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JANM Commemorates the Victims of the Atomic Bombings With a 75th Anniversary Exhibit

By Sean P. Thomas

Nov 21, 2019



The Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall's dome was one of the only structures to remain upright following the dropping of the first atomic bomb and became a symbol for the people of Hiroshima. The structure is known as the Atomic Bomb Dome and is a world UNESCO heritage site.

photo by US Army, courtesy of Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum

During the final days of World War II, mankind bore witness to one of the most infamous actions committed against its fellow man.

On Aug. 6, 1945 and Aug. 9, 1945, the United States Army dropped two atomic bombs, one over the city of Hiroshima, the other, over Nagasaki. In an instance, two flashes of blinding light, followed by scorching winds, wiped the cities off the map, forcing imperial Japan to surrender and bringing an end to the second world war.

While the end of the war brought some semblance of normalcy for the soldiers and civilians, 75 years later, Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain the only cities to ever be attacked with an atomic bomb, and its citizens remain the only people to experience the horror of a nuclear attack.

To commemorate the 75th anniversary of the attacks, the Japanese American National Museum is presenting the exhibit *Under a Mushroom Cloud: Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Atomic Bomb*, which examines both the development of the atomic bomb and the after-effects that the bombings had on the people of the two cities.

“It’s impossible to imagine the pain suffering that resulted from the horror of these bombings,” Ann Burroughs, president and CEO of JANM, said during an opening event at the museum. “It really is our hope, that with the exhibition, we can address the physical and spiritual issues around the ongoing struggles of the survivors and their families and the succeeding generations.”

Much of the exhibit, which opened to the public on Nov. 9 and runs through June 7, is on loan from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. Located in Hiroshima’s Central Park, the museum is dedicated to documenting and preserving the stories and artifacts of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

The exhibit is split almost in half in two rooms, and features nearly 20 artifacts and multiple artworks from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

The first half of the exhibit covers the bomb and its destructive forces. Informational panels about both Japanese cities, the development of the bomb and the decision to ultimately use the weapons can be found along the walls, as well as details on what happens during an atomic explosion. Schematics showing the different mechanisms behind “Little Boy” (the nickname given to the bomb dropped on Hiroshima) and “Fat Man,” later dropped over Nagasaki, are also on display.

Artifacts found in and around the bombsite make up an important part of the first leg of the exhibit.

Display cases present tattered bandages used to wrap wounds, as well as misshapen bottles that were melted and warped by the bomb's heat. In another case, a recreation of a Buddha statue that was melted and destroyed by the bomb's heat is on display and there's also a paper crane folded by President Barack Obama, who in 2016 became the first sitting U.S. President to visit Hiroshima.

A blouse worn by 15-year-old Mutsuko Shimogochi, a student at Shintoku Girls School in Hiroshima, is one of the more striking items in the exhibit. Shimogochi was walking home when the bomb exploded. She would make it home, but succumb to her injuries two days later making her one of over 200,000 atomic victims to die by the end of 1945.

"Of course the powerful image of the mushroom cloud is familiar to all of us, but it's also important that we all know more about what happened underneath that cloud," Burroughs said.

The Hibakusha

The second portion of the exhibit is dedicated solely to the human experience. Developed via a partnership between the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (messages from the mayors of both cities can be found near the entrance of the exhibit), the exhibit explores both the Japanese and Japanese American side of the story, through personal testimony, artwork and documentary film.

It's estimated that nearly 15,000 Japanese Americans were living in Japan in 1945. Due to Hiroshima's history as a popular emigration point, it's believed that nearly 3,200 Americans of Japanese descent were caught in the explosion, some of which eventually made their way back to the United States.

"Here at JANM, we also felt that it was very important to include the Japanese American experience in this partnership," Burroughs said. "What many people don't know is that there were approximately 3,200 Americans of Japanese ancestry in Hiroshima at the time of the bombings and we wanted to be sure that we included their experiences to our presentation of the exhibit."

The faces of the hibakusha diaspora (the spread of atomic bombs victims across the globe) from photographer Darrell Miho line one of the gallery walls, accompanied by personal testimony from the victims.

One of the photographs is of the late Kazuye "Kaz" Suyeishi, a Pasadena-born atomic bomb survivor and advocate on behalf of hibakusha. Having served as President of the American Society of Hiroshima/Nagasaki A-bomb Survivors, she could often be found speaking about her

experiences and was known for the slogan “No more Hiroshima. No more Nagasaki. No more hibakusha. No more any war.” She passed away in 2017.

A truncated version of Miyuki Iwasaki’s *Seeds*, a documentary on Suyeishi, can already be viewed as part of the exhibit.

Although the atomic mushroom cloud is often the most heavily drawn from aspect of the atomic bombs — a few pieces do in fact showcase massive mushroom clouds — Clement Hanami, vice president of exhibits and art director at JANM, said that the attacks provided artists with plenty of fuel to express their sentiments.

The late Yuri Mason, who survived the fire bombings of Tokyo that preceded the atomic attacks, has a few of her explosive acrylic drawings within the galleries as well, alongside work from Patrick Nagatini, who was influenced by images of New Mexico’s Trinity atomic testing site.

“Of course we are familiar with the atomic mushroom cloud, but there was so much more utter devastation, pain and suffering,” Hanami said. “Artists whose lives have been effected by this event, either through family, friends or community, have worked hard to create works they hope communicate some aspect of what they learned from talking to the victims.”

Alan Nakagawa is one of those artists, having created a sound installation that draws from the acoustics from both the Wendover, Utah hangar where the Enola Gay (the plane that dropped the first bomb) took off from, and the Hiroshima Dome.

Formerly the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, the building’s dome was one of the only structures to remain upright following the dropping of the first atomic bomb and was eventually designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.

During the opening ceremony, Nakagawa explained that while developing the installation, he realized that his connection to Hiroshima is not tied solely to the destruction from the bomb, but the resiliency of its residents following the attacks.

“The Hiroshima I know is an amazing city,” Nakagawa said. “A ginormous diaspora that spreads across the entire world. It is my family. It’s not these pictures that I grew up with, this devastated landscape. It’s really a testament to the people.”

Under a Mushroom Cloud: Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Atomic Bomb is on display through June 7 at the Japanese American National Museum, 100 N. Central Ave. or janm.org.

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