

The pre-war period.

From photojournalism to propaganda photography

Domon began to work in photography in 1933 at the age of 24, carrying out the humble duties of an apprentice at Miyauchi Kōtarō's studio in Ueno. Right from the start he won prizes and began to write for photography magazines and journals, publishing his first photo in *Asahi Camera* in August 1935.

The 10th of October of the same year marked an important turning point in his career. He replied to an advertisement published by the Nippon Kōbō studio in Ginza, which was looking for a photo technician. Founded by Natori Yōnosuke (1910-1962) when he returned from his experience in Berlin at the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, the studio spread in Japan for the first time concepts such as editing and reporting and a new system of production based on the collaboration between photographer and graphic designer under the supervision of an art director, which led to the large-scale diffusion of photojournalism.

Domon began his first reportage for the magazine *Nippon*, published in English in order to promote Japanese culture abroad with a mix of information and propaganda. The first photographic reportage was on the traditional Shichigosan Festival on the occasion of the presentation of children in the Meiji Jingu shrine, realised with his model C Leica. This was followed by services that presented handicrafts, traditions, industrial and military progress and the progressive aspects of Japan, which in the 1930s had become increasingly nationalistic.

The war years and the bunraku puppet theatre

During the years of maximum Japanese expansion in the Pacific, immediately prior to the Second World War, even photography had to comply with the strict rules of military policy. Only few selected professional photographers could obtain photographic materials for assignments deemed to be "essential", and naturally the "essential" photographic services were subject to the requirements of government propaganda, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the International Tourism Agency and the International Cultural Relations Company.

Thus many photographic publications were discontinued, with economic repercussions for photographers. In fact, Domon had difficulty maintaining a family of seven. He also had the added anxiety of the probable arrival of a "red card" that would have called him to arms and probably to the front in a group of photo-reporters. In response to this critical situation, Domon decided to retire from the public scene, dedicating himself to culture, in particular to Buddhist temples and the bunraku puppet theatre.

On the 8th of December, 1941 he was in the backstage of the Yotsubashi Bunraku Theatre in Osaka when he read the special edition of a newspaper announcing the declaration of war to the United States. It was not easy to gain the respect and collaboration of the master puppeteers – national living treasures such as Yoshida Bungorō, Yoshida Eiza and Kiritake Monjūrō – in the key moment of taking the shot with a camera that did not go unnoticed due to its size and long exposure times. However, by 1943 he had shot about 7.000 negatives, which were collected in the book entitled *Bunraku* published in 1972.

The postwar period.

The affirmation of realism in photography

The tragic events related to the Second World War and to the defeat of Japan, marked by the atrocities of the atomic bomb, revealed the great deception of the war propaganda. Defeat led to the collapse of the imperial myth and state Shintoism, which had been the basis of military ideology.

If on the one hand, by the end of the 1940s there had been considerable intellectual rebirth leading to a rapid resumption of the diffusion of magazines, publications, exhibitions and artistic circles, on the other hand there was no language that seemed suitable for expressing such a tragic reality.

There was a need to document a society undergoing profound change and in this sense Domon became the promoter of realistic photography, becoming a landmark for amateur photographers. He embraced the western trends that had taken over the city, but also the alleys and the poorest sectors of the population.

The high point of the realist tendency was reached around 1953, thanks to the exhibition, *Photography Today: Japan and France*, held in 1951 at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, provided the opportunity to make comparisons with names such as Cartier Bresson, Brassai, Doisneau. Domon's last word on realism appeared in the magazine *Photo Art* in 1957 with an article that debated the two fundamental concepts of photography: *jijitsu*, reality, and *shinjitsu*, truth.

Children and miners' villages

Domon adored children. His first services for *Nippon* were focused on the *Shichigosan* Festival and then on children fishing in Izu. But in 1952 he began to photographing children all over Japan, capturing the vitality of the streets and of the poorer neighbourhoods in Tokyo, Ginza, Shinbashi, Nagoya and Osaka and in particular in the Kōtō area where he lived. Probably due to the loss of his second child in 1946 in an accident, Domon moved increasingly toward a realist if not a socialist approach, which allowed him to deal with current themes in an indirect way through the innocent eyes of children.

Several books were dedicated to this theme: *The Children of Kōtō* (*Kōtō no kodomotachi*), whose publication was stopped by Domon himself, dissatisfied with his work in 1956; *The Children of Chikuhō* (*Chikuhō no kodomotachi*), published in January 1960, and its continuation which followed in November, *The Father of Little Rumie is Dead* (*Rumie chan has otōsan ga shinda*), which showed the miserable conditions of children in the villages of the mining area on the island of Kyūshū, and in particular the story of two orphan sisters, whose story moved Japan becoming a best seller. Lastly, the collection *Children* (*Kodomotachi*), published in 1976 by master of graphics and friend, Yūsaku Kamekura, and published by Nikkor Club, the amateur photographers' association linked to Nikon and Domon.

Hiroshima

Published in March 1958, the year prior to the first brain hemorrhage to strike Domon Ken, the *Hiroshima* collection presents 180 photographs introduced by a short explanatory essay. The work, completed thirteen years after the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and then on Nagasaki, focused the attention of the world once again on the still open but almost forgotten wounds of Hiroshima, with a strong social impact.

The importance of this event in the life of the photographer is also evidenced by Domon's recording in his notebook in the day and time of his arrival: July 23rd, 1957, 2:40 pm. From then until November he went there six times, for thirty-six days, producing more than 7,800 negatives, of which *Hiroshima* is only the synthesis.

Domon realized that until then he had ignored and been afraid of what Hiroshima had actually meant. With his 35mm camera he revealed the places and people directly and indirectly affected by the atomic bomb, coldly recording with tears in his eyes the material damage, physical injuries, scars, deformations, and the plastic surgery and transplants undergone by the victims of the bomb, dedicating 14 pages at the beginning of the book to the progress made in the field of plastic surgery, which became a real photographic dossier.

The public shock that followed the publication of the dossier made him the object of harsh criticism that, however, failed to undermine his determination to represent reality. In an article published in the magazine *Shinchō* in 1977 the Nobel Prize winner Ōe Kenzaburō defined *Hiroshima* as the first work of modern art that dealt with the theme of the atomic bomb, talking about the living instead of the dead.

Portraits (Fūbō)

In 1953 the publication of the *Portraits (Fūbō)* collection of photographs, which came out in paperback the following year, concluded fifteen years of work dedicated to the portrait that had begun with the first photograph in May 1936 portraying the writer Takeda Rintarō, continuing during the war and until the year in which the collection was published. Domon gathered in a single volume 83 portraits of friends and acquaintances, personalities from the world of entertainment, literature, theatre and politics, stressing in the introduction that they were «[...]people I respect and like and am close to [...] The choice of people was surprisingly subjective and random and no claim to any strictly historical or cultural meaning can be made».

It seems that the initial choice of the faces to be included in the collection was made by Domon with a list written in ink on a sliding door on the second floor of his house in 1948. This list was subjected to the comments and opinions of friends and publishers who went to his house and subsequently underwent substitutions and changes.

Through familiar faces and less well-known personalities, Domon bears witness to a crucial era in Japan, one of great writers such as Mishima, Kawabata and Tanizaki, of actors and directors of the caliber of Mifune and Ozu, of great artists who were often his friends and gave rise to a new important artistic trends in the country, such as the sculptor Noguchi, the graph artist Kamekura, the founder of the Ikebana School, Sōgetsu Teshigahara, or painters like Fujita, Umehara, Okamoto,

Each picture is accompanied by the name of the subject, their occupation and the date it was taken. There are also short texts describing the relationship between Domon and the person depicted, in addition to the atmosphere created during the shooting.

Sometimes subjects were exasperated by the professional stubbornness of Domon, as is clear in the portrait of Umehara that reveals an air of irritation close to intolerance. Outrightness and instantaneousness, which were always Domon's objectives, became easier to achieve thanks to technological developments. He passed from a camera assembled for cabinet card portraits – with a dry plate and flash that worked with magnesium powder, used before the war – to a small Leica in the post-war period.

Pilgrimage to the ancient temples (Kojijunrei)

Murōji

The Murōji temple, small and immersed in the greenery of the Nara mountains, was for Domon the first stage of a “pilgrimage to the ancient temples”, a sort of journey of the soul that accompanied him throughout his life and from which came the encyclopaedic work *Kojijunrei (Pilgrimage to the Ancient Temples)*.

It all began in 1939 with a simple excursion, suggested by friend and art historian Mizusawa Sumio (1905-1975): an experience that changed his life. In the first year alone he returned more than forty times and on many more occasions over the course of the following years.

At first Domon focused his photographic work on buildings, from the five-story pagoda – the smallest in Japan – to the architectural details, focusing on the sculptures inside, but also on the imposing profile of the Miroku Buddha of Ōnodera, excavated on the rocky wall facing the river along the road that leads to Murōji. Later he concentrated on wooden statues (*kōninbutsu*) of the Heian era (794-1185) inside the temple and starting with wide, overall shots he then moved on to capture the most minute details of the wood, so as to emphasize the folds and hems of the vestments and the gestures of the hands and eyes. His favourite statue was of Buddha Shaka, enthroned Mirokudō, who with his “beautiful and compassionate face” was, he claimed, the “most beautiful man on earth.”

For this particular job he used a basic Konishiroku (now Konika) camera made of wood, especially suitable for cabinet card portraits that he had purchased in 1941, but also an Eyemo with a tripod, often carried by his assistants.

Evidence of Domon's numerous pilgrimages and countless photographs can be found in the 1954 *Murōji* collection. The expanded, definitive edition of this work, *Nyonin Takano Murōji*, was published in 1978 and includes photographs taken subsequently with the new post-war techniques.

Pilgrimage to the ancient temples (Kojijunrei)

Around the temples

The thousands of shots that Domon took in 39 temples from 1939 to the seventies made up the *Pilgrimage to the Ancient Temples (Kojijunrei)*, the masterpiece of his career for which, even today, he is known worldwide. It consists of five volumes published over a number of years (the first in 1963, the second in 1965, the third in 1968, the fourth in 1971 and the fifth in 1975) which put together 462 colour pictures and 325 *photogravures* of temples and statues built between the seventh and the sixteenth century, following a subjective criterion and not expecting such large proportions. It is first and foremost a work that documents the beauty of architecture, sculpture, gardens and landscapes around the temples and shrines selected by Domon. And yet it is also a testimony of the progression of photographic technique in those years, such as the transition to colour film of 1958, and of Domon's health problems that influenced his choices. In December 1959 he suffered a brain haemorrhage that paralysed the right part of his body, thus making it impossible to hold the camera, even after a long period of rehabilitation. Therefore, he resolved to use a tripod. He suffered a second haemorrhage on the June 22nd, 1968, which this time confined him to a wheelchair. And even with this umpteenth misfortune he did not stop taking photographs. With the help of assistants and by moving his point of view further down, he continued to work. He had a third haemorrhage in 1979, followed by a long stay in hospital and his death on the September 15th, 1990.