

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation Strives to End Auctioning Of Priceless Japanese American Incarceration Artifacts**

Since mid-March, The Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation (HMWF) has been exploring every possible avenue to prevent a priceless collection of art and crafts created by Japanese Americans, who were illegally confined in remote camps during World War II, from being auctioned. The collection of Allen Hendershott Eaton artifacts is set to sell at auction this Friday, April 17, through Rago Arts and Auctions in Lambertville, NJ. The lots concerning the Japanese American incarceration artworks amount to 450 pieces and images, many prominently featuring Heart Mountain as their subject matter.

“When the camps closed, many Japanese Americans were focused on rebuilding their lives. They weren’t in a position to think about keeping or preserving their artwork,” said Shirley Ann Higuchi, Chair of the Foundation. Her parents met while confined at Heart Mountain. “The idea of making these pieces of art, which symbolize incarcerated’ efforts to make something beautiful out of a miserable experience—making them available to the highest bidder re-opens old wounds. If we don’t act now to slow this auction down or delay it entirely, we’re not doing the right thing,” she said.

The HMWF began their protest by respectfully asking the consignor to consider donating the items to Japanese American institutions capable of conscientiously preserving and exhibiting them to serve the public interest. The HMWF added that if the consignors were unwilling or unable to donate, they should at least consider a private, negotiated sale with one or more appropriate community-supported, non-profit institutions. When these suggestions were rejected by the consignor, the HMWF secured pledges from its board members and friends to make a substantial cash offer—one that far exceeded the estimated auction value of all the incarceration-related items. With the offer, the HMWF made its intent clear: if allowed to secure the collection through such an offer, the Foundation would work with interested and appropriate Japanese American institutions and organizations to reach consensus on where the items would be most appropriately preserved, housed and exhibited. Unfortunately, on April 13, the HMWF learned their proposal to enable all parties to escape the indignity of a public auction and to assure the rightful stewardship of this exceptional collection had been rejected. It is now clear that the consignors are resolute in allowing this unconscionable auction to proceed.

“Over the last several days, we have worked in good faith with the consignor through Rago to find a positive resolution that would end the auction,” said HMWF Executive Director Brian Liesinger. “The fact that we were met with rejection on all of our appeals—and the Japanese American community’s appeals—is baffling.”

Along with a growing number of individuals and groups, both within and beyond the Japanese American community, the HMWF is saddened and offended by the consignor’s and auction house’s apparent indifference to the history, meaning, and appropriate treatment of the invaluable community legacy this collection represents. The value of these precious objects cannot be measured in dollars; their value instead lies in the suffering, resilience, spirit and dignity of those who created them while wrongfully confined behind barbed wire. The HMWF will continue to pursue and support any and all lawful actions to oppose this wrongful public sale.

Since the auction catalog’s release, descendants of incarcerated have identified images of their family depicted in the auction lots. Others have found their family names among lots of wood-carved barrack nameplates. The thought that, years later, someone is profiting off of their families’ misery is heartbreaking.

To understand this heartbreak, you must understand the historical context: because they looked like the enemy in 1942—because they had Japanese ancestry—they were called out and rounded up, despite two-thirds of them being American-born citizens. Our nation’s leaders let hysteria and racism blind them to the Constitution. Americans of Japanese ancestry were forced to abandon their lives on the West Coast, were herded like cattle and were sent off to 10 confinement camps around the country. They were not told where they were going; they were not told how long they would be confined; and they were imprisoned without being charged with any crime or given due process of law. 120,000 of them. That represented the collective shattering of the American Dream for about 80% of the entire population of Japanese Americans in the nation.

It should be noted that not a single case of espionage was committed by Japanese Americans against their government—punctuating how unfounded the argument for incarceration was. Moreover, thousands of young Japanese Americans agreed to leave their families behind in confinement camps to join the army and fight heroically for their country. Despite all this, Japanese Americans discovered that even when the war abroad was won, their struggle against prejudice was not. Racism was still very much alive in the United States, adding insult to injury as they tried desperately to rebuild their lives. Heart Mountain remained open late—until November 1945—because some incarcerated were essentially squatting; they had nowhere to go and did not know what to do.

It is impossible to characterize the psychological pain of this experience, and those who suffered it express it in various ways. The carefully made art pieces set to go to auction this week represent an inspiring response to adversity. Such responses should not be treated as commodities to be dispersed to the highest bidder.

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The Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation manages the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center on the site of the former “Heart Mountain Relocation Center.” The National Historic Landmark site is devoted to memorializing the experiences of more than 14,000 Japanese Americans incarcerated there during World War II with a museum, gallery, archive, original camp structures, war memorial and memorial walking trail. It is located between Cody and Powell on Highway 14A. For more information, call (307) 754-8000 or visit [www.HeartMountain.org](http://www.HeartMountain.org).

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