still-life paintings. Together, these works testify to their mutual appreciation for the beauty of nature and their dedication to sharing the artistic traditions of Japan with others.

These complementary artistic talents enriched the Obatas’ marriage and family life. Their son Gyo Obata studied architecture and became a founding partner of the international firm HOK, whose designs include the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

Haruko Obata (1892–1989), Ikebana artist, wife of Chiura Obata, Berkeley, CA, 1950s. Courtesy of the Obata Family

Gyo Obata (b. 1923), architect, son of Chiura and Haruko Obata, HOK offices, St. Louis, MO, 1983. Photo: Kiku Obata
Artist and Teacher

Through a variety of artistic projects in the 1920s, Obata left behind his early work in commercial illustration and rose to prominence in the Bay Area fine arts community. In 1921 he was a founding member of the East West Art Society, a group that organized cross-cultural exhibitions to demonstrate how immigrant voices enriched the local art scene; three years later, he designed the scenery and costumes for the San Francisco Opera’s first production of *Madame Butterfly*. His first solo show took place in 1928, leading to wider public demand for his work and an invitation to teach in the Art Department at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1932. Obata became an assistant professor there in 1934, one of the school’s first Asian American faculty members. In the summers he led workshops in open-air watercolor painting and explored the natural beauty of California.

Some of Chiura Obata’s tools and materials: a paint box, an ink tray, pigment bottles, brushes, stamps, and minerals used in preparing the pigments. He often mixed his paints using water collected from streams during summer hiking trips in the Sierra Nevada.

Courtesy of the Obata Family

*Evening at Carl Inn*
1929–30
15 progressive proofs; color woodcuts on paper

When Obata returned to Japan for his father’s funeral in 1928, he collaborated with the Takamizawa Mokuhansha workshop in Tokyo to transform some of his watercolors into woodblock prints. A team of thirty-two carvers and forty printers assembled dozens of blocks to replicate the brushstrokes and colors of the original watercolors; Obata supervised this meticulous process and retained many of the test prints. Exhibited here are fifteen of the 130 progressive proofs from *Evening at Carl Inn*. Early proofs lay down the overall composition, while others experimented with ink values to define light and dark zones. Later proofs reveal only minute changes in color, showing the careful attention Obata gave to every aspect of the project.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Obata Family, 2005.17.5 . . . 113

*Evening at Carl Inn*
1930
color woodcut on paper

Obata published thirty-five of his watercolors as a portfolio entitled *World Landscape Series*, with one hundred impressions created for each print. Most of the subjects, including this image of a cabin, were from watercolors he had made while hiking in Yosemite in the summer of 1927.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Obata Family, 2000.76.6
Obata taught art at the University of California, Berkeley, for more than two decades. His courses in ink brush painting were consistently popular with students and led other faculty members to explore the medium. Many took inspiration from his approach to art-making as a spiritual practice, guided by the principles of Zen Buddhism. He described this ideal state of mind in his handbook *Sumi-e* (1967):

> Before the student touches brush to paper, his mind must be as peaceful and tranquil as the surface of a calm, undisturbed lake. Let not a shadow be cast on it nor the slightest thought of self-conceit or egotism! For one should undertake the task with perfect composure and frankness since only thus can a genuine work of art, overflowing in deep praise and abounding inspiration, be produced.

Private collection

*Campanile (UC Berkeley)*
1934
watercolor and pen

In 1947, Obata published a folder of prints reproducing watercolors of landmarks on the University of California, Berkeley, campus. His accompanying text speaks of taking visual and spiritual pleasure in one’s daily life and surroundings:

> I try always to 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. Four years of learning and living on a campus makes it part of us: it becomes our homeland, and it is deep in our mind and experience. A homeland has always beauty, and our eyes should be open to appreciate it. I want to show this to my students.

Private collection
Chiura Obata instructed generations of art students in traditional Japanese sumi-e, or ink brush painting. With simple elegance, he could convey the anatomy of an animal and give it energy, movement, and personality. “One marvels at the way in which he can so easily put across a feeling with the use of such a small number of lines,” wrote the Daily Tar Heel in 1937, reporting on an exhibit of fifty Obata paintings at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. By exhibiting such works and publishing them as prints, Obata challenged Western norms of aesthetic value that privileged time, labor, and complexity. Public interviews, essays, and books further circulated his lessons beyond the classrooms of California.

*Untitled (Black Panther Eating)*

about 1930s
color ink on paper

Although Obata was a diligent student of nature, his paintings are rarely direct transcriptions. In the spirit of Zen Buddhism, he believed that artists should consider both the visual and the spiritual character of their subjects. “In oriental arts,” Obata wrote in the 1930s, “whether of Japanese or Chinese, the aim is not to try to copy as close as possible the object in the static condition, but to try to express the object . . . animate or inanimate, person or flower, bird or animal, as a part of the existence of the whole world as a living unit.”

Private collection

*Above the borderline of nationality everybody must feel a deep appreciation toward Mother Earth.*

—Chiura Obata, “Natural Rhythm and Its Harmony,” 1933
Great Nature

Obata was an avid traveler who enjoyed exploring the natural beauty of California and other western states. He painted many watercolor and ink landscapes outdoors while camping and fishing, trips he often took in the company of other artists, building friendships and learning from one another’s work. These studies sometimes served as the basis for larger finished studio paintings; in other cases they contributed to a visual vocabulary of crashing waves, weathered rocks, and storm-beaten trees—elements Obata later composed into simplified, poetic scenes that do not depict a specific location or landmark.

*Untitled (Pier)*
about 1930s
ink on paper

Obata painted and adored equally California’s mountains and coastline. In a 1965 interview he described thinking of Japan when looking west across the Pacific:

*Since I came here in 1903, every year at the end of the year when it becomes colder in San Francisco on the night of the 31st I would go to the Pacific Ocean to the beach at the Cliff house. In those days there was a lot of driftwood. I would gather them and make a fire. I would dig a hole in the sand; I would get in there and keep myself warm by the driftwood fire, and I would wait for the sun rising from the sea. In the morning I would write down on the sand, which is the result of the crashing waves, my impression to send to my parents and friends in my homeland. This is how I tried to convey my feelings to them.*

Private collection

*Arabella Heights Ranch, Imagiri-san’s Furo*
Aug. 13, 1926
pen on paper

Many of Obata’s landscapes capture spaces and scenery of particular importance to the region’s vibrant communities of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans. The inscription on this sketch, for example, reveals that the wooden cabin houses a furo (bathtub) used for traditional Japanese bathing rituals.

Private collection
World Landscapes

During a six-week visit to Yosemite with his artist friends Worth Ryder and Robert Boardman Howard in the summer of 1927, Obata produced around 150 paintings. He later recalled the trip as "the greatest harvest for my whole life and future in painting." The following year he visited Japan and brought thirty-five of the watercolors to be translated into color woodcuts, which he called his World Landscape Series.

Breaking from Japanese woodblock printing tradition, Obata insisted that his series re-create the subtle brushstrokes and undulations of color in the original watercolors. The resulting images have an unexpected freshness and immediacy. Their simplification of forms also differs from depictions of the American West by Albert Bierstadt and subsequent generations of California painters who worked in Western traditions. Obata exhibited the World Landscape Series in San Francisco to great acclaim in 1930, and his unique approach to these familiar and beloved natural wonders established him as one of California’s leading artists.

Rainbow Falls, Inyo National Forest
1930
color woodcut on paper

Obata described his first impressions of this dramatic mountain scenery in letters to his wife, Haruko:

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 tops of the walls of a massive rock, which stands perpendicular beside the fall, are thrown the last brilliant rays of the setting sun.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Obata Family, 2000.76.21

Struggle, Trail to Johnson Peak
1930
color woodcut on paper

During his travels in the Sierra Nevada, Obata often found emotional kinship with the natural world, themes he highlighted in a series of newspaper essays from 1928 entitled “In Praise of Nature.” He wrote of admiring the mountain trees for their fortitude:

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. When I see this I feel that man should be devoted and struggle hard to follow his own ambition without willful, selfish reasons.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Obata Family, 2000.76.4
Evening Glow at Mono Lake, from Mono Mills
1930
color woodcut on paper

In letters to his wife, Haruko, during the hiking trip, Obata struggled to express in words the beauty of his surroundings: “When we reached Mono Lake the tranquil lake did not even ripple. A mysterious feeling overwhelmed us. It was beyond description.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Obata Family, 2000.76.10

Sounding River, Tuolumne Canyon
1937
color ink on paper

Obata illustrated this landscape in color in his 1967 Sumi-e manual, accompanied by the following caption:

I had a strong determination to see the Tuolumne River, particularly the Water Wheel Falls, so I started from Glen Aulin. The river bottoms are just big boulders, so the water was very clear, and I spotted many nice-sized trout. . . . I continued on the trail and soon, as I approached I heard a sound like many fighter airplanes mingling in the sky and I had reached the falls. The scenery was so different with rock formations like elephants next to diamond-shaped stones.

Private collection

Mountain Mist (Gilroy Hot Springs)
about 1930s
color ink on paper

Peeking through thick layers of fog is Gilroy Yamato Hot Springs, a mineral bath resort in the Diablo Mountain Range roughly ninety miles south of San Francisco. Opened in the 1860s, it became a popular destination for Japanese Americans after its purchase in 1938 by lettuce farmer Kyuzaburo Sakata, who added a Japanese garden and teahouse to the property. Fire destroyed several structures in 1980, and although the resort is now closed, campaigns for its restoration and for the preservation of its history are underway.

Private collection
World War II and Displacement

Between April 1942 and May 1943, Obata produced more than a hundred drawings and paintings documenting the U.S. government’s forced removal of approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans from their homes on the West Coast. Rendered in fluid and immediate ink brushstrokes, these images depict his family’s involuntary journey from the San Francisco Bay Area—where he and his wife, Haruko Kohashi, had lived for three decades—to the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno, California, and then to the Topaz Relocation Center in Delta, Utah. Obata’s artworks from this period remain one of the most comprehensive, first-person, and real-time painterly records of the Japanese American incarceration during World War II.

Street Scene from the Grandstand Looking at the Barracks
May 31, 1942
sumi on paper

The U.S. government initially detained Obata and other Japanese Americans from the San Francisco region at the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno, California. In this converted horse racing track, families were assigned to cramped and muddy horse stalls with insufficient beds. Almost all possessions were left behind.

Private collection

In the Train
11 a.m., Sept. 24, 1942
sumi on paper

After five months at Tanforan, the Obatas and other prisoners were transferred by train and bus to Topaz Relocation Center in a remote, desolate region of the Utah desert. Obata’s sketches capture glimpses of the journey, arrival procedures, and daily life in the camp.

Private collection

At Topaz Hospital
Apr. 6, 1943
pen on paper

While Obata was walking from the communal showers back to his barrack one evening, someone struck him with a metal instrument on his forehead over his left eye. He received ten stitches and was hospitalized for nineteen days, which led to the permanent release of the Obata family from the camp for their safety in May 1943. Obata later attributed the attack to the bleak conditions in the incarceration camp: “In this Relocation Center, the general colorless scenery—the whitish gray of the barracks, no green vegetation growing—can cause even a person in a splendid state of mind to weaken to rumors, which are constantly present . . . this abnormal state of life can contribute to such dreadful acts.”

Private collection
Obata recruited other imprisoned artists to offer art classes at the incarceration camp. One of his fellow artists, George Matsusaburo Hibi, later described the vicious dust storms of the Utah desert:

*When we arrived at Topaz, it was quite hot and dusty; and when the wind blew, dust covered the whole mile-square camp. We could hardly see a few yards away. But when the dust storm ended, we could only see around us sage brushes in the vast broad plains as far as to the foot of mountains which rise around this area. . . . Not a single grass was growing, nor of course a flower. The world was covered only with gray color, and we felt that we were dumped en masse into a desert where only scorpions and coyotes were living.*

Private collection
Beyond the War

After their release from the incarceration camp at Topaz in Utah, the Obata family lived briefly in St. Louis, Missouri, before returning to California in 1945. Chiura Obata resumed his teaching responsibilities at the University of California, Berkeley, and Haruko Obata’s classes in ikebana flower arranging were soon once again in high demand. Obata returned to his favorite landscape subjects, finding healing in the natural world and offering it to others through his art.

When Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, laws that had prevented Asian immigrants from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens were lifted, allowing Chiura Obata to become a U.S. citizen in 1954.

*Devastation*
1945  
watercolor on paper

Obata responded to the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan, in August 1945, with a trio of large watercolor paintings: *Devastation, Prayer, and Harmony*, showing a cycle of destruction and rebirth. He envisioned the emptiness of the destroyed city as a space in which nature could yet triumph, trusting that hope and life could return and heal the wounds of war. He exhibited the series in 1946.

Private collection

*Dusk: East Bay Bridge*
Nov. 1945  
color ink on paper

At the end of the war, the University of California Regents invited Obata to resume his art professorship at its Berkeley campus, where he taught until his retirement in 1954. *Dusk: East Bay Bridge* captures the poignant moment of his return home in November 1945, after more than three years of imprisonment and displacement.

Private collection

*Itsukushima Shrine Sketchbook*
Nov. 12, 1971  
ink on paper

In 1954, Obata and his wife became naturalized American citizens. Later that year, he was invited to lead a tour group from California to visit Japan. It was the first of the famous “Obata Tours,” which occurred every spring and autumn. Ever diligent in capturing scenes that moved him, Obata kept sketchbooks with him throughout his travels, a lifelong practice also evident in his pre–World War II and wartime work. The *Itsukushima Shrine Sketchbook*, dated November 12, 1971, shows ink drawings from the last tour, prior to his death in 1975, making it the final artwork of Obata’s career included in this retrospective.

Private collection
After being attacked and hospitalized at Topaz, Obata applied to leave the camp, along with his wife, Haruko, and youngest daughter, Yuri, for their safety. In May 1943, they were discharged and moved from Utah to Webster Groves, Missouri, where their son Gyo was studying architecture at Washington University in St. Louis.

Private collection

*Beauty of Struggle*
1953
four-panel screen; oil and gilding on silk

Obata described his working process for this painting in a 1953 letter to a patron:

>This is the painting of the impression of the land along [the] seventeen-mile drive [in] Carmel and Point Lobos, where windblown, aged cypress [trees] stand among moss-covered rocks throughout pure white sand dunes [that] meet [the] deep blue Pacific Ocean . . . The great beauty of the mountain and of the sea are outstanding in nature, and I have been working towards this painting in [the] past forty years. It may sound strange that it takes so many years to produce such a painting, but when one is faced with a great nature changing every moment thru the day and the seasons, one needs the years of study and observation . . .

Joel B. Garzoli Fine Art, San Francisco, CA

*Harmony*
1946
watercolor on paper

Painted in 1946, *Harmony* is the optimistic conclusion to a series of works Obata created in response to the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima, Japan, a year earlier. The artist believed in the power of nature to heal the wounds of war—expressed here by the green grass emerging in the center of a ravaged and desolate landscape.

Private collection
In *Glorious Struggle* a sequoia forest endures a violent storm, an image of fortitude and perseverance Obata hoped would inspire younger generations of Japanese Americans. He described the picture’s symbolism in a 1965 lecture:

*Since I came to the United States in 1903, I saw, faced, and heard many struggles among our Japanese Issei [first-generation immigrants]. 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.”*