

Tales
of
Yasutaro
Ancient
Japan
Takano

A Nightingale sings brightly, announcing the coming of spring while perched along the branches of an Ume (plum) tree. When Emperor Marakami wants a new Ume tree found for his garden, servants locate one. But the previous owner of the tree ties a note to the tree, lamenting the Nightingale's lost home.

*choku nareba itomo kashikoshi
uguisu no yado wa to towaba
ikaga kotaemu*

Should my Emperor
Wish for my humble plum tree,
Honoured, may I muse:
How to tell the nightingales
Where their home has gone this spring?

Centuries after this historic folk tale was written (around 1119, by an unknown author), it was illustrated in 1795 or 1796 by Ukiyo-e* artist Kitao Shigemasa (1739-1820) as *Ōshukubai*, the Heian period tale of the Nightingale in the plum tree.

And in desert dust and sun of a World War II Japanese incarceration camp, Yasutaro Takano, of Alameda, CA., would carve his own interpretation of the 880-year-old tale, along with at least nine other wood carvers in Amache, Colorado.

ALAMEDA
Japanese
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*Ukiyo-e translates into "pictures of the floating world"



Ōshukubai, the tale of the Nightingale and plum tree, by artist Shigemasa Kitao (1795 or 1796), Japan. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2009615637>. The translation of the original Japanese is more accurately 'bush warbler' but most documents seem to prefer Nightingale.



Arriving in Alameda

in the early 1920s from Japan, Yasutaro Takano thought he

would return there when his money ran out, but he had met a number of good people in Alameda. One of them had a hothouse full of plants and needed some help.

“What are those little plants for?” Yasutaro asked of this man, recalled his daughter, Ikuko “Cookie” Takeshita. The man continued, “If you’re going to stay here, you might as well come and help me. The Japanese people here found that it’s not like Japan, you can’t just get a job, and most of us are doing gardening.”

With virtually no knowledge of the subject, he would eventually run a very successful business doing just that.

As the youngest in his family, he didn’t think he would be missed back home. He never told his family in Japan that he was a gardener.

February 1942 • World War II • Furniture or Rice?

President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which forced West Coast Japanese families to abandon their businesses and homes because they allegedly posed a threat to society. The Takanos packed what they could and drove to Cortez, a very small farming town

in the Central Valley of California. “We left at 5:30 in the morning in the dark in February,” Cookie said. “The day we got to Cortez it took us 12 hours. Now you can make it an hour and a half. We got there at 6:30 at night and they said you just missed the FBI.”

“We lived in fear. We were not to be out of the house after 8 o’ clock at night.”

They brought their clothes and other necessities to Cortez, but most unusually, they took sacks of rice... 12 sacks of 100 pounders. They had no idea how valuable those sacks would soon be.

“Amazingly, when we went to the country, a lot of the farmers had not had a chance to buy rice, and



Yasutaro, circa 1915-1933
photo courtesy Takuritsu Morita family

already this was February,” Cookie said.* “We stayed with this one family, they have a big family and have children, but they’re all running out of rice, so my father said, “give it to them.””

“And so the people we stayed with,” Cookie continued, “they said we’re very popular because you’re giving the rice away.”

Yasu’s decision to bring rice, instead of furniture, may seem like a strange one, but Cookie explained further. “We didn’t know we were going to go to camp, but that was the one thing I remembered. That we loaded it up instead of furniture, we left the furniture, everything in the house, we thought we were coming back.”

No idea where they were going. No idea if they were coming back. Rice was more valuable than furniture.

Carving the Wood Panel

Yasu ended up working for the Amache police department, the one job he really didn’t want. He didn’t want to arrest his own people, after seeing what the FBI had done in Alameda. Begrudgingly, he took the position because he was told he would mostly be writing reports. During the eight-hour long shifts, some of his fellow “officers” began to work with wood.

“Food was brought in, in wooden boxes,” Cookie said. “They broke up the crates. That’s how my father started to carve.” Carvers also found their materials in the lumber piles that the Japanese used for many purposes at the camp. They sometimes displayed their work at one of the Women’s mess halls at Amache.



Takano sculpted plum branches by undercutting.

He made thousands of dotted indentations for the background by tapping nail heads into the pine surface, Mas said, bundling several nails together to press into the wood at one time.

“The process requires time, patience and a steady hand,” said Sheri Tharp, a woodcarving teacher of 30 years in Berkeley, California, who examined Yasutaro’s carvings with Cookie.



Plum blossoms continue to be a popular attraction in Japan, for locals and tourists. Perhaps the most famous art created about plum blossoms was a Ukiyo-e woodblock created by Utagawa Hiroshige in 1857.



When the Emperor realizes his selfishness, he restores the tree to it's former location.



Another woodcarving by Yasutaro.

While Cookie does not recall her father taking lessons of any kind, she did laugh when thinking back upon the two wood panels that her father created, since the fish and the plum blossom panel is similar to many others made at Amache.

“They all had one pattern,” Cookie said. “Everyone in Amache has the fish and the tree,” which tends to indicate there were lessons, or a template to follow.

Yasutaro may have found that template

in an Amache wood carving class held by Yutaka Suzuki, of Japan. Before the war, Yutaka was living in Los Angeles with his family and worked as a fruit merchant and nursery proprietor.

He taught carving at Amache and may have had assistants teaching as well. Students used the same template, and nine panels of the nightingale and tree design have survived the war, including Yasutaro’s.

He channeled his energy into learning a time-honored craft

using cast-off materials and a desire to create beauty and calm his mind in difficult times.

Yasutaro told the children to rise above the squalor and think of the lotus in Buddhist teachings: “Out of the mud comes beauty.” His craftsmanship speaks for itself and to the nature of the man.

“He was not an artist,” Cookie said of her father. “We never thought my father had that kind of talent. We were floored. We never thought he could carve like he did.”





Wood panels courtesy
Mas and Cookie Takano.
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Additional information
courtesy Nancy Ukai of
the 50 objects website:

[https://50objects.org/
object/plum-and-nightin-
gale-carvings/](https://50objects.org/object/plum-and-nightingale-carvings/)





**Yasutaro Takano, far left, in Alameda, CA.
Circa 1924-1933**