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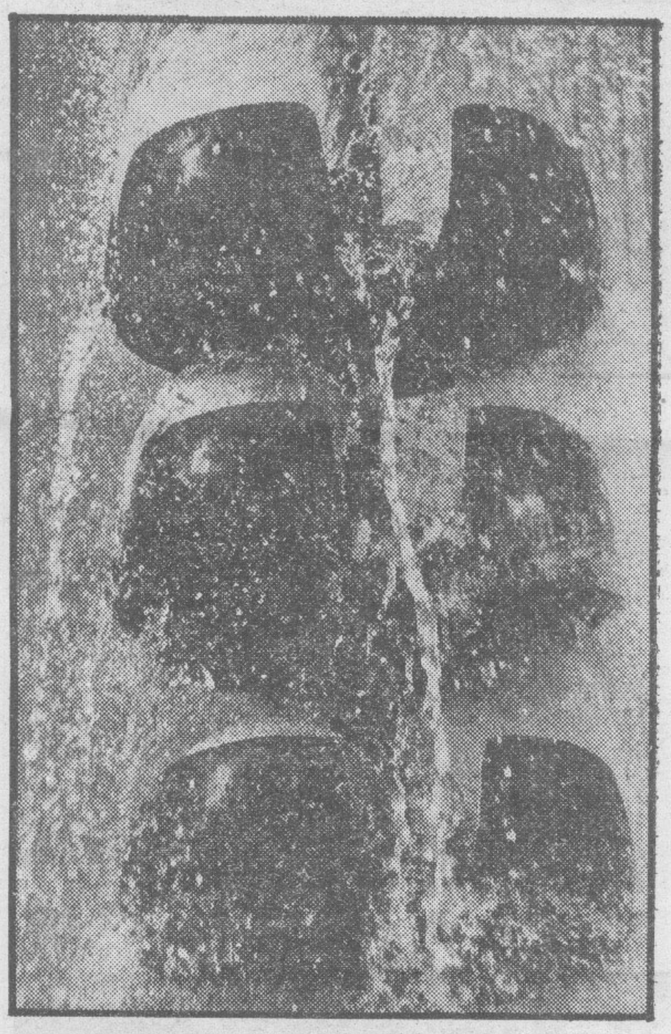
GEORGE TSUTAKAWA: An Ancient Custom Provides Inspiration For Fountains

Not Just Your Ordinary Fountain Maker



Familiar Tsutakawa fountain at Sixth and Seneca Street

George Tsutakawa, whose cityscape fountains are designed to lift the heart, is also an artist, sculptor, teacher and devoted family man . . .

The Cover

A favorite concept in fountain design is borrowed from the ancient Tibetan custom of piling stones in homage to life.

YOU ARE PROCEEDING north on Sixth Avenue when the light at Seneca Street turns red. If you turn your head to the right, your eyes will be filled for a few seconds with the crystalline beauty of water cascading over sculptured metal.

Again, inching south along Fifth Avenue in late afternoon, if you look to the right, you will see graceful arcs of water splintering over sculptured metal in the Seattle Public Library courtyard.

Both of these fountains do what any fountain worthy of the name is supposed to do: they lift the heart. Both are the work of a slight, deceptively wispy Seattle artist, George Tsutakawa, 68.

This serene, contemporary man really exemplifies the implications of that overworked phrase, "renaissance man," because many of those 68 years have been devoted to art in many forms from teaching to oil painting, to the wit and style of classic sumi painting to sculpture and, finally, to the airy beauty of sculptured fountains. In all of this he has added yet another dimension in the classic images of his Japanese ancestry.

Tsutakawa was born in 1910 in a big house at 1815 Federal Ave. E., one of nine children. His father had come to Seattle in 1905 to go into the import - export business. "First - generation Japanese never had the right to citizenship in this country," he recalls, "although their children became U.S. citizens when they were born here."

His father bought the Capitol Hill home through his lawyer, because first - generation Japanese were not allowed to own property, but authorities caught up with him in the 1920s and he lost the house.

George attended Lowell School for a year before he was whisked away to complete his education in Japan in 1917. He studied in the small town of Fukiyama on the Inland Sea near Hiroshima for ten years. This was an education pattern for all except one of the Tsutakawa children.

"By the time I came back in 1927," he recalls, "I was so Japanized I couldn't speak English and had to go to a special language class for recent returnees at Pacific Elementary School."

He went on to Broadway High School, and was graduated in the class of 1932. "I was a good student, but not a very smart one," he grins. "The mysteries of 'Ivanhoe' and 'Lady of the Lake' eluded me, but to make up for it, I earned all of my good grades in art."

The University of Washington Art School, which he entered in 1932, was a feast for him. "I took just about everything they offered," he recalls. "When it was time to graduate they asked me whether I wanted to take my degree in painting, sculpture or even some other field." He came away with a B.A. and an M.F.A. in sculpture and was to return later as a teacher for 30 years. Today, as professor emeritus, he still teaches two three - hour classes a week in sumi painting.

In the lean, depression years that followed his university days, he came to know many of the struggling artists who were to become widely known later as the "northwest artists," people like Mark Tobey, Morris Graves and Kenneth Callahan.

After Pearl Harbor, George Tsutakawa and between 50 and 100 other nisei (second - generation Japanese) were inducted into the U.S. Army from this area and packed off to Monterey, Calif. There was a second, more formal induction service there; then the

A look at Seattle's master sculptor, clockwise: when he works in the yard it's usually on a fountain design; teaching sumi painting at the University; sitting on his father's lap in a 1910 family portrait; with his family today

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inductees were put aboard a special train that streaked across the country for several days, window shades down and a guard for each car.

"There had been strong prejudice toward isei and nisei even before Pearl Harbor," he says, "and most of us were confused and afraid. There were even some rumors that we were going to be gassed."

Fears and rumors were groundless, of course, and the group ended up at Camp Robinson, near Little Rock, Arkansas. After stints in other military installations, mainly southern, Tsutakawa was assigned to Ft. Snell in Minnesota, teaching Japanese in the U.S. language school.

During his army service, he managed to get special permission to visit the relocation camp at Tule Lake, Calif., where his sister, Sadako Moriguchi and her family were being held. It was there that he was introduced to his future wife, Amaye. They were married after the war and settled in Seattle. Money and jobs were scarce, but he went to work as a language instructor in the University of Washington's Far East department, then moved on to the Art School, "where I've been ever since."

Obviously, George Tsutakawa has been other places as well, because he has left an imprint of beauty not only on the landscape in this area, but across the country as well, mainly in his sculpture fountains.

"Even in childhood," he says, "I was interested in running water, in the recycling process of water. I remember Mark Tobey talking to me about the life cycle of the universe and the fact that water moves about endlessly in its various forms, vapor, ice drops forming in the clouds to be released into the rivers. This recycling always fascinated me, and maybe that is why I enjoy designing and building fountains."

Back in the late 1950s Tsutakawa met with architects for the Seattle Public Library. Plans called for a small, interior fountain on a slab, and he was offered a commission of $18,000 for designing the interior fountain.

Seattle hadn't had a new fountain in 25 years, and he began to think about the possibilities of the plaza for an outdoor fountain. "I went home to think," Tsutakawa told a reporter. "Then I started to draw. I made some nice juicy charcoal drawings of what a fountain could mean to that space. Then I went back to talk with the architects.

"They liked the new idea. They called the contractors. They stopped pouring concrete. We worked and we worried."

The result was the beautiful fountain described variously as "The Fountain of Wisdom" and the "Fountain of Knowledge."

"I kept telling myself I didn't dare flub this one," he recalls. "If I did, I'd be laughed out of town and maybe no one would commission another contemporary fountain here for another 25 years. Fortunately, it worked, and the next 20 years were very, very busy."

Along with the commissions that rolled in over the years from as far away as Florida to Hawaii, there have been honors such as the Governors' Award of Commendation he received from Dan Evans in 1967. He was cited for his "distinguished work as a sculptor and teacher and for his rich contribution to blending the art traditions of the Orient with the heritage of the Northwest."

There is a recurrent theme in Tsutakawa's work, including the library fountain, which involves the use of forms based on "obos," the Tibetan word for piling stones at sacred places or places of beauty. Tsutakawa says: "It expresses the work of a sculptor well. Man always has built monuments and piled rocks, to pay homage to life."

Last year, at 67, Tsutakawa made a journey to Nepal and climbed to the 16,000 - foot level of the foothills of Mt. Everest. "It was a wonderful trip, even though it was pretty rugged, and I found many obos there."

One has to look no further than the backyard of his Mt. Baker home to see an obos, three smooth stones resting on a rock formation in the Japanese garden.

The Tsutakawa home is a solid, brown - shingled house built by a lumberman around the turn of the century. It sits on the edge of a bluff with a magnificent view of Lake Washington.

Like Tsutakawa himself, there is a serenity about the house that becomes apparent at first encounter. Not even the fierce demeanor of a 400 - year - old suit of Samurai armor in a corner of the high - ceilinged entrance hall can dispel that feeling.

The house is a handsome blend of comfortable contemporary furniture and oriental art. At one end of the long living room is a koto, a Japanese harp, which Amaye Tsutakawa is teaching her little granddaughter Kaila, 3, to play.

Favorite gathering place of the Tsutakawa family is a dining area off the kitchen with a large, round table that looks out into the garden and the lake.

"Actually, this whole house is a studio," Amaye says, "but George's studios are concentrated in the basement." There is one room for sumi painting, where he might be preparing the ink in the ancient oriental fashion while meditating on what form his painting will take.

Tsutakawa's chief assistant is his son Jerry, 31, and they frequently work together in yet another studio, a converted garage. There is a pond outside the garage that is sometimes used for fountain design ideas.

The big, roomy house is an ideal and frequent gathering place for a closely - knit family. In addition to Jerry, his wife Judy and daughter Kaila, Mayumi Tsutakawa (Mrs. Glenn Chinn) is a newspaper reporter; Deems, 25, is an aspiring jazz pianist and youngest son Marcus, 23, is studying the composing of classical music.

Only two of the original Tsutakawa family of nine children chose to come back to Seattle after World War II, George and his sister Sadako Moriguchi, who, with her husband, owns the Uwajimaya stores.

Looking back, George Tsutakawa says: "I guess what is most gratifying to me is not just having some success in painting, sculpture or teaching, but living in this age as we get close to the end of the century. It's getting to be able to assert myself through the mediums I know best, and having known other northwest artists."

George Tsutakawa finds it difficult to single out his favorites among those heart - lifting fountains that have brightened the landscapes around the country. "They are like my children," he says. "I love them all. Now I have nearly 50 children."

It seems inevitable that the family will grow.