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Eastern Influences and Fusion of Western Art

Today, art has a wide range of styles and forms. It is difficult to name all of them but we can definitely see how some of the art has been influenced by eastern artists within paintings made by famous artists here in the west, especially California. The strokes of the brush, the composition, lighting, or the expression of the subject and scenery can tell a lot about where the artists might have learned a particular style. And as they did learn something new, from Asian influence, the artists were able to fuse some of that eastern style with western or vice versa.

The biography of the following artist is a key to helping connect how he was influenced to fuse eastern art with western art with examples. Also with the artist's background we can examine chronological detailed events that point out specific, notable influences. Many of the art works are unique to California and can be compared to others to show similarities as well, especially from Japan.

One artist, in particular, took his Japanese style of art and fused it with western scenery. It is the same principle as above and his illustrations and paintings show this well. His name was Chiura Obata.

Obata was born in 1885 and grew up in Sendai, a northern city from Tokyo located on the eastern coast of Japan. Obata was a gifted young boy and studied the art of sumi-e starting at the age of seven. His personality was very stubborn and rebellious. Because of this his father wanted

to send him to a military academy . As a result he ran away from home at the age of fourteen to his grandmother's and started as an apprentice in Tokyo as a painter with his father's approval. His real name was Zoroku Obata but he began using his artist's name, "Chiura," shortly after (Kodani, *Topaz Moon*, Pg.2).

In 1889 Chiura was an apprentice to a master artist named Tanryo Murata and at that time European or western art had started to appear in Japan and was getting popular. Many artists wanted to fuse western and eastern art to make an all new style while others wanted to return to traditional Japanese ink and watercolor (Ross, *Nature Art with Chiura Obata*, Pg. 9). Obata was at the fore front with little experience and a lot to learn but was open to western style art. This is a great example of how his biography helps see a starting point for influences and ideas of fusion.

In 1903 Obata moved to San Francisco at the age of eighteen and attended an Institute of Art but found it lacking in discipline. He then studied independently in Japantown and worked as an illustrator for some Japanese magazines. In 1906, after the great San Francisco earthquake, Obata temporarily stayed in a makeshift refugee camp located in a city park. He made many paintings of the aftermath and learned that humans should always try their best to carry on in any situation. During that time Obata made a huge effort to study what he could and learned to paint and draw much of California's landscape after (Kodani, *Topaz Moon*, Pg.3).

In 1912 he married Haruko Kohashi that he met in San Francisco through local friends. They had their first child then and settled in Japantown. Haruko was an established artist as well and spent much of her time doing Ikebana. Both Chiura and Haruko would often present their work together which complemented each other at exhibitions or shows (Kodani, *Topaz Moon*, Pg.4).

In 1927 Obata had a friend from University of California Berkeley named Worth Ryder that invited him on a two month camping trip to Yosemite National Park. Ryder was an art professor for the university and liked landscapes as well. Obata was deeply influenced by the trip and was amazed at the different types of scenery that changed on the way up the roads to Yosemite. Obata became excited when they stopped and camped because of the many different colors of firs and wild flowers that were around. After they made camp another artist friend of theirs named Robert Howard joined the trek. He was a sculptor and wrote about his experience with Obata stating that one morning Obata disappeared in front of them on a trail. As they passed by returning hikers they were told of an artist working like mad at the foot of the first falls (Ross, *Nature Art with Chiura Obata*, Pg. 21-22).

At one point he told his colleague that he would paint a hundred paintings by the end of the trip. He was incredibly focused and kind of obsessed with painting the beautiful nature of Yosemite and eventually painted incredible landscapes that thrill artists today (Ross, *Nature Art with Chiura Obata*, Pg. 21-22). According to a quote from Michael Elsohn Ross, author of *Nature Art with Chiura Obata*, “Unlike many painting of plants, Chiura’s are not only scientifically accurate, they are as delicate as the flowers themselves,” shows the precision and detail of Obata’s prowess.

Obata’s medium was watercolors during his Yosemite trip. Sometimes he used short strokes and sometimes long ones, however Chiura understood how the watercolor would bleed on the paper. He was an expert on this because of the sumi-e training he had since he was seven years old. This art style is without a doubt uniquely Asian, specifically Japanese. However, the subject of his paintings was uniquely western America landscapes specific to Yosemite National park, which Japan has no geological equivalent. This is only one example of how Obata fused his

east style with west. His influence was his upbringing within a traditional Japanese art teacher and community. Also the fact that Obata had a yearning to study as much of the western world as he could, when he was a teenager, helps understand those influences and fusion styles.

In 1932, from his friendship with Worth Ryder, Chiura was asked to teach art in the summer for the University of California Berkeley, the same university his friend was an art professor at. This greatly changed the direction of his career. Still in love with painting landscapes he taught his uniquely Japanese style of sumi-e which the students loved. These classes were probably the first of its kind outside Japan. Because of this new type of painting, many students were inspired and influenced in using the same techniques.

Obata always shared his intense love of nature with his students. He had a belief that each person can find truth and beauty within nature, and cared more about teaching that philosophy than techniques specific painting skills. His influence didn't stop there though. He would constantly remind students to not imitate other artist but to see nature as it really is. This deep belief stems from Japanese culture and aesthetics. Obata brings these concepts to America and weaves them into his teachings as an art professor and at the same time values American lifestyles of freedom and the beauty of a much larger country's landscapes today (Ross, *Nature Art with Chiura Obata*, Pg. 29-30).

Chiura and his family's lives were very good, considering at the time the United States was in an economic depression. Their house was filled with joy and a constant buzz of students and colleagues would visit quite often. Although their house was very open to the people around them, Chiura still liked his own solitude. At least once a week he would engage in surf fishing along the pacific coast (Ross, *Nature Art with Chiura Obata*, Pg. 33).

During the summers, up until 1941, Obata's family would take trips to Yosemite and camp near the Merced River. Many times students would join them to get first hand teachings in a beautiful outdoor setting. Obata would also visit with the famous photographer, Ansel Adams, which was influenced by some of Chiura's paintings of Yosemite. And Chiura, as well, was influenced of the incredible black and white photos that Ansel Adams produced from Yosemite too. Chiura knew Adams from the early days of the East West Art Association and frequently Chiura's art was shown in the studio that Adams had. It has been stated that after Chiura painted a waterfall landscape, Adams was amazed at what Chiura captured in his art and was inspired to run off and take photos himself (Ross, Nature Art with Chiura Obata, Pg. 33).

Unfortunately during the beginning of the 1930's Chiura's home country was beginning to battle other countries in wars to expand the Japanese empire. The acts of Japan's military started to make Americans suspicious of the Japanese that were already living in the United States, especially here in California. This fear eventually intensified and Chiura and his family could feel the repercussions. On December 7th, 1941 The Japanese military attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and at that moment the United States declared war with Japan.

In 1942 President Franklin Roosevelt signed an order that allowed the United States military to intern people that were considered to be from countries the United States was at war with. A majority of the Japanese immigrants came to California and therefore been interned in a number of camps throughout the western states (Ross, Nature Art with Chiura Obata, Pg. 34). These camps were built on the spot of desolate dry areas that were far from major cities. When it was time for the Obata family to go, they were only allowed to take one suitcase with them, leaving all of their valuables behind. The forced imprisonment was a traumatic experience for

most of the Japanese immigrants, however, with Obata, he used his art to express his feelings and capture a time of chaos for himself and many families.

Particular art works, like “Landslide,” depicted the intense inner turmoil and frenzy of helplessness within Obata himself and probably others. The painting itself was done in watercolor and ink, like a majority of Obata’s paintings, but the brush strokes were in a whirling pattern with dark earth tones for color. It would be considered a landscape as if the ground itself was alive and sinking into the middle, like water going down a sink. The parallels of the painting compared to his feelings is another great example how his art captured his adversity.

After the war ended in 1945, Chiura was finally able to return home, but with a lot of bad memories. He was able to return to work at the University of California Berkeley with high regards because everyone there really liked him. However the experience led him to record a part of history in great art work and because of his upbringing and philosophy he knew his survival through the ordeal is a part of life. His artwork has now been admired by millions of people, especially ones around the central coast of California.

Obata died in 1975 but left a legacy of immortal paintings. He received numerous awards both in the United States and in Japan (Kodani, *Topaz Moon*, Pg. 137). His years as a teacher inspired many students to pick up the watercolor and ink style of painting that helped fuse contemporary or classical art today. His wife Haruka carried on in his footsteps teaching her Ikebana along with receiving awards for her husband after his death. Haruko was very involved in exhibitions of her spouse as well.

Overall, Obata had an incredible gift for painting since he was young. And with the traditional Japanese aesthetics and upbringing he became a master of his art. With his philosophy,

stubbornness and curiosity of the west, allowed him opportunities to explore art in a different perspective, especially landscape. He made it to California and spent many years painting landscapes from San Francisco to Yosemite and the Monterey Peninsula. People have been admiring his work for years and are regarded one of the best sumi-e and watercolor artist today. His biography showed where his influences and ideas of fusion came from along with a sad part of history that inspired him to capture a trying time. After analyzing his background we can definitely see where his Eastern influences and fusion collide with western art. Although Obata had some tough times he ultimately set forth the philosophy for future artists to admire when combining Eastern and Western art.

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