



# The Lens of History

EXHIBITION

**The History of Japanese Photography**  
May 25–July 27



Influencing amateur photographers throughout Japan, Hirai Terushichi was a leading practitioner of a highly personal and expressive style dependent on the techniques and imagery of Western surrealism. In this witty, painterly exploration of his dreams and fancies, a feminine figure resting on a unicycle-like form stares intently into a vast blue sky accented by a bright quarter moon (*Fantasies of the Moon*, 1938, hand-painted gelatin-silver photograph, 39.4 x 31.9 cm, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography).

The History of Japanese Photography has been organized by the Japan Foundation and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. National sponsorship is provided by Continental Airlines. Additional funding is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Cleveland Museum of Art receives operating support from the Ohio Arts Council.

**T**he wrenching evolution from a feudal society to an industrial nation and the trauma of modern war changed Japan's insular, inward artistic culture into the questing, skeptical interaction with the wider world we recognize in contemporary Japanese art.

No art form has recorded this epic transformation more vividly than photography. Opening at the museum later this month, *The History of Japanese Photography* brings this fascinating story to the West for the first time. This groundbreaking exhibition examines the 150-year evolution of photography in Japan, probing the impact of history and culture on aesthetic styles, the interaction of Japanese and Western photographers, and photography's links to other Japanese art forms. Some of the medium's most significant images are Japanese, yet, except for works by artists with international reputations, few are known outside Japan. In the show's accompanying catalogue—the first thorough Western-language chronicle of Japanese photogra-

phy—Anne Wilkes Tucker, the Gus and Lyndall Wortham Curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and one of the show's four curators, describes the shortcomings of photographic histories: "What we know about the history of photography is less than what remains to be discovered."

This exhibition, built on eight years of original and extensive research, will radically increase Western interest in Japanese photography. In Cleveland the show features 176 works by 110 photographers gathered from public and private collections around the world, revealing the aesthetic innovations of Japanese photographers and how their concerns paralleled or diverged from the Western photographic tradition.

After seeing photographs for the first time in 1854 with the arrival of U.S. Navy Commodore Matthew Perry, Japanese artists quickly embraced the medium. Following precedents set elsewhere in the world, portrait photography became popular immediately. Early images captured the final mo-



Acclaimed contemporary photographer Hatakeyama Naoya explored Tokyo's densely built environment from an unusual point of view, standing in concrete-lined culverts. The city's constricted space forced him to turn his 6 x 12 cm negative vertically as he worked. This luminous color photograph invites the viewer to consider the dualities depicted in the intriguing cityscape, such as below and above, earth and sky, liquid and solid, and natural and constructed (River Series, No. 4, 1993, chromogenic photograph, 100 x 49 cm, © Hatakeyama Naoya, Collection Welle, Germany).

ments of the warrior class and the emergence of a middle class, the rising influence of Western culture and technology, and the impact of tourism.

By the early 20th century most of the world's large cities were home to active amateur photography clubs whose members primarily focused on pictorialism. Although Japanese practitioners of this international style incorporated aspects of the Western movement—soft focus, muted atmosphere, and landscape views—they imbued their approach with their own rich traditions.

Between the two world wars, modernism enlivened Japanese photographic styles with a wide range of experimentation aimed at discovering new realities and ways of seeing. When surrealism emerged, somewhat later than in the West, it was inventively modified to suit Japanese interests, resulting in especially evocative photographs.

The introduction of the Leica camera in 1926 fostered a social documentary style. Many of Japan's most distinguished documentary photographers began their careers working for government propaganda magazines. In the decade after World War II they reacted to the war's devastation with powerful, sober images.

Two photographic groups, Vivo and Provoke, greatly influenced the evolution of postwar photography. Moving away from social issues, this generation created bold, individualistic pictures, full of energy fueled by enormous cultural change. Finally, during the last two decades, contemporary Japanese artists have explored the boundaries of photographic expression, participating in a global dialogue without losing the cultural context that



Having established a reputation as one of Tokyo's best portrait photographers, Uchida Kuichi—among the first generation of photographers in Japan—was commissioned to make the first photographs of a Japanese ruler, the Emperor Meiji and the empress. The emperor was first photographed in traditional robes and later, in this image, in a Western military uniform (Portrait of the Emperor [Meiji], 1873, albumen photograph, 20 x 17.4 cm, Dawn Ishimaru Frazier, Los Angeles).



enriches their images. *The History of Japanese Photography* promises to be an enlightening experience, bringing deserved recognition to this body of work and stimulating further research.

■ Tom E. Hinson, Curator of Photography