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Michio Iwao Interview

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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