

A retrospective on Shimooka Renjō, 100 years after his death

- Period : Tuesday March 4 – Tuesday May 6, 2014
- Closed on Mondays, or Tuesday when Monday is a national holiday.
- Admission: Adults ¥700 / College Students ¥600 / High School and Junior High School Students and Seniors over 65 ¥500

This is the first large-scale retrospective on Shimooka Renjō (1823-1914) one of the pioneers of photography in Japan. Although he has been recognized in the past for his contributions to photography, it is not been generally known that he was first and foremost a painter. This is the first major exhibition to include not only Renjō's photographs but also his paintings. Together with related exhibits and historical texts, this more comprehensive collection of works help provides a more accurate view of his life and accomplishments and allow us to better understand his place in the history of photography in Japan.

Who was Shimooka Renjō?

Shimooka Renjō was one of the founders of photography in Japan. Although Ukai Gyokusen opened a photographic studio slightly earlier, Renjō taught photography to a number of apprentices who carried photography forward in Japan, including Yokoyama Matsusaburō, Usui Shuzaburō, Suzuki Shinichi and others. Renjō was born in Shimoda, at the southern end of the Izu Peninsula. From about the age of 13 he wanted to become a painter. He studied under Kanō Tōsen, a master painter of the famous Kanō School, from whom he received his artist's name of Tōen. While working in Edo as a painter, he happened to be shown a photograph, a technology that was still very new and as yet almost completely unknown in Japan. When the Yokohama was opened in 1859, he found a position there and received some instruction in photography from an American photographer, John Wilson, as well as Julia Brown, the daughter of an American missionary in Yokohama. Although he opened a photographic studio in Yokohama in 1862, there was a great deal he didn't understand, and struggled greatly to learn the correct proportions for the necessary solutions, etc. He eventually worked out the problems, and moved to a more central location in Yokohama where his business prospered. Until about 1875, he was on the forefront of photography in Japan, running two studios in Yokohama and serving a great number of both foreign and Japanese clients, but soon after he moved to Asakusa in Tokyo and returned to his first career of painting. While running a business painting backgrounds that he sold to the increasing number of commercial photographers, Renjō also painted large-scale panoramas in Western style that he exhibited to the public, and experimented with new styles and materials.



Shimooka Renjō, “Shohe Bridge” (Shōheibashi) from Shimooka Renjō/Usui Shuzaburō Album. 1868. Albumen print. JCII/Morita Collection.

This photograph is believed to have been made at the same time that his student Yokoyama Matsusaburō was photographing Edo Castle, and is representative of Renjō’s landscape photographs of Edo. It was included in Asahi Graph's 1925 special issue, "100 Years of Photography." The method he used to caption the photographs is very distinctive.



a) photograph envelope for Renjō studio c.1868-1875, Numazu City Archives of Meiji History Collection



b) stamp on the backing for a *carte-de-visite* photograph. C. 1863, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography Collection.

Renjō designed this mark after having a dream about a thatched-roof cottage under Mt. Fuji flanked by two trees, and a serpent looking into a pot. He heard from a missionary that the serpent is credited with teaching humans about chemistry, which pleased him greatly since chemistry is the basis of photography. The envelope on the right is from around the time his studio was located on Bentendōri. The backing on the right is from after he moved to Ōta-machi, also in Yokohama. Note how the lines are much finer compared to the mark on the envelope.



left) Shimooka Renjō, “Three craftsmen drinking.” c. 1862-1876
right) Shimooka Renj, “Girl with umbrella.” Albumen prints,
c. 1862-1876, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography Collection.

The exhibition includes about 150 photographs, including portraits, genre scenes and landscapes. It includes both uncolored and hand-colored photographs. A dated album of hand-colored photographs loaned especially for this exhibit by Tom Burnett in New York helps establish when Renjō most likely began selling hand-colored photographs, information that will be of interest to collectors and scholars of the history of photography in Japan.



Shimooka Renjō, “The Four Accomplishments: Zither, Chess, Calligraphy and Painting.”1912. Color on paper. Kanagawa Prefectural Modern Art Museum Collection.

This is four-fold screen painting bears a stamp indicating that it was painted when Renjō was 91. Yet the lines are strong and his brushwork steady, making it clear that Renjō’s kept his abilities as a painter even into his very last years.



Shimooka Renjō, "Portrait of Kimura Masanobu." 1862. Ambrotype. Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography Collection

This ambrotype is dated 1862 and is important in establishing when Renjō opened his first studio. Unlike the more usual paulownia-wood housing for ambrotype portraits, this was stored in a plain wooden frame, a fact of great interest in understanding the earliest photographs in Japan.

Organized by: Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Japan Association of Art Museums, ShimbunYomiuri Shimbun, Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art.

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Some of the exhibits will be changed on April 7. The exhibit will travel to the Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art, June 10-July 21, 2014. The catalog for this exhibition is completely bilingual in English and Japanese, and will be published as a book by Kokusho Kankokai Co., Ltd.

Lecture

Gallery tours in English

April 6 (Sun) 14:00~

May 1 (Thu) 18:00~

As a special service for this exhibition, there will be two guided tours of the gallery conducted in English. The lecturer is Alice Gordenker, a writer and researcher in Japanese photographic history, who provide explanation in English while guiding visitors through the exhibition for about an hour. Free with purchase of regular exhibition admission.

Gallery tours in Japanese

March 14 (Fri) 14:00~/March 28 (Fri) 14:00~

April 11 (Fri) 14:00~/April 25 (Fri) 14:00~

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