



## **Surrealism in Art and Poetry**

## **Student Handout**

### **About the Artist: Kansuke Yamamoto**

Born in 1914 to the first photographic supply merchant in Nagoya, Japan, Kansuke Yamamoto devoted himself to experimental and avant-garde photography and poetry from the time he was a teenager. A poet and critic, Yamamoto became an avid proponent of and innovator in the Japanese Surrealism movement.

Surrealism began in Japan in the 1930s as an artistic and cultural response to the modernization and urbanization of the country. Artists were inspired by the Surrealism movement that originated in Europe, which emphasized the role of chance and the subconscious in the creation of surprising and ambiguous imagery. For Japanese artists, embracing Surrealist imagery demonstrated their interest in new modes of expression and modern forms.

Ambiguous in subject matter, Yamamoto's work evoked mystery by distorting scale and juxtaposing images in unexpected ways. He used the technique of collage to evoke uncanny and mythical ideals. He also left significant areas of negative space untouched, alluding to the Japanese concept of *ma*, which refers to intervals of emptiness or blankness.

Encouraged by Katue Kitasono, founder of the avant-garde group VOU and its namesake Surrealist magazine, Yamamoto contributed both poetry and art to *VOU* magazine and to exhibitions organized by the group. Instead of writing poetry, Kitasono encouraged peers to make "plastic poems," photographs that incorporated found objects and magazine and newspaper clippings and involved the photographic process to elicit emotions and poetic meanings. Such works challenged the limitations of language.

Under Japan's Peace Preservation Law of 1925, Japanese Surrealists, including Yamamoto, were heavily pursued and sometimes persecuted by the Special Higher Police for fear that the movement did not conform to the Japanese establishment. However, Yamamoto still found ways to remain active in avant-garde circles, responding to his oppressive experiences in his innovative, socially conscious photographs and poems and by participating in numerous Surrealist and experimental art exhibitions. In the late 1930s, he became one of the founding members of the experimental organization Nagoya Photo Avant Garde, and formed VIVI in the late 1940s. He continued making photographs and writing poetry until his death in 1987.

Learn more about Kansuke Yamamoto on the Getty's Web site at [www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/japans\\_moderndivide/](http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/japans_moderndivide/).