

“My Sister is Making the World’s Cameras!” Depictions of Female Producers and Users of Cameras in Postwar Japan

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Hardly two months after the end of World War Two, the Japanese camera industry quickly retooled its wartime optical engineering research and began to produce cameras, lenses, and other photographic equipment for the consumer market. Companies such as Canon, Nikon, and Minolta worked to produce high quality 35mm cameras capable of transforming the negative connotations of the “Made in Japan” label into highly sought after domestic and international brands. Amidst economic, social, and political movements to rebuild postwar Japan, camera companies cultivated their products as aspirational middle-class commodities. Much like owning all three *sanshu no jingi* (refrigerator, washing machine, and television), buying a Canonet camera in 1961 meant that one had surpassed the years of wartime privation and fully recovered from the end of the war to the extent that one could now begin to photograph one’s own prosperity.

However, not all photographers were depicted equally: a detailed look at camera advertising from the 1950s and 1960s reveals that despite attempts to create new camera users, the general assumption was that women primarily saw cameras as fashion accessories and lacked the technical capacity to be interested in photography. Yet, at the same time the number of female workers in camera factories surpassed that of men, and corporate literature seized on the opportunity to depict women skillfully assembling cameras. Through close examination of various advertising strategies, I compare the laudatory depictions of women as producers of cameras with the somewhat disparaging image of females using cameras as mere adornments. How might tropes of advertising and corporate self-representation have contributed to this dichotomous approach to representing women and their relationship with cameras?

In this presentation I focus on camera companies as innovative producers of visual culture to analyze the diverse ways in which companies such as Canon cultivated desire for the Japanese camera along gendered lines. Through television and print advertisements, the camera was depicted as a malleable object: able to shape shift to fit the hands of adventurous men, fashionable women, and curious children alike. I look for the tensions in this image through an inquiry into the production of the camera as an emblem of mass society. In doing so, I propose a method to analyzing consumer culture that combines the scholarly approaches of the history of photography, business, gender studies, and culture to bring together each of these intertwined critical perspectives to tell a uniquely visual history of postwar consumption.