In 1929, Miki Hayakawa (1899–1953) seemingly burst onto the art scene with a solo exhibition of some 150 paintings at San Francisco's Golden Gate Institute (Kinmon Gakuen, or 金門学園). The word “genius” was used to describe her talent in a positive review by the San Francisco Examiner's Gobind Behari Lal. Praising the artist’s tremendous industry, keen observation, and “supple fingers,” Lal asserted that Hayakawa “feels and conveys beauty through her brush in irrepressible flashes.” Informing his readers that Hayakawa was a “very young woman” and an immigrant from northern Japan who studied at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA, later renamed the San Francisco Art Institute, now the San Francisco Art Institute Legacy Foundation), Lal further proclaimed that the artist’s work “represents the full blossom of the Occidental art of painting.”

Lal—himself an immigrant from Delhi, India; a science reporter who had written about arts and culture for the Examiner since 1925; and an eventual co-winner of the 1937 Pulitzer Prize for distinguished reporting—acknowledged Hayakawa’s artistic acumen without attributing it to an essentialized assessment based on her race, nationality, or gender. He instead offered that Hayakawa’s sophisticated artwork “excellently answers the question, ‘What are the younger women painters of California doing worth particular recognition?’” In Lal’s view, Hayakawa’s accomplishments proved San Francisco to be a place where people of divergent backgrounds could converge and flourish: “The prophets of a new renaissance have said so often that here, if anywhere, the East and the West will meet and pool their talents and begin new creative romances in cultural history.” Hayakawa and her art in effect evidenced the arrival of that multicultural “renaissance.”

Hayakawa was not exactly the kind of undiscovered ingénue that Lal presented her to be, however. An excavation of historical exhibition records shows that Hayakawa had in fact been exhibiting her...
work, to critical acclaim, for years before 1929. Since commencing her formal art education, first at the California School of Arts and Crafts (now California College of the Arts) around 1920 and then at the CSFA in 1923, Hayakawa had won a series of honors, including becoming the first student in the CSFA’s fifty-six-year history to have been awarded both the Virgil Williams and the Anne Bremer scholarships in the same year (1927). In addition to the 150 works in her solo show, Hayakawa had paintings in the annual exhibitions of the Oakland Art Gallery/Oakland Art League and the San Francisco Art Association (SFAA), as well as the first San Francisco Japanese Art Association exhibition, to which she submitted eight works, all in 1929.3 She followed this banner year by becoming the only female artist of Japanese descent (there were twelve other artists of Asian descent, all men) in the opening exhibition of the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMOMA) in 1935. Among her four submitted paintings were One Afternoon (ca. 1935; Plate 12) and From My Window (1935; Plate 53)—the latter was exhibited in the Golden Gate International Exposition (GGIE) in 1939. As my archival research has revealed, between 1925 and 1953, when Hayakawa passed away at age fifty-three, she had participated every year in art exhibitions in prewar California, and in wartime/postwar Santa Fe, New Mexico.4

Hayakawa might appear to be an outlier in the early twentieth-century American art world, where the overwhelming majority who received most critical (and commercial) attention were male and white. She was, but not alone. Hayakawa, Hisako Hibi (1907–1991), and Miné Okubo (1912–2001) would become the three most visible and critically acclaimed female artists of Japanese descent of the pre–World War II generations in the San Francisco Bay Area and the entire United States.5 All three pursued their art training in California: Hayakawa and Hibi at the CSFA in the 1920s and Okubo at the University of California, Berkeley, where she earned both a bachelor and a master of fine arts in the late 1930s (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2). All three artists consistently showed works and received honors in juried exhibitions by the SFAA, the Oakland Art Gallery, and other artist collectives throughout California; Okubo, for example, won prizes from the SFAA in 1941 and 1945. And all three shared the distinction of being the only female artists of Japanese descent to represent the United States in the GGIE in 1939–40.

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, in response to Japan’s attack
On Pearl Harbor, more than 120,000 first- and second-generation Japanese Americans (Issei and Nisei, respectively) were forced to abandon their homes on the West Coast. They had to either give up everything they had earned over decades to leave the so-called Western Defense Zone, or be moved into incarceration camps hastily established in several inland states. All three artists experienced displacement: Hayakawa had to abandon her Northern California residency of more than three decades and relocated to Santa Fe in 1942; Hibi and Okubo were incarcerated first at the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno, California, and later at the Central Utah Relocation Center, also known as Topaz, between 1942 and 1944/45.

None of them ever stopped making art, however. Hayakawa regularly exhibited in Santa Fe between 1943 and 1953 (Fig. 1.3), and one of her later paintings (Angie [ca. 1948–51; Plate 46]) won the First Premium Prize at the Santa Fe State Fair in 1951. Hibi became an active and respected member of the San Francisco art circles for nearly forty years following her return to California in 1954, after moving from Topaz to New York City in 1945; losing her husband, the artist Matsusaburo George Hibi (1886–1947), to cancer; and raising her two children alone. She was an early supporter of the San Francisco Women Artists Association (Fig. 1.4) and received a U.S. congressional tribute (courtesy of Rep. Robert T. Matsui), a commendation from the Arts Commission of San Francisco, and a declaration of June 14 as “Hisako Hibi Day” by then-mayor Dianne Feinstein, all in 1985, at age seventy-nine (Fig. 1.5). Okubo also moved to New York, but earlier, in 1944, for special assignments at the invitation of Fortune magazine’s editors, and she stayed in the city for nearly six decades, until she passed away in 2001. She built a prolific career as an illustrator and fine artist, creating works numbering in the tens of thousands. Her graphic memoir Citizen 13660, a first-person account of the Japanese American incarceration experience, won the American Book Award in 1984, an honor that followed her invited testimony.