

BROKEN PROMISES

PROMESSES BRISÉES

The Dispossession of Japanese Canadians

Can you imagine someone taking your home, all your possessions, and your freedom? In 1942, the Canadian government forcibly removed 21,460 Japanese Canadians from British Columbia's coast. They boarded trains bringing only what they could carry. Officials promised to protect the rest.

Instead, Japanese Canadians were dispossessed: everything was stolen or sold.



Top: *Broken Promises* exhibition, 2020.

Photo credit: Jack Lindsay. City of Vancouver Archives, 1184-1537.

Right: Nikkei National Museum Gallery, 2019.

Photo credit: Kayla Isomura.



REFLECTIONS ON HONOURING, PRESERVING, AND SHARING JAPANESE CANADIAN HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Celebrating the Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre's 20th Anniversary at Nikkei Place

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The Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre (NNMCC) is celebrating 20 years at its Burnaby, B.C. location. Nikkei means of Japanese ancestry and our museum exists to honour, preserve, and share Japanese Canadian history and heritage for a better Canada. Anniversary celebrations and all planned special events, including the centenary of the Japanese Canadian cenotaph in Stanley Park (April 9, 2020), cultural festivals, and in-person programs, have been circumvented and overshadowed by the global pandemic. Sadly, along with the spread of COVID-19, there has been a rise in anti-racist sentiment which has become particularly virulent on the North American West Coast.

The Nikkei National Museum (NNM) was built by a small and dispersed community descended from immigrants who began settling this country in the late 1800s. The majority of these immigrants lived and raised their families in B.C. where they worked as fishers, farmers and operated businesses. Between 1871 and 1895, Japanese men aged 21 or older, and who owned property, had the right to vote. However, in 1895, the B.C. government passed a law banning Japanese Canadians from voting in provincial elections. As federal voting rights are tied to provincial voting rights, Japanese Canadians simultaneously lost the right to vote in federal elections.



Nikkei National Museum, 2019.
Photo credit: Kayla Isomura.

The struggle to win back the right to vote took half a century. Japanese Canadian voting rights were reestablished in 1949 following the end of WWII, by which time our entire ethnic group had been all but eliminated from B.C. Our forced dispersal and dispossession during the 1940s has only been surpassed by injustices against the Indigenous peoples of this land.

Redress funds received in 1988 following the success of the Japanese Canadian Redress Campaign, provided seed money for the NNMCC. Another decade of fundraising, primarily from within the Japanese Canadian community, resulted in the establishment of the Burnaby Nikkei Place campus, which is situated on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), səliłwətaʔɬ (Tseil-Waututh), and kʷikʷəłəm (Kwkwetlem) Nations.

At the time of the 1988 Redress, the strongest sentiment from within the Nikkei community was a conviction that the witnessed federal neglect of human rights and the observed injustices inflicted upon Japanese Canadians in the 1940s should never again be repeated with any group in Canada. Nikkei Place

was born out of dreams to provide a gathering place for our varied and diverse community. Today, the NNMCC continues its mission through the development of programs, exhibits, and community partnerships, striving for a broader reach nationwide through education, research assistance, and communication.

The 'national' in our museum's name denotes the scope and scale of our responsibility; we are not part of the federal museum system. The NNM has a strong collections management/resource component. Preserved in our storage vault are over 41,000 photographs and digital images, 38 metres of textual records, 650+ oral history records, 156 film reels, and over 2,600 works of art and objects that were once the personal belongings of the individuals and organizations of our community. We have a robust education program that was experiencing exponential growth in field trip visits and Spring/Summer camp attendance until pandemic closures required a radical pivot to online and virtual offerings. Last but not least, we share the stories of Japanese Canadians and Japanese culture through both on-site and virtual exhibitions.



REFLECTIONS ON HONOURING, PRESERVING, AND SHARING JAPANESE CANADIAN HISTORY

In the Fall and Winter seasons of 2020, we will launch a new online exhibit, titled *Writing Wrongs: Japanese Canadian Letters of Protest from the 1940s* through the Virtual Museum of Canada, and a major traveling exhibit titled *Broken Promises*, co-curated with partners from the Royal British Columbia Museum and the [Landscapes of Injustice](#) research collective. *Broken Promises* shares the story of the mass dispossession of Japanese Canadians that began during the Second World War and continued for a full decade. In addition to a 1,500 sq ft traveling exhibit, we are producing a mini-traveler that will accommodate less than 500 sq ft spaces, allowing this important narrative to reach as broad an audience as is possible. Both versions of this exhibit will be accompanied by a digital exhibition catalogue and an e-education kit. We hope that there will be interest from institutions and organizations across the province and country to book this exhibit, educating their communities about these injustices and the resilience of Japanese Canadians.

The present day crises are a call for the entire world to wake up and for each of us to acknowledge our own complacency in the messiness of shared humanness. Knowing, telling, and sharing our own stories, authentically, gives us hope for the future.



Sherri Kajiwara.
Photo credit:
Yvonne Kong.

Sherri Kajiwara

Sherri Kajiwara has worked in the arts/culture/heritage sector since 1992. The various positions she has held include: gallerist, gallery director, gallery owner, writer, editor, publisher, and curator. She is a graduate of the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia and of the Board of Trade's Leadership Vancouver program. In addition to her professional commitments, Sherri is a passionate volunteer. She is a BCMA Councillor, public art committee member for Heritage Vancouver, on call curator for Volunteer Vancouver, Past President of the Contemporary Art Society of Vancouver, and is a teacher and Past President of Three Jewels Vancouver (a yoga/meditation/dharma centre).

Recommended Resources

centre.nikkeiplace.org/museum-exhibits/online-exhibits/

centre.nikkeiplace.org/research/charles-h-kadota-resource-centre/

centre.nikkeiplace.org/research/moving-image-collection/

centre.nikkeiplace.org/research/oral-history-collection/

centre.nikkeiplace.org/research/por/

centre.nikkeiplace.org/education/

electionsanddemocracy.ca/voting-rights-through-time-0/case-study-1-japanese-canadians

Nikkei National Museum, 2019.
Photo credit:
Kayla Isomura.

