

David Martin

Innovative Isolation: Re-examining Pictorialism through the Recovery of Reputation

*Lecture on November 23, 2013 on the occasion of the symposium
"Inspirations – Interactions: Pictorialism Reconsidered"*

Today I hope to introduce several photographers that you are most likely unfamiliar with and otherwise would never have the opportunity to see their work.

I selected the subject of reputation as the basis for my presentation as I feel it is most fitting for our topic. Pictorialism itself has suffered a loss of reputation as an art movement worthy of serious study. With the current reassessment of Pictorialism I propose that we first consider reputation. That is, why do we currently know only about certain artists' work? Why is one artist known and another unknown? Some Pictorialists might have had successful careers during their lifetime, working alongside some of their famous contemporaries, and yet one is forgotten while the other is celebrated. Why are some photographers' works in museums while others, perhaps more talented, remain obscure? How do we study a movement unless we know who participated in it?



I begin with a map of the United States because most will probably be familiar with only a few artists who were active outside of the East Coast, and I want you to visualize the great distance between Seattle and New York. Many people think that Seattle artists were too geographically isolated from major urban art centers during the time that Pictorialism flourished in America, and, in a sense, they were; however, perhaps it was through this isolation that their creativity and originality thrived. By looking at some of the facts I have uncovered during my research, we will see that they really were not hindered in any sense of artistic expression.

I was born and raised in Western New York State, specifically Niagara Falls. This iconic natural wonder was often depicted in Pictorialist compositions. In nearby Buffalo and Rochester, NY, there are museums that have held this medium in high regard, allowing me to learn about Pictorialism at an early age. In 1910 Alfred Stieglitz produced his monumental exhibition of Pictorial photography at Buffalo's Albright Art Gallery, which firmly established photography as an important art form in the US.

As I learned more about photographic art history, I noticed that many experts in the field derided Pictorialism and treated it with disdain, dismissing it as sentimental and irrelevant compared to the modernist approach that followed. My own research began in 1986 after I moved to Seattle and I began discovering works that were quite different than what was commonly thought of as Pictorialist. Some of the artists whom I became very interested in were members of the Seattle Camera Club, which was founded and dominated by a group of Issei, first generation Japanese Americans, as well as a few Caucasian women of note. It is interesting to point out that none of the photographs that I was looking at were in any local art museums. Instead, they were in library collections and preserved as documents rather than as art. My interest piqued, I discovered that the Seattle Camera Club began in 1924 and only lasted until 1929, another casualty of the American stock market crash and ensuing economic depression. Seattle did have an earlier Camera Club that formed in 1895, but almost all of its material and archival history has been lost.



Frank Asakichi Kunishige, *Betti*, c. 1924



Soichi Sunami, *Martha Graham*, c. 1930

So I was starting with what many people would consider the second wave of Pictorialism, after the demise of Stieglitz's Photo Secession and into the 1920s and 1930s. A work from 1924 titled *Betti* by Frank Asakichi Kunishige and an unusual depiction of dancer Martha Graham's distorted face by Soichi Sunami from around 1930 would have been categorized as Pictorialist by their creators, and yet they show the extreme range of expression utilized by different photographers under the same designation. Kunishige pursued a Western tradition of beautiful and poetic imagery while Sunami infused his work with an abstract approach, the almost grotesque subject reminiscent of a Japanese Noh mask. Kunishige's portrait was included in several international salons, including Paris where it won an award and was reproduced in a leading French art magazine that praised Kunishige's work as among the finest in the world.



During the 1920's, seven of the top ten most exhibited Pictorialists in the world were members of the SCC.

The members of the Seattle Camera Club help prove my case in point about reputation and Pictorialism. Why are these photographers unfamiliar to us when they obviously had a great deal of success during their lifetimes? Some of the questions I pose relate to their personal lives; were they married? Did they have children or descendants to preserve their work and promote their reputation after their deaths? Were they gay or lesbian and their works destroyed after their deaths by embarrassed relatives? A group image shows some of the key members of the Seattle Camera Club. Most never married, and the two who did had only one child each. In many cases, the artists without surviving families have suffered the worst loss of reputation. Not only was their work housed in libraries and historical institutions rather than in museums, but they were also broken up into subject categories like bridges, mountains, trees, landscapes, and portraits with other photographers' works mixed in. In the case of the Japanese photographers, many of the photographs were removed from the mounts during World War II, making it difficult to locate titles and dates necessary to properly document the works.

One of the most startling facts my research confirmed was that, during the middle and late 1920s, seven of the top ten most exhibited Pictorialists in the world were members of the Seattle Camera Club. I was able to locate this information by exploring how the photographers networked. When the Seattle Camera Club held its first exhibition in 1925, it had 34 regional exhibitors, 25 of whom were *Issei*, or first generation immigrant Japanese, and 89 prints. By the time of its second exhibition one year later, it had 84 photographers, 194 prints, and was international with 24 countries represented. An original shipping box that I was able to locate shows how members' work was transported, either by train in the United States or by boat internationally. Fortunately the Pictorialists in the second movement were somewhat competitive and neurotic about listing how many prints they exhibited in national and international salons. Using the *American Annual of Photography* and other photography publications, I was able to draw up charts to measure their achievements and thus determine the high success rate of the members of the club.



Dr. Kyo Koike 1878-1947, Artist, guiding force, writer, international advocate for Pictorialism



Notan

The main figure of the Seattle Camera Club was Dr. Kyo Koike. He was an artist, guiding force, writer, and international advocate for Pictorialism. In his professional life he was a medical doctor and surgeon. Unlike many of the members of the Seattle Camera Club, he had a substantial income because of his medical practice, which allowed him to financially assist the other artists. He produced a bi-monthly pamphlet called "Notan," which documented all of the members' activities. "Notan" is a Japanese word used to describe shadow and light, very similar to chiaroscuro. Had it not been for his publication's recording the activities of the Seattle Camera Club, most of this organization's activities would have been lost. By the early 1930s Koike himself had become the most exhibited Pictorialist in the world, and his work blended Eastern and Western traditions. Some of his work, like that of other members of the Seattle Camera Club, resembles the compositions used in Japanese woodcuts, the Ukiyo-e block prints of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; other subjects appear to have a Western influence. Koike stated, "I try to make my composition simple as possible and at the same time to contain much meaning." This economy of means may have been reinforced by the fact that he was a published haiku poet as well.



Frank Asakichi Kunishige (1878-1960)



Heart Of, c. 1920

Another prominent member of the Seattle Camera Club was Frank Asakichi Kunishige. He was probably the most internationally known of the group during his lifetime. A Parisian art magazine described his work very favorably: "In terms of photography, I know of nothing more artistic than F. A. Kunishige's work. In front of his prints, you catch yourself forgetting that you are dealing with the mysteries of the darkroom, and totally believing that you are looking at true, authentic paintings. It takes a veritable effort to re-enter reality; for these are, truly, incomparable works of art." (*Revue du Vrai et du Beau*, Paris 1924)



The East Awakes, c.1927; *Pioneer Square, Seattle*, c. 1920; *Untitled studio portrait*, c. 1920; *Anna Pavlova*, 1921

His floral image *Heart Of* dates from about 1920. It is not typically Pictorialist but relates instead more to modernism. I would categorize many works by the members of the Seattle Camera Club as transitional because they have elements of what we think of as traditional Pictorialism while simultaneously displaying a more modern approach. Other examples of this transitional phase are Kunishige's *The East Awakes* and *Pioneer Square*, which depicts a beloved landmark pergola in Seattle. Like some of the other photographs, the treatment causes the works to look like aquatints, etchings, or charcoal-drawings – adding a sense of mystery and illusion through various types of processes. (The woman posing was in fact a very interesting character in her own right. Her name was Aida Kawakami. Japanese born, she was very active as a dancer in Hawaii. She was one of the earlier

dancers touring the US to promote Flamenco and traditional Hawaiian dancing.) Kunishige photographed many dancers throughout his career, some obscure and others such as the legendary Anna Pavlova, whom he captured in two different portraits, a formal studio shot and another in costume. Kunishige used two different chops to sign his work, very much in the manner of Ukiyo-e color blockprints. The upper Magatama-shaped seal translates phonetically as “Furan” and then “Koo,” describing his American pseudonym, “Frank.” The lower seal translates the name as “Kuni” and then “shige.” On the studio portrait of Pavlova, he instead uses a lovely calligraphy signature.



Soichi Sunami (1885-1971)



Studies of Martha Graham



Kunishige and other members of the Seattle Camera Club often worked with Seattle’s Cornish School, which was founded around 1913 by Nelly Cornish, who had brought some of the most famous internationally acclaimed musicians and dancers to either perform or teach in Seattle. Soichi Sunami, who worked with Kunishige at the studio of Ella McBride, began a long career as a photographer at the McBride Studio, and it was there that his fascination with dancers began. In 1922, he moved from Seattle to New York to study painting at the Art Students League. But he could not shake his background in photography, and what could be more useful to a group of artists than a photographer friend? He started assisting his friends and instructors by photographing their works for publicity purposes. Many of them – Edward Hopper and Yasuo Kuniyoshi, to name a few – became very well known. His work was noticed by a group of people in New York who were in the initial stages of forming the Museum of Modern Art. As soon as the museum opened, Sunami was asked to be the resident photographer for the museum, and he stayed there until his death in 1971. But it was his connections in Seattle through the Camera Club that introduced him to many of the dancers. Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, and especially Martha Graham became regular customers. Graham liked his work so much that she hired him on numerous occasions to document her work. By the end of his career, he had produced one of the largest bodies of work in American dance. The majority of it is contained in the dance collection of the New York Public Library.



Three other images, on the other hand – Martha Graham with the Noh-mask grimace, a study of Martha Graham's breast, and a study of an African-American woman – were just located through Sunami's daughter in September 2013. They had been stashed away since the 1970s. The daughter, who has just recently retired, found several boxes full of her father's vintage prints, which I am delighted to present here for the first time.



Edward Curtis,
Ella E. McBride



Ella E. McBride,
Eryngium, An Arrangement, c. 1924



Wayne Albee,
Ella E. McBride

Ella McBride was one of the key figures of the Seattle Camera Club. As I mentioned previously, the group consisted primarily of *Issei* men, but there were also two female Caucasian members, and they were interesting on several levels. Ella McBride, whose long life stretched from 1862 to 1965, had her own portrait studio and made her living that way. She hired both Sunami and Kunishige as her assistants. Her portrait was taken by Edward Curtis, a formal picture, and by Wayne Albee, who was the earliest successful

Pictorialist in Washington State. McBride's start into photography was very unusual. A mountain climber, she was scaling Mount Rainier in 1897, the largest mountain in Washington State, when she met Edward Curtis, who was also a mountaineer. She was one of the first women to climb the mountain. They became very close friends, and Curtis hired her on subsequent expeditions up the mountains to guide some of the women. She had had a career as a schoolteacher, supervising several schools in Portland, Oregon, but he convinced her to move to Seattle in 1907 to manage his studio, giving up her career as a teacher. She absorbed what she could from Curtis, although she was not a big fan of his work. Her own interest leaned toward Pictorialism and displayed no influence of Curtis in technique or subject matter. By 1916 she had left the Curtis Studio to open her own. At the age of 59 she started exhibiting her original Pictorialist works, beginning with a few regional shows before being accepted to the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain's salon in 1922. Only twelve works from America were included in that exhibition, three of them hers. She became known for her floral studies, such as *Eryngium, An Arrangement*, which was exhibited quite frequently internationally.



Portrait of a Tulip, c. 1924



Judging a Print, c. 1924



A Shirley Poppy, 1925



A Pattern, c. 1922

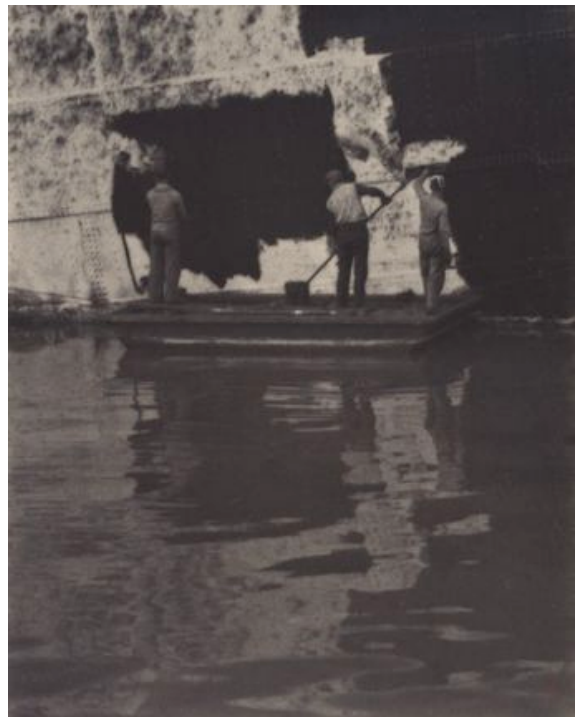
She used her Japanese friends, photographers, and sculptors as models for many of her works including *Judging a Print* with Kunishige on the left. In *Portrait of a Tulip* she experiments with a more modern approach. McBride's internationally exhibited works are perhaps best exemplified by *A Pattern* of 1922 and *Shirley Poppy* of 1925, which was the most exhibited Pictorial photograph by any member of the Seattle Camera Club. Here, too, she relied on Japanese compositional elements while utilizing a more modern approach. Imogen Cunningham, who became well known for her floral studies, worked under

McBride when she worked for Edward Curtis from 1909 to 1910. So the early floral works by McBride and by Kunishige, who also worked briefly for Curtis, predate Cunningham's floral work by several years. This fact has never been mentioned in any of the studies on Cunningham, who certainly would have been aware of these works even though she had moved to California by 1917.

Once again, it is worth pointing out that McBride had no children: she lived with women for most of her life. I assume that she was lesbian. Kunishige also had no children. Imogen Cunningham, on the other hand, had children. Her children became photographers. Her granddaughter is a photographer. They continued printing and promoting her work, producing books, all of which has had a positive effect on preserving her reputation. McBride had no such champions, and most of her work has only been located in the past ten years. Such personal details must factor into the equation when we consider reputation.



Yukio Morinaga (1888-1968)
Portrait of Yukio Morinaga by Virna Haffer, c. 1946



Untitled, c. 1924

Another member of the Camera Club was Yukio Morinaga. Morinaga focused more on the urban environment. Many of the other artists in the Camera Club were looking at traditional landscapes, particularly the mountains that are so much a part of the Seattle landscape. But Morinaga looked instead at the city and the neighborhood where he resided. He was also a calligrapher. An untitled work of three men painting the side of a large boat from approximately 1924 looks almost like an abstract expressionist painting with its gestural quality and interest in abstract shapes. He also did a number of street scenes in Seattle, such as one from an elevated vantage point from 1924. Several of his street scenes were very compatible with the street photography that would become popular twenty or thirty years later.



Untitled, c. 1924

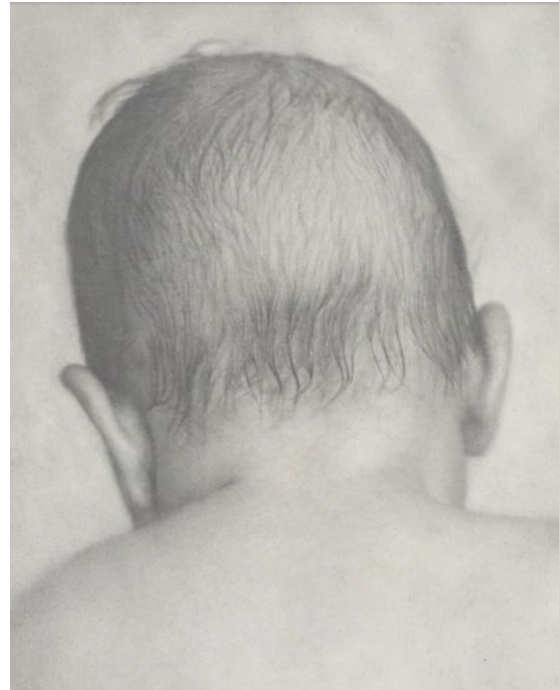


Plegaria (Prayer), c. 1930

He also used multiple languages to name his photos, such as *Plegaria (Prayer)* from 1930; here the ethereal shapes of the incense smoke are set against the slanted ovoid, which counters the vertical thrust of the composition. According to my charts, Morinaga was the second-most exhibited Pictorialist in the world during the late 1920s. But of all of these photographers, his work is represented by the smallest number of surviving prints.



Virna Haffer (1899-1974)
Self Portrait, 1929



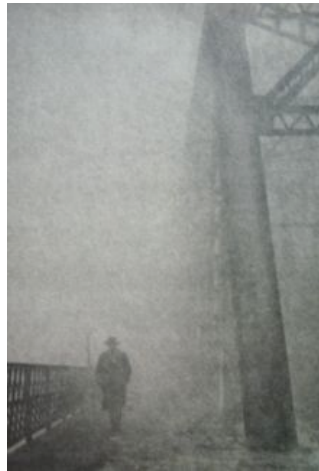
His First Growth, 1923

The last member I would like to mention is Virna Haffer, the other female Caucasian member of the Seattle Camera Club. Two pieces demonstrate her fascinating body of work: her self-portrait of 1929 and a study of the back of her infant son's head in 1923. She was probably the most modern of all the members of the Seattle Camera Club, and

from her work and the works of other American Pictorialists we can deduce links to later well-known photographers: Cindy Sherman, Robert Mapplethorpe, Diane Arbus, and others. Her works were exhibited initially with the Camera Club and later nationally, including the very bizarre work entitled *Gian Paolo*. This is not something we would normally see or think of as a Pictorialist photograph – or I would not have when I started doing this research – whereas the *11th Street Bridge* from c. 1928 is more in line with the standard type of Pictorialism, although it has an eerie film noir quality about it, too. *Gian Paolo* is also interesting because it bears the same name as her son, Jean Paul. She was a single mother, very unconventional, and lived a life of spirited individuality. A female friend of hers posed as the model to create this grotesque, nightmarish image that references *Kaidan*, Japanese fairytales that sometimes incorporated monsters and frightening images.



Gian Paolo, c. 1928



11th Street Bridge, c. 1928



Studies of Corwin Chase, 1929



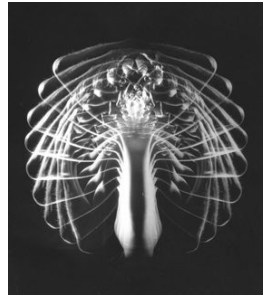
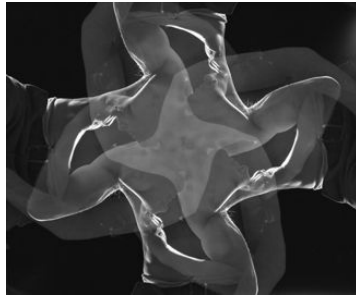
Autumn, c. 1929; *Phallic Worship*, c. 1927

Haffer also created some non-allegorical male nudes, a rare motif in Pictorialism, where most nudes were female and the few male nudes were usually presented in an allegorical setting, a biblical reference, or a historical tableau. Haffer was raised on Puget Sound in a utopian community where she was brought up with no religion; she was raised instead with the idea of free love and political anarchy. In 1929 she produced a series of nude studies of her lover, a printmaker named Corwin Chase. She painted him with concentric circles of blue paint and portrayed her sensual observation of his beautiful body set against the Northwest landscape. These types of erotic, sensual depictions of men were very unusual for that time in America. I know of no other female photographers who produced such works. Haffer was also a very talented printmaker, and she would often use images from her photographs to produce wonderful woodcuts. An unusual one called *Phallic Worship* from circa 1927 is a bold and startling condemnation of religion and the traditional family structure, made during the time of her impending divorce.



Virna Haffer photographing her husband, c. 1933

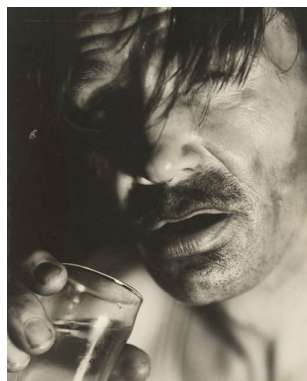
A few years after her divorce, she met a man named Norman Randall who would serve as lover, muse, and father to her son. The photographs of Randall are among the most fascinating in her oeuvre. A self-portrait depicts her in the studio photographing Randall in a complete role reversal for the time: the female artist, wearing clothes of her own design, in a dominant stance, directing and posing her partially nude male model (Randall). Haffer would mine the erotic and abstract potential of her model for numerous compositions. She isolated certain body parts and manipulated the negatives in the darkroom to produce surrealistic, biomorphic images. Another woodcut attests that she always referred to herself as a "Camera Pictorialist."



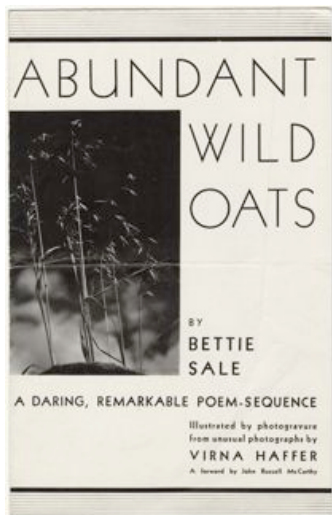
Randall would often frustrate her with his drinking and womanizing. She retaliated by producing a number of startling depictions of him in an inebriated state (*Norman*, 1936).



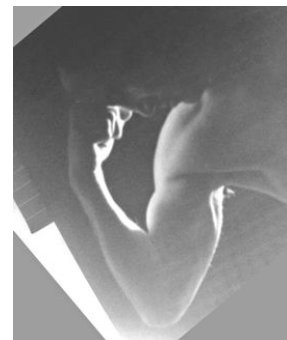
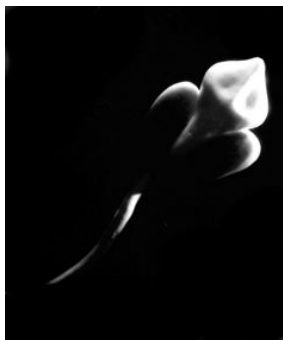
Norman, 1944



Norman, 1936



In the early 1930s she began a project titled *Abundant Wild Oats* with her friend Bettie Sale, who was a poet. The two women decided to do a collaboration of Haffer's Pictorial photographs inspired by Sale's erotic poems. A sensual but disturbing image of a woman's torso floating in a lily pond was used as one of the illustrations for the proposed book, but a preliminary study for the illustration has its own merits as an individual work. We are also able to retrace her work to see her process of layering positive and negative images to create a distortion of a female nude.



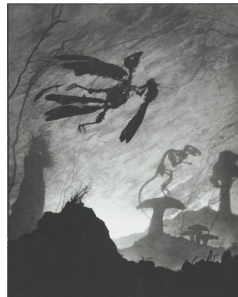
Dark Man

In the image *Dark Man*, she and Sale hoped to construct with words and imagery an abstract or surrealistic compilation of what they found attractive about a man's body. She made this image by superimposing and layering different images using Randall and a gay male friend as models. Randall's flexing bicep in the middle of the composition is set against the stubble-covered torso of her friend a day after she shaved his belly. She then created a carving from a bar of soap to imitate a phallus/scrotum, which she photographed, reversed, and layered into the image to make the final composition.



Hooverville, c. 1935

Haffer tempered her abstract works with images reflecting her social and political views. Her powerful images of Hooverville, American depression-era homeless encampments named disparagingly after President Hoover, were located only a few years ago.



Photograms 1950's and 60's

Haffer developed an interest in photograms toward the later part of her career. She started creating images that elucidated her concerns and beliefs: a strong environmental concern, nuclear danger, and animal cruelty. She used these photograms to make statements, some abstract, some disturbing. The falling shrew was produced by placing a dead shrew on photosensitive paper and focusing the beam of a flashlight on it, creating the illusion that the animal is falling into a vortex. An unusual, pixelated abstract image was created by spraying Christmas flocking onto glass, allowing it to crystallize for several months, then placing a section in her enlarger. Another strange image was made by putting water onto cellophane and moving it around in the carrier until it made a desired image, then printing it in reverse. *Tomorrow Land*, one of her well-known works, reflects a foreboding nuclear holocaust. It was made from cut paper, mouse and bird skeletons, and debris found in her garden.



Haffer's use of distortion and elongation of subject: El Greco, Jaume Plensa, Thomas Hart Benton

One stylistic convention within the Pictorialist movement was the use of distortion and elongation, which can be illustrated by two of Haffer's works from the 1920s: the portraits of Cornelius Vanderbilt and of her friend Kay Harshberger. This type of portrayal has been utilized for centuries, from the work of El Greco to the American Thomas Hart Benton to the contemporary work of Jaume Plensa.



Haffer: *Craig Boardman*, c. 1928; Kunishige: *Masculine Dancer*, c. 1921; Haffer: *Female Dancer*, c. 1950

Members of the Seattle Camera Club also photographed androgynous subjects, which I find fascinating for the time, for instance Haffer's 1928 portrait of her male friend in make up and the deceptive female model wearing a bolero hat. Kunishige produced a work called *The Masculine Dancer* in 1921 that featured a female model and *Traumerie* in 1926, in which the model's gender is indiscernible. Kunishige's *Poppy Dreams* depicts an androgynous Caucasian figure in Chinese clothes, giving the impression of an induced opium stupor.



Kunishige: *Traumerie*, 1926;



Kunishige: *Poppy Dream*, c. 1924

In closing, I would like to return to the issue of reputation. In the United States, Japanese Americans were interned in concentration camps during World War II. All of the Japanese members of the Seattle Camera Club were interned; almost all of them, with a few exceptions, lost the majority of their photographs and archival material. Although he had moved to New York and wasn't interned, Sunami burned his nude studies for fear of government reprisal. Photographs and documents attest to this regrettable period and the personal hardships it inflicted.

By the time they were released, many of the members were past middle age and suffered financially because they had no ready jobs to reintegrate into society. Kunishige never recovered, suffering serious health problems for the remainder of his life. Koike suffered from depression and died of a heart attack relatively young. Morinaga took his own life. These histories should be a lesson to younger art historians that we cannot simply accept what has been handed down to us as fact. There are other photographers and other artists who deserve to be studied. But don't just look in museums – because many of the times they are not there!

David F. Martin

Born and raised in Niagara Falls, New York, David F. Martin is an independent arts researcher, curator, and writer focusing on the art history of Seattle and the Pacific Northwest as well as of western New York State. Many of the artists he has chosen to focus on are women, Japanese-Americans, and other minorities who had established national and international reputations during the period 1890–1960. He is the author of several regional catalogues and contributes essays and catalogue entries for national and international publications on painting, printmaking, and photography.