Classroom Connection

Experiencing Japanese American Internment through Haiku and Art Created with Found Objects: A Lesson Activity for Grades 9-12 History and Art Students
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Many Japanese Americans created art with found objects while imprisoned in internment camps. Delphine Hirasuna’s book and exhibit The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese American Internment Camps, 1942-1946 showcases the many pieces of art created at the various internment camps. Gaman means “enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity.” Many internees also wrote poignant haikus while imprisoned in the internment camps.

Historical Background

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, anti-Japanese sentiment, unwarranted suspicion of Japanese in America, propaganda, and the failure of the U.S. government to balance Japanese civil liberties and national security led to over 120,000 Japanese being imprisoned in internment camps throughout the country. Many internees, though not trained artists, created intricate and detailed pieces of art with objects found in the camps. To view a map of the internment camps and a comprehensive timeline of events, please use the following link: http://www.densho.org/sitesofshame/map.html.

Suggested Classroom Lesson Activity

1) Students will view all or a portion of an interview with Delphine Hirasuna at http://www.c-span.org/Events/Japanese-American-Internment-Camp-Art/19612/. The interview uses footage from the primary source A Challenge to Democracy (1944), a film by the US War Relocation Authority. In it, Hirasuna weaves her story about the art created in the camps and the resilience of the Japanese internees.

2) Students will explore some of the art created with found objects via a Smithsonian Institute slide show at http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2010/gaman/.

3) Students will analyze primary sources depicting the people, places, daily life, and personal experiences of those at the various internment camps by exploring the following Web sites: http://www.oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=tf596nb4h0&doc.view=items&style=oac4&item.position=1 and http://www.calisphere.universityofcalifornia.edu/jarda/.

4) After watching the interview, exploring some of the art created in the camps, and analyzing primary sources, students will create a piece of art using found objects. The art must attempt to portray the experiences of the Japanese internees. Found objects are everywhere and plentiful. Students may use a primary source as the background of their creation or they may create a freestanding piece of art.

5) After completing their piece of art, students will write a haiku poem that will serve as a prologue to their creation. The haiku has three lines, with the first and third line containing five syllables and the second line containing seven syllables.

The following example of haiku is from Farewell to Manzanar:

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Mountain snow loosens
Rivulets of tears. Washed stones,
Forgotten clearing

More examples of Japanese internee Violet Kazue de Cristoforo’s haikus can be found at http://voiceseducation.org/content/violet-kazue-de-cristoforo-american.

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