A letter from Japan: the photographs of John Swope.

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A Letter from Japan: The Photographs of John Swope

March 5 - June 4, 2006

(above: John Swope, Near Tokyo, Omori POW Camp, Allied POWS Greeting Their Liberators, August 29, 1945, gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 inches. John Swope Collection, © John Swope Trust)
A Letter from Japan: The Photographs of John Swope is the first in-depth presentation of vintage prints from the late Los Angeles photographer's 1945 journey through post-war Japan. Shot during a three-and-a-half-week period, Swope's photographs vividly document the impact of World War II on the local population of Japan as well as on the Allied soldiers and prisoners of war. The exhibition presents over 115 vintage prints, and gives insight into Swope's larger pursuit of capturing the universal human experience by also including highlights of his work as a renowned Hollywood photographer and his international travels from the 1930s through 1970s. A Letter from Japan is on view at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, from March 5 through June 4, 2006. (right: John Swope, Arai, September 5, 1945, gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 inches. John Swope Collection, © John Swope Trust)

The exhibition and accompanying catalogue honor John Swope's original intention of bringing together his timeless, powerful photographs with the emotional text of a letter he wrote from Japan to his wife, actress Dorothy McGuire. Individual images are juxtaposed with short excerpts in both the exhibition and the catalogue. Published by the Hammer Museum and Steidl Press, the catalogue also reprints the entire 144-page letter for the first time.

In addition to the Japanese series, the exhibition presents a selection of Swope's earlier and subsequent work in photojournalism and portraiture that further reflect his striking ability to encapsulate a range of universal human experiences in photographs. Early on, Swope (1908-1979) became best known for his insider views of Hollywood in which he captured both the glamorous and the mundane sides of life through intimate portraits of celebrities and behind-the-scenes views of movie and theatrical productions. He went on to have a successful career as a freelance Life magazine photographer, where he frequently covered similar stories on
Alongside the photographs, *A Letter from Japan* presents books and magazines, in which Swope's work was originally published, the photographer's personal documents and letters, his camera, and other ephemera. The exhibition includes significant loans from the John Swope Trust, Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts, Craig Krull Gallery, Ben Stiller, and other private collections. (left: John Swope, *Shinagawa*, September 2, 1945, gelatin silver print, John Swope Collection, © John Swope Trust)

**CAPTURING POST-WAR JAPAN**

In 1945, John Swope was chosen by the influential photographer and subsequent Museum of Modern Art curator Edward Steichen to join an elite group of U.S. Navy photographers assigned to tell the story of World War II from the perspective of the average sailor. The photographs, which would ultimately be disseminated in military and popular national publications, were intended to reinforce American patriotic ideals. Swope's three-and-a-half-week Japan assignment lasted from August 28 through September 19, 1945 -- a time of limbo between war and peace, during which Swope was assigned to document the release of Allied prisoners of war on a journey throughout Japan. In Japan, Swope used his particular Hollywood aesthetic, taking poignant close-up portraits of prisoners from unexpected angles, often using dramatic natural lighting. Challenging the Navy's rules about fraternizing with the Japanese civilians, Swope widened his artistic focus beyond his official assignment to explore another side of the military struggle -- the personal, moving moments of individuals and families struggling in the aftermath of war. His photographs depict Japanese people going about their daily lives in harsh post-war conditions. Amidst the rubble, there are small signs of hope, such as gardens sprouting and children playing. Other poetic images are more timeless views, portraying such moments as a mother pushing her child in a carriage through a desolate street, a farm worker
wearing a typical bamboo hat walking in the rice fields, and the beautiful landscape of Ohashi reminiscent of traditional Japanese woodblock prints. (right: John Swope, Jimmy Stewart with model airplane, 1936, gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 inches. John Swope Collection, © John Swope Trust)

Throughout Swope's Japan tour, he wrote an emotional and insightful 144-page letter to his wife, Dorothy McGuire. In his letter, he articulates his conflicted feelings about the war and his position as a representative of the victors. Swope was particularly sensitive to how much the war had impacted the local population as he had visited Japan fifteen years earlier as a young man. His letter notes these changes and tells personal stories about the prisoners and Japanese people whom he encounters and photographs. Swope begins the letter on August 30, 1945 while anchored in Tokyo Bay:

This is hardly a letter, but it will tell you what's going on in the other side of the world. The last few days have been like some fantastic nightmare there have been so many mixed and strange emotions converging on me in rapid succession and so many interesting, exciting, and history-making events taking place that I hardly know where to begin

Though the letter was never published during his lifetime, Swope wrote it with the intention to make his observations available to a broader audience alongside the images from his journey through war-torn Japan. This exhibition at the Hammer Museum and accompanying catalogue marks the fruition of Swope's initial project begun sixty years ago.

JOHN SWOPE'S CAREER
John Swope was a self-taught photographer who began his career documenting federal housing projects for the Resettlement Administration, one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs. Swope's approach to his subjects was greatly influenced by the socially conscientious photo-texts of the 1930s and 40s by such photographers as Lewis Hine, Margaret Bourke-White, Dorothea Lange, and Walker Evans as well as the painter Piet Mondrian who taught him to seek geometry in nature that became prevalent in Swope's compositions.

In 1936, he moved to Hollywood to join his college friends Henry Fonda, James Stewart, Josh Logan, and Margaret Sullavan, and took a job with talent agent Leland Hayward. Swope began photographing the Hollywood scene and published the photographic essay *Camera Over Hollywood* with Random House in 1939, which combined images and text and captured both the glamour and the realities of trying to succeed in the film industry. Around this time, he also began freelance assignments shooting Hollywood personalities, fashion, and film and theater productions for *Life* magazine, *Town and Country*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. Likewise he portrayed contrasts in the less glamorous urban landscape of the city of Los Angeles. Swope found he could explain multiple perspectives by presenting powerful images and narrative words, and he approached Japan and his letter to his wife with much the same regard.

(left: John Swope, *Arai, Ohmura Family (Satoru, Tetuji, and Kimiko), with Kimiko’s Brother, Noburu Asakura*, September 7, 1945, gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 inches. John Swope Collection, © John Swope Trust)

In 1941, he joined the Army and began training Aviation cadets at
Thunderbird Airfield. The following year he worked with author John Steinbeck on *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team*, an illustrated book and public relations piece on the training of army cadets. In 1943, Swope married actress Dorothy McGuire (to whom he addressed his letter from Japan).

Swope returned to Los Angeles following his discharge from the Navy in 1946. He began freelancing again for national magazines, continued to collaborate on book projects and photography exhibitions throughout the remainder of his career, and even produced theatrical productions at the La Jolla Playhouse. He also frequently traveled to different parts of the world to pursue his ongoing artistic project exploring aspects of the universal human experience. Swope's work has been exhibited at institutions and galleries for the past 70 years, most recently at the Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts, Kiyosato, Japan; Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica; and the Presentation House, Vancouver, Canada.

**EXHIBITION ORGANIZER AND FUNDING**

_A Letter from Japan: The Photography of John Swope_ was organized by Carolyn Peter, associate curator of the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

The exhibition is generously supported by Gail and Jerry Oppenheimer, with additional support from Mrs. Sidney F. Brody, The Judith Rothschild Foundation, Shirlee Fonda, and Jane Wyatt.

**EXHIBITION CATALOGUE**

The exhibition is accompanied by a 256-page catalogue co-published by the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and Steidl Press, Germany. The book
includes the first publication of John Swope's "Letter from Japan," and as well as essays by Pulitzer Prize-winning author John W. Dower and exhibition curator Carolyn Peter. With over 115 four-color reproductions, the catalogue includes all works from the exhibition and was designed by award-winning designer Lorraine Wild of Green Dragon Office in Los Angeles. It will be published in March 2006. (right: John Swope, Near Tokyo, Omori POW Camp, c. August 29, 1945, gelatin silver print. John Swope Collection, © John Swope Trust)

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

The Hammer Museum presents a number of exhibition-related programs. All programs are free of charge and open to the public; gallery talks are free with museum admission. Seating is on a first-come, first-served basis. Hammer members receive priority seating at all public programs.

TBD, Gallery Talk
Carolyn Peter, exhibition curator

TBD, Lecture
Ann Wilkes Tucker, curator of photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Tuesday, April 4, 7pm, Discussion on WWII Prisons of War
John A. Glusman editor-in-chief and executive vice president of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, with William Barrette, artist and writer

Thursday, April 6, 7pm, Propaganda Film Night
Screenings of Japanese and American World War II propaganda films

TBD, Lecture
Gilles Peress, Magnum photographer

All programs except gallery talks are held at the Hammer Annex at 1083-
1087 Broxton Avenue, one block north of the museum at the corner of Broxton and Westwood Boulevards. Parking continues to be at the Hammer Museum.

**About the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center**

The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center is operated by the University of California, Los Angeles. Occidental Petroleum Corporation has partially endowed the Museum and constructed the Occidental Petroleum Cultural Center Building, which houses the Museum.

The Museum is located at the northeast corner of Westwood and Wilshire Boulevards in Westwood Village, 3 blocks east of the 405 freeway's Wilshire Boulevard exit. The street address is 10899 Wilshire Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

Beginning January 2006, all public programs except gallery talks will be held at the Hammer Annex, located in close walking distance one block north of the Hammer Museum at 1087 Broxton Avenue near Westwood Boulevard. Parking for program attendees continues to be at the Hammer Museum and within easy walking distance of the Hammer Annex. Directions and maps will be available to patrons, who are asked to arrive an extra 15 minutes before events. Admission to Hammer Museum public programs continues to be free of charge and on a first-come, first-served basis. Priority seating for Hammer members. Please see the Museum's website for hours and admission fees.

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related essays published by Resource Library. See Definitions for more information on finding brochures, catalogues and gallery guides using TFAO's website.

A Letter from Japan: The Photographs of John Swope, by Carolyn Peter, John W. Dower, John Swope - History - 2006. "Published on the occasion of the exhibition A letter from Japan: the photographs of John Swope, presented at the Hammer Museum at UCLA, March 5-June 4,...


Pacific Dreams: Currents of Surrealism and Fantasy in California Art, 1934-1957, by Susan Ehrlich - Art - 1995. Published in conjunction with the exhibition held at UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, July 11-September 17, 1995; the Oakland Museum...

Book information courtesy of Google Books.

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