

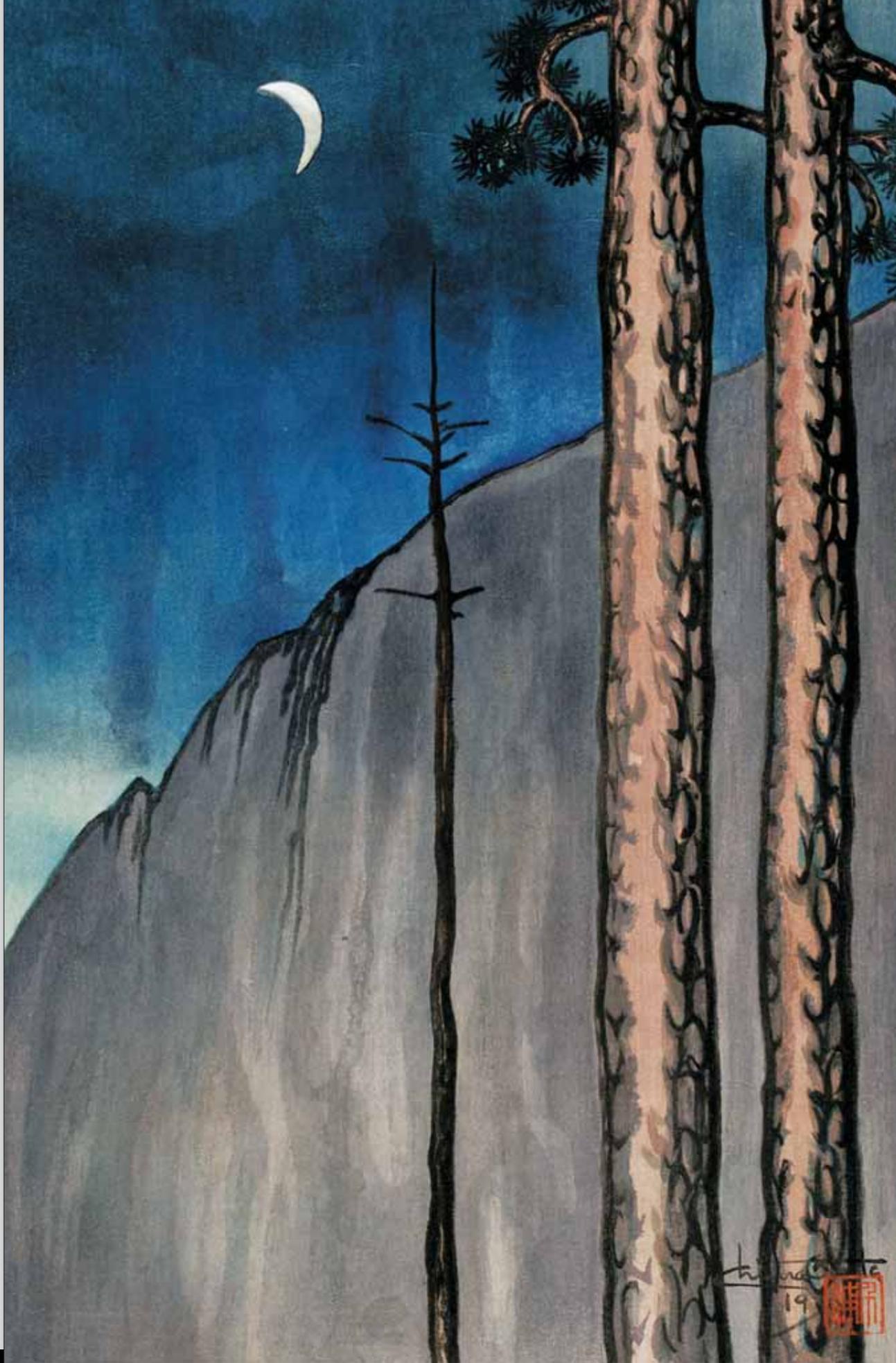
# obata's yosemite

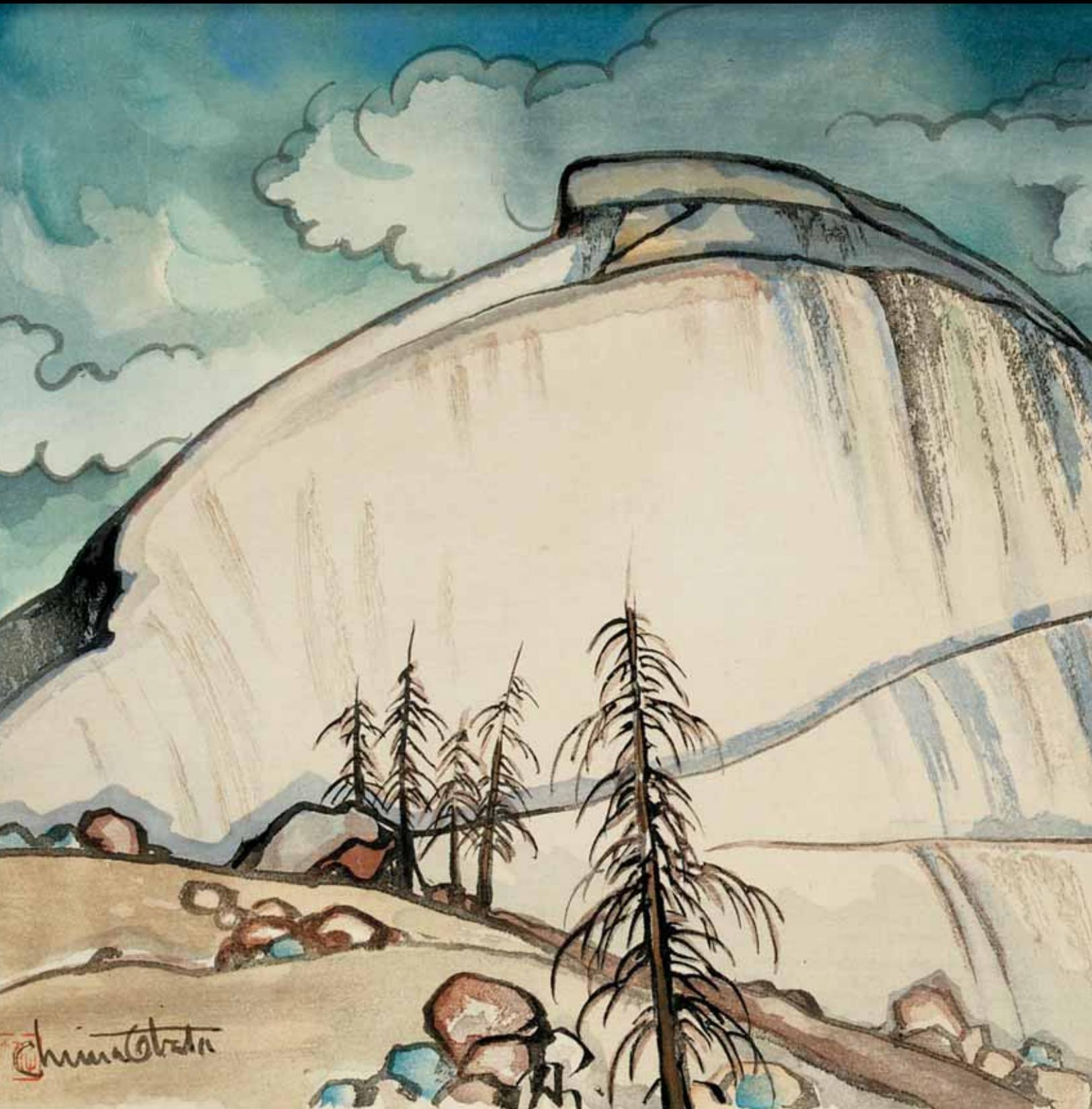
Yosemite National Park has long been a magnet for artists, Thomas Moran and Ansel Adams to name a few. “Yosemite is one of the country’s premier art parks,” says Jonathan Bayless, the park’s chief curator. But there was a time when the oasis of nature was deemed “unpaintable,” largely due to the work of accomplished but over-the-top artists such as Albert Bierstadt, whose large-scale oils, lush and romantic, inspired both awe and loathing. Mark Twain said that Bierstadt’s *Domes of the Yosemite*, 9 1/2 feet high and 15 feet long, reminded him more of “Kingdom-Come” than California. However gorgeous, such works spawned “a virtual industry of sentimental painting and verse,” writes Susan Landauer in *Obata’s Yosemite*. “The result was that many serious painters shied away from the theme.” Chiura Obata helped change that.

**RIGHT:** *Evening Moon*, color woodblock print, 1930. “From Eagle Peake Trail the massive stroke of the rocky mountains can be seen cutting boldly across the heavens—a prelude of melody before the evening moon.” —Chiura Obata

chiura obata's brush with zen in the high sierras by meghan hogan

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE OBATA FAMILY EXCEPT AS NOTED







Obata, one of the artists featured in Ken Burns' new film on the parks, helped change perceptions with his first set of watercolor sketches after a visit in 1927. Blending modernism with traditional painting, they remain some of the park's most distinctive images, still "fresh," says Kimi Kodani Hill, his granddaughter, their simple, cropped compositions worlds away from Bierstadt's all-encompassing panoramas. Hill cites a sketch of Yosemite Falls, focused on a thin stream of waterfall and surrounding rock: "Many western artists would paint the whole thing with the mountains in the background. He cropped it like you would with a

**OBATA'S ESPOUSAL OF THE ZEN TRADITION . . . LED HIM TO IMBUE HIS LANDSCAPES WITH AN INTENSE CALLIGRAPHIC EXPRESSIVENESS.**

camera. It makes a very striking graphic image." And contemporary—not at all like three quarters of a century ago. Obata, who subscribed to the Buddhist belief of keeping your mind open and pure so as to experience every moment, roamed Yosemite mesmerized by its unspoiled nature, the experience staying with him for the rest of his life. "It was just the perfect moment in time," Hill says. "He made a very deep spiritual connection." Writes Landauer, "Obata's espousal of the Zen tradition . . . led him to imbue his landscapes with an intense calligraphic expressiveness."

His visit to the park was initiated by an invitation from fellow artist Worth Ryder, an art professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who enjoyed hiking. Obata enjoyed hiking too, but went there mostly for the chance to create art, which at the age of 42 had been his way of life for many years. Born in 1885 in Sendai, Japan, he was adopted by his older brother, Rokuichi, a noted painter, at the age of five. He soon showed an instinct for art himself. At the age of seven, he began an apprenticeship to learn the ancient Chinese craft of sumi-e painting, a style of monochrome ink painting introduced into Japanese culture by Zen Buddhists around the 14th century. In his teens, he moved to Tokyo, where he attended the Japan Fine Arts Academy and trained with eminent artists Tanryo Murata and Gaho Hashimoto. His talent earned awards and commissions, but he wanted to see the bigger world. So at the age of 18, he left for San Francisco, a new world and not a friendly one for a Japanese immigrant. When he sailed into Seattle in 1903, he was hardly the only Asian on the boat. It was the height of immigration, with 110,000 Japanese coming to America between 1900 and 1907. It was also a time of great prejudice against Japanese Americans. Obata was spit on in the streets and attacked.



**LEFT:** *Death's Grave Pass and Tenaya Peak*, color woodblock print, 1930. "While standing at Death's Grave Pass, I recalled many American Indian legends and historical facts centered on the imposing Tenaya Peak seen in the distance." —Chiura Obata **ABOVE:** Berkeley, 1930s.

His first job was as a household servant, but he soon found his creative footing. Despite the xenophobia, Americans had an appetite for Asian art, and Obata profited from the early 1900s rage for Japonisme with his Tosa- and Kano-style screens and murals showcased in department stores. The bulk of his earnings, however, came from illustrating Japanese-language publications. He married Haruko Kohashi, a fellow immigrant, in 1912, and as they started a family, he sold work back in his homeland as well. It wasn't until the 1920s that he became more involved with the western art world, in 1921 helping create the East-West Art Society, a group celebrating art in both hemispheres. Several esteemed painters joined, including Perham Nahl and Ray Boynton, connections that later helped Obata in his career.

**He and Ryder started their journey into Yosemite on June 16, 1927,** at the Big Flat Oak road entrance along the park's western border. The pair slowly wound their way eastward, towards the other side of the park, using Tioga Road, one of the major thoroughfares and the only route through the Sierra. "In the 1920s it was a much rougher road than it is today, but the appeal was that it brought one very close, by car, to

**WHEN WE REACHED MONO LAKE . . . A MYSTERIOUS FEELING OVERWHELMED US. IT WAS BEYOND**

Robert Boardman Howard, a fellow Berkeley artist, joined them the first week of July. That first night around the campfire, Obata said he intended to paint 100 more pictures. At the end of the month, the trio left Yosemite Valley for the high Sierra. "When we reached Mono Lake the tranquil lake did not even ripple. A mysterious feeling overwhelmed us. It was beyond description," wrote Obata. It was one of his last sights of the expedition. He returned home four days later on July 30, but he brought the indelible experience with him. In a last letter from the park, he wrote "From the deep impression of my experience there springs an emotion which others may not understand . . . I am looking forward with pleasure and hope as to how I will be able to express this precious experience on silk."

While he did express his emotions by recreating some of the images on silk, he drew acclaim for his woodblock prints, which involve carving images onto blocks of wood and cutting off the unprinted sections. At the news of his father's death the next year, he and his family left for Japan where he employed Tadeo Takamizawa, one of the country's most illustrious print publishers, to create his prints. Using his drawings,

**—CHIURA OBATA**

craftsmen created a series of woodblocks for each different area of color. Hill says the concept for the prints was most likely her grandfather's ingrained homage to Japanese tradition. "It was the going on and recording of a journey," much like other Japanese expeditions preserved in art, such as Katsushika Hokusai's famed *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*.

Obata's standards were high; some prints went through as many as 160 states before being finished. They took 18 months to produce and a team of more than 32 carvers and 40 printers. Only the best 100 were chosen for the final portfolios; over 10,000 impressions were deemed inferior and destroyed. The prints were then wrapped in decorative sleeves inscribed with their titles, Obata's name, and the publisher. The process was expensive—Obata used the family's entire savings and then had to borrow 20,000 yen (approximately \$214) so that they could get back to America. The prints earned him acclaim throughout California. Critics were taken with the woodblock print format, and his efforts in creating the prints, as well as his extraordinary attention to detail, didn't go unnoticed. He was appointed an art instructor at the University of California, Berkeley, where he spent the next several years teaching and lecturing, often taking time to revisit Yosemite and tour other national parks.

**LEFT:** *Along Mono Lake, sumi and watercolor on paper, 1927.* **RIGHT:** *Life and Death, Porcupine Flat, color woodblock print, 1930. "In the burning heat of the summer day, against the deep blue skies, stands a towering pine tree, brimming with life. At the foot of the pine tree lies another tree, dead and white."* —Chiura Obata

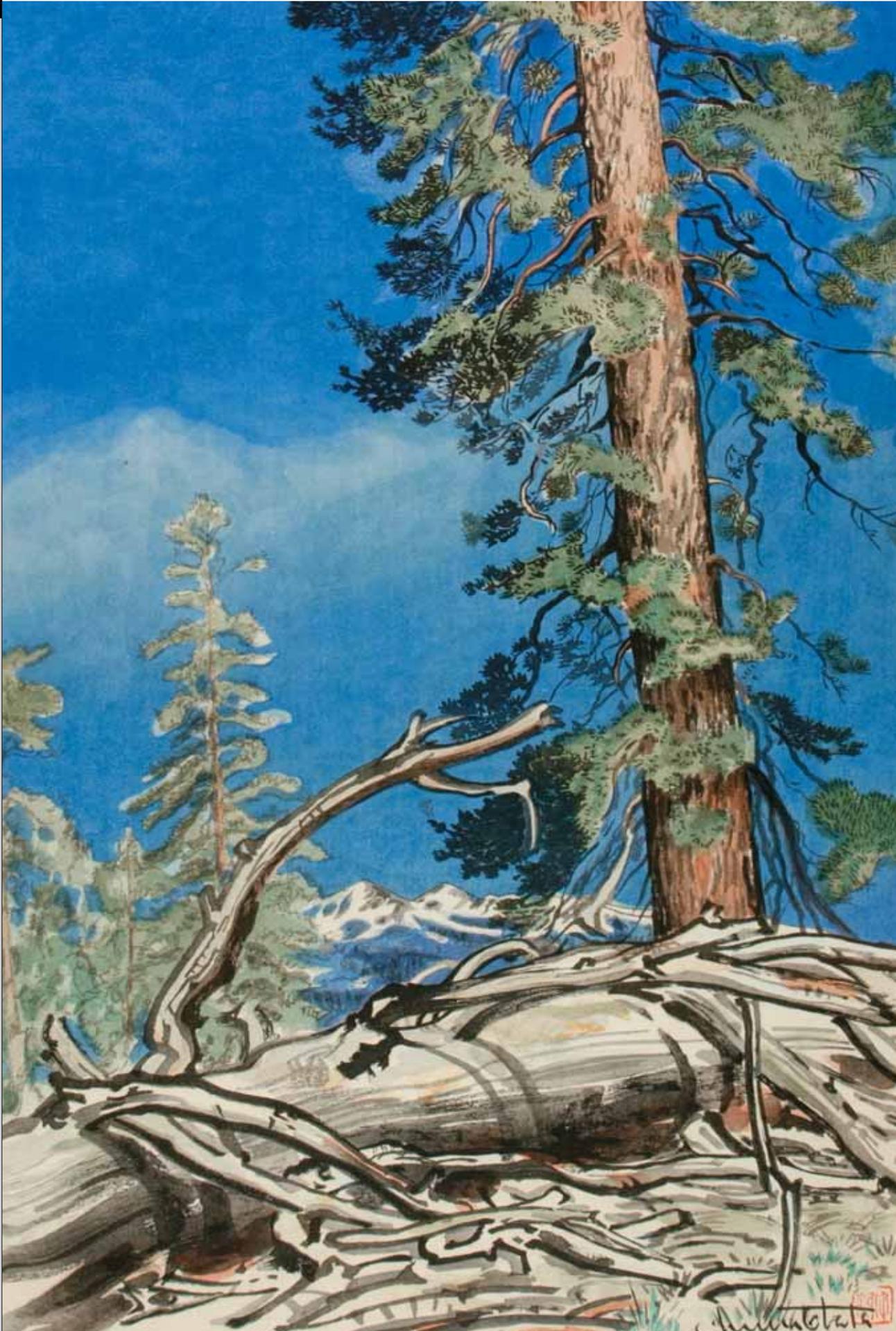


the alpine meadows, glaciers, lakes, and the high Sierra environs," Bayless says. Yosemite Valley was, and still is, the most visited area of the park, but in Ryder's Model T they strayed off the beaten path. "Much of the 19th-century art was focused on the valley, so Obata's diversity of locations helped to diversify the views of Yosemite," Bayless says.

As they navigated through the park, Obata and Ryder leisurely hiked, fished, and of course, sketched and painted. Obata's letters reflect how clearly awestruck he was. "Great silver fir and pine wound their roots around the unusual, interesting rocks left behind by the glacier's erosion. They stand even after experiencing hundreds of years of hardship," he marveled while standing at Porcupine Flat.

DESCRIPTION.

SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM/GIFT OF THE OBATA FAMILY



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SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM/GIFT OF THE OBATA FAMILY

**Obata's peaceful life of art and nature came crashing down in** February 1942 with the opening of internment camps for Japanese Americans two months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Almost 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps. Although his son, Gyo, obtained a last-minute approval to attend architecture school in St. Louis, where he could avoid the camps, Obata, his wife, and children Kim and Yuri had no choice but to go. They were first sent to Tanforan Assembly Center, a temporary camp in San Bruno, California, where—as *Obata's Yosemite* describes it—the accommodations were a “horse stall with hay for bedding.” Hill, the family historian and author of *Topaz Moon: Chiura Obata's Art of the Internment*, says that it was the first time her mother saw her grandmother cry. Five months later, they were relocated to Topaz in Utah.

For Obata, at the age of 57, the experience must have been extremely sobering. He made the best of it with his art. Together with fellow artist and internee George Hibi, he established art schools offering a range of classes to over 600 students. In addition to teaching art to others, he also worked on paintings of his own, not just to keep busy, but to document the experience. He found beauty and inspiration in the barren desert, as his airbrushed watercolor camp scenes illustrate. “His experience of knowing nature consoled and inspired him,” Hill says. “He always told his students at the camp ‘don't just look at the dust on the ground, look beyond.’”

After a little over a year in the camp, the Obatas were released to wait out the rest of the war in St. Louis. In 1945, Obata resumed his position at the University of California, where he taught until retiring as professor emeritus in 1954, the same year he became a naturalized citizen of the United States. True to his Zen-inspired philosophy, he kept working for

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the next 15 years, lecturing throughout California and giving demonstrations on Japanese brush painting. He died in 1975 at the age of 90, but his art lives on. The exhibitions of his work have continued over the years—one of the most recent at the Smithsonian American Art Museum last year—inspiring people to appreciate the world around them and to find the bigger world he, himself, searched for. Hill says that is what her grandfather would want, recalling her surprise in talking with some of his students and finding that what they most remembered him for wasn't his art techniques. “What they remembered was his teaching them how to look at the world and see the beauty of nature, and how to interpret that nature in artwork. That was his big message.”

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**LEFT:** *Great Nature, Storm on Mount Lyell from Johnson Peak*, color woodblock print, 1930. “Mount Lyell stands majestically, 13,650 feet high, clad in brilliant snow and towering over the high peaks of the Sierra—Tioga Peak, Mount Dana, Ragged Peak, Johnson Peak, Unicorn Peak, and Mount San Joaquin, which surround her. The spotlessly clear blue sky that sweeps high up over the mountains changes in a moment to a furious black color. Clouds call clouds. Pealing thunder shrieks and roars across the black heavens. Man stands awestruck in the face of the great change of wondrous nature.” —Chiura Obata