

EXHIBITION REVIEW

A Look Back at Japanese Internment

By Edward Rothstein

H Hyde Park and Queens, N.Y.

How did it happen that 75 years ago this week the decision was made to send about 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry who lived along the West Coast to internment camps deep in the nation's heartland? How did it happen that—as we see in the photographs in a fine new exhibition at the FDR Presidential Library & Museum in Hyde Park, “Images of Internment: The Incarceration of Japanese Americans During World War II”—they were forced to board up their stores, evacuate their homes, abandon agricultural work and line up in streets with only the possessions they could carry? And that they ultimately were conducted to 10 “War Relocation Centers”—most formed of tar-paper covered barracks in vast forbidding landscapes—where they lived in cramped quarters until the end of the war?

Images of Internment: The Incarceration of Japanese Americans During World War II

*FDR Presidential Library & Museum
Through Dec. 31*

Self-Interned, 1942: Noguchi in Poston War Relocation Center

*The Noguchi Museum
Through Jan. 7, 2018*

In more than 200 images from five photographers, including Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams, we see how they hobbled together communities in these far-flung camps, establishing schools and newspapers and sports teams—while piecing together their upended lives. It was only in 1988 that an official apology was offered by President Reagan to those interned, with \$20,000 in restitution paid to each surviving person.



Ansel Adams's photo of editor Roy Takeno of the Manzanar Free Press, left, outside the paper's office (1943).
PHOTO: ANSEL ADAMS/WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

But why did it happen? As the exhibition tells us, in the months after Pearl Harbor, there were “deep anxieties” about Japanese “naval assaults, bombing raids, or invasion.” A “climate of fear” combined with “racial prejudice.”

That is what led to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signing Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942, allowing the designation of militarily sensitive areas within which “any or all persons may be excluded.” Here the area was along the West Coast—home to aircraft and shipbuilding facilities, and a possible wartime front. The persons excluded were those with Japanese ancestry—some two thirds were American citizens.

The injustice was compounded because, as the exhibition states and historians widely believe, “no serious evidence” exists that made the population a threat. This exhibition and others have focused, then, on making the scale of the injustice palpable. In the case of a show at the Noguchi Museum in Queens—“Self-Interned, 1942: Noguchi in Poston War Relocation Center”—we are also asked to see the aesthetic consequences. The sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), whose father was Japanese, volunteered to enter the Poston War Relocation Center in Arizona. He arrived in May 1942, wanting to teach and improve conditions. But frustrated both by the camp administration and by those interned, he soon sought to leave. The episode, though, had aroused suspicions. His release was held up for months, until November 1942. He wasn’t even allowed out to see an exhibition of his work in San Francisco that July.

In a roughly chronological display of his work during this period, you see the transformation that the curator Dakin Hart outlines. We move from early sculpted portraiture to Poston-inspired works like “This Tortured Earth” (1942-43) and “Yellow Landscape” (1943), which include organic forms that are distended and punctured. Then comes another transformation evident in a sampling of later work: weighty polished abstractions, with elements suggesting portals and doors.

But we also get some unusual historical insight from documents on display. In a letter of Jan. 21, 1942—after Pearl Harbor but before the internments—Noguchi alludes to Isei (the immigrants themselves—the first generation—who were not generally citizens) as “potentially” being “the most dangerous,” with a “large subversive element among them” that must be counteracted by encouraging “loyalty to America.” In a post-Poston, February 1943 essay in the *New Republic*, “Trouble Among Japanese

Americans,” Noguchi notes “that about 50 percent of non-citizens” in the camps “are now at least passively loyal to America.”

Noguchi’s allusions to pro-Axis sympathies are startling because they jar against today’s tendency to see internment as a morality play in which the wholly innocent are wholly wronged. But while the existence of racism and hysteria is beyond question, wariness was not as completely irrational as is widely assumed. And that played a role in the injustices to follow. Certainly, the act of internment itself was not unique. Britain interned Jewish refugees from Germany as enemy aliens; Japanese Canadians were interned for longer than their American counterparts and lost all property rights. The U.S. Enemy Alien Control Program constricted the lives of hundreds of thousands of Italian and German residents who were considered “enemy aliens.”

There were also good reasons for West Coast wariness. In the 1930s, Japanese-language schools in California regularly taught loyalty to the emperor. In Hawaii, a Japanese couple tried to help a downed Japanese pilot escape just after the Pearl Harbor attack. Japanese submarines patrolled the West Coast; one shelled an oil field near Santa Barbara, Calif., on Feb. 23, 1942. And decoded intercepts of Japanese cables suggested the presence of Japanese agents; one dispatch sent before Pearl Harbor referred to contacts made with “absolutely reliable Japanese in the San Pedro and San Diego area.”

This helps explain, but, of course, it does not excuse. How, though, can we get a sense of the era’s history without such information? And how can future situations be understood if the portrayal of this one is so limited? There is no need to insist that the internees were all innocent, the fear all irrational, and the racism all encompassing. Seventy five years later, we ought to be able to deal with the shameful yet comprehensible complexities of the truth.

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