

David ‘Mas’ Masumoto: The arts of our valley

By David Mas Masumoto

I didn't grow up surrounded by the arts – or so I thought. My family didn't go to concerts or museums. We had a cheap landscape-painting reproduction hanging in our living room, and as a kid, I stared at it for hours yet found nothing. But we did farm, and I knew the colors of nature, understood taste and the flavor of peaches. I listened to pop music and danced with “American Bandstand.” I loved the sleek lines of 1950s cars (remember tail fins?).

All of this makes me think of the arts in everyday life here in the Valley and how in September 1965 the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was born. No one in my family took notice of this event; none of my neighbors paid attention. Yet today, decades later, the intent and spirit of the arts permeate our daily lives more than we may imagine.

“Art is a nation's most precious heritage. Art reveals ourselves. Art is the inner vision which guides us.”

President Lyndon B. Johnson

The language around the founding of the NEA was radical. At the signing of the bill, President Lyndon B. Johnson said, “Art is a nation's most precious heritage. Art reveals ourselves. Art is the inner vision which guides us.”

We often don't think of the fusion of arts and heritage, yet our identity can be found in self expression. For example, growing up as a young Japanese-American, my community struggled with the World War II uprooting and evacuation because we looked like the enemy. The scars forced many into a silence as we wrestled with self-acceptance. Yet in 1963, it was a song called “Sukiyaki” – sung in Japanese and at the top of the American pop music charts – that made me realize some of the wounds from the war had healed. It was OK to acknowledge my Japanese roots and sing along in Japanese.

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In our Valley, we know who we are because we know where we are. A sense of place can be grounded in the arts of our piece of this Earth. Not only the art found at a symphony or art gallery, but the everyday music at a club, the group of landscape painters capturing the Valley's farms and hills, the foods and flavors of diverse ethnic communities with meals infused with culture and art. With each bite from an ethnic food truck, we identify with a piece of our heritage. Art becomes part of the public face we share with the world.

Johnson: “(Arts) gives the power to turn dreams and ideas into reality. Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

For generations, our Valley has drawn waves of immigrants seeking economic opportunity. In many cases, the natural landscape offered a powerful sense of place, a reminder of their homelands, an emotional tie to the past in the present. This was true of Armenian Americans – they even named a farm town Yetttem, Armenian for Eden. The landscape gave voice to writers of this valley, from William Saroyan to Juan Felipe Herrera, the poet laureate of the United States.

Art continues to legitimize our Valley stories. The present day photographic images – the art of the drought – have captured both the natural and human drama of life without water. These images depict the pain but also the resilience of the people here.

Yet, as if to foreshadow the future, Johnson spoke about controversies and those who do not believe the arts have value. “We in America have not always been kind to artists who are the keepers of our vision.”

Yes, there have been attempts to abolish the NEA and defund art programs. Yet what progress has been without controversy? Art does challenge our thinking. (For full disclosure, I serve on the National Council on the Arts which advises the NEA.)

One of the most powerful statements made at the founding of the NEA by President Johnson was, "It is in the neighborhoods of each community that a nation's art is born."

For me, a simple farm kid who thought art was only for the privileged and the culturally sophisticated, to read this makes me re-examine the context of art. Today, we celebrate art in daily life. For example, new art programs are working with military veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. A study finds art as a strategy to deal with depression and promote well being. Across our Valley, from Visalia's Taste the Arts to Fresno's Arthop and Sacramento's Arts Festival, the creative cultural community manifests itself. The art genes vary, the quality may lie in the eye of the beholder, but each of these gatherings bring energy and celebration of a people.

In many ways, the heart of art lies in the everyday, working classes. We now accept tattoos as art. Can hair styling and nail design be the next cool scene of artistic creation? I love the back stories behind a colorful fruit-box label, part of a new field of industrial design as art. I lobby for the culinary arts to be recognized as art and literally consumed by hungry patrons.

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President Lyndon B. Johnson

Johnson ended his speech: "Arts belong to the people, for it is, after all, people who created them."

In many ways, 50 years ago at the founding of the NEA, a door was opened into the creative economy and innovative cultural communities to come. Art stimulates, engages and makes us whole.

Award-winning author and organic farmer David Mas Masumoto of Del Rey writes about the San Joaquin Valley and its people. He is a member of the National Council on the Arts.