
Landscape of Incarceration: Works by Roger Shimomura

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abstract

This paper will conduct a close reading of Roger Shimomura's "Minidoka" series, which he executed in 1978–79 by appropriating a number of ukiyo-e images. "Minidoka" refers to an incarceration camp Shimomura and his family were sent to following the Pearl Harbor attack and the outbreak of the Pacific War. The series consists of six paintings that chronologically narrate Japanese Americans' experience of incarceration. Although Shimomura has long been known for his use of ukiyo-e images, their sources have never been examined in detail before. During my research, I was able to identify a number of sources for "Minidoka" paintings. For instance, the first painting of the series, *Notification*, includes images taken from Sharaku, Utamarao, and Shiba Kōkan while the second *Exodus* contains images from Hiroshige, Kiyonaga, and such. The third work *Diary* features a large image taken from Keisai Eisen as well as an image of a mother and a son from Utamaro. It is difficult, however, to realize the scene is set in an incarceration camp, because Shimomura depicts such motifs as barbed wire and a watch tower far in the background. This prompts a question: why did Shimomura have to use ukiyo-e images in order to depict the landscape of incarceration? I will argue that this had something to do with the "redress movement" started in 1978. Before that, Japanese Americans repressed their memory of incarceration and tried to assimilate into the white-dominant American society. Shimomura's family was not an exception, and the artist was never familiar with Japanese art and culture. He in fact chose to use ukiyo-e out of frustration that he was always expected to do something "Japanese." Just as Japanese Americans had to visit camp sites and recreated camp life in order to regain their memory, Shimomura used ukiyo-e images to rediscover his own memory of incarceration camp and regain the cultural heritage that had been cut off because of the war.