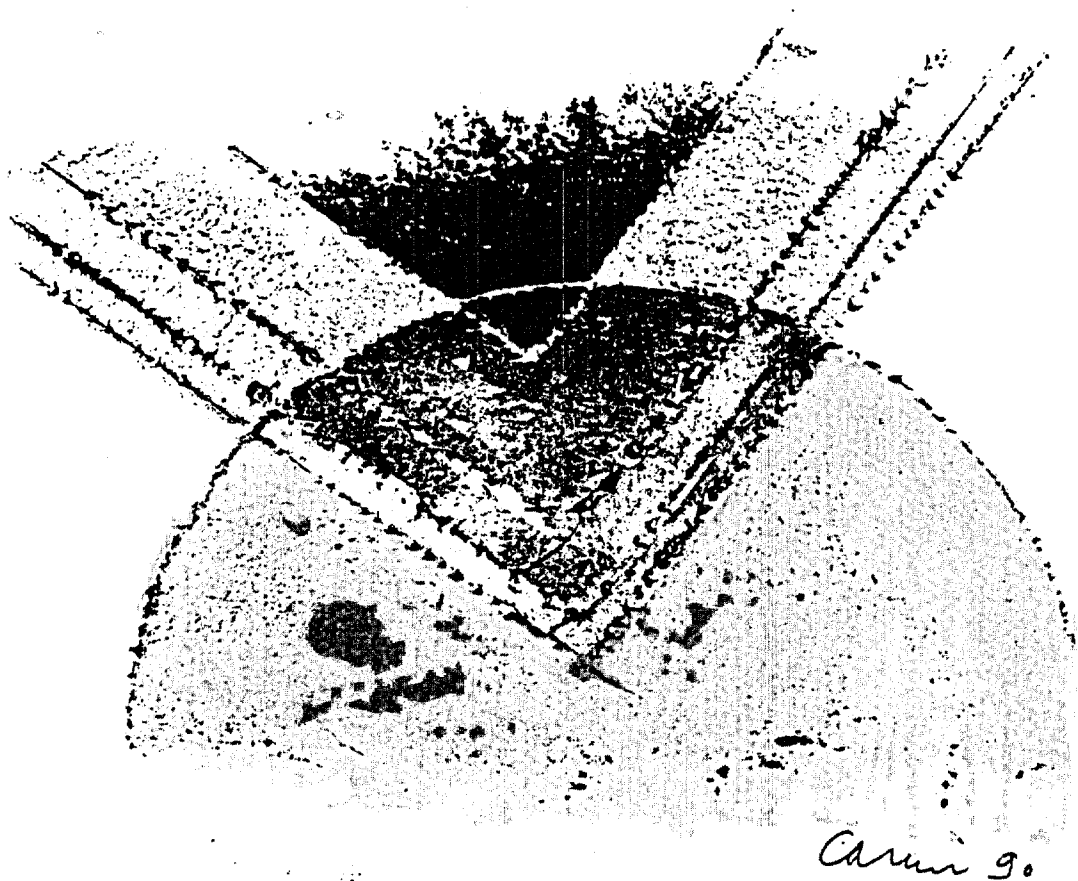


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# L. MOHOLY-NAGY AND JAPANESE MODERN ART

with special reference to his influence on  
Japanese artists in the 1920's

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## INTRODUCTION

László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) the great artist, who was born in Hungary, had a great deal of influence on many young Japanese artists through students and scholars who studied in Europe and visited the *Bauhaus* during the period of modern Japanese art called *Shinkou Geijutsu-undou* (The New Rising Art Movement) from 1920 to 1930's. Moholy-Nagy's influence was not only in the fine arts but also photography and design. In the 1920's, however, there was only limited information on European art in Japan, and little was known about the whole body of Moholy-Nagy's works. The image that was not formed of Moholy-Nagy in Japan may have been incomplete, particularly having to do with similarities and differences in his use of different media, and his influences on them. Compared to the world of art, Moholy-Nagy's influence on the world of photography was greater. So what is the reason for this? Could it be that there was a problem with the interpretation of information brought back by scholars from Europe?

Although a large number of studies have been done on Moholy-Nagy, some critics have yet to grasp the extent of Moholy-Nagy's activities. That is to say, they set his position as simply a constructivist photographer, or *Bauhauser*. The purpose of this paper is to trace Moholy-Nagy's influences on the history of modern Japanese art and to re-establish his position accordingly. Based on this, we would like to re-examine the modernisation of art in Japan as it moved away from tradition during the importation and transformation of European theory.

## SHINKOU-BIJUTSU AND MOHOLY-NAGY

In the Japanese *Meiji* period (1868-1912), modernisation advanced rapidly alongside democratic theory, and even more so in the *Taisho* period (1912-1925).<sup>1</sup> After the First World War, a new art current, called *Shinkou Geijutsu*, developed from the influence of the European avant-garde. At the point that the influence of Moholy-Nagy intersected with *Shinkou Geijutsu*, we can see two artists emerging: Tomoyoshi Murayama (1901-1977) and Sadanosuke Nakada (1888-1970). At that time most young Japanese painters went to Paris to study, but Nakada and Murayama went to Germany, and after returning they introduced trends of European avant-garde art including Moholy-Nagy's works.

Germany, at the time of their visit, was in chaos and could not handle the political and economic problems that remained after the First World War. In respect to art, many avant-garde artists came from East and Central Europe to Berlin. *De Stijl* was introduced by Theo van Doesburg from the Netherlands, *Merz* painting by Kurt Schwitters, while supermatism and Russian constructivism by El. Lissitzky from Russia. In 1922 the International Congress of Progressive Artists was held in Düsseldorf in May, while the Weimar Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists in September. In 1923 Moholy-Nagy was invited to the Bauhaus and he became well known as an artist internationally.

Murayama, who was a student at Teikoku University (Tokyo University) studying philosophy, decided to study at Berlin University. After a 40 day voyage he arrived in Berlin in January of 1922. In the beginning his purpose for going abroad was to study early Christianity, but he became obsessed with the art movement, and immersed himself in it. He produced about 200 works and participated in the Congress at Düsseldorf and the International Exhibition of Futurism within a twelve months period. On January 31, 1923, he returned to Japan.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as he returned home, he wrote an article on the *Yomiuri Newspaper* entitled "Constructivism and touch-ism: The new current in Germany", which was published on February 19. He also wrote articles for the magazine *Chuou Bijutsu* every month from April. He described his own works as *bewusste Konstruktionismus* (conscious constructivism) which propelled him into the world of Japanese art. He had an exhibition entitled *Bewusste Konstruktionismus-show* which included his new works (made in Japan) on May 15 at *Kanda Bumpodo* Gallery. In early June, after his belongings were shipped from Europe, he exhibited works which he had made while in Europe, along with his more recent works. In this way, Murayama made a great impact on the Japan art scene both by theory and practice. He organised an

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<sup>1</sup> "In East Asia, it was formerly the custom of weaker countries to reckon years according to the era of whatever major country they were under the control of at the moment. Stronger countries were therefore proud of their era systems as evidence of their independence, Japan began reckoning years by era in the seventh century. Under the Japanese system, it was the Emperor who decided when one era would end and the next begin. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, it was decided that from the *Meiji* era on each emperor's reign would constitute one era. That is to say, the year in which an Emperor ascended to the throne would be the first year of a new era which would continue until his death." (*Nippon - the Land and its People*, 1982, Gakuseisha, p. 76.)

<sup>2</sup> Tomoyoshi Murayama (1971) *Dramatic Autobiography*, Tokyo: Toho Press, p. 29.

avant-garde group entitled *MAVO*<sup>3</sup> with Masamu Yanase, Kamenosuke Ogata, Shuzou Oura, and Shinro Kadowaki in July of that year. In the article for the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, mentioned above, Murayama described constructivism as quoted below:

Constructivism flows out of cubism. It insists that technique is not composition but construction. This current germinated in Russia and then went to Berlin. It began to influence stage setting design and architecture.

He explained that “constructivism goes beyond the formative arts in a more civilised historical movement.” Furthermore, he wrote an article which asserts the limitations of constructivism entitled *Constructivism-Criticism*. In short, Murayama interpreted constructivism as an art movement in a cultural and ideological context which was to build a new society. Also he was, who indicated that the meaning of ‘construction’ is the organisation of actual industrial materials rather than the combination of ‘abstract elements’ with ‘drawing elements’; as well as the movements ‘from composition to construction’ arises from a large-scale, powerful, speedy, and precise inspiration which is in no way related to the ‘industrial, machine, and science arts’.<sup>4</sup>

In this way, Murayama took the intersection of science, technology, and culture, and started a new current of constructivism. For his definition, he quoted from three documents. The first of these is *Buch Neuer Künstler* written by Ludwig Kassák (in Hungarian: Lajos Kassák) and L. Moholy-Nagy. The second is an article in *Broom* (October 1922) which criticized Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*. The third is El. Lissitzky’s paper with his litographs attached to the ‘puppet portfolio’ which he created for Kruchnykyh’s electromechanical peep-show “Victory over the Sun” (*Pobeda nad Sol’ntsem*). It follows from this that Murayama understood constructivism as the movement from Russian constructivism to Hungarian Activism.

Murayama analyzed constructivism in an art historical context studying the relationship between machine and art, and its process of development to architecture. He published *Study on Constructivism* in 1926. Moholy-Nagy’s work *Construction* (1922) appeared as the first illustration in this book, which included 32 pages illustrating the following artists’ works: Theo van Doesburg, P. Mondrian, Gerrit Rietveld, Kazimir Malevich, F. Kiesler, N. Gabo, Tatlin, Man Ray, Murayama and Nakada.

The new current which Murayama predicted at the cross point between technology and art is “mechanisation in art”. He explained “handmade art is like that of the Middle Ages, it is *bourgeois* and unnecessarily luxurious. It is not suitable for the equality of the masses; therefore, during the age of mass production art became necessarily mechanized. Prints, photography and film caught the attention of people as the newest art trend.” He also argued from the content of Moholy-Nagy’s

<sup>3</sup> *MAVO* was named by scattered papers with the members initials written on them and picking them up spontaneously.

<sup>4</sup> Tomoyoshi Murayama (1925) *Constructivism-Critique*, In: *Art at the Present and Art in the Future*, Tokyo: Chuou Press, p. 247.

paper that constructivism gives importance to printing, to the size and shapes of letters, and to the position and space between lines.<sup>5</sup>

It follows from what has been said that Murayama agrees with an affirmative stance for mechanization which is the new view of art by typical constructivists like Moholy-Nagy. He believes in the possibility of reproduction art.

Only a few artists, however, were successful in the Japanese constructivism movement which came about through the theory and practices of Murayama. (They exhibited at the MAVO show in 1924 and in *Sanka-kai* show in 1925.) There are two reasons for the lack of success in this area. The first is that there was a great distance between the Japanese art scene and constructivism. The leading current of the Japanese art world of the 1910's and 1920's was *naturalism* based on the landscape and natural features of Japan. A new trend came about as a reaction to this, a non-naturalist group, so to speak, of futurism, cubism and expressionism. Some artists formed a group called *Nika-kai*, and afterward an even more avant-garde group *Miraiha Bijutsu Kyoukai* (The Association of Futurist Art) was organized. They, however, advocated subjectivism from an "art for art sake" standpoint, which had nothing to do with the constructivist notion of relating art to industry which was regarded as the style of the Proletarian Revolution. (By and by Murayama left the art world and found his own expression on the stage.)

The second reason for the lack of success is that Japan in the early 1920's had not grown the soil which would accept "mechanisation in art" advocated by Murayama. That is to say Japanese modernization on the surface made advances with democratic theory, but ended at the level of exoticism or yearning for Europe, and did not extend to the level of everyday activities. The beginning of 'modern', not just on a surface level but that which penetrates the climate and features of Japan, was after the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 destroyed Tokyo, and the steel, glass and concrete buildings which were the chief aim of the constructivists, appeared in great numbers. The problem of the reproduction of art works as proposed by Moholy-Nagy affected photography and graphic design activities, which were socialized by prints as a media, more so than the fine art world.

## SHINKOU-SHASHIN AND MOHOLY-NAGY

Sadanosuke Nakada was one of the first Japanese visitors to visit the *Bauhaus* at the same time as Murayama. He introduced the Bauhaus activities in some journals from 1925 to 1928.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Tomoyoshi Murayama (1925) *Study on Constructivism*, Tokyo: Chuou Press, pp. 68-71.

<sup>6</sup> National *Bauhaus*, *Mizue*, 1925 June-July;  
*Bauhaus* Report, *Mizue*, 1925 October;  
*Homage* to W. Gropius, *Kenchiku-shinchou*, 1925 June;  
*Bauhaus* Report, *Kougei-jidai*, 1927 January;  
*Bauhaus*, *Atelier*, 1928 September;  
 From Weimar to Dessau, *Kenchiku-kigenn*, 1928 November.

Nakada, a painter and critic, was a good judge of fine art, as well as architecture and photography, so he introduced European modern art to each of these fields in Japan. He wrote the article *The New Trend of Artistic Photography: Moholy-Nagy's New Essay* which suggested a new approach to photography through translating Moholy-Nagy's book *Painting/Photography/Film*. In Nakada's paper, he explained photogram, X-ray photography, photoplastic and photomontage techniques as classified by Moholy-Nagy. Nakada said that photographs of plant and animal forms and things in motion show that photography was originally something which became the foundation for inventing new methods of production and equipment based on science.

On the other hand Murayama and Kuwazo Okada organized the *Travelling International Exhibition of German Photographs - Film und Foto*, the 1929 *Werkbundaussstellung* exhibition, on tour, sponsored by the Asahi Newspaper Company, 1931 April 13-22 (in Tokyo), July 1-7 (in Osaka). This exhibition showed "1200 works categorized by Moholy-Nagy into four groups: (1) historical samples of photographic development; (2) applications of modern photography; (3) works by individuals; (4) free-style applied/collage photographs. Comprehensively, these included the techniques: night photography by artificial lighting, motion techniques, construction of direct lighting, photomontage, photo-typography; and included such subject matter as science, aviation, commerce, animals, news and various types of art photography."<sup>7</sup>

At that time, in Japan, there was little known about new trends in photography, including Moholy-Nagy's, by means of some fragmentary information through foreign journals before this exhibition. It was the first opportunity for photographers to appreciate original prints. Concerning this exhibition, Yoshitaro Mori, a professor in photography at Tokyo Art School, commented:

What is photography? What possibilities does it have? How does it relate with social fields as one element of culture? What level of progress is it at now? What is its contribution? - In the *Travelling International Exhibition of German Photographers*, photography while revealing itself completely, calls to society.<sup>8</sup>

This exhibition launched the Japanese *Shinkou Shashin* movement. Based on this exhibition, "the system of photography's social and cultural functions has been clearly defined for the first time."<sup>9</sup> Photography, therefore, broke its old shell, which has modelled after painting (pictorialism), and was established as an independent media. This, along with its function as a means of information, accelerated modernization in Japan - so to speak.

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<sup>7</sup> "The Travelling International Exhibition of German Photographers - has never been done on a large scale" (1931) *The Asahi Newspaper*, April 11, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Yoshitaro Mori (1931) The Travelling International Exhibition of German Photographers show all functions of photography, *The Asahi Newspaper*, April 18, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Kineo Kuwahara (1986) *The Pioneers of Modern Photography*, Japan Photographs series 3, Tokyo: Shougakukan Press, p. 155.

Furthermore, the translations from Moholy-Nagy's papers and the studies on his writings established him in Japan primarily as a photographer, rather than a painter. The studies were published in photography journals during the four years from 1929 to 1933 in succession.<sup>10</sup>

An examination of the publications listed above shows that the *Photo Times* journal published most of the articles about Moholy-Nagy. The chief editor of this journal, Senichi Kimura was on a tour of inspection in Europe, he had an interview with Moholy-Nagy in Berlin in 1931. Moholy-Nagy's relationship with the *Photo Times* began in October 1932, when Moholy-Nagy sent Kimura a photograph, nine photograms, and some stills from the films "Marseillaise" and "Black White Grey".<sup>11</sup> These prints appeared in *Photo Times* during the twelve months period from November 1932 to November 1933. On the other hand, in respect to technique, Shigemine Kanemaru published *The Way to Print Shinkou Shashin* as a guidebook for beginners, and it promoted the *Shinkou Shashin*

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*Shashin Shinkou*

Sep. 1930 - Aug. 1931, L. Moholy-Nagy, *Painting/Photography/Film*, Transl., Zen Ogida.

*Photo Times*

May 1931, Masao Horino, The description character of photography.

June Franz Roh, Moholy-Nagy and the New Photography, Transl., Juro Oka.

Goro Kataoka, Photography (Inga) 2.

July Yasuo Gojo, Letter and photography.

August Masao Horino, New photographer.

October Hikaru Shimizu, Concerning the photogram - one side of contemporary.

November Hikaru Shimizu, Moholy-Nagy's photography view.

December L. Moholy-Nagy, Photography is creation with light, Transl., Hikaru Shimizu.

Febr. 1932 Masao Horino, A new photographer in Germany and France, (4)

Moholy-Nagy.

Hikaru Shimizu, Concerning the photomontage.

March Hikaru Shimizu, Concerning typophotography.

Ipei Wada, Advance of photomontage.

June Hikaru Shimizu, Typophoto and modern art.

September Hikaru Shimizu, Type/Photography/Type/Photography, Film (1).

Febr. 1933 L. Moholy-Nagy, Problems of the Modern Film (1), Transl., unknown.

March L. Moholy-Nagy, Problems of the Modern Film (2), Transl., unknown.

October L. Moholy-Nagy, Photography, an objective form of vision of our age, Transl., unknown.

*Bi / Hihyou* (Beauty / Review)

Jan. 1931 L. Moholy-Nagy, The future of the photographic process, Transl., unknown.

*Koga*

Sep. 1932 L. Moholy-Nagy, Problems of the modern film, Transl., Hajime Yamaga.

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*Photo Times* (1933) 10, 2, 157-166.

movement. Since then a large number of constructivist works began to appear. For example, photographer Masao Horino's excellent works: *The Character of the Great City of Tokyo* (a compilation of photographs of Tokyo's mechanical buildings), *Flowing Through the Capital - The Album of the Sumida River* (created in the style of Moholy-Nagy's layout), and *Camera/Eyes vs. Iron/Construct* (symbols of modernization - the beauty of iron structures, for example iron bridges, shipyards, and gas tanks). Kiyoshi Koishi also printed *Early Summer Nerve* which had a good command of photogram and photomontage. Until 1932, as mentioned above, a lot of excellent works which fused the landscape and natural features of Japan, appeared and the *Shinkou Shashin* movement came to its zenith.

Furthermore, the journal *Koga* was published by the photographers Yasozou Nojima, Iwata Nakayama, Ihei Kimura, and the art critic Nobuo Ina in May 1932. Though this journal continued for only eighteen months, abundant high quality work by domestic and foreign photographers appeared, and some translations of Moholy-Nagy's writings were serialized. *Painting-Photograph, Letter-Type and Typofoto*, written by the designer Hiromu Hara, was also serialized and its contents dealt with the relationship between photography and typesetting as a function of optical information.

This shows, that the problem Hara described was conscious in the news and commercial fields by professional photographers in Japan in the 1930's. Photography gave functional society its information media. Photography, after all, was free from 'art' (in its narrow meaning), and had penetrated society. Art, namely, was not only for art, but also had an important meaning in society. This was one of the concepts promoted through constructivism.

Viewed in this light, the enthusiastic admiration of Moholy-Nagy's work in the photography world meant that the 'mechanization' ideal (which was not found in Japan until the 1930's), was accepted positively, even if it tended towards romanticism. In other words, Japanese Modern art had overcome traditional art through the 'machine' and 'the image of the machine' as a symbol of what is 'modern' (in a narrow sense). The mechanical images of Europe were exotic, and gave the illusion of 'modernity' in Japan. Photography has the function of recording windows of reality, such that a photographer isolates images in modern cities, combines them, and creates intense messages.

## MODERNIZATION OF THE JAPANESE ART

Naturally, photographers were fascinated by machines and their mechanical structures and enthusiastically photographed them. During this time, there was an important person who took the leadership of many photographers. His name was Takaho Itagaki (1894-1966).

Itagaki taught art history at Tokyo Fine Art School after graduating from the philosophy course of Teikoku University. He gave a lecture "On the study of modern art history" in autumn of 1928, where he considered plastic art as a social phenomenon - an aspect of industrial civilization. Later he developed this theme, and wrote the articles "The industrial civilization and modern art" and "The



interchange between machine and art" in the journal *Shisou* (Idea) in 1929. In his articles, Itagaki wrote that the art of modernism "... which held the growing admiration of industrial civilization (which appeared in Russian constructivism and came out of futurism) and had a clear conscious purpose along with the power of scientific technique ..." was carried out throughout European countries. Itagaki explained that "during the development of capitalism and the industrial civilization, and the construction of large scale factories, and the rationalization of production business, the art theory admiring the rationality of mechanical form was born." Itagaki described the reasons which allowed machines to change art theory as modern society's "... emphasis on a social consciousness, which, in contrast to individualism, recognized daily life as having cultural value". Therefore, "... simplicity, sanitation, order, worth, steadfastness, quantity, and such new criteria decide the reason and value of art".<sup>12</sup> In addition to that, Itagaki published *Obtain New Art* and *The Theory of Machine Art* in May 1930. Itagaki, in this way, promoted the mechanization of art and guided photographers into the *Shinkou Shashin* movement by a theoretical approach.

It is important that Horino's book *The Character of the Great City of Tokyo* which was under the supervision of Itagaki, in the style of layout, had a strong resemblance to Moholy-Nagy's scenario *Dynamic of the Metropolis* (1921-22). This style of layout - continuous letters "TEMPO" and "1 2 3", the marks of mechanical elements, and the rhythmical composition - was strongly influenced by Moholy-Nagy. Itagaki's experiment is representative of the importation of European culture.

Japan's modernization, as I have mentioned before, had changed in quality as the result of the rational idea and the advancement of urbanization in Tokyo, from the Taisho period to the Showa period. We may say that the understanding of 'mechanization in art' was a result of the actual conditions in Japan. Machines were not considered a strange subject for artists, but rather penetrated the people in support of rational life. The trend of Japanization - transformation of imported European art into Japanese actualities - had developed from the late 1920's to the early 1930's.

## CONCLUSION

It is concluded from what has been said above, that the art of Moholy-Nagy was a grail of Japanese modern art. He was an essential part of Japanese modern art history, especially as a photographer.

In Japan, only a few attempts have been made at researching Moholy-Nagy's activities as a Hungarian activist. Much remains to be done to bridge the gap between the actual Moholy-Nagy and the his image in Japan.

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Takaho Itadaki (1925) The interchange between machine and art, *Shisou* [Idea], 88, 25.