

Artist from the Collection: A Portrait of Yamada Minoru

Ishida Tetsuro

Curator, Tokyo Photographic Art Museum

Artist from the Collection: A Portrait of Yamada Minoru

Ishida Tetsuro

Yamada Minoru is part of the first-generation of postwar Okinawan photographers. During the turbulent period from U.S. rule of Okinawa to its reversion to Japan (1945-1972), Yamada remained focused on everyday life and children. In retracing his footsteps and trying to understand Yamada as a person, however, we find that he was not merely a photographer: He was a powerful figure who attracted people in a much more multifaceted way. In the following essay, while touching on this multifaceted aspect, I would like to present a portrait of Yamada Minoru.

First and foremost, Yamada was an important witness to the 20th century. He was born in Hyogo Prefecture in 1918. But the Yamada family, descended from the Ryukyu warrior class, lived in the Higashimachi neighborhood of old Naha, where they ran a business. Yamada and his family moved back to Naha when he was two, and he spent his childhood and adolescence there. After graduating from junior high school (under the old education system) in 1936, Yamada moved to Tokyo to attend university. He enrolled in Meiji University in 1938, and while studying in the Specialized Department of Commerce, Yamada served on the editorial board at the university newspaper for three years, exposing him to proletarian literature and journalism. His student life in Tokyo exerted a strong influence on Yamada's life. After finding a job at Nissan Doboku (now Rinkai Nissan Construction Co., Ltd.) in 1941, Yamada was sent to work in Manchuria. In 1944, he was drafted and was assigned to the Kwantung Army (the Japanese armed forces in Manchuria). Spending the rest of the war there, Yamada was subsequently sent to a detention camp in Siberia. In 1947, he returned to Japan and was demobilized. In 1952, he returned to his hometown of Naha and opened the Yamada Camera Shop. From that point until the 2010s, Yamada managed the shop and was active as an amateur photographer. To learn more about Yamada's role as a witness of his times, we can refer to the interviews in which he recounts his experiences.^{❖1}

Next, I would like to discuss Yamada's role in Okinawan and postwar Japanese photography history. He was involved in a wide range of activities, including helping to popularize cameras, promote photography culture, and serving as a liaison and coordinator for mainland photographers visiting Okinawa. According to the critic Nakazato Isao, "He was the key man in a

❖ 1 Refer to the following for comprehensive interviews with Yamada: Nakazato Isao, Ushiban Naoko, Hirata Rieko, eds., *A Yamada Minoru Chronicle: Okinawa, Photography, and Me*, published by *Lyrics of Time, Music of People, Pattern of Cities: 50 Years of Photographs by Yamada Minoru* Executive Committee, 2006; Ryukyu Shimposha, ed., *Okinawa: Postwar and Yamada Minoru*, Ryukyu Shimposha, 2012; "Interview with Yamada Minoru: The Artist Discusses His Work," *Yamada Minoru: People and Moment, Going by*, exh. cat., Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum, 2012.

❖2 Nakazato, "Foreword," Nakazato, Ushiban, Hirata, eds., *ibid.*, p. 1.

network of photographers' groups.^{❖2} At the dawn of Okinawan photography, Yamada was invariably at the center of any gathering of aspiring photographers. In 1956, after the *Okinawa Times* added a photography division to its annual open-call exhibition (known as Okiten), Yamada's camera shop oversaw the developing of many of the submissions, and thus made a positive contribution to the production of amateur photographers' works. Yamada was also a founding member of the Okinawa branch of the Nika-kai, an art group that had been active on the mainland since before the war, and in 1959, he was named head of the Okinawa Nikkor Club, a group of Nikon camera enthusiasts.

Yamada was particularly well known as a guarantor and guide for mainland photographers who visited Okinawa. When Okinawa was still under American control, people from the mainland were unable to travel freely to the area. To visit the region, it was necessary to have a guarantor. The guarantor vouched for the visitor and agreed to take responsibility if anything should happen. It was an era in which public security authorities were on the lookout for professional photographers traveling to Okinawa. In the 1960s, at the request of the editors of *Asahi Camera*, Yamada served as a guarantor for people like Hayashi Tadahiko, Kimura Ihee, and Tomatsu Shomei. Not only did he accompany them as a guide on their shoots, he sometimes worked as a shooting assistant. Among the visiting photographers he guided were Iwamiya Takeji, Hamaya Hiroshi, and Otake Shoji. Yamada also provided the painter Togo Seiji with the second floor of his camera shop as a space for live modeling. He also accompanied the avant-garde artist Okamoto Taro when he came to research the sacred Izaiho ritual on Kudakajima Island in 1966. In 1974, after Okinawa had already reverted to the mainland, Yamada oversaw the application process for an event organized by the Tokyo-based Workshop School of Photography in Okinawa that was taught by five people: Tomatsu Shomei, Hosoe Eikoh, Moriyama Daido, Araki Nobuyoshi, and Fukase Masahisa. Although the six-day workshop was limited to 30 people, who paid 30,000 yen (a rather high price at the time) each to participate, the event quickly reached maximum capacity. Some of the participants were experienced photographers, but the majority of them were younger people in their 20s and 30s.^{❖3} The photo historian Kaneko Ryuichi has suggested that at the time of Okinawa's reversion Yamada was a "media-like presence" – someone who mediated between mainland photographers and their amateur counterparts in Okinawa.^{❖4}

Yamada was also an amateur photographer himself. He taught himself how to take pictures after opening his camera shop when he returned to Naha in 1952. Yamada explained, "At that time, I had just started photography, so I wasn't sure what to shoot, and since I didn't know any of the basics, I relied on camera magazines that I ordered from the mainland." He also said that reading the monthly critiques written by a panel of judges (Domon Ken and Kimura Ihee) for an amateur photography contest in *Camera* magazine was "the only way for me to study photography."^{❖5}

❖3 Ryukyu Shimposha, ed., *ibid.*, p. 236.

❖4 Kaneko Ryuichi, "Yamada Minoru and Mainland Photographers," *Yamada Minoru: People and Moment, Going by*, exh. cat., Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum, 2012, p. 218.

❖5 Ryukyu Shimposha, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 173.

was heavily influenced by Domon's photorealism – a “realism in which human joy and sadness were expressed in an honest way.” But Yamada's decision to train his lens on children and the poor was not merely due to Domon's words in a magazine. Domon proved to be a catalyst, giving shape to the interests that Yamada had cultivated until that point in his life. This should be seen as the event that provided Yamada with direction as a photographer. Later, he consistently devoted himself to taking pictures of daily life and children. Yamada also recalled how Hamaya Hiroshi and Kimura Ihee had told local photographers that because Okinawa was changing so rapidly it was vital for them to document it, and shoot regular life around them. These messages spurred Yamada on. At the time, it was common to make so-called “salon photos,” which depicted things such as women dressed in traditional Okinawan dress. Yamada said that he was one of the only people who seriously attempted to document people's lives. No photographers of the period were focusing on children. The fact that media coverage of Okinawa on the mainland dealt primarily with political conflict also had a strong effect on Yamada's photography. He said, “Every news report made it seem as if Okinawa was completely overrun with demonstrators, and that made me think that I should document the real Okinawa.”

With a view to enhancing its collection of postwar Okinawan photography, the museum began acquiring works from the region including 30 of Yamada's pieces. These are snapshots dating from around 1960, a time when Yamada was most actively engaged in photography. Among them are scenes of Naminoue Shrine with a broken *torii* gate, ruined buildings bearing fresh bullet holes, Shureimon Gate immediately after it had been rebuilt, and the public market without any paved roads. The pictures are important in the sense that they are etched with memories of the city at that time. They also provide a vivid record of the children and scenes from everyday life that Yamada continually focused on. Take for example, *Shoeshine Boy, Kokusai Street* (1956) [fig.1], one of Yamada's earliest works. Yamada brilliantly captures a momentary encounter with the boy, who casts an impressive gaze in our direction. Meanwhile, the lively appearance of the girl in *Girl Working at Salt Farm, Yone, Tomigusuku* (1963) [fig.2], who is collecting grains of salt to take to the factory, leaves us with a deep impression. Yamada's precise composition and his acute sense of timing convey the fact that the lessons he had received from his revered teacher Domon Ken's were not merely theoretical – they were embodied in his photography in a physical form.

It was only relatively recently that Yamada came to be widely recognized as an artist. In 2002, 30 years after Okinawa reverted to the mainland, Yamada published his first photo book, *Okinawa of the Children 1955-1965*. In 2003, an exhibition called *Lyrics of Time, Music of People, Pattern of Cities: 50 Years of Photographs by Yamada Minoru*, and in 2012, a retrospective of the artist's work was held at the Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum. While on the one hand, more people began to

❖6 *Ibid.*, pp. 200-205.

❖7 Nakazato, Ushiban, Hirata, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 29.

❖8 Ryukyu Shimposha, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 218-219.



fig. 1
Shoeshine Boy, Kokusai Street (1956)



fig. 2
Girl Working at Salt Farm, Yone, Tomigusuku (1963)

❖9 Yamada Minoru, *Okinawa of the Children 1955-1965*, Ikemiya, 2002.

❖10 Nakazato, Ushiban, Hirata, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 56.

❖11 Ryukyu Shimposha, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 248-250.

❖12 Nakazato, Ushiban, Hirata, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 30.

❖13 I conducted my interview with Yamada at the artist's camera shop in Kume, Naha on May 11, 2016. This text was written for "A Survey of Okinawan Photography History during the Occupation Era with a Focus on Yamada Minoru," a fiscal 2016 grant I received from the Pola Art Foundation. The grant covered the period from April 2016 until late March 2017. Since then, I have continued to conduct related surveys.

❖14 The Meirindo, the first public school in the country, was established in 1714 during the Ryukyu Dynasty. Okinawa Bunkasha, ed., *An Easy-to-Understand History of the Ryukyu Islands and Okinawa*, Okinawa Bunkasha, p. 52.

take notice of his photography, Yamada maintained his lifelong stance as a "photo craftsman."^{❖10}

What was it about children in postwar Okinawa that caught Yamada's eye? He often spoke about the sights he had seen from the deck of the demobilization ship he had taken back to Japan after being released from detention camp in Siberia in 1947. When the boat pulled into the pier at Maizuru Port, Yamada saw a group of about 100 women and children, who had come to greet the returning soldiers, as they vigorously waved the Japanese flag. This scene was unforgettably moving because he had been convinced that the stories he had heard in Siberia about all of the Japanese women and children being killed by the American forces were true. At the opening ceremony for the Kaiho National Athletic Meet, held in Okinawa in 1987, the magnificent sight of dancing children reminded Yamada of what he had seen in Maizuru 40 years earlier, causing him to reflect on the past. He said, "Our war-ridden age has come to an end. And Okinawa has finally emerged from postwar chaos. I thought back on all of the children I had shot over the years, and to see children now dancing in such a splendid way, I decided that that would be the last time I took pictures of children."^{❖11} His decision came just at the end of the Showa Period in the late '80s. Yamada commented, "We had invested all of our unrealized hopes in that generation and the one after it."^{❖12} With these things in mind, we can see that behind Yamada's vivid pictures of children lay the photographer's experiences of the war and his deep feelings about the future of Okinawa.

In 2016, while I was conducting a survey on postwar Okinawan photography history in the local area, I had a chance to interview Yamada near the end of his life.^{❖13} He was 97 at the time. On the way to the Yamada Camera Shop in Naha, I walked through the area where Yamada had lived for many years. The Kume, Wakasa, and Izumizaki neighborhoods, where he had lived as a child, were in the heart of old Naha. Also in the area were Tensonbyochi, a sacred Daoist site dating to the Ryukyu Dynasty, and Meirindo, the elementary school that Yamada had attended which was located on the grounds of a Confucian temple.^{❖14} In front of the historic school flowed the Kumojigawa, a river that was spanned by Izumizaki Bridge, a beautiful arched bridge made of stone. The bridge was widely known as a notable site for moon-viewing, as depicted in Katsushika Hokusai's *Evening Moon at Izumizaki*, part of the artist's "Eight Views of Ryukyu" series. If you walk down Kume Street, which stretches straight toward the sea from the bridge, you will eventually arrive at Naminoue Shrine, which has been venerated as "the first shrine in the land" since the Ryukyu Dynasty. Historical heritages such as the Tensonbyochi, Meirindo, and Izumizaki Bridge were all burned or destroyed in the ravages of the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, almost completely wiping out the harmony between the rich religious and cultural entities in this old neighborhood. The vivid battle scars that are still apparent in the area from a work like *Torii at Naminoue Shrine* (1958) [fig. 3], which Yamada shot after the war just as he was embarking on a career as a photographer, are no longer visible



fig. 3
Torii at Naminoue Shrine (1958)

today, more than 60 years later. But when you actually walk through the neighborhood, and imagine the huge gap between the harmonious world that must have existed there before the war, and the nihilistic scene of the devastated Naminoue Shrine, you get a sense of Yamada's earnest attitude as he was inspired to begin taking pictures by focusing on the reality of his utterly changed hometown.

Due to changing times, the Yamada Camera Shop in Naha had stopped selling cameras and developing pictures. It now functioned as a place for photography enthusiasts to gather and interact as they listened to Yamada's stories. The show window of the store was emblazoned with a huge Nikon logo (a relic of a bygone era when the shop had served as the company's general agent in Okinawa). It was also decorated with photographic panels of Yamada's most notable works.

To avoid overburdening the elderly artist, one of Yamada's relatives, Yamada Tsutomu, who had helped him with his work, assisted with many of the answers to my questions. Even so, the artist himself treated me to many invaluable stories about postwar Okinawa and photography. Yamada talked about how he became covered in mud when it rained while walking on the unpaved streets at a time when there were still almost no buildings on Kokusai Street. He talked about showing famous photographers from the mainland around Okinawa. He talked about how, during the Vietnam War, throngs of American soldiers would come to his shop in the middle of the night, every one of them saying, "Naikon, Naikon,"^{❖15} and desperately hoping to buy a camera before they left for the front. Each story, recounted in a high-pitched, hoarse voice, was a testament to the times and could not have been delivered by anyone but him. Moreover, though Yamada continued to speak calmly, I sometimes caught a glimpse of the steely strength that grew out of his experiences during that difficult age. Thinking back on this meeting with Yamada, which happened just before the end of the Heisei Period (1989-2019), he seems like an informant from the oldest generation that could still talk about Okinawa and photography.

When I left the shop after the interview, I suddenly caught sight of the sign with the shop's name on the glass entrance. It had originally read "Yamada Shashinkiten" (Yamada Camera Shop), but the character for ki ("machine") was now missing [fig.4]. The reason for this was that Yamada had stopped selling cameras. But the fact that only one letter had peeled away and the rest were still there struck me as slightly humorous. It seemed to imply that you could rely on the fact that at heart things were the same despite all of the changes that the shop had deftly navigated with the times. Somehow it seemed to symbolize Yamada Minoru, a survivor of many ages.

Translated by Christopher Stephens

❖15 In the English-speaking world, "Nikon" is pronounced "Naikon." The brand and other Japanese-made cameras enjoyed great popularity among the U.S. soldiers stationed in Okinawa.



fig. 4
Yamada Minoru in front of the Yamada Camera Shop in 2016 (author's photo).