

Impact Statement

Taylor Yingshi, Grade 12.
Illuminating the Unseen, 2021.
Digital art, 20 x 16 Inches.
Issaquah High School, Issaquah, WA
Unsung Hero: Minoru Yasui

As an Asian American residing in the Pacific Northwest, I felt an immediate connection with Oregon-born Minoru Yasui. Though this region has accrued a reputation for racial inclusivity, our progressive front belies a dark history of Japanese exclusion and disenfranchisement. The life of Minoru Yasui, one of the 120,000 Japanese American citizens forcefully incarcerated in internment camps during World War II, reflects this disgraceful past. However, after learning about his contributions to racial equality, I became enamored with the flipside of this era in U.S. history: Asian American activism. In a time fraught with discrimination, Yasui not only courageously fought for Japanese rights, but also the rights of African American communities, extending his advocacy to all peoples facing wrongful treatment. By artistically commemorating the life of a local activist, I hope to shed light on the complex, oft-forgotten history of injustice and reform experienced by the Asian diaspora.

While researching Yasui's life and visualizing how I would honor his legacy, I found myself gravitating towards the ukiyo-e prints that originated in Yasui's homeland of Japan. A fervent activist for the rights of Japanese Americans, Yasui was staunchly proud of his nationality in a time when the Japanese endured unconscionable maltreatment in America. I decided ukiyo-e would be an apt way of symbolizing this Japanese pride. Following the ukiyo-e style, I drew a grassy background reminiscent of Yasui's childhood fruit farm in Oregon. Combining Japanese artistic technique and American subject matter, this farm represents the synthesis of Yasui's Asian and American identities. This is critical to his life story — as an Asian American, Yasui overcame countless barriers which defined his resilience and courage.

On his suit, I alluded to the events that shaped his life the most. At the bottom, hands filing papers symbolize his interest in the law. He was the first Japanese person to graduate from Oregon's law school in 1939, eventually establishing the only law practice for the Japanese community in Portland at the time. In the middle of the suit, protest signs which read mottos such as "Never Again Is Now" represent his advocacy against Japanese discrimination. When Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 — legalizing the internment of Japanese Americans — Yasui purposefully violated the instituted curfew in Oregon, protesting these unjust laws by intentionally getting arrested and filing a court case against his detainers. His case eventually reached the Supreme Court, but lost. After spending several years in solitary confinement and internment camps, Yasui settled down in Colorado, where he became a prominent figure in the city's Community Relations Commission — an interracial organization striving to advance the rights of minority populations. These events are reflected in the uppermost section of the suit, where signs reading "We Demand the Right to Vote" and "Stop Brutality" allude not only to Yasui's Asian American activism, but also his solidarity with African Americans seeking justice. Juxtaposed against the peaceful, pastoral background, the collage conveys the deep

significance of Yasui's actions, which have been unfairly overshadowed in studies of American history.

The digital medium enabled me to transpose different mediums which would not technically mesh together otherwise, such as ukiyo-e printmaking and collage. Through digital manipulation, I spliced together these disparate forms of art. While the ukiyo-e style evokes an ephemeral, fleeting moment, photography is permanent and long-lasting. I aimed to use the sentiments around these mediums to convey that while Yasui's life was brief, his efforts towards racial justice have left an indelible mark on American history. Thus, the fruit farm in the background reflects the transient nature of his life, and the collage on his suit represents the lasting effects of his important activism. I chose the digital medium to best create this effect, and properly commemorate his legacy as an unsung hero.

Looking back on my completed project, I realize that through paying homage to the Minoru Yasui, I have cultivated a better understanding of both the continent I come from and the region of the United States I grew up in. Since childhood, I have often felt disconnected from my Asian American heritage. In school, I was taught little about Asian leaders from the Pacific Northwest, and I had never heard of somebody like Minoru Yasui until stumbling upon the Unsung Heroes project. During his lifetime, Minoru Yasui purposefully placed himself in situations of challenge in the hopes of drawing awareness and support to his unseen community. He never took the easy route, breaking barriers in the fields of law and politics when few were doing the same. After learning about his experience, I feel empowered to understand more about the history of Asian America. I feel that my duty as a citizen includes standing up for those who face unfair treatment, and constantly challenging the status quo even if those around me choose to merely follow it. As a result of these feelings, I intend to share my project via social media and physical posters. I will post my drawing across various social platforms to increase awareness around Yasui's activism, as well as print posters of the work attached with a text panel to hang around my city.

Throughout high school, I have created artworks centered around Asian American film, TV, music, and entertainment. Never did I seek out the unseen stories of heroes such as Minoru Yasui. Through the ARTEFFECT Project, I have uncovered an integral piece of American history that deserves far more attention. Just as Minoru Yasui illuminated his unseen community through ceaseless activism, I hope to shed light on his life through this artwork. Today, I am particularly grateful for the rights I have — in part thanks to Yasui's courage and leadership. In an effort to continue his legacy, I will endeavor to speak up against inequality, using my artwork as a conduit for powerful change.