

# Charles Mikami, Internment Camp Artist, Dies at 96



"Topaz" (August 1943, watercolor) by Suiko Mikami.

**MORGAN HILL** — Charles Erabu Mikami, a painter whose works have been exhibited from San Jose to Washington, D.C., died Sept. 16 at the age of 96 at his home, the San Jose Mercury News reports.

Born in Hiroshima, he sailed to America with the last of the picture brides in 1920, earned and lost a home, earned and lost a farm and a hauling business, then spent World War II in two internment camps and lived out the rest of years as a Morgan Hill farmer.

Mikami's life told a familiar tale of Japanese immigration early in the 20th century, but also an unfamiliar tale of talent long subordinated and finally released.

As a schoolboy in Japan, he discovered sumi-e (brush painting) and sought to pursue it as a career. His grandfather wanted him to teach. Instead, an 18-year-old Mikami boarded a ship filled with young women destined for arranged marriages in the U.S.

In Seattle, he joined his father and mother, who had immigrated in 1907.

Barred by law from land ownership or U.S. citizenship, Mikami worked with his father in a lumber mill and saved \$2,000, then indentured himself as a houseboy for a Caucasian family and went to school to learn English. He earned \$20 a month, plus room and board, said his grandson, Fred Crane.

After teaching in a Japanese language school for \$50 a month, he used his savings to become a tenant farmer with a partner. Their crops failed and he had to leave with a \$700 debt.

Then Mikami tried the hauling business for tenant truck farmers who couldn't afford their own vehicles. He persuaded a truck owner to let him have a vehicle for \$2,000 — when he earned some money. He did, regularly clearing \$20 a day, and sometimes \$30 when he didn't sleep, according to Crane.

By the mid-1920s, Mikami had built a house on a hill and taken a bride, Yaeko Mori. He avoided the land-owning prohibition by putting the title in the name of a friend who was a U.S. citizen.

Yaeko bore a son, Harry, but died shortly after the birth of a daughter, June. Both children were sent to Japan for their education in the 1930s. They remained in there until after World War II.

Mikami married his wife's cousin, Mifuye Ota, and they had two sons, Kai Kazuto and Dean.

But the Depression cost him much of what he had saved.

Because he had taught Japanese and had been a leader in the Japanese American community in Seattle, Mikami, along with many other Issei men, was arrested immediately after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, said his son Kai. "To this day, we personally don't know where he was sent," he said.

Mifuye and her sons were processed at Pinedale, near Fresno, and sent to Tule Lake. Mikami was released and joined them for a time before the family went to the internment camp in Topaz, Utah. Tule Lake was converted essentially to a prison camp for Japanese Americans who had renounced their U.S. citizenship after being detained and others who wanted to return to Japan after the war, said Kai Mikami, now a Seattle architect.

## Time to Paint

Ironically, the forced relocation meant that for the first time in his life, Charles Mikami had time to paint. He repaid friends who gave him paper and supplies with Japanese scenes, and he spent the duration earning \$19 a month teaching brush painting and documenting life in the camps with his own art.

His internment camp art has been exhibited at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C., and in San Jose area museums.

Two of his paintings, "Tule Lake" and "Topaz," both done in 1943, were included in "The View From Within: Japanese Art From the Internment Camps, 1942-45," an exhibition organized by the Japanese American National Museum and UCLA Asian American Studies Center.

After the war, the Mikamis moved to the second house of Mifuye's parents, who returned to their prewar farm in Coyote, and grew tomatoes. He saved enough to buy his own eight acres nearby

and grew walnuts, pears and apples.

Mikami also started a produce stand along the Monterey Highway. "It was a reasonably good-sized operation for its time," Kai Mikami said, "but as soon as the freeway came, business died out."

"To paint, you have to be relaxed," Charles Mikami told an interviewer in 1974 at one of the exhibitions of his paintings. "You must have no worries about things like money, but you must have the feeling to paint."

Mikami had it. In retirement, he painted under the name "Suiko," practiced calligraphy and taught brush painting. Under the pen name "Chari," he wrote and taught senryu, a form of poetry similar to haiku.

He was active in the South County Japanese American community, starting a club to assist Issei. In 1978, the Japanese government awarded him the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Fifth Class, for his efforts to promote Japanese culture and U.S.-Japan goodwill through art and poetry.

A mild stroke affected the quality of Mikami's work in the 1980s and he stopped painting, but he continued his poetry. An intestinal infection required surgery and a recurrence ultimately caused his death.

"The Japanese of his generation tended to internalize any feelings. It was bad form to express bitterness," said Kai Mikami. "'Things happen,' they said. 'Regardless if they're good or bad, you move on.'"

Charles Mikami is survived by his children, Harry Kazuya Mikami of Morgan Hill, June Junko Crane of San Jose, Dean Yoshio Mikami of San Jose, and Kai Kazuto Mikami of Seattle; a sister, Terumi Mikami of Japan; 11 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

Services have been held. Memorial donations may be made to Wesley United Methodist Church, 556 N. Fifth St., San Jose 95112.

Hokubei Mainichi  
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