

Impact Statement

Sarah Vargas, Grade 11.

A Vision of Blossoms, 2017.

Watercolor on paper, 19 x 14 Inches.

Bergen County Academies, Hackensack, NJ

Unsung Hero: Eliza Scidmore

An unsung hero is a person who epitomizes the ideals of hard work, determination, and seeing the future in the present. Eliza Scidmore embodies all of these principles. She joined the National Geographic Society in 1890 and became the first female board member. Scidmore was not afraid to break boundaries and tear down expected gender roles. She was an American writer, photographer, geographer, and activist for international peace. Despite her name not being widely recognized, her work has left a lasting impression on Washington D.C. It was her efforts that resulted in the planting of 3,000 Japanese cherry blossom trees in the United States capitol.

Through her travels with the National Geographic Society, Scidmore fell in love with the culture of Japan. Her hand-colored photographs of Japanese people and nature brought a new level of cultural awareness and understanding to a curious America leading up to World War I. It was her desire to bring Japanese influence to the United States as a symbol of peace between the two conflicting nations. Immediately following her return from her trip there, she began to petition Washington to plant Japanese cherry blossom trees in the barren areas around the Capitol. It took a quarter of a century for her vision to be appreciated and realized. Her perseverance and dedication are vital characteristics to any unsung hero. An idea cannot become reality unless there is a strong force behind it, and Scidmore was that force. Steadfast and fearless, she did not follow societal expectations. She never married and faced criticism for her independence, but it was her individuality that allowed her to achieve so much. Scidmore was a private person who never sought recognition for her work, an exemplary unsung hero, but she deserves having people know who she is and what she accomplished. Her moral fiber and achievements paved a path for future activists to follow, even if they do not know her name.

Scidmore left behind a legacy of eternal beauty in Washington D.C., symbolizing the peace brokered between two countries that were once at odds. I wanted to honor her legacy by depicting her amongst her beloved trees, connecting Japan to western culture. I painted her with a thoughtful expression, as if she were looking over her long journey of bringing the delicate trees to America. The background depicts what her efforts have led to, the flowering beauty of Washington D.C. Her clothing is indicative of Japan's influence on her. When conducting research, I learned she once attended an American society gala garbed in a brilliant green kimono. I wanted to incorporate my own vision of that kimono in my piece because Eliza Scidmore was not a woman afraid of being herself. It was always her aim to bridge the culture of Japan, the country she loved, to the United States, her home. I took this concept and incorporated it in my painting. Her clothing is influenced by Japan, but her hairstyle was the standard in early 1900s America. In the distance is the Jefferson Memorial, reflected on the Potomac River where her cherry blossom trees were planted. The memorial was built in 1943, fifteen years after Scidmore's death, but I decided that the future of her work should be

represented in the piece and the Jefferson Memorial is closely associated with Washington's cherry blossom trees. There are cherry blossom tree branches in the foreground and a distant haze of trees surrounding the memorial, showcasing the fruits of her labor. In the piece, Scidmore holds a cherry blossom because, even though she is in Washington D.C., her heart belongs to Japan. The overall composition emphasizes the beauty produced by Scidmore's efforts that acts as a physical symbol of friendship between Japan and the United States, fusing the two cultures together to create her vision.

It was Eliza Scidmore's petitions, connections, and involvement that resulted in Mayor Yukio Ozaki of Tokyo gifting 3,000 cherry trees to Washington D.C. in 1912. The gift honors the lasting unity and close relationship between the two countries. With this in mind, I considered Japanese painting techniques as I painted, wanting to reference their influence on our culture. For a piece celebrating Eliza Scidmore, I decided that I would work with watercolor, a traditional Japanese medium. The overall color palette is based on earth tones, emphasizing Scidmore's devotion to nature. Eliza Scidmore led a very private life, which made it a difficult process to find reference photographs. There is one photograph of her where she is perfectly posed with a slight frown and another where she is younger and dressed head to toe in Japanese clothing. I used both of these references to develop her pose and facial expression. These were black and white photographs so I had to rely on my own sense of color to render her accurately. Through research, I found a first-hand account of Scidmore, describing her as having blue-gray eyes, dark hair, and that she is a softer person than she appears in photographs, which I took in account when drawing her profile. I also utilized some of Scidmore's own photography when creating her clothing, accessories, and selecting colors for her clothing. By doing so, a piece of Eliza Scidmore is infused in the painting.

This was the first piece I have created where I merged two cultures together to create one harmonious composition. It was an honor to research Eliza Scidmore and celebrate her selfless achievements that are not widely recognized. It was important to me that the painting convey her message, which was taking two conflicted nations and bringing them together through cultural awareness and acceptance to create peace. Through her photography, literary works, and petitions, Scidmore infused a piece of Japanese culture in the United States, bringing the two countries closer together. Even today, in an environment as divisive as Washington D.C., Eliza Scidmore's cherry blossom trees continue to inspire millions, bringing people together in appreciation of culture. Eliza Scidmore's name deserves to be known and valued.