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# The Photographic Society of Japan and Photographic Enlightenment from the West

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The Photographic Society of Japan  
and Photographic Enlightenment from the West

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## Abstract

Kazumasa Ogawa learned photography with his eyes fixed on the West, getting to know the latest photographic techniques and making the acquaintance of Japanese students of influential status while he was in the United States. William Burton describes Ogawa's life as a "Young Japan" who found his way of living by learning the Western technology. The Photographic Society of Japan also developed by interacting the West and it mainly consisted of foreigners and Japanese members of the upper class. They shared photographic knowledge and works regardless of nationality or profession. Western culture was recommended to the aristocracy as something to be learned, as members were expected to be good role models for others. Therefore, the Photographic Society emphasized the nobility of photography in order to promote it. In May 1893, it held the Exhibition of Foreign Photographs, the first exhibition of photographs from other countries, demonstrating the latest technology and the artistic nature of photographs. The exhibition was requested by a British photographic association, which stimulated pride in photography in Japan. Photography appealed to both the upper class and other classes in Japan, demonstrating that enlightenment had spread throughout the country's classes.

*Keywords: Photography, Kazumasa Ogawa, the Photographic Society of Japan, Meiji Era, William K. Burton*

## Introduction

Japan aggressively adopted Western culture in the 19th century, when the Meiji Government (明治政府) took over political administration from the Edo Shogunate (江戸幕府). This presentation is going to focus on the photographer Kazumasa Ogawa (小川一真, 1860-1929) and his association with the Photographic Society of Japan (日本写真会) to discuss how Western culture was introduced and practiced through the creation of connections.

### Photography as a Key to Connecting with the West

The first photo studio in Japan was opened in Yokohama in 1859 by an American merchant, Orrin Erastus Freeman (1830-66), and he trained the first Japanese photographer (Benett, 2006, p. 58). Later, Japanese photographers also started to have disciples, but it was not until Ogawa went to the United States that the Japanese started to go abroad to learn the skill.

Ogawa encountered photography when he was fourteen. His English teacher, Kennon, showed Ogawa his camera and lent him *A History and Handbook of Photography* (1876), by Gaston Tissandier (1843-99), an English textbook (Ozawa, 1994, pp. 30-31). Ogawa encountered photography through a Westerner instead of learning it from Japanese photographers, and he started to learn it in English. Learning photography may have been an experience of the Western world for him, so when he decided to study photography to become an expert, he valued his acquisition of English.

After his graduation, Ogawa opened his own photo studio in Tomioka, a thriving silk-spinning city thanks to a famous factory, the Tomioka Silk Mill. Although his photographs cost 75 sen a piece, which was quite expensive for the factory workers, who earned about 2 yen (200 sen) a month, they were unusual enough to make good souvenirs. Ogawa had enough money after two years to be able to afford a dark box, which cost 150 yen. He also won a prize at the second Domestic Industrial Exposition in 1888 (Ozawa, 1994, pp. 32-36). It can be said that he could make a living without considering the West.

However, after three years of running his studio, he closed it and went to Tsukiji Daigakko (築地大学校), a mission school that mainly taught English. While he brushed up on his English, he made the acquaintance of other photographers and heard about photography in the West (Ozawa, 1994, pp. 38-40). Confident in his English and with his dreams about Western photography, he went to Yokohama and worked as an interpreter. Finally, in 1882, he got an opportunity to petition Captain Philip H. Cooper (1844-1912) to hire him as a sailor on the USS *Swatara*, with the aim of working in photo studios in America (Ozawa, 1994, pp. 47-48).

He worked at a photo studio run by Ernst F. Ritz and G. H. Hasting and learned photography while earning \$3.50 a week (Ozawa, 1994, p. 51). However, he could not earn enough money for lessons or equipment. Asakuma Futami (二見朝隈, 1852-1908) learned of Ogawa's situation and hired him for his photo company, Choyosha (朝陽社). There, Ogawa introduced the latest techniques he learned in the States, such as the quick shooter, in the magazine *Shashin Shimpō* (『寫真新報』) (Ozawa, 1994, pp. 54-57). It is likely that this experience formed one

of his ways of introducing and connecting the latest Western technology to Japan. In fact, he revived *Shashin Shimpo* after the bankruptcy of Choyosha, which was caused by embezzlement by an employee and brought about a financial crisis during Ogawa's study in the States (Ozawa, 1994, p. 57).

It was Shinsuke Mihara (三原親輔, year of birth and death unknown) who saved Ogawa from his financial troubles. He introduced Ogawa to Hiroitsu Sakakibara (榑原浩逸, year of birth and death unknown), and Sakakibara asked his former feudal lord, Nagamoto Okabe (岡部長職, 1855-1925), to support Ogawa. Okabe was willing to help Ogawa and sent money with an encouraging message (Ozawa, 1994, pp. 55-61).

In this way, thanks to all the support from friends and people he met there, Ogawa rapidly acquired the latest photographic skills, despite his difficult financial circumstances. He learned not only the latest photographic techniques but also made connections with other Japanese students who were studying abroad. In this period, most of those students were publicly funded. The costs were refunded or entered into the services of the officials after their return home (The Educational Department, 1972, p. 231). Briefly, those who studied abroad with public funds were candidates for future official posts. In fact, Okabe worked as an Administrative Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Consequently, connecting with them influenced Ogawa's social status and photography in Japan. What he acquired from the foreign experience became an essential foundation for his activities promoting photography in Japan.

### The Enlightenment Perspective in Ogawa's Story

William K. Burton (1856-99) was a professor at Imperial University whose *Modern Photography* has gone through seven editions. He was a good friend of Ogawa and published an article about him in a British magazine, *The Practical Photographer* (Checkland, 2002, p. 183). "A Japanese Photographer: The Difficulties That Had to Be Overcome in Former Times in the Land of the Rising Sun" told the story of a young boy whose father was a retainer of Lord of Castle Oshi but who lost membership of his 'proud military class' after the Meiji Restoration, which reformed the previous federal systems. The period is which young Ogawa was to find his way of life comprised "the years when a great portion of 'Young Japan' was first turning eager eyes to the West, and was looking to adopt Western civilization" (Burton, 1913, p. 63). Burton appears to describe Ogawa as an impoverished aristocrat who found his way into Western technology and enhanced his social influence, considering him representative of the "Young Japan."

It is worth focusing on how Burton refers to Kuichi Uchida (内田九一, 1844-75), who was a famous photographer of the time. Burton explains how Uchida sold his expensive photographs and photographic goods with detailed prices and how he made it difficult to learn photography through his high lecture fees and his secretiveness about his skills. He comments on Uchida's business strategy that he "must have made considerable hay whilst the sun of those times shone." "The sun of those times shone" is the time before Ogawa's "Young Japan" came to the fore. In contrast to the Ogawa of "Young Japan," Uchida is one of "The Difficulties That Had to Be Overcome in Former Times in the Land of the Rising Sun."

Burton mentions that Uchida was "the oldest photographer in the country, who had

learned it in the very old times from a Dutchman” (Burton, 1913, p. 63). He repeats the term “old” and conveys that Uchida’s photographic technique was acquired in “very old times” and from the Dutch. By contrast, Burton notes that Ogawa learned the skill through “a book on photography in the English language.” Burton gives the impression that the old skills from the Dutch were outdated and expensive, that new technology was coming through the English language, and that “Young Japan” achieved great success by it. The success of Ogawa came from a Western creation and from using things from Britain, such as the English language and Burton, who was from Britain. It would make the reader of the magazine feel that Britain “enlightened” Japan, in the OED’s sense of the word: “To supply with intellectual light” and “To inform, remove (one’s) ignorance of something” (OED, 1989, pp. 265-66). Uchida kept Japanese photographers in “ignorance,” but Ogawa was supplied with Western photography, the “intellectual light,” by British or American photographers rather than old Dutch or old Japanese photographers.

### The Establishment of the Photographic Society of Japan

This enlightenment partly contributed to the setting up of the first association of photography in Japan, the Photographic Society of Japan, established in 1889. The founder of the group was Charles Dickinson West (1847-1908)<sup>1)</sup> who was a professor at Tokyo Imperial University and a co-worker of Burton. According to the annual meeting report of 1890, the aims of the society were to “foster the interest of Amateur Photographers” (The Photographic Society of Japan, 1890, p. 2) and to “arouse greater interest amongst professional photographers, in the Scientific and the Artistic aspects of their work than they have, as a body, seemed to show in this country, as yet; — not by any means to the neglect of their Commercial interests” (The Photographic Society of Japan, 1890, p. 3). The latter citation indicates that some people in Japan were afraid of the negative effect of sharing photographic knowledge and information on “Commercial interests.” It recalls Uchida in the Burton article, depicted as someone who kept his techniques secret so that customers had to pay quite a high price to learn them. In short, the society had as its goal to break the old system of photography in Japan.

The annual reports of the society were written in both Japanese and English. In the first revived volume of *Shashin Shimpo*, edited by Ogawa, West mentioned that “those kind of associations prosper actively anywhere in Europe. Therefore, I believe there are significances to have the group” (Okatsuka, 2014, p. 481). Making photographic groups like those of Western countries meant following the Western way of boosting photography. There were 65 members of the society in the first year, 33 of whom were foreign nationals; the group retained its internationalism over the years [Fig. 1]. The president of the group was Viscount Takeaki Enomoto (榎本武揚, 1836-1908), who had the highest social ranking of the membership. There were four vice presidents: Hiromoto Watanabe (渡辺洪基, 1848-1901), the first chancellor of Imperial

1) ————— The Japan Photographic Society, which still exists and was established in 1924 by Shinzō Fukuhara (福原信三 1883-1948), a photographer and the first president of Shiseido (資生堂), is different from the association discussed here.

University; Dairoku Kikuchi (菊池大麓, 1855-1917), a professor at Imperial University; Okabe, who was a close friend of Ogawa; and William Sturgis Bigelow (1850-1926), a doctor and researcher into Japanese art and Buddhism. Although Burton was a secretary and West, one of the founders, was just a committee member, since they worked at the same university as Watanabe and Kikuchi, both had a strong influence on photography. According to the membership list, members had a variety of professions, such as photographer, merchant, captain, post officer, hotel owner, prefectural agent, and worker at a water service.

As for the Japanese members, Ogawa deployed his energies in activities that included demonstrating photographic methods or reporting on the activities of the associations in his magazine. Tokichi Asanuma (浅沼藤吉, 1852-1929), a merchant who had been dealing in photographic equipment from early times and had made a fortune, joined the association. Seibei Kajima (鹿嶋清兵衛, 1866-1924), a son of a business magnate, was also an important member. Burton wrote an article about him and described him as “the most enthusiastic amateur that it has been my privilege to meet anywhere” (Checkland, 2002, p. 184). His article was published in *The Photographic Times* on August 17, 1894.

While foreign members were varied in occupation, Japanese members were limited because of the high annual subscription of 2 yen and the high price of the photographic equipment. Consequently, a large number of them were of the upper class, who could afford the expense. Many of them had foreign experience, because there were Imperial instructions for them to be good roles models for the lower classes by positively absorbing Western culture (Ogawabara, 2006, p. 103). Learning Western culture was an obligation and for a good cause, and so the Photographic Society offered them the opportunity to learn it and to fulfil their duty. Foreign members of the association were welcomed by the influential classes, and it was an important task for the members of the association to promote photography to those classes.

## The Exhibition of Foreign Photographs

The Photographic Society of Japan held meetings and introduced new photographic technologies and products. They also went on shoots and held demonstrations. Among their activities, one of the most notable events was the Exhibition of Foreign Photographs in 1893. This was the first exhibition of photos from foreign countries: 296 pictures from the London Camera Club and other photos from the United States and China were displayed in the old building No. 5, the building constructed for the National Industrial Expo. The fifth exhibition of the Meiji Association of Art (明治美術会) was held at the same time. Shun Uchibayashi points out that the Photographic Society of Japan decided on the site, expecting Prince Taruhito Arisugawa (有栖川宮熾仁親王, 1835-95) to visit the exhibition because he was the president of the art society and there was a possibility of his coming for the award ceremony (Uchibayashi, 2015, pp. 95-6). In fact, *Tokyo Asahi News* reported that Empress Shoken (昭憲皇后, 1849-1914) visited the exhibition (“Kougou Heika Ueno Gyokei,” 1893). Ogawa had taken photos of her; the funeral of her husband, the Emperor Meiji (明治天皇, 1852-1912); and her son the Emperor Taisho (大正天皇, 1879-1926). It is possible that the exhibition enabled Ogawa to get closer to the royal families. The visit of the Imperial family would have been persuasive for the upper class to take



up photography.

*Shashin Shimpo* reported that the exhibition had two great achievements. One was to demonstrate the advances in photography outside Japan. In particular, works that were printed with bromide papers surprised the audience, for the Japanese had mainly used albumenized papers up to then. Ogawa recalls that he had previously thought that a bromide print was “dazzling and beautiful because it develops all in black, but it also made it less sublime and attractive because its colour is what is called cold colour” (Ogawa, 1893, pp. 49-50). However, when he saw works on bromide paper, he realized that “it has far wider range of colour variation” (Ogawa, 1893, p. 50) than he had imagined. He concluded that “the works from Britain are great models from the aspect of design and techniques” (Ogawa, 1893, p. 49). This suggests that the exhibition validated the technology’s capacity for expression and that Britain was the leader to follow.

The other great achievement of the exhibition was that it displayed “great models” of “design,” demonstrating the high artistic quality of photography. *Shashin Shimpo* commented that the photographs “drew attention to artistic point and raised artistic thought among photographers. Therefore, it is the best way to see these pictures in modern Japan where technology is developing” (Ogawa, 1893, p. 49). The exhibition sowed the seeds of artistic photography.

The Exhibition of Foreign Photographs brought Kajima to the fore; he was inspired by it to create a new photographic group in 1893, named the Greater Japan Photography Critique Society (大日本写真品評会) (Bennett, 2006, p. 238). All members of the Kazoku (華族), the Japanese nobility, became honorary members. Besides big names in Japanese photography, such as Kimbei Kusakabe (日下部 金兵衛, 1841-1934), many members of the Photographic Society of Japan, such as Asanuma, Burton, and Okabe, joined the group. Akiko Okatsuka suggests that some of the honorary members became a part of Kakokai (華光会), a photographic club for Kazoku that was founded later (Okatsuka, 2014, pp. 484-85). In this way, the Exhibition of Foreign Photographs influenced the way photographers saw pictures.

Kakokai published a coterie magazine called *Hana no Kage* (『華影』), which had a column, “Inga Hyo” (印画評), meaning “Reviews of Printings.” The reviewers were Ogawa and Seiki Kuroda (黒田清輝, 1866-1924), an oil painter and a professor at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Atsushi Tanaka indicates that Kuroda treated photographs like paintings, as expressive works in which the photographer had calculated its composition, shading, and printing. In fact, Kuroda knew little about photography, but his perspective on nature was considered a sound principle for taking pictures (Tanaka, 2014, pp. 469-70). In this way, photography in Japan gradually came closer to the fine arts and deepened their relationship, especially after the exhibition. Ogawa was the first photographer to be elected as an official artist of the Imperial Household, alongside Kuroda who was the Imperial Household oil painter.

### The Request from the London Camera Club

As seen above, the Exhibition of Foreign Photographs had a strong influence in many ways, but what is notable here is that the event was held because of a request from the London Camera Club. According to the annual record, the fact of the matter is that the Photographic Society

of Japan paid for all the transport, the venue, and the frames, and that the Japanese society lent the pictures to be exhibited. Its financial burden was so heavy that some members were concerned about a lack of funding, but they decided to charge an entrance fee and use group funds to make up for the shortfall (“Shashin Tenrankai,” 1893, pp. 4-6). *Shashin Shimpo* often cited articles from British magazines about their latest techniques, productions, events, and associations. In addition, the most frequent writer of the magazine, who introduced the latest knowledge, was Burton. Consequently, it is possible that many readers of the magazine, that is, people who were interested in photography, had an image of Britain as being at the cutting edge of photography. Because the most advanced country had then decided that Japan should present its prized works, this show of confidence in the photography of Japan was worth bearing the economic liability.

*Shashin Shimpo* argued that the exhibition was held “to allow the wider public to see photography and to commit to advancing it.” It was another way of demonstrating to the public that “one could enjoy [photography’s] sublimeness” besides through publications (“Shashin Tenrankai,” 1893, p. 4). Receipt of the request from Britain could offer powerful support for the claim that photography would connect the world, and it suited the needs of Japan, which wanted elegant models to follow. The exhibition was intended to preach the “sublimeness” of photography to the “public” while also aiming to enhance the perception of photography in Japan. Briefly, it appealed to both the upper class and other classes. Although the entrance fee limited the base of audience, it still played an important part in introducing a Western culture that was enjoyed mainly by the upper class, but also by the masses, since everyone could enter once they paid the fee.

## Conclusion

Ogawa learned photography with his eyes turned to the West. He acquired the latest techniques and networked with Japanese students of influential status in America, and it provided the foundation for him to be a powerful photographer and to promote photography. Burton describes him as a boy who had lost his power as a result of the ending of the old system but who started to rise along with Western technology. He presents Ogawa as the symbol of the “Young Japan” rather than of the “New Japan,” which implies that Japan should be taught by adults. In other words, Burton’s article is a story of enlightenment from the West. The Photographic Society of Japan provides a good example of this enlightenment. It was the point of connection between foreigners and Japanese who were interested in photography. Most of the Japanese members belonged to the upper classes, and they were encouraged to learn Western culture. The Exhibition of Foreign Photographs is notable as an event of enlightenment. Displaying the latest photographs from outside of Japan demonstrated the potential of the new technology and the artistic nature of photography. It stimulated the pride of Japanese photographers and enabled them to exhibit photography to all classes. Enlightenment spread as the connection between different nationalities and social classes was made.

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Yuki Shimizu is a Ph.D. student at Tsuda University. While studying Lafcadio Hearn at Kochi University, she

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