

# EAST MEETS WEST COAST

When the soft-focus aesthetic of pictorialism went out of fashion, the work of many Japanese-American camera clubs was lost. But thanks to the foresight of one West Coast archivist, says Nicolette Bromberg, a comprehensive collection of material from Seattle remains intact

During a brief period in the 1920s, a small group of immigrant Japanese-American photographers based in Seattle achieved a remarkable degree of success. Pictorialism – the form they favored – was a worldwide movement in reaction to the objective or scientific style of nineteenth-century photography. It was photography as art: personal, expressive imagery that was emotional and beautiful – a subjective expression of the artist rather than an objective depiction of the world.

With the advent of small Kodak cameras, enthusiastic amateurs began to take up artistic photography. Japanese immigrants in America found themselves set apart from the culture of their new adopted country by their different background and language, but they were able to bridge the gap by sharing their love for photography. They blended their Japanese aesthetic – use of pattern, flat surfaces, and lack of perspective – with the pictorialist expression of beauty and emotion. By the 1920s, Japanese-American photographers had started camera clubs all along the western coast.

Set up in 1924, the Seattle Camera Club was initially an all-Japanese group of photographers, though some non-Japanese members joined later. They were mainly amateurs, and most had day jobs: Hideo Onishi, for instance, was a cook, and Kusutora Matsuki worked in a drugstore. The president of the club, Dr. Kyo Koike, practiced medicine but loved photography and haiku poetry. A keen hiker, he often photographed Mount Rainier along with his close friend, Iwao Matsushita, who worked for a Japanese trading company. The club also had a Japanese woman photographer, Miss Y. Inagi. Several members were professionals: two of them, Frank Kunishige and Ella McBride, had worked for the well-known photographer, Edward S. Curtis, but left to start the McBride Studio. Virna Haffer, who joined in 1928, and Yukio Morinaga were also professional photographers who became close friends.

Members of the club quickly became known around the world. Regularly published in photography magazines, they also won many prizes for their work. In 1926, the club received the *Photo-Era* magazine award for the camera club whose members had won the most prizes in the magazine's monthly competitions that year. The same year, Ella McBride became the sixth most exhibited photographer in the world. She had probably been taught by Kunishige and Soichi Sunami, and her work was very Japanese in its simple design elements and lack of perspective. In March 1926,

*Portrait of a Tulip, Ella McBride, circa 1924 (right). Employing a number of other members of the Seattle Camera Club, McBride ran her own commercial photography studio, while her fine art photography focused primarily on floral subjects. When she died, aged 102, lack of interest in pictorialism meant most of her work was destroyed*









Previous spread:  
*Autumn Clouds* (left), Iwao Matsushita, date unknown;  
*Sunlight in the Morning*, Kusutora Matsuki, c. 1929.  
 Above from left: *Betti*, Frank Kunishige, c. 1924;  
*Untitled*, Yukio Morinaga, c. 1925; *Called a Home*, Kyo Koike, c. 1925

*Sunset Magazine* said of her photography, “It is in the single bloom, the lone spray that she sees pictorial possibilities. Simplicity characterizes her camera studies, a simplicity, however, that involves subtle form and line and the suggestion of elusiveness and fragility. The simplicity is an underlying reason why critics today regard her as one of the foremost flower portraiture artists in the realm of photography.”

The Seattle Camera Club members thrived throughout the life of the group. The 1928 *American Annual of Photography* stated that Japanese photographers “put a lasting mark on photography in this country, the repercussions of which are echoing throughout the world.” Kyo Koike was honored with an invitation to join the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain as its only Japanese member, and others received high praise for their work, such as this French critic’s review of Frank Kunishige’s photographs: “Before one of his prints you find yourself entranced, forgetting that you are witnessing the mysteries of the dark room...these are truly incomparable works.” The club disbanded in October 1929 as the Depression hit the United States. Ironically, that year the club’s annual juried exhibition was named one of the best in the world.

Despite the success of the many Japanese clubs along the West Coast, a few decades later most of their work was forgotten. Some photographers had returned to Japan; later, during the war, it became illegal for Japanese-Americans to have cameras or take pictures. Photographers turned in their cameras and hid or even destroyed their photographs for fear of seeming unpatriotic. Some lost their possessions while away in internment camps. Continuing anti-Japanese sentiment after the war meant some were reluctant to admit they had ever been photographers. Even their descendants sometimes didn’t know about their work. With the advent of modernism, pictorialism came to be considered trivial and irrelevant. It was looked down upon in the art photography world and, until recently, there was little interest in collecting or exhibiting such work.

Little remains from the Japanese camera clubs, few photographs and almost no documentation, with one exception: the Seattle Camera Club. Through a fortuitous turn of events, photographs and documents from the club were saved. During the war, the possessions of Kyo Koike, Iwao Matsushita, and Frank Kunishige were looked after by their non-Japanese friends. In 1946, when Koike died suddenly on Mount Rainier while collecting



ferns, he left his belongings to his friend, Iwao Matsushita. Matsushita's wife, Hanaye, and his friend Frank Kunishige both died in the 1960s. Matsushita went on to marry Frank's widow, Gin, bringing together the work of three photographers and the club documents they saved.

Matsushita was hired to teach Japanese at the University of Washington. Around 1970, Robert Monroe, head of Special Collections, heard about the Seattle Camera Club material. As a curator, Monroe was ahead of his time. He actively sought the work of minority photographers and also art photography, not usually collected by libraries as they were only interested in illustrative photography. Over a thousand pictures from Matsushita, Koike, Kunishige, and others were donated to the library, as were all the issues of their journal, *Notan*, recording the history of the club. (They contain the only known images by Miss Y. Inagi and a few other members.)

Thanks to Monroe's foresight – he salvaged the entire body of work, including hundreds of negatives – the achievements of the Seattle Camera Club are preserved in the University of Washington Libraries, a snapshot of a moment in photographic history.✦

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