

# Collecting



**Modernist** 'Untitled (Pans)', c1928-32, by Frederick Bradley, left; 'Untitled (Wine Glass and Shadow)', c1931-32, by Victor Keppler

In 1931 and 1932 a youngish Japanese photography enthusiast called Senichi Kimura made a trip to Europe and the US. Kimura had been the editor of *Photo Times* since 1924, and he hunted widely for ideas to import. In a column plainly called Modern Photo Section, he introduced names from the Bauhaus such as László Moholy-Nagy, Walter Peterhans and Herbert Bayer; Americans struggling to shift from pictorialism to modernism, such as Edward Steichen; advertising and commercial photographers trying to spread their wings, such as Man Ray and his assistant Lee Miller in Paris; out-and-out journalists such as Margaret Bourke-White; and contemporary painters with a pleasure in photography, such as Charles Sheeler.

Kimura was one of the main voices appealing in Japan for a new way of making pictures. This was to be thoroughly Japanese, but it was to look for its inspirations to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement in Germany and its various similar or parallel tendencies elsewhere in the west. His great text was *Es Kommt der Neue Fotograf!* (Here Comes the New Photographer!) by Werner Graff, itself a spin-off from the groundbreaking Stuttgart exhibition of 1929, *Film und Foto*, which arrived on tour in Japan in a modified version in 1931.

A photographic proselytiser, Kimura wanted to blow away the muddy and the cutesy and replace them with keen-eyed sharpness. In Japan it was thought of simply as *shinko shashin*, new seeing, and it didn't so much matter whether its roots were surrealism or Dada or New Objectivity or journalism or even propaganda.

Kimura died young in 1938, but his

## Images of import

**Francis Hodgson** on a set of photographs that casts light on the flow of ideas from Europe to Japan in the 1930s

influence is unquestioned. The new exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Photography in Tokyo this month, for example, is devoted to Horino Masao. Although still overlooked in the west, Masao was an important member in the 1930s of the group Kimura founded called the New Photography Research Centre (Shinko Shashin Kenyukai).

Two influential dealers, Rudolf Kicken from Germany and Alain Paviot from France, have unearthed a surviving hoard of the pictures put together by Kimura on his journey, and they will together present these at the European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht for the first time. They are being offered as a group, for around €500,000.

It is not a large hoard – only 21 images – but it is a fascinating one. The masterpiece is a print of one of Moholy-Nagy's plunging views from the radio tower in Berlin, looking down on the snow-covered ground. This, no doubt, is why the two dealers have acted together to buy the collection: no more than three prints of this view are known; it is a rare and great thing. Kimura featured Moholy-Nagy many times in the pages of

*Photo Times*; Kimura had no doubt that the great pioneer was the man to follow. Kimura seems to have sought out photographers personally. In addition to a clinically executed Man Ray fashion print, a neat picture that gets the most out of a simple columnar dress in black with long white wings, we find a cheerful triple portrait of Kimura with Lee Miller and Man Ray himself: the obligatory photograph-as-evidence of every Japanese tourist's habits.

Images by Frederick Bradley, a photographer new to me, include a slight but likeable view of three saucepans from a *batterie de cuisine*, making almost a parody of modernism out of gleaming metal, repetition of pattern and harsh lighting. Another self-consciously modernist view is an anonymous close study captioned as strings but probably of haberdashery, piping and petersham and knotted tassels, a nod to the elegance of machine-made products wholly in tune with modernist thinking. Less self-consciously modernist (but gloriously modern in 1930) is Margaret Bourke-White's hymn to the textile workers of Russia, in a famous picture reprinted in her first book, *Eyes on Russia*.

These bits and pieces of the new contrast with the portraits in Kimura's collection, which are mainly things that would have looked good in a silver frame on a piano at any time from the 1870s on. Two of them – by Charles Gerschel of Lucien Guitry, the actor and father of Sacha Guitry – are really good. They seem to depict Guitry in character, in one case with a big shawl and wind-blown hair, and in the other with a very stagey hat. But these are a hangover from an older way of seeing, with the camera horizontal and at a "normal" distance from the subject. Kimura must have puzzled away at these things on his way home.

Much is unknown about these pictures, both in practical details of date and photographer and sitter, and also in what they meant to Kimura: they deserve further study. Not all of them are first-rate, by any means. But their survival gives a grand opportunity to explore the complex transmission of ideas from Europe to Japan.

*Twenty-One Surviving Photographs from the Senichi Kimura Collection*, Tefaf, Maastricht, March 16-25, [www.tefaf.com](http://www.tefaf.com)