

# Turbulent lives – early 20th-century photographers in the USA

– April 2012 [www.cassone art.com](http://www.cassoneart.com)

*By Susan Noyes Platt*

## Turbulent lives – early 20th-century photographers in the USA

– April 2012



Starting in the early 1900s in the Northwest United States, a unique conjunction of artists and geography led to a little-known production of innovative photographs. Northwest art historian David F. Martin, in collaboration with other writers, has produced two invaluable studies of these works. The first examines the Seattle Camera Club (1925 – 1929), the second the work of Virna Haffer (1899 –1974).

Photography was a crucial aspect of the art scene on the West Coast in these years for obvious reasons, it was accessible, inexpensive, transportable, and independent of a long academic tradition. The artists of the Seattle Camera Club, many of whom were born in Japan, immediately became prominent for their innovative Pictorialist photographs imbued with the aesthetics of Japanese art. Pictorialist photography, with its rich tonalities of manipulated effects in black and white, and symbolist- influenced imagery, was established as an art form through the efforts of Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo Secession on the East Coast. The artists of the Seattle Camera Club add a new chapter to this history. Their photographs of Northwest scenery, urban landscapes, and avant-garde artists, like the dancer Martha Graham, are stunningly original in their use of abstract shapes, the juxtaposition of flat and deep space and subtle contrasts of light and dark.

Founder of the club, Dr. Kyo Koike, climbed 10,000 feet to the peak of Mt Rainier to create sweeping photographs of clouds, mountains, waterfalls, and rivers. Another member of the club Yukio Morinaga photographed urban landscapes and waterfront workers in dark and shadowy weather. Iwao Matshushita created near abstractions from silhouetted Northwest evergreen trees. Frank Asakichi Kunishige framed sharp foregrounds against muted views as well as dramatic portraits and close ups of flowers.

But the later story of these creative Japanese American artists is a sad one: after two decades as widely-acknowledged photographers, they were interned during World War II, a traumatic experience from which they never recovered. A heartbreaking newspaper photograph documents Dr. Kyo Koike giving his camera to authorities in 1942. The survival of the records and art of the Seattle Camera Club in the Special Collections of the University of Washington Library is almost as dramatic as the art and the story of the artists – the result of an exceptionally enlightened librarian, Robert Monroe, who believed in the photographs as art, rather than as documents, in the early 1960s, when Pictorialism was out of favor and libraries rarely valued or collected photographs for their own sake. The Club's records and publication *Notan*, together with the photographs themselves provides the basis for this crucial and beautiful book.

One of the members of the Seattle Camera Club was Virna Haffer a photographer based primarily in Tacoma, Washington throughout her life. *A Turbulent Lens* is an appropriate title for this innovative artist who practiced pictorialism, modernism, surrealism, documentary photography and studio portraiture with equal ease, always experimenting and responding sensitively to her subjects. Haffer grew up in a utopian community called Home Colony, Washington and by the age of sixteen had already started living on her own and advertising herself as a photographer. By the mid 1920s, she was a respected artist, and participated in both the Tacoma Camera Club and the Seattle Camera Club. During her six decade career she pursued different styles simultaneously as well as wood block printing and painting. She photographed in Alaska and California, created innovative portraits of her family and artist friends, and pioneered in dignified portraits of African Americans and native Americans (including a series at the famous fishing platforms at Celilo Falls on the Columbia River just before they were inundated by a dam). Haffer also enabled her friend Yukio Morinaga to survive after his internment by buying a house for him. This book is the first study of her extraordinary photographic output and her life, predominately based on her extensive archives at the Washington State Historical Society in Tacoma.

Both of these publications place their subjects in the context of the history of photography and provide new perspectives on the importance of regional production. David F. Martin is to be saluted for the years of research that led to these books as well as the eye-opening exhibitions that they accompanied.

*A Turbulent Lens: The Photographic Art of Virna Haffer*, by David F. Martin, Margaret Bullock and Christina S. Henderson, University of Washington Press, 2011, 144 pp, 200 illus. ISBN 978-0-924335-32-7.

*Shadows of a Fleeting World: Pictorial Photography and the Seattle Camera Club* by David F. Martin and Nicolette Bromberg, University of Washington Press, 2011, 190 pp, 110 color ill. ISBN 978 – 0-295-99085

Susan Noyes Platt's most recent publication is *Art and Politics Now, Cultural Activism in a Time of Crisis*, Midmarch, 2011. [www.artandpoliticsnow.com](http://www.artandpoliticsnow.com)