

The Mess Hall F3



Henry Sugimoto
Our Mess Hall, 1942
Oil on canvas
Japanese American National Museum

BACKGROUND

*Plate in hand,
I stand in line,
Losing my resolve
To hide my tears
- Yukari
Desert Exile (83)*

All ten relocation camps were organized on a grid similar to military camps. Barracks were grouped into blocks with separate buildings housing a mess hall and a latrine with showers and a washroom for each block. For example, at Rohwer Relocation Center, there were thirty-six residential blocks of twelve barracks each.

Standing in line was one of the major adjustments for the inmates. Always there was a wait for the mess hall, the showers, and the washroom, something Yukari alludes to in her poem printed above. Yukari was the pen name for Iko Umegaki Uchida who responded to events in her life by writing poems in Japanese. Iko was the mother of Yoshiko Uchida who used her as a model for Yuki Sakane's mom in *Journey to Topaz*. In the book, Yuki explains,

“Mother seldom spoke of her aches or sadness and rarely let anyone see her shed a tear, but she could make people understand how she felt by putting the right words in the fragile shell of poetry.” (*Journey to Topaz* 38)

OUR MESS HALL

This painting is one of at least three that Sugimoto painted on the same subject of mess hall dining. There appear to be three generations included in this version: *Issei*, *Nisei*, and *Sansei*. Sugimoto used images of family members in his paintings which sometimes were actual portraits. More often, he used them in a symbolic way, to represent all mothers and grandparents and children whose lives had been interrupted by incarceration.

The group in *Our Mess Hall* is seated at a wooden picnic table on benches, typical of military mess halls. There are three points of view in the composition creating a slightly cubist approach, one that children often use. The table is painted from a bird’s eye view while the two rows of figures are painted straight-on from two elevation points of view.

The food appears to be fish, rice or potatoes, and a green vegetable. A brown bottle on the table possibly contains soy sauce. In another version of the painting titled *Mess Hall*, plates hold sausages, potatoes or rice, white bread, and beans, a largely starchy fare that was standard in the camps. Vegetables had been an important part of the Japanese Americans’ diet on the West Coast and were replaced in camp with starches. Soon the inmates established food crops as well as victory gardens which provided fresh produce.

In the upper left hand corner is part of a sign stating that employees only are allowed in the kitchen. An open window to the right of the sign allows the viewer to see beyond the mess hall into the kitchen where cooks prepare the meals. Some were experienced cooks; others were not and the fare was not so good.

A sign behind the diners reminds them that food quantities are limited. Often hungry teenagers ate meals at more than one mess hall, making sure they had enough food for their growing bodies. Another sign on the wall explains that milk is limited to children and those who are ill.

ACTIVITY

Eating meals in a crowded, noisy school cafeteria is something like eating in the concentration camp mess hall. Discuss lunchtime in the school cafeteria. What are the school cafeteria tables like? The seats? Are there food choices? What about the noise? Are you able to talk? Can you hear each other?

Are there people of all ages? How does this compare with what Henry Sugimoto tells us in his painting *Mess Hall*? Talk about schedules and lunch cards. Marielle Tsukamoto was five when her family was incarcerated at Jerome. She remembers having a badge with her family number and a meal ticket which was punched for each meal.

Draw fellow students eating lunch in the cafeteria. Draw while they eat or draw from photographs made during lunchtime. Use Sugimoto's same points of view in the drawing: bird's eye view and elevation. Use Sugimoto's composition and include a window or door in the background that leads the viewer's eye beyond the room and outside the school or into the kitchen. Include signs or posters on the back wall.

Draw with #2 pencil or markers on 9 x 12 paper. Color with markers or watercolor. Exhibit all drawings.

Fourth Grade Visual Arts Standards: A.1.1, A.1.2, A.1.3, A.1.4, A.1.7; A.2.1, A.2.2, A.2.3, A.2.4, A.2.5, A.2.6, A.2.7, A.2.8; A.3.1, A.3.3, A.3.4, A.3.5, A.3.6, A.3.9.

Fifth Grade Visual Arts Standards: A.1.1, A.1.2, A.1.4, A.1.5, A.1.7, A.1.8, A.1.10; A.2.1, A.2.2, A.2.3, A.2.4, A.2.6, A.2.7; A.3.1, A.3.4, A.3.5, A.3.6, A.3.9.