



Kay Sekimachi

(b. 1926)

Teacher Packet
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Biography: Kay Sekimachi

Kay Sekimachi (b.1926) is a California native, born and raised in San Francisco. As a fiber artist, she is recognized as a pioneer in resurrecting fiber as a medium of artistic expression.

In San Francisco, Sekimachi grew up with her parents, who were first generation Japanese Americans. During World War II, she and her family were imprisoned in an internment camp. There, Chiura Obata who was also in her camp started an art school, and Sekimachi and her younger sister would go to these classes every day. From Obata's lessons, she learned to fold origami figures, paint, and draw.

In 1946, Sekimachi enrolled at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now known as California College of the Arts). Toward the end of her career there, she studied weaving on the loom and became so adept at the labor-intensive process that she is often referred to as a "weaver's weaver."

Sekimachi is best known for her three-dimensional sculptural forms that take inspiration from her ancestral homeland of Japan, where she looks toward ancient culture for ideas. Japanese paper and origami shapes, for instance, are common motifs in her art. Today, she is still weaving in her workshop in Berkeley, California.



Kay Sekimachi's Workshop in Berkeley, CA.

Lesson 1: Kay Sekimachi and Family Traditions



Woven Book: *Wave*, 1980.

Introduction:

In an interview, Kay Sekimachi uses examples, such as specific items of clothing and traditions kept by her mother, to show how American and Japanese cultures were present in her childhood and inspired her artworks. Think about your own life. What cultural influences have greatly shaped you?

In this lesson, you will take inspiration from Sekimachi and write a short essay on the cultures, celebrations, and traditions that represent you. You will then create a poster, slideshow, or video with pictures and drawings that illustrate your essay.

Common Core Standards (California):

Reading Literature (Grade 3-5):

RL.5.1: Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

RL.5.6: Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.

Writing (Grade 5-12):

W.3.1: Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

W.3.4: With guidance and support from adults, produce writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task and purpose.

W.3.7: Explain how specific aspects of a text's illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting).

W.4.1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

W.4.7: Make connections between the text of a story or drama and a visual or oral presentation of the text, identifying where each version reflects specific descriptions and directions in the text.

W.4.4: Produce clear and coherent writing (including multi-paragraph texts) in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

W.5.4: Produce clear and coherent writing (including multi-paragraph texts) in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

W.5.8: Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; summarize or paraphrase information in notes and finished work and provide a list of sources.

W.6-12.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

W.6-12.3.d: Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.

Content Standards (California):

Visual Arts:

VA 2.3.3: Individually or collaboratively construct representations, diagrams, or maps of places that are part of everyday life.

VA 2.3.5: Identify, describe, and visually document places and/or objects of personal significance.

VA 2.3.7: Apply visual organizational strategies to design and produce a work of art, design, or media that clearly communicates information or ideas.

VA 2.3.8: Select, organize, and design images and words to make visually clear and compelling presentations.

Materials: Excerpts from Sekimachi’s interview (Appendix A); Slideshow Presentation, *Selected Artworks of Kay Sekimachi* (Appendix D); poster board, coloring markers / crayons, glue, scissors, and access to various images as needed; computer and internet access.

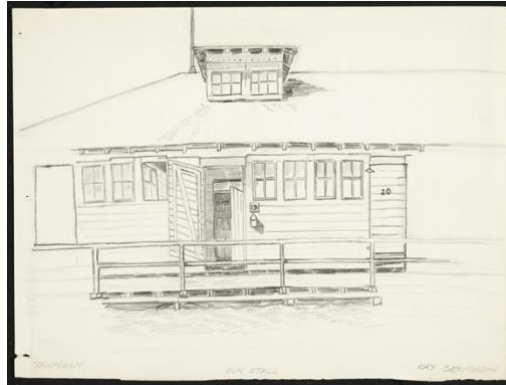
Procedure:

1. Introduce Kay Sekimachi by reading her brief biography.
2. Present: Read the excerpt from Kay Sekimachi’s interview, while displaying *Selected Artworks of Kay Sekimachi*.
3. Reflect and Brainstorm: Write a short reflective essay that addresses the following:
 - a. Describe how Japanese culture was present in Sekimachi’s life and artwork. Use specific examples.
 - b. Describe the culture you live in and practice by identifying your favorite foods, your family or community traditions or rituals, and holidays that you celebrate.
 - c. Reflect on how your culture has shaped your own art or the way you express yourself. (Do you talk or dress a certain way because of your cultural influences? Do you listen to certain music or watch shows that relate to your culture?)
4. Create: Based on your reflective essay, gather images, phrases, and other visuals to make a poster that represents your culture(s).
Extension for Grade 8-12: Instead of a poster, you may create a slideshow or video that uses your reflective essay as a script.
5. Present: Share your creation with your peers and explain how it connects with your reflective essay.

Lesson 2: Internment Camp and Identity



Tanforan, between 1940–1946.



Our Stall, Tanforan, ca. 1942–1944.

Introduction: After the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. Signed on February 19, 1942, the order gave the military broad powers to ban and evacuate any citizen on the West Coast, including California. While Executive Order 9066 applied to “any or all persons,” the newly established War Relocation Authority (WRA) began deporting approximately 120,000 Japanese immigrants (Issei) and Americans of Japanese descent (Nisei) first to assembly centers, and then to internment camps. The WRA relocated them to ten internment camps built in deserts and swamplands, including in Topaz, Utah. The relocation of Japanese Americans uprooted entire communities, as they were forced to leave their homes and jobs.

In 1942, Kay Sekimachi was relocated to Topaz, Utah with her mother and three sisters. In an oral history interview, Sekimachi recalled her memories when she and her family were relocated and then incarcerated.

Similarly, Julie Otsuka draws from her research, personal family experience, and background as a visual artist to write a semi-autobiographical historical-fiction novel, *When the Emperor Was Divine*. She tells a story about the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans through four points of view, including a boy and a girl around the same age as Sekimachi.

In this lesson, you will read an excerpt from Kay Sekimachi’s interview and the novel, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, by Julie Otsuka, and compare and contrast experiences of Kay Sekimachi and the characters of the novel to draw themes about the treatment of American and Japanese cultures and the erasure of individuality during World War II. This lesson can be used while teaching Otsuka’s novel or as a stand-alone lesson.

Common Core Content Standards (California):

Reading Literature (Grade 9–10):

RL 9/10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL 9/10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

RL 9/10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

RL 9/10.5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

Content Standards (California):

History and Social Science (Grade 10–11):

HSS 10.8.6: Discuss the human costs of the war, with particular attention to the civilian and military losses in Russia, Germany, Britain, the United States, China, and Japan.

HSS 11.7.5: Discuss the constitutional issues and impact of events on the U.S. home front, including the internment of Japanese Americans (e.g., *Fred Korematsu v. United States of America*) and the restrictions on German and Italian resident aliens; the response of the administration to Hitler's atrocities against Jews and other groups; the roles of women in military production; and the roles and growing political demands of African Americans.

Materials: Excerpt of Kay Sekimachi's interview about relocation and internment camp (Appendix B); Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor Was Divine*. New York: Anchor Books. 2002 (*Note: Selected passages from the novel can be found in Appendix B*).

Vocabulary/Concepts:

Issei: (*noun*) a Japanese immigrant to North America

Nisei: (*noun*) second-generation Japanese American

Incarceration: (*noun*) the state of being confined in prison; imprisonment.

Executive Order 9066: issued on December 7, 1941, the order gave the military broad powers to ban and evacuate any Japanese citizen on the West Coast.

Procedure:

1. Present: Introduce Kay Sekimachi and the internment of Japanese Americans.
2. Prepare: Create a table that will list the differences and similarities in themes between the excerpt of Kay Sekimachi's interview and *When the Emperor was Divine* by Julie Otsuka. While completing Steps 3–4, have this table by your side and write down themes as you read.
3. Read the excerpt of Kay Sekimachi's interview about relocation and internment camp.
4. Read *When the Emperor was Divine* by Julie Otsuka. If you do not have the book, read selected passages from the novel.
5. Write a comparative essay of the themes in the two texts. Use your table for guidance. Consider the following questions:
 - a. What are the similarities between the two texts?

- b. What are the differences?
- c. How were Japanese Americans socially and physically isolated from society?
- d. How did the camps attempt to strip individualism from the Japanese Americans?
- e. How did Japanese Americans try to resist erasure?
- f. What is the significance of the main characters not having names?
- g. How did the art school at the internment camp impact Sekimachi?
- h. What are the limitations to a historical-fiction novel?
- i. What are the limitations of an individual account?

Lesson 3: Oral History

Inspired by Kay Sekimachi's interview with Suzanne Baizerman



Kay Sekimachi, 1950.

Introduction: We can learn a lot about someone if we take the time to ask the right questions. Thanks to the Smithsonian Institution, *Archives of American Art* has recorded oral histories of a number of artists, including Kay Sekimachi. In her interview, we learn about Sekimachi's childhood as a first-generation Japanese American, her parents' relationship to Japan, her experience in the internment camp, and the Japanese influence on her own artwork.

In this activity, you will interview a grandparent, parent, guardian, or community member about their childhood, immigration story, family traditions or celebrations.

Content Standards (California):

History and Social Science (Grade 2):

HSS 2.2.1: Students differentiate between things that happened long ago and things that happened yesterday. 1. Trace the history of a family through the use of primary and secondary sources, including artifacts, photographs, interviews, and documents. 2. Compare and contrast their daily lives with those of their parents, grandparents, and/or guardians. 3. Place important events in their lives in the order in which they occurred (e.g., on a timeline or storyboard).

English and Language Arts (Grade 9-12):

ELA 2.3: Apply appropriate interviewing techniques.

ELA 2.3.a: Prepare and ask relevant questions.

ELA 2.3.b: Make notes of responses.

ELA 2.3.c: Use language that conveys maturity, sensitivity, and respect.

ELA 2.3.d: Respond correctly and effectively to questions.

ELA 2.3.e: Demonstrate knowledge of the subject or organization.

ELA 2.3.f: Compile and report responses.

ELA 2.3.g: Evaluate the effectiveness of the interview.

ELA 1.6: Develop presentations by using clear research questions and creative and critical research strategies (e.g., field studies, oral histories, interviews, experiments, electronic sources).

Materials: List of Possible Interview Questions (Appendix C); [Kay Sekimachi's Interview](#); Internet access.

Vocabulary:

Celebration: (*noun*) the act of performing publicly and according to certain rules; the act of observing in some special way.

Ritual: (*noun*) an established form for a ceremony.

Tradition: (*noun*) the handing down of information, beliefs, or customs from one generation to another.

Immigration: (*noun*) the action of coming to live permanently in a foreign country.

Issei: (*noun*) a Japanese immigrant to North America

Nisei: (*noun*) second-generation Japanese American

Procedures:*Elementary and Middle School*

1. Make a list of potential interviewees. The person that you interview should be one or, ideally, two generations older than you and has insights on either your family or community history and traditions.
2. Contact the list of potential people you would like to interview. Ask for their permission to be interviewed. Also, coordinate when and how you will conduct the interview: in-person, over the phone, through video chat, etc.
3. Hear an example: Visit the [Archives of American Art website](#) to access Kay Sekimachi's interview, and listen to the first five minutes. Notice how the interview begins and how the interviewer and interviewee introduce themselves.
4. Read over possible questions. Select six or eight questions that you want to ask and organize questions in an order that makes the most sense to you. Be sure to begin the interview similar to the Sekimachi example.
(*Tip: It's best practice to ask questions that follow a person's timeline chronologically, from their childhood to the present.*)
5. When the time of the interview comes, ask your questions. Be sure to take notes during the interview for future reference.
6. When the interview ends, thank the person you interviewed.
7. On the same day as the interview or the next, write a summary of your interview and reflect on what you learned about the person, yourself, your family, or your community.

High School and Beyond

1. Make a list of potential interviewees. The person that you interview should be one or, ideally, two generations older than you and has insights on either your family or community history and traditions.
2. Contact the list of potential interviewees. Ask for their permission to be interviewed. Also, coordinate when and how you will conduct the interview: in-person, over the phone, through video chat, etc.
3. Once you have selected an interviewee, do some research. Find at least two scholarly articles that can apply to the person or community's history.

4. Hear an example: Visit the [Archives of American Art website](#) to access Kay Sekimachi's interview, and listen to the first five minutes. Notice how the interview begins and how the interviewer and interviewee introduce themselves.
5. Read over possible questions. Select four or five questions that you want to ask, and create two or three questions that are specific to the person, your family's history or traditions. Organize questions in an order that makes the most sense to you. Be sure to begin the interview similar to the Sekimachi example.
(Tip: It's best practice to ask questions that follow a person's timeline chronologically, from their childhood to the present.)
6. When the time of the interview comes, ask your questions. Be sure to take notes during the interview for future reference.
7. When the interview ends, thank the person you interviewed.
8. On the same day as the interview or the next, write a summary of your interview and reflect on what you learned about the person, yourself, your family, or your community. Incorporate how your scholarly articles shaped your understanding of the interview, learned history, or traditions.

Resources

General Resources

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. “In the Studio: Kay Sekimachi.” *YouTube*. Sep 16, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrXV6NUZEYU>.

Smithsonian American Art Museum. <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/kay-sekimachi-4363>.

“Kay Sekimachi.” *Craft in America*. <https://www.craftinamerica.org/artist/kay-sekimachi>.

“Kay Sekimachi on card weaving.” *Craft in America*. KQED. Season 10 Episode 2. December 21, 2018. <https://www.pbs.org/video/kay-sekimachi-card-weaving-ekzfk4/>.

“VISIONARIES” episode. *Craft in America*. KQED. Season 10 Episode 2. December 21, 2018. <https://www.pbs.org/video/visionaries-anoopg/>.

Ueno, Rihoko. “An Epistolary Friendship: Miné Okubo’s Letters to Kay Sekimachi.” *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian*. May 26, 2016. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/blog/2016/05/epistolary-friendship-min%C3%A9-okubo%E2%80%99s-letters-to-kay-sekimachi>.

Cover Page and Biography

Image Credit:

Smithsonian American Art Museum. <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/kay-sekimachi-4363>.

Williamson, Leslie. “Kay Sekimachi, Berkeley.” *Interior Portraits: At Home With Cultural Pioneers and Creative Mavericks*. Rizzoli, February 20, 2018.

Lesson 1: Kay Sekimachi and Family Traditions

Baizerman, Suzanne and Kay Sekimachi Stocksdale. “Oral history interview with Kay Sekimachi [Stocksdale], 2001 July 26–August 6.” *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. 2001. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-kay-sekimachi-stocksdale-11768#transcript>.

Image Credit:

Ikat Box, 1996. By Kay Sekimachi (b. 1926–). United States. Linen and acrylic paint. *Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Renwick Acquisitions Fund*, 2003.25. <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/ikat-box-71851>.

Woven Book: Wave, 1980. By Kay Sekimachi (b. 1926–). United States. Linen, transfer dye, buckram (lining); dye painting, double weave on a four-harness loom. *Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, Gift of the Artist*, 2005.124. <https://art.famsf.org/kay-sekimachi/woven-book-wave-2005124>.

Kay Sekimachi. Smithsonian American Art Museum. <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/kay-sekimachi-4363>.

Lesson 2: Internment Camp and Identity

Baizerman, Suzanne and Kay Sekimachi Stocksdale. “Oral history interview with Kay Sekimachi [Stocksdale], 2001 July 26–August 6.” *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. 2001. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-kay-sekimachi-stocksdale-11768#transcript>.

George Mason University. “Executive Order 9066: The President Authorizes Japanese Relocation.” *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*. 2020. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5154>.

NEA Big Read. “*When the Emperor Was Divine*.” *National Endowment for the Arts*. 2020. <https://www.arts.gov/national-initiatives/nea-big-read/when-the-emperor-was-divine>.

The Noguchi Museum. *Self-Interned, 1942: A Curriculum Guide*. August 2019. <https://150lfn2rfn013q1hld13l6me-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Self-Interned-1942-Noguchi-Museum-Curriculum-Guide.pdf>.

Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor Was Divine*. New York: Anchor Books. 2002.

Image Credit:

Our Stall, Tanforan, ca. 1942–1944. By Kay Sekimachi Stocksdale. Graphite drawing. Bob Stocksdale and Kay Sekimachi papers, ca. 1900–2015. *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*, 6245.

Tanforan, between 1940–1946. By Kay Sekimachi Stocksdale. Watercolor painting. Bob Stocksdale and Kay Sekimachi papers, ca. 1900–2015. *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*, 6246.

Lesson 3: Oral History

Baizerman, Suzanne and Kay Sekimachi Stocksdale. “Oral history interview with Kay Sekimachi [Stocksdale], 2001 July 26–August 6.” *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. 2001. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-kay-sekimachi-stocksdale-11768#transcript>.

Image Credit:

Kay Sekimachi, 1950. Photographic Print. Bob Stocksdale and Kay Sekimachi papers, ca. 1900–2015. *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*, 6244.

Appendix A (Lesson 1)

Kay Sekimacki and Family Traditions – Excerpts from Sekimachi’s Interview

Baizerman, Suzanne and Kay Sekimachi Stocksdale. “Oral history interview with Kay Sekimachi [Stocksdale], 2001 July 26–August 6.” *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. 2001. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-kay-sekimachi-stocksdale-11768#transcript>.

Kay Sekimachi on her Childhood

“After coming back in 1930, we were living in Berkeley, and there was a Japanese community, a Japanese Buddhist church, and there was also a Methodist church. And we did go to Japanese school after classes, and there were other Japanese kids around.”

“[My parents] weren’t Americanized. But on the other hand, I don’t think there was too much in the way of Japanese culture. I think they were just too busy, my father, number one, trying to make a living. This was during the Depression. And I know my mother took in sewing. And anyway, it was, I think, a very hard time.”

“One loves to eat, and so I think about growing up eating Japanese food, which, of course, my mother was more familiar with in cooking. And in those days, there was a vendor who came around to the various Japanese houses, and it was always fun going out to see what the man would have. So my mother was able to buy tofu, and fresh fish, and daikon [Japanese radish], and all kinds of Japanese produce. And then there was also a Japanese grocery store run by Japanese around the corner, and so we were able to get groceries there.

And I do remember a few Japanese New Year’s feasts that we would have. And I just remember one time, my mother cooked a lobster and put it on her great big plate that she used for just the New Year banquet. And anyway, I remember things like that. And also, once a year, she would pull out her kori, which was like a suitcase that Japanese women would store their kimonos in, and she would pull it out mainly to air them. And so, we always looked forward to that, and it was a big treat to see her wedding kimono and her obis and her other kimonos that she brought over.

I also do remember, we did kind of celebrate Girls’ Day, which was a big thing in Japan. And we had a set of ohinasamas—I think that’s what they were called—and you had a tiered platform, like a little stage set that you set these dolls on. And on the top, you had the empress and the emperor and the courtiers. And anyway, I’m positive we did not have a full set, but we had some, and they were always sort of our treasures.”

“But I must say, the first few days [at the internment camp], I thought, when we had to stand in line at the mess hall for meals, and I really thought, gosh, are we going to survive, because nothing was organized. . . . [I]t was, I guess, sort of army meals, beans and hot dogs and stuff like that.”

Kay Sekimachi on her Woven Books

“The first series started way back in, I think about 1985 [1980]. And one of the first ones I did was called *Waves*. And again, that was because the British Craft Center was having an exhibition of miniature textiles, and I, let's see, I participated in many of their exhibitions. And maybe for the first one, I did the three-dimensional woven box, and I did a whole series after that of nesting boxes. And then, the split-ply twining came, and then another show came up, and I thought, well, what am I going to do for them?

I can't recall what actually triggered the woven books, but maybe I'm beginning to remember that a book was given to us that came from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and it was a reproduction of an old Japanese book, and it was *The Book of Butterflies*. And it was an accordion fold book, and when you stretched it out or opened it out, it spread to about twenty feet. And so I looked at it and I looked at it and thought, well, gee whiz, if I did a double weave, I could have two images, one on either side.

So I thought, okay, let's just give it a try. And so I tried a book of waves, and I still have that one, and it's in the show down at the Mingei [Mingei Museum of International Folk Art, San Diego, CA]. And then after that, I was looking at the work of Hokusai and Hiroshige. I've just started thinking about Japanese things or Japanese books and Japanese prints. And then I even remember that we had a little tiny miniature book, which was an accordion fold book, and it was *Prints of Hiroshige*. So the prints were just tiny, but that went way back to our childhood, so I pulled it out and looked at it.

And so the next book I did was called *100 Views of Fuji*, and it was just Mt. Fuji repeated all the way across the whole front and the back of the book.

. . . I actually painted the image of the waves onto the threads with acrylic paint. And then, Joy [Stocksdale, Kay's stepdaughter] had given me some transfer dyes, and so I thought, well, why don't I try the transfer dyes? The only thing is that you have to use part-synthetic material, and I wanted to use linen, because of the crispness of linen and the body that linen has. So I thought, well, I'll give it a try anyway.

So I made the warp, which was in 40/2 linen, and set at, I think, thirty threads to the inch, and so it was double—it would be sixty because of the two layers. But anyway, I painted my image on with the transfer dyes onto tracing paper, and then when the warp was ready, I just stretched it out across an ironing board, and then put paper under my first layer of warp threads. And then I took the image and my hot iron, and just pressed the dye onto the linen.

But I knew that I had to do something to make the dye adhere to the linen better than, well, I wanted it to take on linen, and I knew that I had to size the linen with something. So in some of my experiments, I have glued warp ends. Actually before cutting off the woven part of the warp, you can weave an inch or so and then weave in a stick, then a little more weaving beyond the

stick. The inch in front of the stick gets glued, so as not to fray; the woven piece is cut off, and the stick gets tied to the front beam. No knots are required, so you don't lose a lot of warp.

I had strips of material with glue on it, and I found that the dye just took much better on the glued part. So I made a glue wash. I sized my linen threads with glue and let that dry. It was kind of a slow process; it took many steps.”

Kay Sekimachi on her Paper Boxes

“[T]he paper boxes are more like origami, where I actually would take a square piece of paper and I would fold. And again, I would make a small model just to be sure it worked. Because when I'm doing a piece that's about twelve inches wide, I want to be sure that it's going to work.

[N]ow, I have only a few sheets [of paper] left. They were planned pretty carefully. I marked stitching lines on the paper, and then I actually stitched two layers of paper together on the sewing machine. Some of the stitch lines became fold lines. And then, on some, I would even reinforce the two layers with another piece of paper on the inside just to give it a little more body.”

[Interviewer: “Now, you mentioned origami. Is that something you learned as a child, or did you learn that—”]

“That's something that we did when we were growing up—origami. We just grew up with it. I think my mother probably just did it, and we just grew up knowing how to fold the crane, boxes, and hats.”

Appendix B (Lesson 2)

Internment Camp and Identity – Excerpts from Kay Sekimachi’s Interview

Baizerman, Suzanne and Kay Sekimachi Stocksedale. “Oral history interview with Kay Sekimachi [Stocksdale], 2001 July 26–August 6.” *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. 2001. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-kay-sekimachi-stocksedale-11768#transcript>.

Kay Sekimachi on Relocation and Internment Camp

“We were living on Berkeley Way, and all I remember is that my mother, you know—rumors started flying around that if you had anything Japanese, that you had to get rid of it. And so I remember her breaking Japanese records and even burning books, I think. You weren't supposed to have any books or magazines in Japanese.”

“And then, of course, we were told that we were going to be relocated, or that we were going to an assembly center, and to pack up your belongings. And so it turned out that my mother worked for a very nice family here in Berkeley, the Dennesses, and they said they would take as much stuff as we wanted to store. And I don't know where these trunks came from, but we did pack up a couple of trunks and we put what we thought was precious to us.

And I know I saved my paper dolls, because as we were growing up, all we had to do for recreation was to play with our paper dolls. And that meant cutting the dolls out of the newspaper every Sunday, and then making clothes for them. So I still have them.”

“We had some suitcases—well, as much as we could carry, that was about it. So it wasn't much. And I do remember, we left a whole bunch of stuff right in the middle of the room. And, at that point, dealers were coming around buying up what people left. And we did have an upright piano that was given to us, and that went for five dollars. That was probably a pretty good price for it in those days [laughs]. But anyway, I do remember that we did get five dollars.

And what I do remember the most is that we left a bunch of quilts. These quilts were given to my mother by one of the women she worked for. And I do remember that they were beautiful, and I think now, my gosh, if we only had them.”

“By bus to Tanforan Assembly Center [for ‘Persons of Japanese Ancestry;’ opened April 27, 1942, and housed 8,000 people]. And then, we were assigned rooms in a barrack, and there were cots and we had straw mattresses, and it was just bare other than the cot. And somehow, we managed for, I think it was about three months that we were in Tanforan. But I must say, the first few days, I thought, when we had to stand in line at the mess hall for meals, and I really thought, gosh, are we going to survive, because nothing was organized.”

[Interviewer: “And was it Japanese food? Was it things you were used to eating?”]

“No, it was, I guess, sort of army meals, beans and hot dogs and stuff like that.”

“Well, the older Niseis, who were, like, in Cal by that time, they started a school. And then Professor Obata from Cal was in our camp, and he started an art school. And so, that's where my younger sister and I went to. So every day we drew and painted.”

“They did have school. We were moved to Topaz, Utah, and there they did have schools organized. And so, actually, I graduated high school in Topaz, class of '44, something like that.”

Internment Camp and Identity—Selected Passages from *When the Emperor Was Divine*

Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor Was Divine*. New York: Anchor Books. 2002.

The girl sat down and the woman gave her a glass of cold barley water and a long silver spoon. The girl licked the spoon and stared at her reflection. Her head was upside down. She dipped the spoon into the sugar bowl.

“Is there anything wrong with my face?” she asked.

“Why?” said the woman.

“People were staring.” (15)

Three times a day the clanging of bells. Endless lines. The smell of liver drifting out across the black barrack roofs. The smell of catfish. From time to time, the smell of horse meat. On meatless days, the smell of beans. Inside the mess hall, the clatter of forks and spoons, and knives. No chopsticks. An endless sea of bobbing black heads. Hundreds of mouths chewing. Slurping. Sucking. Swallowing. (50)

The rules about the fence were simple: You could not go over it, you could not go under it, you could not go around it, you could not go through it.

And if your kite got stuck on it?

That was an easy one. You let the kite go.

There were rules about language, too: *Here we say Dining Hall and not Mess Hall; Safety Council, not Internal Police; Residents, not Evacuees; and last but not least Mental Climate, not Morale.*

There were rules about food: No second helpings except for milk and bread.

And books: No books in Japanese.

There were rules about religion: No Emperor-worshipping Shintos allowed. (61)

The school was opened in mid-October. Classes were held in an unheated barrack at the far end of Block 8 and in the morning it was sometimes so cold the boy could not feel his fingers or toes and his breath came out in small white puffs. Textbooks had to be shared, and paper and pencils were often in short supply.

Every morning, at Mountain View Elementary, he placed his hand over his heart and recited the pledge of allegiance. He sang “Oh, beautiful for spacious skies” and “My country, ‘tis of thee” and he shouted out “Here!” at the sound of his name. His teacher was Mrs. Delaney. She had short brown hair and smooth creamy skin and a husband named Hank who was a sergeant in the Marines. Every week he sent her a letter from the front lines in the Pacific. Once, he even sent her a grass skirt. “Now when am I ever going to wear a grass skirt?” she asked the class.

“How about tomorrow?”

“Or after recess.”

“Put it on right now!”

The first week of school they learned all about the *Nina* and the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria*, and Squanto and the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. They wrote down the names of the

states in neat cursive letters across lined sheets of paper. They played hangman and twenty questions. In the afternoon, during current events, they listened to Mrs. Delaney read out loud to them from the newspaper. *The First Lady is visiting the Queen in London. The Russians are still holding in Stalingrad. The Japs are massing on Guadalcanal.*

“What about Burma?” the boy asked.

The situation in Burma, she told the class, was bleak. (71–72)

He was there, above his mother’s cot. Jesus. In color. Four inches by six. A picture postcard someone had once sent to her from the Louvre. Jesus had bright blue eyes and a kind but mysterious smile.

“Just like the *Mona Lisa*’s,” said the girl.

The boy thought He looked more like Mrs. Delaney, only with longer hair and a halo.

Jesus’ eyes were filled with a secret and flickering joy. With rapture. He’d died once – “for you,” said his mother, “for your sins” – and then he’d risen.

The girl said, “Mmm.” She said, “That’s divine.”

Late at night, in the darkness, he could hear his mother praying. “Our Father, who art in heaven...”

And in the morning, at sunrise, coming from the other side of the wall, the sound of the man next door chanting. “*Kokyo ni taishite keirei.*”

Salute to the Imperial Palace. (82–83)

Appendix C (Lesson 3)

Oral History – Possible Questions

Introduction / Ice Breaker

1. Please tell me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth.
 - a. Who were you named after?

Childhood

2. What were you like as a child?
3. What was your childhood like?
4. How would you describe your parents?
5. Where did you live?
6. Do you remember any songs that you used to sing as a child?
7. Do you remember any stories that you heard or read as a child?

Teenage Years

8. What were you like as a teenager?

Immigration

9. How old were you when you migrated?
10. What is your favorite memory of your home country?
11. What was the most difficult part about leaving?
12. What was your journey to this new country like?
13. Who supported you the most during your journey? What did they do?
14. What was it like when you first arrived?

Traditions and Celebrations

15. What holidays do you celebrate?
16. What's your favorite holiday to celebrate?
17. What would you consider the most traditional holiday that you celebrate?
18. How do you celebrate this holiday? Are there traditions?
19. What do you eat?
20. Is there a religious component?
21. Where do you celebrate?

Appendix D (Lesson 1)



Kay Sekimachi (b.1926–)
Selected Artworks



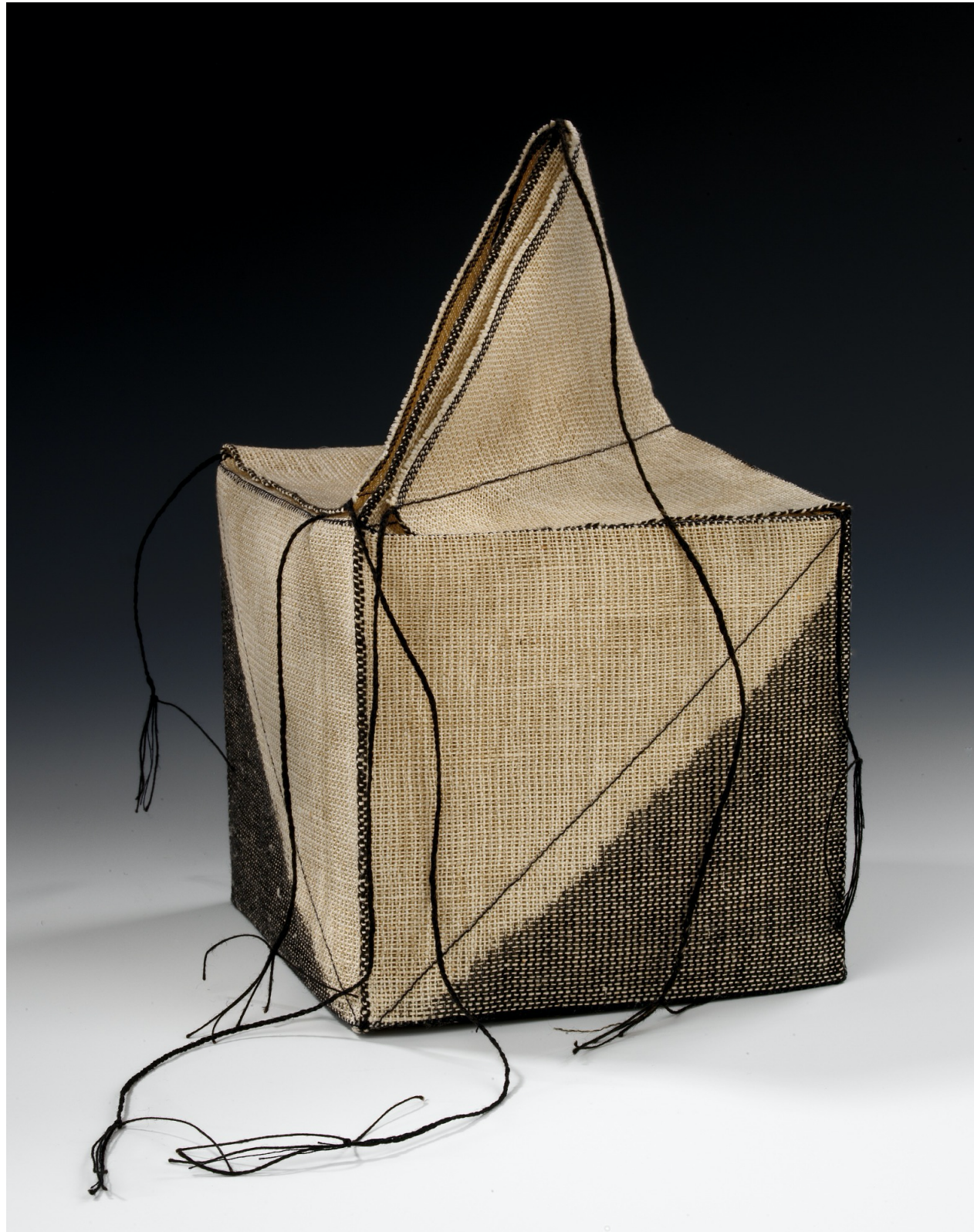


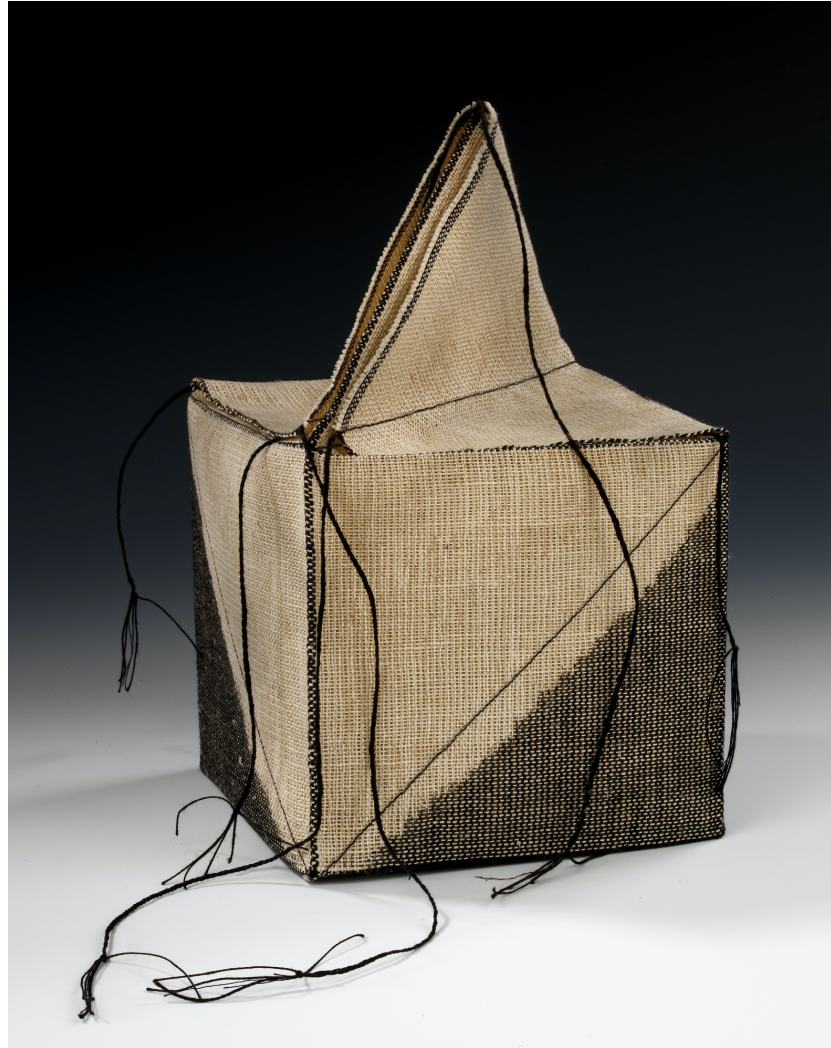


Woven book: *Wave*

Year: 1980

Material: Linen, transfer dye, buckram (lining); dye painting, double weave on a four-harness Loom.





Ikat Box

Year: 1996

Material: Linen and acrylic paint.

Image Credits

Ikat Box, 1996. By Kay Sekimachi (b. 1926–). United States. Linen and acrylic paint. *Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Renwick Acquisitions Fund*, 2003.25.

<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/ikat-box-71851>.

Woven Book: Wave, 1980. By Kay Sekimachi (b. 1926-). United States. Linen, transfer dye, buckram (lining); dye painting, double weave on a four-harness loom. *Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, Gift of the Artist*, 2005.124. <https://art.famsf.org/kay-sekimachi/woven-book-wave-2005124>.

Kay Sekimachi. Smithsonian American Art Museum. <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/kay-sekimachi-4363>.