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Michio Iwao Interview

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Interviewer: Grace Johnson

Artist: Michio Iwao (with his daughter Jacquelin Denofrio)

Location: In person- Chicago, IL JASC (Japanese American Service Committee)

Date: February 13,2017

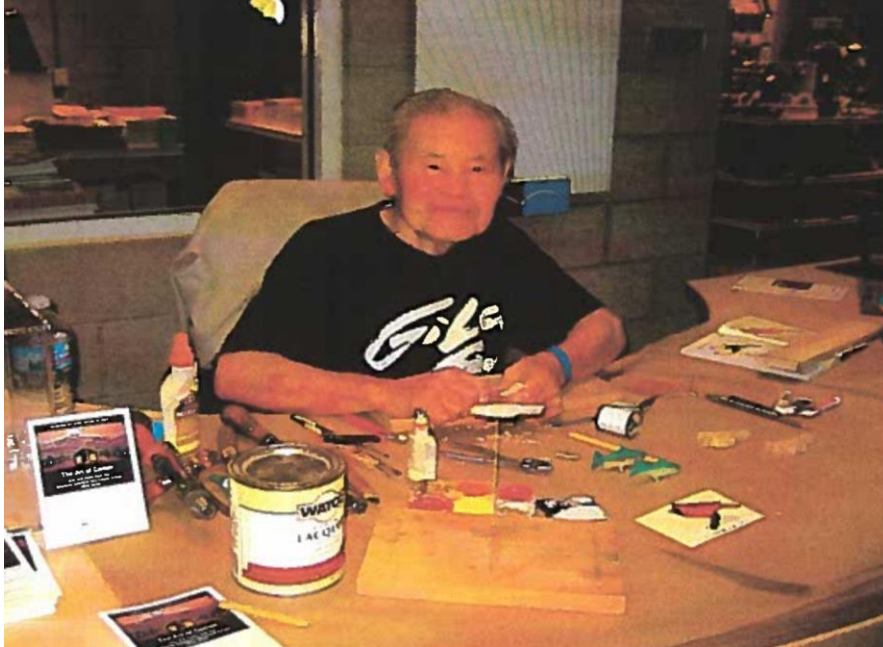


Photo courtesy of Jacquelin Denofrio 2017

***Note:** the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2016-2017 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media & Design.*

Bio: Michio Iwao is one of four sons of the parents Kotama and Tomonosuke Iwao. He is known as an Asian American craftsperson that was born on July 12, 1922 in Suisun City, California. During World War II Michio and his family were relocated and held at the Gila River Internment Camp also known as Trulock. This stay lasted from 1942 to 1945 under the War Relocation Authority. This Japanese Internment camp inspired Iwao to spend his idle time learning how to make bird pins. This was the start of Iwao becoming a craftsperson.

Interview Transcript:

Grace Johnson: Tell me a little bit about yourself.

Michio Iwao: I'm an old man [laughs].

GJ: How did the Japanese American internment camp experience impact you?

MI: Well, I don't know, it was an experience I was just out of high school, 19 when they threw us out so it was a "vacation" for me. I was working, you know, when the war started, yeah.

GJ: Tell me about the meaning of your bird pins that you have created?

Jackie Denofrio [Michio Iwao's daughter]: How did you start making the bird pins?

MI: When I was in camp, I think it was in Turlock [Japanese internment camp in California] we had a lot of time on our hands and so I heard that someone was teaching how to make things so I went to take a look and I saw Nisei [2nd generation Japanese Americans] tried to do it you know. I said if the Nisei's could do it, I can do it so that's how I got started.

GJ: How did you make them?

MI: Wood was one of the hardest things to get. We used to go to the mess hall where the eggs used to come in crates. The wood was about 3/8th inches thick and we took the pieces off the egg crate and then we drew pictures on it. Then we took a coping saw and a pocket knife to cut it all out. There was a Nisei showing us how to do it so I said, if they can do it, I can do it. That's how I got started.

GJ: How did the bird pins help you get through such a hard time?

MI: Something to do. In other words, it was better than sitting and doing nothing while I was an athlete, so I also learned how to play golf, football, basketball.

GJ: Were the bird pins a coping mechanism, an activity to pass the time or both?

MI: An activity to pass the time.

GJ: Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes and histories in your artwork? If so please give a specific example.

JD: So, do your birds, are any of them related to Asian themes?

MI: No.

JD: You have a koi fish right here. What about this goldfish? These are what, Japanese? [showing collection of fish and bird pins]

MI: Yes.

GJ: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

MI: Well, I started working at the art company and then I don't know how I got started carving birds but in camp there was an older person that taught me how to carve these birds [cut off]

JD: No, she's asking dad, as far as showing your artwork what has changed over the years? When did you start showing them and then how have they changed?

MI: Through the JASC [Japanese American Service Committee] they had a charity event and I started carving fish for my fishing club because they wanted to raise money so I carved salmon and trout for Lake Michigan, took it to them and asked them how many cents can I make [laughs]. I raised money for them by selling them. Then I made them for the JASC for their fundraiser and everyone loved the fish.

JD: He made two series of fish, one the Lake Michigan series with Salmon and Trout. He started raising money and he would always just donate and it took him about a month to make. He displayed them here [JASC], Japanese festivals, and at the Buddhist temple.

GJ: You were a part of the "Art of Gaman" exhibit of arts and crafts by Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II.¹ You ended up donating your bird pins from the tour to the empress of Japan which in a letter she wrote to you she said she cherishes. How did this accomplishment make you feel?

JD: Were you proud that the Empress of Japan sent you a letter?

MI: Well yeah, it went to somebody important [laughs].

JD: And you gave her what the cardinal? Right?

MI: Yes

JD: [shows letter from Empress of Japan]

GJ: And that's it. Those are all my questions.

JD: Okay.

END

¹*The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese American Internment Camps, 1942-1946.* March 5, 2010–January 30, 2011 Smithsonian American Art Museum, Renwick Gallery, Washington, DC. Curated by Delphine Hirasuna.
<http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2010/gaman/>.