

RCCD'S CENTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CIVIL LIBERTIES OPENS

Thu, Jul 19 2012 |



Taking part in the ribbon-cutting were (from right) Riverside City Councilmember Mike Gardner; Consul General Jun Niimi; Jim Heiting; RCCD Board of Trustees President Janet Green; RCCD Chancellor Gregory Gray; former Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta; Seiko Buckingham, Miné Okubo's niece, and her granddaughter; RCCD Trustee Mary Figueroa; RCCD Trustee Virginia Blumenthal; RCCD Trustee Mark Takano; RCC President Cynthia Azari.



An exhibition on the ground floor tells Miné Okubo's story.

RIVERSIDE — The preview opening of Riverside Community College District's new Center for Social Justice and Civil Liberties, and the official commemoration of the 100th anniversary of noted artist Miné Okubo's birth, were held June 27 with about 400 people in attendance.

Speakers included former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta, who was interned in the Heart Mountain, Wyo. camp as a child, and Consul General Jun Niimi from the Consulate General of Japan in Los Angeles.



RCC President Cynthia Azari and former Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta.

Okubo's seminal work, "Citizen 13660," the first chronicling of the Japanese American internment camp experience by an internee, was published to critical acclaim in 1946. Her personal collection of 8,000 pieces of artwork, professional papers, correspondence, and memorabilia, which she bequeathed to

Riverside City College, her alma mater, in 2001, was the catalyst for the new center, and anchors the inaugural exhibitions.

Elena Tajima Creef, associate professor at Wellesley College and one of a handful of scholars who has seen the material first-hand, noted that because Okubo saved everything, “for a historian it’s an absolute dream ... there is simply nothing like this that exists.” Creef and Greg Robinson co-edited “Miné Okubo: Following Her Own Road” (University of Washington Press, 2008).

The Okubo Collection affords research opportunities in a range of academic disciplines, including art history, women’s studies, Asian American studies, and American history. It is housed on the second-floor main level of the center, which underwent a museum-quality adaptive restoration. Architects and craftsmen restored the original, ornate Spanish baroque facade on the historic 1926 building, and museum experts repurposed the interior space to create a two-level exhibition, gallery and research facility.



Consul General of Japan Jun Niimi speaks at the opening ceremony.

Complementing the Okubo Collection is the plaza-level “Riverside Stories” interpretive exhibition, which explores the struggle for social justice through citizens engaged in the fight for equality. These stories include the Harada family, who challenged the Alien Land Act in U.S. courts; Frank Johnson, who fought to integrate the city’s public swimming pool in the 1920s; Rupert Costo, an RCC alumnus and national leader in the fight for economic and social recognition for Native Americans; and Johnny Sotelo, the first Mexican American to serve on the Riverside City Council.

Also profiled are poet and author Tomas Rivera, UC Riverside’s first Mexican American chancellor, and hotelier and peace ambassador Frank Miller, original builder and innkeeper of the Mission Inn, a national historical landmark.

“Today we have achieved our vision for what I am confident will grow to become one of the most significant social justice and civil liberties resources in California,” said RCCD Chancellor Gregory Gray.

Retired Court of Appeal Associate Justice John Gabbert (RCC Class of 1929), who had just celebrated his 103rd birthday a week earlier, said, “I don’t believe there is any other institution in the country that has a program under way of this type. It’s to increase our knowledge and support of civil rights and personal liberties. We hope that this program will lead to a better future. Multiculturalism works for the benefit of all members of our common population. Their dreams resonate with us today and always at RCC.

“Miné Okubo and I attended RCC at the same time. She was a very talented artist. Her thousands of sketches of life are the founding nexus of this center.”

The program commenced in adjacent White Park, followed by a ribbon-cutting ceremony and tours of the center. Okubo's family was present to commemorate the centennial of her birth and participate in the tribute to her public roles as artist, activist and feminist.

"The most important thing is that the significant pieces of Miné's life's art are now together in one place," stated Seiko Buckingham, Okubo's niece. "With the leadership of Riverside Community College District, the collection is home where it rightfully belongs."

"I am proud to be here today to express my thanks to everyone for all the work you have done to make this center a reality," said Mineta. "I have frequently noted how injustice inevitably plants the seeds of its own destruction. And that destruction began in no small way the first time that Miné Okubo looked around her [in the camp] and began to draw ... She was laying a foundation of understanding in the broader world ... a foot place in the door that would lead to healing. Miné Okubo would be very proud today."

"I recently learned of Miné Okubo and Riverside's importance in the history of Japanese Americans, as well," commented Niimi. "I was amazed to know the depth of the connection between Riverside and Japan were in place for over a century."

"By remembering, we and the center celebrate the civil rights victories that were hard-fought and won through these struggles and recognize the ongoing quest for equality and inclusiveness," said Riverside City Councilmember Mike Gardner.

Okubo's Story

Born in Riverside in 1912, Okubo was part of a family of artists. Her mother was a calligrapher and painter. Her uncle, Kantaro Kato, was a painter who found inspiration in French impressionism and post-impressionism and chose to spend as much time in Paris as he could. Two of her siblings became artists. She produced thousands of paintings and drawings over seven decades.

Okubo graduated from Riverside Junior College in 1933 and received her MFA from UC Berkeley in 1938. She developed as an artist while traveling in France and Italy for two years, and worked with famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera for the federal Works Progress Administration.

Interned at the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno and later the War Relocation Authority camp at Topaz, Utah, Okubo recorded the internees' daily lives in paintings and taught art to children. After the war, she relocated to New York and published "Citizen 13660," which helped to educate the public about the camps.

Her work was periodically featured in gallery and museum exhibitions, but Okubo rejected the art world of commerce and careerism, labeling it the "art business — show business as a promotion game." Regular purchases from a private benefactor and his partner, along with occasional sales through the handful of dealers she trusted, allowed her to maintain a very modest existence and pursue painting full-time from the 1950s to the end of her life.

The first and only documented museum retrospective of her work was presented 40 years ago by the Oakland Museum of California. In 1974, she was named RCC Alumnus of the Year, and a show was done on the campus at that time. Later, RCC named a street on campus after Okubo.

In her will, Okubo identified a handful of museums to receive work from her estate. The bulk of her art, per her wishes, was divided between her family and RCC, which was also given her archive of correspondence and documents. Her one-bedroom apartment in Greenwich Village — her art studio and home since her arrival in New York City in 1944 — housed thousands of paintings and drawings.

In 2008, once her estate was settled, these materials and works of art were transferred to the college. Today, the center provides state-of-the-art storage and archives. With so much material, there is an office for visiting scholars to further develop the works through National Endowment of Humanities grants, and other resources to be developed.

The center includes an exhibition that seeks to expand public awareness of the artist by presenting works that have not been seen in decades and some that have never been shown, such as her commercial

illustrations from the 1940s and 1950s. Paintings and drawings from her bequest to RCC and works loaned by the trustees of the Miné Okubo Art Collection have been brought together to give a more complete picture of the artist.

A total of \$5.15 million has been spent to renovate the facility and create the center with development of the stories of Riverside and the restoration and preparation of the artwork for the second floor. Okubo's family has also loaned works of art for the second floor, to ensure that a full retrospective of her work is presented.

RCC acquired the property in 2005 and RCCD made plans in 2010 to renovate and repurpose the facility to house the collection and archives. Originally a bank, the building was designed by Stiles Oliver Clements, who also designed the Wilton Theatre, El Capitan Theatre, and other Los Angeles landmarks. This facility is the only one known that he did in Riverside County.

The center was born out of a partnership between RCC and the City of Riverside. Funds to establish operational endowments and research programming are being sought by the RCCD Foundation as part of the Invest In Excellence centennial campaign.

Located at 3855 Market St., the center will be open to select groups by appointment only. Interested groups are asked to contact the Chancellor's Office at (951) 222-8800. The center will be open to the public in the fall. There will be no admission charge.

Photos by Joshua Scheide



The building before renovation (above) and after (below).

