# Revisiting Ancient Monuments: Domon Ken's Muroji Series in the Context of the Post-war Japanese Photography Development

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**Abstract**

The paper examines the Muroji photographic series executed by the Japanese photographer Domon Ken (1909–1990) and published in a photobook format in 1954. These images, depicting the eponymous Buddhist temple, occupied a significant place within the Japanese photography of the time. In particular, Muroji was one of the earliest post-war projects devoted to the national culture and its symbols, employing modernist aesthetics to re-actualise traditional works of art. Using methods of formal-stylistic and semantic analysis, the study identifies the distinctive features of Muroji and compares them with several later projects, thereby establishing its role in the development of post-war Japanese photography.

*Keywords:* Japanese photography, post-war photography, 20th century, Domon Ken

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## Introduction

A Japanese photographer, Domon Ken 土門拳 (1909–1990), took his first trip to Murō-ji temple in 1939. By that time, he was already considered a proficient author, being one of the contributors to the prestigious *NIPPON* magazine. During his work there, Domon created sophisticated and thoroughly constructed photo-reportage, which popularised contemporary Japanese culture and implicitly promoted the totalitarian Shōwa regime. However, the journey to the ancient Buddhist site in the secluded mountainous area of Nara Prefecture provided him with fresh inspiration and notably different visual motifs. Domon visited the temple again several times in the 1940s and took numerous photographs of the temple's architecture, sculptures and the surrounding landscape. In 1954, those were published in a photobook, *Muroji*, which marked the beginning of Buddhist imagery in his career. After its translation into English in 1958, the photobook entered the international sphere, overcoming the boundaries of a solely local project.

Today, *Muroji* embodies a major tendency in the development of post-war Japanese photography. In the 1940s–1950s, in line with Domon's work, many Japanese photographers turned to subjects of traditional culture. They often travelled to rural areas, pursuing images of authentic Japan. However, while actively engaging with tradition, they sought to portray it in vivid modernist aesthetics, and thus, to assign it new meanings and to re-actualise it for contemporary audiences. In this regard, *Muroji* was one of the most acclaimed projects, which, through the means of visual art, had a great influence on the formation of the Japanese post-war cultural image.

Despite the importance of the series in this context and Domon's oeuvre, these photographs received relatively less attention than his post-war "snapshot" (*sunappu*) reportage. Along with Domon's theoretical essays on "photographic realism" (*riarizumu*), the latter is usually assigned a pivotal role in the development of Japanese "straight" photography in the 1950s.[1] In this context, Buddhist photos are sometimes regarded as a rather peripheral area of Domon's interests. Furthermore, a limited number of authors, who specifically analyse *Muroji* photographs, are more inclined to examine their semantic aspects (Chan, 2019; Tseng, 2009). Therefore, the stylistic and thematic patterns of the series, as well as its place within post-war Japanese photography, usually remain beyond the scope of research.

This research gap clarifies the aim of this study. The paper discusses stylistic and semantic features of *Muroji* photographs, as presented in the 1958 English edition of the photobook (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958). Additionally, it places the series within the context of 1950s Japanese photography development, comparing it to other projects on similar subjects by Japanese authors at the time. Specifically, the article examines the albums *Katsura: Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture* (Gropius & Tange, 1960) and *Ise: Prototype of Japanese Architecture* (Tange & Kawazoe, 1965). Featuring photographs by Ishimoto Yasuhiro 石元泰博 (1921–2012) and Watanabe Yoshio 渡辺義雄 (1907–2000), respectively, these became the most well-known post-war series dedicated to traditional Japanese architecture, reinforcing the trend largely established by Domon. By providing this comparison, the paper outlines the position of *Muroji* within this movement and defines its role in the development of Japanese photography in the 1950s.

[1] Among the numerours materials, covering this aspect of Domon's oeuvre, I can mention Tucker et al. (2003, pp. 210–212), Thomas (2008) and Feltens (2011).

## The Origins of *Muroji* Aesthetics

While Muroji was conceived and executed mainly during the war years (and published almost a decade later), its thematic and formal foundations had developed in the 1930s. That period is typically described as a time of rapid technical and stylistic progress in Japanese photography. In particular, the 1930s were characterised by a widespread recognition of mainstream trends in Western photography (Gremer, 2011, p. 3; Tucker et al., 2003, pp. 188–189). Japanese photographers mostly familiarised themselves with these tendencies through foreign magazines, travelling exhibitions, and trips to European countries. In Japan, Western photo modernism was embraced under the name "New Photography" (*shinkō shashin*), signifying a shift from the pictorialist soft focus and painterly aesthetics to a sharper "mechanical eye" of the camera (Tucker et al., 2003, p. 188). Visually, this approach was reflected in precise detail, abstract compositional geometry, and dynamic angles.

That positivist agenda soon became appropriated by the state media and affiliated with its political demands. By the mid-1930s, along with Domon, many young Japanese photographers found occupation in major government-supported projects that were targeted both to domestic and international audiences.[2] The largest among them was *NIPPON* magazine, established in 1934 by photographer Natori Yōnosuke 名取洋之助 (1910–1962) under the auspices of the Nippon Kōbō ("Japan Studio") agency. It was issued in several languages, conveying a positive and vivid image of the totalitarian Shōwa regime abroad. For a full decade until its shutdown, *NIPPON* represented Japan as a modern country that had great advancements in technology and social life, while preserving its authentic culture and ancient traditions. Such synthesis between modernist imagery and a strong state-driven political message could also be influenced by similar trends in Western art.[3]

At the same time, Japanese photographers did not limit themselves to depicting modern subjects and constructing a progressive international image of the nation. In the mid- and late 1930s, amid the establishment of conservative ideology in Japan, there was an explicit development of reactionary trends against foreign cultural influences. As Jonathan Reynolds argues, it was an uprising of ideas related to the "overcoming of 'modernity'" and rejection of "the West's cultural hegemony" (2015, p. XIII). According to him, many Japanese intellectuals, writers and artists sought to find a "lost home" (Reynolds, 2015, p. XIV)—authentic Japan liberated from external authorities, concepts and technologies. Their search for national identity was often (and quite naturally) conducted within the confines of traditional culture and its narratives. Japanese intellectuals immersed themselves in the lives of rural communities and interpreted their customs and everyday existence. Those tendencies led to the development of prominent groups, such as Nihon Mingei Kyōkai ("Japan Folk Craft Association"), which was established in 1931 by Yanagi Soetsu 柳宗悦 (1889–1961) and experienced a significant growth during the pre-war decade (Mimura, 1994).

[2] Among them were Horino Masao 堀野 正雄 (1907–1998), Domon Ken and Kimura Ihei 木村伊兵衛 (1901–1974), to name a just few.

[3] For instance, it is usually noted that Natori Yōnosuke drew inspiration for *NIPPON* from German illustrated magazines, such as *Die Böttcherstraße* (1928–1930) that promoted the racism ideology through appealing modernist visuals (Gremer, 2011, p. 6). Moreover, among the prototypes for late editions of Natori's project, as well as for the similar though more military-focused FRONT, was the *SSSR na stroike* ("USSR in Construction") magazine designed by leading Russian constructivists Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova and El Lissitzky to promote the rapid advent of Soviet industry and its socialist society (Schlicher, 2019, p. 276).

Consequently, those subjects also appeared in Japanese photography, as the major authors turned to images of traditional culture in the late 1930s. Domon Ken's *Muroji* serves as a pioneering example in this sphere. Since he started to work on the series in 1939, it can be considered one of the earliest projects at the time devoted to traditional art.[4] It is also important to note that Domon's inspirational trip to Murō-ji concurred with the crucially important developments in his career. In 1939, due to personal disputes with Natori, he left *NIPPON* after 4 years of work. Later, he joined Kokusai Bunka Shinkōkai and became acquainted with the *mingei* circle, accompanying their expedition to Okinawa in 1940 (Warren, 2006, p. 416). During the war, he also executed several other projects related to traditional culture. In 1941, he created an extensive series on *bunraku* (the Japanese puppet theatre) and its prominent master Yoshida Bungorō IV 吉田文五郎 (1869–1962). Moreover, two years later, he took part in a round-table discussion on ethnographic photography led by the prominent folklorist Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男(1875–1962).[5] Those endeavours manifest Domon's interest in tradition, as well as its intellectual and artistic interpretation. Moreover, they seem to naturally correlate with his enthusiasm for Buddhist art and thus shape the ideological context of *Muroji*'s creation. Straying from overtly political reportage of *NIPPON*, Domon immersed himself in a new area, where he could elaborate on more profound ideas and apply his modernist style to a new subject matter.

## Stylistic and Semantic Features of *Muroji* Photographs

The foundation of Domon's modernist aesthetics in *Muroji* lies in the technological aspects of his work. In the photobook's preface, he thoroughly describes the equipment he used during the excursions to the temple. For example, the majority of shots were taken with wide-angle lenses, such as "Tessar F 4.5 250 mm and Nikkor F 4.5 150 mm" (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, p. 14), characterised by high-light sensitivity and small aperture. Though slightly diverging in this aspect from practices more fashionable among his peers, wielding small-format Leicas, Domon, nevertheless, attained an inherently modernist vision with such devices. For instance, he could create large-scale and highly detailed compositions, very common for his approach to these subjects. These features are most noticeable in *Muroji* landscape shots, which often embrace vast scenery (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, Plates 6–7, 14, 54–55). Due to the large depth of field, the visual distinction between compositional planes in these photos is virtually obliterated, and the images display almost consistent sharpness in every fragment. This creates a peculiar effect of a visual flatness and dismembering of an image to a complex of equally discernible patterns (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, Plate 14).

Domon's abstract rendition is further developed by his interventions into the properties and composition of a shot. Firstly, the majority of *Muroji* photos display a high level of contrast. For example, in the image *Summer: the Main Hall, from the Baptistry* [6] (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, Plate 15), there is an explicitly emphasised discrepancy between blacks and whites that substantially enhances the *chiaroscuro* effect. The sunlit roof of the *kon-dō* ("Main" or literally "Golden Hall") is sharply outlined against the dark background of forest thickets, and the same contrast can be spotted among the illuminated and shaded foliage in the foreground.

[4] In the early 1940s, that subject began to appear in the photographs by Irie Taikichi 入江泰吉 (1905–1992), Fujimoto Shihachi 藤本四八 (1911–2006) and other authors.

[5] It is believed that Yanagita's research and publications had a great influence on Japanese photographers' interest in vernacular and traditional subjects (Reynolds, 2015, p. 20).

[6] In the English edition of *Muroji*, "Baptistry" is a rather incorrect name assigned to the *kanjō-dō*, a hall devoted to the ritual ablution (*kanjō*).

It seems that Domon deliberately places the major focus on the abstract rhythm and visual interplay of areas of light and darkness, thus deconstructing the image even further.

Another modernist feature of Domon's manner is his frequent use of close-ups (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, Plates 21, 33–4, 36–41, 47). That allows him to dismantle figurativeness even more, severely framing the fragments, separating them from the whole and assigning these excerpts aesthetic autonomy. This aspect is most prominent in the photos of draperies (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, Plates 24, 37) that are almost completely liberated from their pictorial nature and transformed into self-sufficient abstractions with their own expression and dynamics.[7]

On the other hand, by dramatically framing these monuments, he sometimes draws attention to their subject features and iconography. For example, several photos highlight statues' faces or hand gestures (*insō*) that translate specific meanings in the Buddhist tradition (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, Plates 21, 23, 32, 36, 38, 39). Moreover, with the close-ups, Domon also accentuates the distinctive features of Japanese art. He depicts the sculptures' traits related to a specific era—e.g. *honpashiki-emon*, the wavy decorative folds of draperies common for Heian period artworks (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, Plate 37). Furthermore, Domon focuses on the monuments' material in general, its cracks, abrasions and other imperfections (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, Plate 36). The latter brings his vision somewhat in line fundamental categories of Japanese culture. In particular, it seems closely related to the conception of *sabi* that proclaims the aesthetic value of the organic ageing of man-made objects (as well as the seasonal withering of nature) and various manifestations of this process (Juniper, 2011, p. 57; Prusinski, 2012, p. 27). Within this conception, an ancient object, whose appearance bears evident marks of its long life, is perceived as equally (if not even more) beautiful as a modern one.

Similar formal and semantic attitudes are sustained by compositional renditions of more "conventional" *Muroji* photos. For instance, in the photographs of the sculptures, Domon employs a rather coherent formal approach. Most of them are depicted on a rather large scale from a slightly low angle, which gives them a substantial monumentality and corporeal presence (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, Plates 20, 22). At the same time, the abstract pitch-black backgrounds, against which they are often placed, establish a sense of their detachment from their environment. The camera seems to remove the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from the temple's halls and present them to a viewer as independent museum-like exhibits framed "in glass cases" (Chan, 2019, p. 192). In such a manner, Domon visually disassembles the sculptural group of the *kon-dō*, which, *in situ, is* placed together on a small pedestal. He, however, interacts with each of them separately, immersing himself deeply into their exploration from numerous viewpoints (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, Plates 18–31). This aspect can emphasise the fundamental aesthetic qualities of these monuments, making their vivid photo appearance relevant for contemporary audiences.

Summarising the analysis, *Muroji* photographs exhibit a vibrant combination of traditional symbols and images and their bold modernist rendition. On the one hand, Domon detaches the tradition from its specific historical and cultural context and puts it into an anachronistic

[7] Peculiarly, such an approach may arguably be influenced by the photographers from the New Objectivity movement and, especially, Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897–1966), whose oeuvre was one of the most important benchmarks for Domon's generation (Tucker et al., 2003, p. 189). In the context of these formal parallels with Western photography, Domon's approach may also be regarded as a way of conveying Murō-ji aesthetics that would be relevant for contemporary tastes.

aesthetic system, filled with universal images and forms. The medium of photography itself, being more novel in comparison to ancient Buddhist statues and employed in its modern style, assigns these scenes an evident relevance. On the other hand, *Muroji*, albeit in a more implicit way, underscores the attributes of the traditional art, which are further verbalised in the accompanying texts of the photobook (Kitagawa & Domon, 1958, pp. 9–14, 75–103).

In this regard, the series exists on several semantic and visual levels, therefore, acquiring an "allegorical" (Reynolds, 2015, XXI) nature, as a set of images that translate vivid and comprehensive aesthetics and at the same time refer to ideas beyond the objects and spaces that they depict. This aspect explicitly ties *Muroji* to the major tendencies of 1950s Japanese photography and other projects executed by Japanese authors, which will be analysed further.

## The Cultural Context of the Post-war Japanese Photography Development

The post-WWII years were extremely challenging for Japan, which suffered the disaster of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as other terrible consequences of the war—the USA's occupation, economic and social issues, political censorship, the Anpō protests[8], etc. Considering the humanitarian and cultural crisis, the abovementioned "realism" and social reportage became the main means for interpreting the post-war reality. The photographers[9] actively employed "straight" imagery of the aftermath of the atomic bombings and military actions, as well as addressing the genre of street photography. The development of such tendencies was maintained by professional discourse, exercised in specialised magazines that began to reappear after the war.[10]

However, despite the scale of the radical photo movements devoted to contemporary subjects, traditional imagery also experienced considerable development in the post-war decades. Many photographers sought to liberate traditional subjects and narratives from their past connection with totalitarian discourse and to find deep cultural roots and inherently relevant messages within that area (Reynolds, 2015, p. XXIII). This aspiration can be attributed to Japanese intellectuals' common desire to revitalise artistic and cultural tradition (*dentō*) and to reconstruct the national identity in a new environment. In the mid-1950s, a "debate about tradition" (*dentō ronsō*), together with the discourse on photo-realism, was the key theme in Japanese printed media devoted to culture and arts (Hein et al., 2003, p. 195; Nakamori, 2010, p. 31).

In this regard, the 1950s became a period of a true heyday of traditional narratives in Japanese photography, as many prominent projects were published (or began to develop) during that decade. Similarly to *Muroji*, many of them were executed in a photobook format, which appealed to wide audiences. Some of those series (e.g. the *Yukiguni* by Hamaya Hiroshi 濱谷 浩 [1915–1999]) turned to subjects of the Japanese rural periphery and portrayed challenges brought there by an increasing urbanisation and post-war technological progress. Others, such as *Nihon no Minka* ("Japanese Country Houses"; 1957–1959) by

[8] *Anpō tōsō*, the large public demonstrations in 1959–1960 in Japan against the prolongation of Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan and, essentially, against the USA military presence in Japan (Kapur, 2018).

[9] For example, Kimura Ihei, Hamaya Hiroshi and Tōmatsu Shōmei 東松照明 (1903–2012).

[10] For instance, among the most prominent was *Camera* which established a monthly contest of documentary photography and issued an affiliated Domon's column (*Domon getsurei*) (Tucker et al., 2003, p. 211). In the latter, he expressed judgements about contestants' works and declared his own theoretical ideas in a format of programme essays on the nature of photographic "realism", snapshots, etc.

Futagawa Yukio 二川幸夫 (1932–2013), depicted vernacular and religious architecture. As was mentioned in the introduction, among the most renowned in the latter category were two albums, *Katsura* and *Ise*, that began to be conceived in the early and mid-1950s under Tange Kenzo's curation.

An equally important role in maintaining the post-war photographers' interest in traditional imagery was also played by the government policy on cultural heritage. For instance, in 1950, the state adopted the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties (*Bunkazai hogohō*) that introduced a two-level protection system composed of National Treasures (*kokuhō*) and Important Cultural Properties (*jūyō bunkazai*) (Trifu, 2017). In this regard, the law proposed a vast and harmonised legal basis for the classification and protection of cultural heritage, as well as increased public awareness and engagement in this process (Trifu, 2017, p. 225). In general, this extensive campaign served as one of the major frameworks for the formation of the post-war "cultural state" (*bunka kokka*)—a new Japan that renounced the 1930s–1940s militarism and declared culture and "soft power" as key aspects of its policy (Park, 2007).

The photographic projects of the time can be regarded as visual manifestations of those socio-political and cultural tendencies, due to their authors' focus on the most significant, appraised and protected Japanese monuments. In this way, either unconsciously or deliberately, they were establishing a vivid pantheon of recognisable images of national culture and artistic tradition. Naturally, Domon's *Muroji* was not an exception in this respect, as the majority of the depicted Buddhist monuments belong to either of the two categories of tangible cultural property.[11] Therefore, Domon's attitude correlates with the ideological context of post-war Japan and its pursuit of a reconstructed cultural identity and with other visualisations of that trend in the mentioned photo projects. However, while their concept and subject matter seem rather corresponding, in terms of the formal rendition, these photographs display a noticeable variety of methods. The final section of this paper will deal with a formal-comparative analysis of *Muroji* and the mentioned series, examining the unique traits of Domon's vision.

## *Muroji* in Comparison to Tange Kenzo's *Ise* and *Katsura* Albums

The albums *Ise* and *Katsura* curated by Tange Kenzo were, undisputedly, among the most renowned 1950s projects devoted to traditional culture and architecture. Furthermore, it seems quite important that photography was one of the main methods of Tange's interaction with tradition. Through the modern medium, he sought to deconstruct the very essence of ancient monuments and to employ these visual findings in his theories. In this sense, the two albums, which he conceived in collaboration with professional photographers, became rather distinctive manifestos that translated his ideas on both visual and verbal dimensions.

First of all, the differences between *Ise*, *Katsura* and *Muroji* can be noticed at the structural level. In the first two albums, the photographers' involvement is limited to the visual content, while the verbal declarations are provided by Tange and closely related authors.[12] Tange's

[11] For instance, Buddha Shakyamuni sculptures from the *kon-dō* and *miroku-dō*, Eleven-Headed Avalokiteshvara, Taishaku-ten Mandala, *kon-dō* itself, *kanjo-dō* and the pagoda were National Treasures, whereas *miroku-dō*, Twelve Guardians statues, Buddha Maitreya and Nyoirin Kannon were Important Cultural Properties.

[12] In particular, the introductory essay to Katsura was written by Walter Gropius (1883–1969), the most acclaimed master of international modernism, whose participation in the project (as well as his genuine interest towards Japan) contributed to the book's popularity abroad. (Gropius & Tange, 1960, pp. 1–11.) Gropius, as many other Western modenists that visited Japan, was impressed by the abstract forms of Japanese architecture

vision subjugated the visual material and, to a significant extent, the individual approach of the photographers. Moreover, according to Yasufumi Nakamori, Tange even did rather authoritative interventions into the visual contents of the albums. For example, while working on *Katsura*, he significantly edited Ishimoto's shots and cropped many compositions based on his own aesthetic attitude (Nakamori, 2010, p. 37).

Concerning Watanabe and Ishimoto's images themselves, despite Tange's strong vision, they display a lot of similarities with the photos from *Muroji*. In terms of subject matter, in both albums, there are many shots accentuating the specific elements of Japanese traditional (religious and secular) architecture. For instance, within several compositions, Watanabe focuses on the overall distinctive shape of Ise Shrines—*shinmei-zukuri,* a small structure made of wood with gabled roof (*kirizuma-yane*) and raised on pillars above the ground level—as well as on particular elements, such as perpendicular logs *katsuogi* and the projecting V-shaped rafters *chigi* (Tange & Kawazoe, 1965, pp. 119, 142, 103, 140).[13] As mentioned by Reynolds, these shots (Tange & Kawazoe, 1965, p. 111) also emphasise the contrast between multiple tactile surfaces—the moderate "finely planed wood rafters" and the vitally textured "miscanthus thatched roofs" (Reynolds, 2001, p. 334). Similar perception of materials (wood, paper, stones, grass, etc.), found in Katsura decoration and the surrounding gardens, can be noticed in many of Ishimoto's close-ups (Gropius & Tange, 1960, p. 40).

Furthermore, the correspondence between Watanabe's, Ishimoto's and Domon's approaches is exemplified by their use of specific equipment and their elaborated attitude towards composition. For instance, like Domon, the first two arguably employed large cameras and wide-angle lenses, which contributed to the overall flatness and consistent detailing of the image.[14] Complemented by the heightened contrast, these aspects transformed the photos into modernist compositions, arranged by the rhythms of geometric forms, lines and planes. A fine example of this vision can be found in Watanabe's wide landscape shot depicting the 'alternate site' at Ise, where the trees, the gravel in the yard and the sleek building in the foreground shapeshift into the almost non-figurative fields of light and dark textures (Tange & Kawazoe, 1965, pp. 78–79).

On the other hand, Watanabe and Ishimoto significantly amplify these abstract principles in their photographs and display far more explicit modernist aesthetics. For instance, they turn to substantially more aggressive angles and sharper compositional cropping than Domon. First of all, these traits are manifested in Watanabe's photographs. He often employs a dynamic angle viewpoint, visually distorting the architectural volumes, as well as "merciless cropping" (Reynolds, 2001, p. 334) that leaves only separate parts of the shrine visible (Tange & Kawazoe, 1965, pp. 122–123). These fragments, torn from the integral body of a building, are represented as self-sufficient visual forms and patterns, whose rhythmic arrangements define their implicit momentum.

Ishimoto, in his turn, displays an even more radical vision. He completely neglects general views of the Katsura complex, narrowing his gaze to its separate details and surfaces. "Dismembering" (Gropius & Tange, 1960, p. V) and deconstructing the architecture via

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and, in particular, Ise Shrines and Villa Katsura. About Gropius's trip to Japan in 1954 and his influence of the local *dentō ronsō* discourse see Nakamori (2010, pp. 32–34) and Reynolds (2001, p. 324).

[13] Since neither *Ise* nor *Katsura* provide specific Plate s or figures numbering, in this article, I used references to the pages containing the mentioned images.

[14] According to Nakamori, Ishimoto used a Linhof large-format camera to shoot Katsura (Nakamori, 2010, p. 20)

abstract close-ups, he edits these scattered impressions into an independent narrative, which was described by Tange as a flow of "sequentially shifting textures, patterns and spaces" (Gropius & Tange, 1960, p. V). Moreover, by depicting Katsura's façades and interiors, Ishimoto tends to visually conceal the spatial depth and bring the abstract geometry of Katsura and its post-and-lintel structure to the forefront (Gropius & Tange, 1960, pp. 81–82, 93). This minimalistic grace of horizontal and vertical lines, the matrix rhythm of planes they enclose, and the concord of multiple textures and monochromic shades bring his compositions closer to Western non-figurative painting. Remarkably, Ishimoto himself addressed these parallels openly, comparing the geometric motifs of Katsura to neoplasticism artworks by Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) (Nakamori, 2010, p. 20).

The modernist character of Watanabe and Ishimoto's photos is also developed by the frequent (and more radical, compared to Domon's) use of close-ups. For example, while depicting the fence railings of the inner site, Watanabe transforms their forms into a very abstract composition solely consisting of overlapping vertical and diagonal lines (Tange & Kawazoe, 1965, pp. 94–95). Ishimoto again transcends the principle even further. In *Katsura*, he completely immerses himself in exploring inner expressiveness, geometry and dynamics of materials and textures, detaching them from the real objects (Gropius & Tange, 1960, p. 51).

Thus, in comparison to the explicitness of Watanabe and Ishimoto's abstract aesthetics, Domon employs a far softer rendition. On the one hand, these discrepancies can account for the stylistic distinctions between the depicted monuments themselves. For instance, the minimalistic appearance of Ise Shrines and Katsura seems to naturally invoke a more modernistic interpretation, conveyed in Tange's albums, while the rather richly decorated façades of Murō-ji tempted Domon's "choice" of the more figurative and traditional approach. On the other hand, these formal variations can be attributed to the differences in the photographers' professional backgrounds. Turning to architectural photography in the early 1930s, Watanabe soon shaped his distinctive style, greatly inspired by *New Objectivity* principles. The international modernist influence is even more present in Ishimoto's professional biography. Born in the USA in an immigrant family, he studied photography in 1948–1952 at the "New Bauhaus" (Illinois Institute of Design) established by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) and in 1955 took part in the *Family of Man* exhibition at New-York MoMA (Nakamori, 2010, pp. 11, 17–19). Those early inspirations to a great extent defined his approach to photographing Katsura, which he embarked on in 1953–1954 after his return to Japan (Nakamori, 2010, pp. 20–21).

Naturally, one cannot overlook Tange's curatorial influence on the visual rendition of *Ise* and *Katsura*. Examining the traditional monuments as formal and ideological prototypes of contemporary Japanese art, he sought to assign them a contemporary image through the selected photos. The latter transformed ancient architecture into a resemblance of modern buildings and served as concrete evidence of a genealogic connection between the 20$^{th}$-century artists and the practices of their ancestors. Furthermore, the photographs themselves embodied Tange's ideas on the harmonic synthesis of "Jomon" and "Yayoi" strains that originated from the Japanese pre-history (Tange & Kawazoe, 1965, p. 16).[15] For example, in *Katsura*, the austere geometry of the villa (symbolising "Yayoi" aristocratic moderation) is enlivened by the dynamic tempo of the visual narrative and the rather chaotic arrangements of shots within the photobook (epitomising the primaeval vitality of "Jomon").

[15] Related to the eponymous historical periods of c. 13,000–300 B.C. and c. 300 B.C.–300 A.D, respectively.

On his part, Domon retained a more traditional stance within these subjects, though he was deeply influenced by the Western artistic impulses in his oeuvre. This might be associated with his professional upbringing within the field of visual propaganda, where modernist motifs were usually incorporated into socio-political (and genuinely figurative) images. Moreover, he turned to Buddhist art and traditional culture at the onset of WWII—at the time, when the interest in tradition was inherently tied to the rejection of Western culture and, consequently, the most radical of its abstract manifestations. Therefore, even his relatively modern vision of *Muroji* (described in the third section of the paper) remained within the confines of pictoriality and did not transform into the deconstructive attitude of Watanabe and Ishimoto.

The last observation leads to the key conclusion of this paper. Within the selected renowned projects of the 1950s, Domon's *Muroji* occupies a very distinct place in terms of its thematic and formal traits. Being one of the earliest series devoted to this theme, it exhibits the vivid modernist rendition of traditional subjects, while conserving the fundamental figurative basis of the image. I believe that in this regard, *Muroji* should be considered as a "middle ground" in the development of Japanese photography's approach to tradition. Formally, it signifies the important step in the transition from pictorially integral imagery to the disembodied vision of international post-war modernism. Subject-wise, it exists both in the modernist space of decontextualised self-sufficient images and in the dimension filled with implicit (or sometimes even overt) allusions to the religious, historical and cultural meaning of depicted objects. Therefore, while explicitly reinterpreting symbols of ancient Japan in a relevant aesthetics, Domon, nevertheless, seeks to maintain their inherent essence and to create on their basis coherent, extra-temporal and infinitely relevant emblems of Japanese culture. In this sense, the later projects by Watanabe and Ishimoto, though conceived more or less independently from Domon's direct influence, were arguably built on the foundation laid by *Muroji*, transcending its tendencies even further.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the semantic and formal features of *Muroji* provided in this paper allows us to evaluate the artistic and cultural significance of Domon Ken's series, along with its role in the development of mid-20$^{th}$-century and post-war Japanese photography.

First of all, the *Muroji* photographs embody the major tendencies of the late 1930s – early 1940s by bringing together vivid modernist aesthetics and the subject of traditional art and culture. In particular, Domon substantially relies on the principles of the *shinkō shashin* movement (which was largely based on Western modernism). He renders *Muroji* scenes in high contrast and detail and employs the spatial flattening of compositions and dynamic close-ups that deconstruct the integrity of Buddhist monuments and assign aesthetic self-sufficiency to their separate motifs. At the same time, Domon seeks to establish a multidimensional value of the depicted objects, by emphasising their historical, religious and cultural meanings (e.g. by highlighting distinctive iconographic elements, ancient styles and materials, etc.). Thus, via this synthesis of modernity and tradition, he creates anachronistic images and fundamental symbols of Japan.

In this regard, *Muroji*, as a project published in the 1950s, represents the post-war discourses and trends related to the overcoming of the national crises and rebuilding the cultural image of Japan, especially through visual arts. Domon's series corresponds both to the intellectual and artistic ideas of the time (i.e. the *dentō ronsō* or "tradition debates"), as well as reflects

the official policy in the protection and promotion of cultural heritage (i.e. via the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties).

Furthermore, based on the comparisons provided in the preceding section, the article described the intricate stylistic correlations and discrepancies between *Muroji* and the later *Ise* and *Katsura* albums, comprising photographs by Watanabe Yoshio and Ishimoto Yasuhiro. Peculiarly, Domon's series, though exhibiting rather vibrant formal features, seems a more visually restrained project than his counterparts' explicitly abstract renditions. For instance, Watanabe and Ishimoto often employ far more aggressive angles, compositional distortions and cropping, as well as overtly non-figurative close-ups that disembody the depicted traditional monuments completely and represent them as constellations of separate abstract forms, motifs and textures.

In this sense, Domon's vision can be considered an aesthetically convenient and harmonious synthesis of relevant modernist visuals with traditional images and symbols, which would be further enhanced by Watanabe, Ishimoto and similar artists. Thus, not only does *Muroji* herald the advent of traditional subjects in Domon's oeuvre, but it also plays the role of stylistic (and to a certain extent thematic) foundation for the development of this theme in Japanese photography, and Domon's recognisable aesthetics will be recreated by several artists even in the late 20th century.[16]

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[16] One of the most eloquent examples of this influence, in our opinion, can be seen in the photographs *Sea of Buddha* (1995) by Sugimoto Hiroshi 杉本博司 (b. 1948), displaying explicit references to the expressive visuals of Domon and his contemporaries' works (Sugimoto, 2024).

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