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**Asian Pacific American Visual Artists in a Modern Seattle: 1960s to 1980s**

Mayumi Tsutakawa

Contributing Writer

Arts Ecosystem Research Project

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**Abstract**

The relationships, connections, and community networks of Asian American and Pacific Islander visual artists in the Seattle area reveal their responses to conditions wrought from a history of discrimination and economic inequality, overlaid with their own cultural heritage. From the 1960s to the 1980s, they formed bonds and shared concepts with kindred spirits, excelled in art achievements, and formed their own fellowships, creating a fabric of pan-Asian art. Moreover, non-Asian artists learned and benefited in crucial ways as they learned Asian art techniques and subject matter from API artists. After World War II, younger Asian American artists in Seattle rebuilt art-community ties. Community-focused art clubs nurtured and engaged artists of color, and less traditional venues augmented limited opportunities in galleries and museums for recognition. These artists found training opportunities in high schools and college-level art schools including the University of Washington and [Cornish College of the Arts](#). [The Wing Luke Asian Museum](#)'s first Asian American invitational art exhibition, held in 1979 in its original space in the International District, featured 59 pan-Asian artists representing all art forms, selected by community-based curators. The success of this show encouraged the museum to continue to present fine arts by local API artists. From 1960s Jet Dreams to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Establishment Asian American and Pacific Islander artists, both native-born and those recently arrived from around the Pacific Rim, have come to expand the vocabulary and definitions of what makes the Seattle art world, some achieving renown and others still awaiting further recognition and celebration.

### **Author's note**

Writing this article provided me with an opportunity to recognize and give shape to the era from postwar to contemporary times among Asian American and Pacific Islander artists in Seattle. What began as an idea blossomed into this survey of artists, their networks, and their influence on later generations, but it is by no means complete. I invite other arts writers to fill in the missing pieces and enrich our knowledge of this important period of growth in API art.

### **Asian Pacific American Artists in a Modern Seattle: 1960s to 1980s**

Delving into the ways in which Asian American and Pacific Islander visual artists in the Seattle area developed their relationships, connections and community networks reveals their responses to human and community conditions wrought from a history of discrimination and economic inequality, but overlaid with their own cultural heritage. From the 1960s to the 1980s, they formed bonds and shared concepts with kindred spirits, excelled in art achievements, and formed their own fellowships, creating a fabric of pan-Asian art. Moreover, students of Pacific Northwest art history know that non-Asian artists learned and benefited in crucial ways as they learned Asian art techniques and subject matter from API artists.

Earlier achievements of Asian American artists in the Seattle region prior to World War II have been extensively researched and documented. The nationally recognized Seattle Camera Club; the collegial group of painters, Kamekichi Tokita, Kenjiro Nomura and Takuichi Fuji; and their art exhibitions and prizes for landscapes and urban realist paintings have been noted. But the atrocity of the imprisonment of Japanese Americans in American concentration camps during World War II, decimated the Asian American community. After the war, younger Asian American artists in Seattle rebuilt art-community ties from the 1950s through the 1980s.

Sometimes creating in solitary spaces while working other jobs to support families, at times gaining larger public responses, these cultural artists persevered as Seattle forged a modern Jet Age legacy based on industry and technology.

### **Building Fellowship From the Ground Up**

In Seattle, community-focused art clubs nurtured and engaged artists of color. The International Art Exhibition, an outgrowth of the 1930s Chinese Art Club centered in the Chinatown/International District, was organized annually in the 1950s and grew as an element of the energetic Chinatown Seafair celebrations into the 1960s. Talented Chinese/Modernist style artists Fay Chong, Andrew Chinn, and Yippe Eng took part while challenging the definitions of Modernist art. This International Art Exhibition group welcomed noted Black American sculptor Dr. James Washington, Jr.

At the same time, the groundbreaking gallerist Zoe Dusanne, an African American art expert from New York, specialized in showing modern art in her chic North Capitol Hill gallery from 1950 to 1964. Contemporary art audiences are learning about the importance of the role she played in shining a spotlight on the Japanese American abstract artists George Tsutakawa, Paul Horiuchi, John Matsudaira, Kenjiro Nomura and Filipino American Val Laigo. Even the visiting conceptual artist Yayoi Kusama, on her way from Tokyo to New York City, showed her art there. Documentation of these communal art gatherings at the Dusanne Gallery was steadfastly shot by excellent biracial news photographer Elmer Ogawa.

More surprising to today's art connoisseurs, the Western Washington Fair in Puyallup presented a prestigious annual art exhibition, providing the space, prizes and publicity for many artists of color from the 1920s to 1960s. Beyond the elite [Seattle Art Museum](#), the Puyallup Fair

art show awarded juried recognition to API artists rarely noticed by wealthy non-Asian art collectors.

Photographers such as Chao-chen Yang and Johsel Namkung worked in labs to perfect groundbreaking color photography processing, followed by excellent portrait photography work by Que Chin, Yuen Lui and Wah Lui, and museum documentary work by Paul Macapia and Victor Gardaya. Johsel Namkung's intensive work with large scale color nature photography led to a major solo exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum in 1978.

### **Institutions as Home Bases**

API artists found training opportunities in high schools and college-level art schools. The University of Washington School of Art nurtured the talents of key Japanese American artists. George Tsutakawa, who received his BFA and MFA at the UW, was invited to join the faculty in 1947 and taught there for more than 30 years, even as his international sculpture and fountain commissions grew in number and stature.

He influenced students such as the funk and Pop-Art inflected ceramicist Patti Warashina and painter and printmaker Roger Shimomura. Warashina, who grew up in Spokane, earned her BFA and MFA degrees at the UW in the early 1960s. She joined the faculty and taught there in the '70s and '80s, inspiring students with her innovative and witty ceramic constructions. Her work is now widely collected. Her close colleague Roger Shimomura, born in Seattle in 1939, received his BA from the University of Washington and MFA from Syracuse University, then taught at the University of Kansas from 1969 to 2004. His fine pop, comic book and ukiyoe-style works, often featuring self-portraits, have been nationally exhibited. Shimomura's work represents a wry look at the America that imprisoned his family during World War II and

perpetuated racism and anti-Asian sentiment over the decades. Video artist Norie Sato, received her MFA in 1974 and continues to innovate extensively in the field of public art.

At [Cornish College](#), Seattle-born abstractionist Frank Okada impressed local critics as a student, before going on to receive his BFA at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. His large-scale color field and abstract works created a balance of forms and textures without reference to nature or himself and have been exhibited extensively. In 1969 he returned to the Pacific Northwest to join the art faculty at the University of Oregon where he taught until 1999. As a native of Seattle and part of a large and eminent family, he maintained ties in Seattle through family, collegial and gallery avenues.

At Seattle University, noted Filipino American painter Val Laigo received his BA in 1954 and joined the art faculty in 1965. His historic 65 foot-long mural graces the Lemieux Library there. Alongside involvement in Filipino community and youth programs, Laigo's largest commission was his outdoor mosaic mural at Jose Rizal Park, on the northern point of Beacon Hill, completed in 1981, shortly before his death in Seattle.

### **Organizations Provide Context and Community**

The Northwest Watercolor Society created a home base for a number of these post-war API artists with their fine talents in all art media, including a facility for the use of watercolor. In its 75-year history, the Society exhibited and awarded prizes to Chinese painters Andrew Chinn and Fay Chong, as well as the aforementioned artists Tsutakawa, Okada and Matsudaira. John Matsudaira, a WWII veteran, stands out as a modern abstractionist of this region. He trained at the local Burnley School of Art (later the Art Institute of Seattle) and had solo exhibitions at the Zoe Dusanne Gallery.

An outstanding watercolorist, Fumiko Kimura, based in Tacoma and trained in chemistry, also was active in the Society. With her talents in Japanese calligraphy and sumi painting, she went on to innovate new painting forms beyond watercolor and established the Puget Sound Sumi Artists Association, which was opened to non-Asian members who studied the Asian art form.

From the 1960s to 1980s, other Seattle-based Asian artists such as Ikune Sawada, Midori Kono Thiel, Frank Fujii, and Mineko Namkung merged traditional styles and training in calligraphy, to cross with modern forms in painting. The Korean Art Group, Ikebana International Society, and Meito Shodo-Kai Japanese Calligraphy Association came to create active and warm local exhibitions celebrating their traditional cultures amid a Jet Age Seattle, to the delight of the public and many school children.

Northwest craft arts were strongly advanced by excellent independent ceramic artists Carl Kishida, and Yoji Kan. Ron Ho was a leading innovator of jewelry design, utilizing Chinese antique objects in his wearable constructions. He grew up in Hawaii and was responsible for introducing the arts of Southeast Asia and India to a welcoming Seattle audience. Fabric artist Priscilla Chong Jue also was active in exhibiting and teaching weaving, batik and screen printed fabric.

Some talented and skilled artists could not support their families as studio fine artists and applied their skills to commercial art. Painters Andrew Chinn and John Matsudaira were employed in drafting and illustration for The Boeing Co. Mitsuru 'Mits' Katayama worked as a graphic designer and illustrator in the publishing trade. Visual artists Fay Chong, Ron Ho and Frank Fujii taught art in the public schools for decades.

### **International District as Exhibition Central**



The [Wing Luke Asian Museum's](#) first Asian American invitational art exhibition was held in 1979 in its original space on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue South, near King Street in the International District. The month-long exhibition featured 59 pan-Asian artists representing all art forms, including ceramicist Patti Warashina; photographers Johsel Namkung and Victor Gardaya; painters Andrew Chinn, Ikune Sawada, and Val Laigo; and jeweler Nadine Kariya. Community-based curators were Vera Ing, Frank Fujii, and Ayame Tsutakawa. A substantial catalog was written to accompany this exhibition. The success of this show encouraged the Wing Luke Museum to continue to present fine arts by local API artists through the years. In 1996, "Beyond the Rock Garden" featured innovative work in the craft media.

Also in the International District, the Cicada Cooperative Craft Gallery operated on Jackson Street, in the Bush Hotel building, from about 1976 to 1984. A group of 20 multiethnic fine craft artists displayed their work in a former historic barber shop, sharing duties to keep the space open for visitors. The gallery exhibited ceramics, woodworking, jewelry and fabric art. Among the artists were potters Doreen Lew, Paddy McNeely, and Colleen Morisaki; rare-bead artists Afua and Diana Bower; and sculptor Gerard Tsutakawa.

Another arts organization based in the International District was Kingstreet Media, a media collective focused on film, radio, television and photography. Documentary photographer Dean Wong lead the group from 1980 onwards and the group's mainstays were Mark Mano, Sumi Hayashi, John Harada, Ken Mochizuki and Jeff Hanada. They offered workshops on photography, video and audio production. A high point of Kingstreet Media's early history was certainly the 1984 production of "Beacon Hill Boys," an Asian American cult film classic based on a novel by Mochizuki recounting a young man's struggle to build an identity amid the drug culture of the 1970s.

### **The 1990s and Beyond**

As major institutions such as Seattle Art Museum, [Bellevue Art Museum](#), and Tacoma Art Museum expanded their definitions of a community's culture and reconsidered how to offer it to the public, API community-based arts groups advocated through the voices of political and home-grown artists in public exhibitions and talks. As Asian Pacific American theater, music and literature spawned performance venues and publishers, the API visual arts created art spaces, gallery exhibitions, publications and training for youth.

No longer scattered friendships between individual API artists with occasional forays into major museums or commercial galleries, the Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, South Asian, Vietnamese and other newcomer Asian artists have blossomed through training, exhibitions, street, gender and political art, technological innovation and comradeship. Asian American and Pacific Islander artists, both native-born and those who have just arrived from around the Pacific Rim to make a home in Seattle, along with artists from Africa and Latin America, now form a core of Seattle creativity. From 1960s Jet Dreams to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Establishment, they have come to expand the vocabulary and definitions of what makes the Seattle art world, some achieving renown and others still awaiting further recognition and celebration. They are the many threads of a fabric, woven to innovate and strengthen Pacific Northwest art.

Note: This article was written for the Arts Ecosystem Research Project by author and art historian Mayumi Tsutakawa, through an initiative to commission perspectives by community scholars, journalists, and other voices to illuminate aspects of the Seattle region's creative ecosystem, with support from 4Culture. The author retains all copyrights. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing. Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

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In addition to the sources listed below, information and insights were gained from conversations with cultural writers Ron Chew, Barbara Johns, Alan Lau, and David Martin.

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