

## Home F6



*Henry Sugimoto*  
*When Can We Go Home?, 1943*  
*Oil on canvas*  
*Gift of Madeleine Sugimoto and Naomi Tagawa,*  
*Japanese American National Museum (92.97.3)*

### BACKGROUND

*Four months have passed,  
And at last I learn  
To call this horse stall  
My family's home.*  
- Yukari  
*Desert Exile (83)*

California artist Henry Sugimoto, his wife Susie, daughter Madeleine Sumile, and extended family were evacuated from Hanford to the Fresno Assembly Center in late spring 1942. They remained at the former fairgrounds until they were moved by train to Jerome Relocation Center in the Arkansas Delta in October, remaining there until the camp was closed in June 1944. The Sugimotos were then moved to Rohwer just twenty-six miles away where they remained until they relocated to New York City after World War II ended. Sugimoto taught art classes and continued to paint over one-hundred and fifty paintings documenting the camp experience.

Sugimoto painted *When Can We Go Home?* in 1943 while incarcerated at Jerome. Its title was inspired by something six-year old Madeleine Sumile said. Susie had packed a lunch of *omusubi* (rice balls) for the trip to the assembly center. After they had eaten, Madeleine asked her parents, “When are we going home?” She had not understood the reason for their trip to Fresno and thought the family had simply gone on a picnic.

The painting is at once narrative and documentary. The composition of the painting is torn in half by large, diagonal bolts of lightning just as the lives of Japanese Americans were torn apart by Executive Order 9066 which excluded them, citizens and aliens alike, from the West Coast.

Puzzle pieces of this cubist composition tell the story. On the left hand side within the v-shape formed by the lightning bolts, are elements of life in California now lost to the Japanese Americans who were sent to sixteen assembly centers and later to ten inland relocation centers. Leaning to the left is the tall, white Los Angeles City Hall. Overlapping it is a racing steam engine which transported the Japanese Americans to the camps. Beneath the engine is the image of the recently constructed Golden Gate Bridge.

On the right hand side of the canvas, are symbols of life at Jerome. At the top in front of the tree line, are the ubiquitous guard tower and the roof of Mess Hall 28 where the Sugimotos ate. Lightning strikes from a stormy, dark blue sky. Arkansas thunderstorms were a new and very frightening experience for many inmates. In his book, George Takei describes such a storm that began as the family was gathered in their single-walled barrack apartment:

*The most terrifying camp memory I have is of an Arkansas spring thunderstorm. . . Suddenly, there was a bright, soundless flash, and everything in the room turned electric white. Then it was gone. It was there just long enough to shock us, and it was gone. But even before we could say, “What was that?” the terror began. With a colossal bang, the sky began to tear apart. . . Just as Mama came rushing over, an even more violent explosion ripped the sky. . . She gathered us up on Daddy’s bed in the center of our room and huddled over us. . . It was as if the world was going to end. (40-41)*

Poet Kenneth Yasuda was incarcerated at Jerome where he met and became friends with Arkansans John Gould Fletcher, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet, and his wife Charlie May Simon, children’s book author. Also known by the pen name Shôson, Yasuda paints a picture of a thunderstorm in a *haiku* included in his book *A Pepper-Pod*:

*AT DENSON, ARKANSAS  
’Gainst the inky sky  
The lightning paints the great oak  
As it flashes by.*

Along the right edge of the painting is a tall sunflower, indigenous to the southeast Arkansas landscape and also planted by inmates for shade according to Madeleine Sugimoto. Beneath the sunflower is the end of a log with a forest creature, a squirrel, perched atop. The axe, leaning diagonally against the log, was used by the inmates who were forced to cut their own fuel for wood burning stoves that heated their barracks.

In the lower left hand corner is a cane break or timber rattlesnake coiled and striking out at the little girl. Poisonous snakes, including rattlesnakes, copperheads, and water moccasins, were a very real fear for the inmates in the southeast Arkansas camps. However, in her book *We the People*, Mary Tsukamoto writes that rattlesnakes became scarce at Jerome after the arrival of two trainloads of Hawaiians who enjoyed hunting them. “Barbecued teriyaki rattlesnake, a most delicious treat, was the talk of the camp.” (156) Bob Mitori was incarcerated with his family at Rohwer when he was eight. He remembers that the teriyaki rattlesnake tasted like eel and that the skins were used to make belts.

Dominating the painting are large figures of mother and child. Their monumental size is an influence of the muralists, particularly Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco whose paintings Sugimoto had seen in Mexico City in 1939. In this painting, the artist pays homage to the courageous role women played in helping their families survive and in nurturing and protecting their children. The mother’s very round breasts are a symbol of her ability to nurture, a symbol that dates at least to pre-Christian times. For Sugimoto, the earth-mother symbol also has antecedent in the murals of Diego Rivera.

Here, as in most of his other camp paintings, Sugimoto uses images of family members to tell a more universal story. The figures of Susie and Madeleine represent all mothers and children coping with incarceration in an unfamiliar, often hostile setting. The little girl is wearing a red sailor dress that Madeleine actually wore and still remembers. She also wears white boots, possibly ordered from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue, to protect her feet from the gumbo mud of Jerome swamp land.

The artist returned to this composition in the 1944 painting re-titled *Longing* in which he included a self-portrait. The painting was included in an exhibition of his work at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas in February 1944.

## ACTIVITY

1. Talk about *When Can We Go Home?* What do you see? Who are the people? What are they doing? What is on the left side of the picture? What is on the right? There are two bolts of lightning. Find them. Why did the artist paint them into his picture? What sounds do you hear? What are the mother and her little girl saying to each other? What do you smell? Read Yasuda’s *haiku* aloud. What part of Sugimoto’s painting might it describe?

*Fourth Grade Visual Arts Standards:* A.1.1; A.3.1, A.3.2, A.3.5, A.3.6, A.3.8, A.3.9.

*Fifth Grade Visual Arts Standards:* A.1.1, A.1.8, A.1.9; A.3.1, A.3.3, A.3.5, A.3.6, A.3.8, A.3.9.

2. In your journal, use a black ballpoint pen to draw a 5 x 6 in. picture of the home you described in lesson B6. Add the landscape around your home and then add an Arkansas thunderstorm.

*Fourth Grade Visual Arts Standards:* A.1.1, A.1.2, A.1.4, A.1.7, A.1.8, A.1.9; A.2.1, A.2.2, A.2.3, A.2.5, A.2.7; A.3.3, A.3.5, A.3.9.

*Fifth Grade Visual Arts Standards:* A.1.1, A.1.3, A.1.5, A.1.7, A.1.8; A.2.1, A.2.2, A.2.5, A.2.6; A.3.1, A.3.3, A.3.5, A.3.6, A.3.9.