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While most of Obata's internment-era paintings were black-and-white documentation, "Dust Storm Topaz" (1943) shows the natural fury of the Topaz Relocation Center's surrounding desert.

◀ "WEATHERING THE STORM" CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

"He believed that when you are making art, you have to concentrate," Wang said. "And when you're concentrating, you have a calmness of the mind to be able ... not be so affected by the traumatic experience around you."

When they moved to Topaz in September 1942, they brought the art school with them. But in April 1943, Obata was allegedly attacked by an unknown assailant and hospitalized. He was released with his family, and reunited with his son in Missouri.

At the end of of internment in 1946, 1,862 internees had died, mostly from medical issues. One in 10 died from tuberculosis.

"What we had built up during that long period—more than half a century or even a century—we had to leave and abandon," Obata said. "They lost everything. I don't think anyone earned anything from that experience."

### RETURNING TO COLOR

With immigrant artists, museums sometimes drop "American" from their identity. Asian-American artworks may be shown in the "Asian" department, while white artists can define mainstream art history, even when an artist of color may have originated an idea.

Through the traveling exhibit, Wang hopes to persuade museums to integrate Obata's story.

"I'm presenting him as an American artist without the Japanese qualifier," said Wang. "I'm asking American museums to think about their definitions of American art and their collections."

The exhibit is semi-chronological, presenting Obata's tendencies: watercolor and ink paintings of landscapes, animals, *ikebana* (Japanese flower arrangements), his magazine covers, and his documentations of every day life.

"It was very important that we include post-World War [II] work [in the exhibit]," Wang said. "It's also a way to say that while World War II was

a crucial period for people who were incarcerated, some of them returned to what they did before as a sign of resilience, as a sign to say, 'I'm not defeated by this experience.'"

Hope is a central theme in Obata's 1946 trilogy reacting to the Hiroshima-Nagasaki atomic bombings, which killed between 100,000 and 200,000 Japanese civilians, and led to Japan's surrender.

In the first painting, "Devastation," two people sit amid battleground of dirt-colored splatters signifying the wreckage. And in the third painting, "Harmony," smoke-infected sunrays illuminate a patch of green grass.

"He seemed to want to suggest that while the annihilation is almost complete, we can still survive," Wang said.

After the war ended, Obata returned to teaching at UC Berkeley, where he retired in 1954. Two years prior, he was able to finally acquire citizenship after the Immigration Act of 1952 ended Asian exclusion. He continued painting and, for two decades, led 'Obata Tours' to Japan. He died in 1975, at age 89.

"He was determined to introduce Americans to the traditional arts and culture and scenic beauty of Japan, and hopefully that way teach Americans and Japanese to appreciate each other's cultures, to create a bridge of understanding," Kodani Hill said.

The end of the exhibit shows a resurgence of vibrant landscapes. A bold dungeness crab painting from 1961 calls back to his prewar *sumi-e* animals. Some paintings show giant sequoia trees, which Obata praised as survivors.

"Think of the fact that it was more than 30 centuries ago when the sequoia trees sprung out from tiny seeds, even long before Christ was born," he wrote in the 1933 essay. "You can imagine what tedious hardship and experience—wind, rain, snow, storm, drought and avalanche—the trees have gone through during their life without crying. This is real existence, not imagination, not abstract impression." □