Countdown to Riverside City College's 100th Anniversary

Miné Okubo attended what was then called Riverside Junior College in the early 1930s. During her time at the college, she was called “Minnie” and was most known for her artwork. She was a member of the art staffs of the 1931, 1932 and 1933 “Tequesquite” yearbooks and the “Student Varieties” publication. In the 1932 yearbook, examples of her artwork were featured and can be seen in the eight examples below.

After leaving R.J.C. she attended the University of Berkeley where she received her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in art. She then travelled to Europe on a fellowship to study European art at its sources. Upon the outbreak of World War II, she returned to the United States on the last ship to leave Bordeaux, France. She returned to California where, in 1941, she was at work on mosaics for Fort Ord and for the Serviceman’s Hospitality House in Oakland when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Eager to finish these projects, Okubo did not follow her friends’ advice to move away from the war jittery West Coast and fell victim to the forced evacuation of Japanese-American citizens.

Assigned the number 13660, she became part of a group that was to be bused from Oakland to an assembly center at the Tanforan Race Track in San Bruno. Said Okubo, “We were silent on the trip except for a group of four University of California boys who were singing college songs. The bus crossed the Bay Bridge. Everyone stared at
the beautiful view as if for the last time. The singing stopped." Ultimately the group was taken to Topaz in the Utah desert where they found life grim, devoid of most of the amenities which other American citizens continued to enjoy.

The first winter they suffered from the cold and in the summer had their choice of facing the mosquitos outdoors or suffocating with the heat indoors. “What hurt the most,” Okubo said, “was the idea of being segregated and put away in a camp, completely divorced from the national defense effort.” She became a staff artist for the camp magazine “Trek” and it was here that “Fortune Magazine” editors discovered her work and ultimately gave her a number of commissions.

In 1946, Okubo wrote and illustrated the book “Citizen 13660”, which recounted her experiences in the internment camps. The book drew enthusiastic reviews in such publications as the “Book-of-the-Month Club News”, the “Saturday Review”, and a host of newspapers from New York to San Francisco to Honolulu. In that same year, many of her paintings were part of a traveling exhibit entitled “As Nisei Saw It”. It had a local showing at the public library sponsored by the Riverside Fine Arts Guild. For the rest of her life, she continued to support herself as a professional artist. In 1974 she was named the eighteenth RCCD Alumnus of the Year. The photo below is from the 1933 “Tequesquite” yearbook and shows Okubo when she was a member of the R.J.C. “Student Varieties” staff. She is in the front row on the extreme left. Three other R.C.C.D. Alumni of the Year honorees also appear in the photo, Rexford Brandt (top row, third from the left), Robert Patton (top row, extreme right) and Helen Brigden Bottel (bottom row, fourth from the left).
On February 22, 2006, a street on the RCC campus was renamed “Miné Okubo Drive” in her honor. June 27, 2012 marked the 100th anniversary of Miné Okubo’s birth. On that date, the Riverside Community College District had a preview opening of the “Center for Social Justice & Civil Liberties” in downtown Riverside which is the repository of some 6,000 paintings and 2,000 documents of Miné Okubo. Most of the article above was adapted from a story that appeared in the June 1974 “RCC Reports” District publication. The photos below are of Okubo while she was a student at R.J.C.

It is 2 years and 8 weeks until RCC’s 100th Anniversary on March 13, 2016.

The Riverside City College Instructional Media Center is bringing you this five year countdown to RCC’s 100th Anniversary. Our intention is to give everyone a weekly glance at the many people and events that have been a part of the college.

Our thanks go to the RCC Digital Library Archives and the District’s Office of Strategic Communications and Relations for allowing us to use their photo and newspaper collections. Thanks as well to all of the RCC students and Faculty Advisors that were a part of the yearbook and newspaper staffs. Thanks also to Tom Johnson and Gilbert Jimenez who wrote “the book” about RCC’s history. “Riverside City College 1916-1981- A 65 Year History” is available in the RCC Digital Library.

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