

January 8, 1980

Despite the inclusion of Asian Americans into the institutional life of this country since World War II, they have been excluded from recognitions in the arts. It is a sad commentary on the cultural life of this society ^{which} ~~for~~ the experience of racial groups have been relegated to an obscure position in the world of art. Only recently have national institutions such as the National Endowment for the Arts began to acknowledge the existence and contributions of Asian American cultural groups in the San Francisco Bay Area whose purpose is to expose their communities and other communities to cultural and artistic endeavor and to make the Asian American Community more visible to the wider community of which it is a unique part.

As many Asian American writers have long pointed out, the problem of cultivating a community audience is critical and it is time that the cultural sensibilities unique to the Asian experience in America be expressed and made available to community people who are unaware of their "internal" resources. For too long, the traditions of Japan, China, Korea and the Philippines have been viewed as the cultural base of Japanese-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Korean-Americans and Filipino-Americans to the exclusion of recognizing the cultural realities springing from the experiences of Asian groups within this country.

Although Asian American history expands more than a century and contains a diverse and heterogeneous cultural experience, only recently has the renaissance occurring among community artists, writers and intellectuals since the 1960's been promoted through arts, drama, literature, film and other media which have brought forward to richness of this heritage. But much more needs to be done. The momentum generated by these artists need to be maintained and new vistas and styles of cultural expression having historical, contemporary and comparative significance for Asian American communities must be developed.

In the Japanese Canadian photographic exhibits, a unique opportunity is presented for expressing and illuminating the cultural and historical roots of the Japanese-Canadian experience and in the process, raising new questions and new insights into the Japanese American experience. Starkly beautiful in themselves, the pictures present the history and culture of one small minority in Canada, but beyond their undeniable artistic value, the pictures reveal something about Canada, about Japanese Canadians and about Japanese Americans. The exhibit and accompanying text provide a counterpoint and comparison with the Japanese American experience evoking powerful and sometimes disturbing parallels between the experience of Japanese in North America. The comparisons ~~were~~ ^{will} undoubtedly raise ~~noble~~ ^{profound} issues and stimulate greater research which will shed light on the whys and hows of the Japanese experience in North America.

This photographic essay was produced by the Japanese Canadian Centennial Project and has toured Canada, Japan and selected cities in the United States. The exhibit consists of 200 enlarged pictures approximately 32" x 40" framed in glass and aluminum. Beneath each picture is a text which narrates aspects of Japanese Canadian history and culture. The set of pictures weigh approximately one ton and requires 200 linear feet to adequately stage the exhibit.

Despite its proximity to the United States, Canada remains to many Americans a silently cooperative partner. We know little about its history and culture, and we know even less about the character of Canadian race relations. It may be startling to us that the history of Japanese-Canadians provides the potential for informing Americans--minority and majority--about a unique part of the Canadian experience that can teach us about America's treatment of racial minorities, too.

Historically, Japanese-Canadians played an important role in the development of Canadian society as laborers, farmers and fishermen, yet their presence generated hostile sentiments and efforts to exclude them from full participation in Canadian institutional and economic life. Through their prolonged battle against discrimination and hardship, however, Japanese-Canadians have slowly won the right to participate more fully in Canadian culture and politics and only in the past few decades have their contributions to Canada become more widely recognized, in part, through the efforts of the Japanese-Canadian Centennial Project.

Our sponsoring organization, the Japan Town Art Movement is a community based art and cultural project designed to preserve and encourage the growth of Japanese/Asian American culture, educate the community on the role of art and provide graphic and artistic support for community endeavor. Formed in 1974, JTAM is a non profit-tax-exempt corporation organized under the laws of the State of California and located in San Francisco. Over the years, it has organized art programs for members of the community, a Community Art Center, community art projects including the sponsorship of the Nihonmachi Street Fair and the Oshogatsu celebration (Japanese New Year's), poetry readings and musical and dance performances. JTAM also acts as a resource for community art needs providing services and equipment for work in graphics and art.

As a special project of the Japan Town Art Movement, the Japanese Canadian-American Project is striving to produce more than a photographic exhibit. Presenting the exhibit as a focal point, we hope to create a broad educational and community event in keeping with our concerns about greater art and cultural exposure within our communities. Thus, symposiums and workshops comparing the history, art and culture of Japanese-Canadians and Japanese Americans will be presented.

Artwork and crafts produced by Japanese American artists during their World War II internment experience will also be displayed for comparative purposes. In this way, we hope to combine a sense of feeling and life with the striking black and white pictures which comprise this photo exhibit.

Having made the commitment toward the production of community event, we are encouraging broad participation by the various Asian communities in the Bay Area in this project. We hope to provide transportation for the Issei--first generation settlers and pioneers--who will find warm similarities between their experience and the faces and back grounds portrayed in the photographs. Furthermore, we intend to enlist the support of community organizations, provide child care and publicize this event widely. Thus, the larger community will be targeted as well as the Asian American community.

We hope to present the exhibit in July, 1980 at the Fine Art Resources Center near San Francisco Nihonmachi or at Art Museums with whom we are currently communicating. We are requesting \$150,000 to cover costs of transportation, rental of facilities, security, travel, stipends, publicity, mailing and for an opening night gala celebration. Hopefully, through the success of this project in the San Francisco Bay Area, we will encourage other cities in the United States to undertake the organizing and financing necessary for the presentation of this exhibit.