

Photography magazines and cross-cultural encounters in postwar Japan, 1945-1955

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Abstract

This article examines cross-cultural encounters between Japanese and western (European and American) photographers in the immediate postwar period (1945-1955), asking how these encounters influenced Japanese photographic trends. In addition, this article considers what photographic representations of western cultures reveal about postwar constructions of Japanese cultural identity. Building upon recent research framed by conceptions of photography as sites of cross-cultural encounter (see Melissa Miles & Kate Warren), this article argues that photography magazines provided space for consistent exchange between western and Japanese photographers through multiple platforms: interviews and round table discussions of photographic trends; articles on and photo series by western photographers; and images by both western and Japanese photographers depicting western cultural material and landscapes, such as photographs of western-style fashions, domestic space, and daily life in European and American cities. Such encounters directly influenced photographic trends in Japan. Features on European nude photographers popularised nude photography as an art form among Japanese photographers, and works contributed by the likes of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, and Robert Doisneau contributed to a rising interest in photographic humanism. Further, these encounters provided a conduit through which photographers and readers encountered western cultural material at a time when Japan underwent a cultural identity crisis brought on by the devastation of defeat and foreign Occupation. In this way, photography magazines simultaneously functioned as spaces that negotiated what exactly "Japanese culture" meant in Japan's new postwar world.

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Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return. Miryam Sas. Hardcover. CDN\$ 53.46.

Tokyo 1955-1970: A New Avant-Garde. "We have never really known Japan like this: From Postwar to Postmodern reveals a bracingly innovative, multifarious, and thoroughly international cultural sphere. A nuanced survey of primary texts betrays a roiling milieu in which form and content, modernism and tradition, realism and abstraction, things (mono) and ideas (koto) were hotly debated amid a historically specific context of violence, guilt, and trauma. New ways of working--from Gutai and Jikken Kobo's intermedia experiments to collaborations in performance, architecture, and other disciplines--informed advanced art both Given these powerful American paradigms, photography in postwar Japan might have seemed destined to serve as documentary in popular magazines and poised to achieve the status of fine art with a place in museums.⁶ But it did not.⁷ Indeed, despite all the seeming convergences of equipment, people, publications, and institutions, Japanese photography and American photo-graphy performed radically different roles in. Indeed, the era from 1945 to 1955 has been dubbed Japanese photography's "age of realism." As with most attempts to label an era, we must take this appellation with a grain of salt.