



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
January 5, 2007

“Only what we could carry was the rule, so we carried strength, dignity and soul.”

-Lawson Fusao Inada,
The Art of Gaman exhibit
at the Museum of Craft
and Folk Art, San
Francisco

A few weeks ago one of our regular library patrons highly recommended both a book and the exhibit it represents. They are both called *The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese American Internment Camps 1942-1946* and the author and curator is Delphine Hirasuna. I immediately checked out the book and after looking through it, knew I would have to go and see some of the amazing objects presented. This past week, I finally made it there - and I'm very glad I did.

It is difficult to use words to describe the feeling of being immersed in the astounding story of our nation's decision to incarcerate some of its citizens. On the walls are replicas of notices that were posted, giving the Japanese Americans one week to turn themselves in. One of these notices, shown in the book, begins: "INSTRUCTIONS TO ALL PERSONS OF JAPANESE ANCESTRY..." then continues with instructions on where and when to report, as

well as what property to take with them. Included in this are bedding, linens, and "sufficient knives, forks, spoons, plates, bowls and cups for each member of the family." No pets were permitted and "no personal items and no household goods will be shipped to the Assembly Center."

In her book, Hirasuna tells the story of how this came to be and it is not difficult to make a connection between the hysteria of that time and the fears that were particularly widespread after the September 11, 2001, attack. So, in the current political situation, it is not only important for Japanese Americans that this story be told, but it is essential for all of us as well.

The exhibit is beautifully laid out. There are huge black-and-white photographs on the wall, showing some of the artists at work. And the art is incredible - there are dolls, wooden boxes, sculptures, paintings, geta (wooden sandals),

and a large display of carved wooden bird pins. One of these pins – made from scrap lumber – was the impetus for the book. Hirasuna found it in a “dust-covered wooden box,” and she concluded it must have been carved while her parents were in the camp. “This prompted me,” she comments, “to wonder what other objects made in the camps lay tossed aside and forgotten, never shown to anyone because they might generate questions too painful to answer.”

Other displays include a wall of carved canes, made from every type of wood available. The explanation with these canes includes: “Not allowed vehicles, internees walked everywhere in camp. The unpaved paths were sandy, muddy, slippery with ice, or severely potholed, depending on the season. The making of walking sticks began as a necessity, but soon became a fad...”

Other objects, in Plexiglas cases, are teapots carved from stone, a smoking set, lent by a local Albany resident, and a hand stenciled Hanafuda deck – a card game my children and I used to play.

The names of the internment camps are stenciled on tarpaper-covered walls, designed to symbolize the barracks used for internment camp housing. They provide a stark contrast to the beauty and artistry of the objects on display.

This exhibit will run until February 25, 2007, and there will be free admission on Monday, February 19, as a way of commemorating the signing of Executive Order #9066, “which called for the internment of anyone of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast and was carried out from the Presidio in San Francisco.”