

KOHEI YASU

(1844 – 1917)

A Japanese Photographer in  
Guatemala

Official Visit by Their Imperial Highnesses  
Prince and Princess Akishino  
to Guatemala

La Antigua Guatemala, October 2014



Kohei Yasu, self-portrait  
1895 – 1915

# THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ART OF KOHEI YASU

In the history of Guatemalan photography, the artist photographer Juan José de Jesús Yas is a most interesting case. Of Japanese origin, Yas was the first immigrant from there to arrive and live in Guatemala. He founded his photographic studio, called "Fotografía Japonesa," initially in Guatemala City, in the year 1880. Around 1895 he moved the establishment to La Antigua Guatemala, where he died in 1917, at the age of 73. After his death, the studio was passed on to his godson, José Domingo Noriega, who himself became a skilled photographer under the guidance of Yas.

Yas, whose name in Japanese was Kohei Yasu, was born on December 27th, 1844 in the town of Fuyisawa, in Iwate-Ken prefecture. As a student, he learned both Dutch and French, a reflection of the sustained efforts of the Meji restoration to modernize Japan by making it more western, while at the same time attempting to preserve (as much as possible) traditional elements of Japanese culture. In 1874, when Yas would have been 30 years of age, an important astronomical event took place: celestially, the planet Venus rotated its path in front of the Sun, attracting worldwide scientific interest. Excitement about the event prompted President Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada of Mexico to send a scientific mission to Japan. This mission marked the beginning of formal diplomatic ties between Japan and Mexico. When Japan sent a reciprocal mission to visit Mexico, Yas was invited to accompany it as interpreter. This was to be his first trip to the Americas.

After several lengthy stays in Mexico, including at least one visit to Guatemala, Yas decided to move and settle in the latter country. By November of 1891 he had married María Noriega, daughter of Doña Jesús Salazar de Noriega; prior to their marriage, María had prepared food and served as housekeeper for Yas. When the couple married, the ceremony was held at the Iglesia del Cerrito del Carmen in Guatemala City, a church atop a hill that Yas considered picturesque.

As part of his process of cultural adaptation, or, better put, intense westernization, Yas converted with great enthusiasm to Catholicism, which he practiced devoutly while exercising his profession as a photographer. Yas, without doubt, was a pioneer of one of the most important expressions of Japanese technology in the contemporary world: photography. He retained, nonetheless, the customs and mores of distant Japan, as evidenced by his love of gardening and writing poems in the style of haiku, some of which still exist. He also, in his latter years, took to collecting diverse objects of Japanese origin, not to mention the voluminous correspondence he exchanged with his nephew, Matutino Oigo, who in 1916 expressed his desire to travel from Japan to Guatemala, in order to visit his uncle.

Attracted by its beauty and the customs of its citizens, the move to live in La Antigua Guatemala saw Yas set up business for some seven years in the house of Don Florencio Salazar, on the corner of the Church of El Carmen. After that, his headquarters were located on the property of Doña Catalina Luna de Gándara. In 1907 he moved again, on this occasion to the house of Don Mariano Solís, on Callejón Camposeco. There Yas remained until 1912, investing money that enlarged his photographic studio, making it more suitable to work in than his previous locations. He planted an orchard and created a small garden. We know this because, when the owner decided to sell the house, he had to remove everything, including dismantling Yas's photo gallery. Moving yet again, Yas rented this time from Doña Rafaela Morales, on whose property he built an even bigger and more functional studio, where Yas and his family lived until May of 1914, when Doña Rafaela sold her estate to Don Santiago Jonama. The following month, Yas took up residence in the house where he would die on February 28th, 1917. It was in this last abode that he would write: "After having made more than one trip around the world, with God by my side I finally settled in charming La Antigua Guatemala, seeking the hospitality of the ages, indeed all eternity."

Among the photographs Yas left behind, mention must first be made of those of Antigua's monuments, images that allow us to examine the colonial ruins of the city and how they appeared as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth. His photographs were made on glass plate negatives using the wet "collodion" process. Shots of the Panchoy Valley, where Antigua is situated, were taken looking north to south, affording us a panoramic view. Yas took photographs of other places in Guatemala, including the vicinities of Chimaltenango and Sololá, as well as some coffee estates or fincas close to Antigua. We know, too, that Yas made trips to Zacapa in the east of the country and to the Pacific coast.

His portraits feature persons from different social strata in La Antigua Guatemala. Especially noteworthy are the "tipos populares" of the lower ranks of society. Portraiture involved painting a landscape on a cloth backdrop, its scenes usually evincing a romantic sensibility, rendered with a degree of exaggerated gentility and manipulated natural light. All of this required that the photographer construct, or have built for him, what in Yas's day was called a "galera fotográfica," a special structure for taking studio photographs in which the subject of the portrait could be placed in front of, or alongside, the painted landscape backdrops. This structure had to be illuminated by the brightest light possible, refracted through glass roof and windows. These windows and roof had curtains hung over them in order to control the quality of light as necessary.

The twelve photographs selected for this portfolio, all of them part of the holdings of the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA) in La Antigua Guatemala, are as follows:

# KOHEI YASU

La Antigua Guatemala  
1895 – 1915  
Fototeca Guatemala  
Photographic Archive  
of CIRMA



El Calvario Church.



San Pedro Church.



Finca "El Portal".



Portrait of four young men  
posing on a boat.



Triptych portrait of a young man.



Portrait of a Maya Kaqchikel  
family from Comalapa,  
Chimaltenango.



Portrait of a family outing in the countryside, together with María Noriega, the photographer's wife.



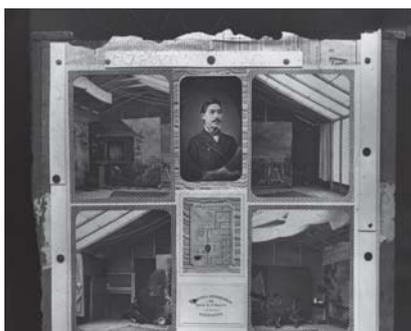
Portrait of María Noriega alongside her mother, Doña Jesús Salazar de Noriega.



Public square of the town of San Juan del Obispo.



5th Avenue, with the Arch of Santa Catalina and Agua Volcano in the background.



Advertisement for the Fotografía Japonesa Studio.



Self-portrait of Kohei Yasu and his wife María Noriega on their wedding day.

Contact prints from original collodion and gelatin glass plate negatives  
printed on Ilford fiber-based paper by Mitchell Denburg.

Custom hand-made portfolio case covered in Asahi-World Cloth raw silk  
and lined with hand-made Natural Amate Bark Paper.

Bone Clasp closures.

Hand-stamping, type face Edinburgh, in 24k Reines Gold.

Inter-leaf photographic folders of Gampi Silk Tissue.

Libros San Cristóbal La Antigua, S.A. by Sergio Bucú Miché.

Rendered, with embellishments in English, from the Spanish text of  
Luis Luján Muñoz ("Exposición homenaje a: J. J. Yas y J. D. Noriega", Guatemala, 1982)  
by Christopher H. Lutz (CIRMA) and W. George Lovell (Queen's University, Canada).

A joint collaboration between CIRMA and New Roots Foundation.

