

Biography

Remembered for his “elegance” and “showy personality style”, the once blue-haired photographer built his artistic personal around fanciful stories.¹ Adolph de Meyer is a pioneer in fashion photographer. Born in Paris, 1868, to a Scottish mother and German father, de Meyer was educated mostly in Germany.² The personality was half Jewish and homosexual despite living in an era of widespread homophobia and antisemitism.³ He inherited the title of baron from his grandfather in 1898,⁴ amongst other dramatics happenings in his life.

De Meyer was married to Olga Alberta Caracciolo, goddaughter (rumoured biological daughter) of the Prince of Wales.⁵ This was a marriage of convenience as his wife was also speculated to be bisexual or lesbian.⁶ The couple moved various times and travelled extensively. Their homes were based at London's Cadogan Gardens, Paris, and New York, with summers at Venice and Constantinople, winters in St. Moritz. Since 1900, they visited Greece, Spain, Morocco, Tangier, and Egypt. The couple's honeymoon was spent in Asia, covering Hong Kong and Japan, then with de Meyer visiting India alone.



Garden Pool with Waterlilies, 1900. Carbon print, 12.2 x 20.1 cm

¹ Welle, Deutsche. "Why Pioneering Photographer" Why Pioneering Photographer Adolf De Meyer Is the 'Debussy of the Camera' | DW | 04.12.2017. December 4, 2017. Accessed October 6, 2018. <https://www.dw.com/en/why-pioneering-photographer-adolf-de-meyer-is-the-debussy-of-the-camera/a-41595276>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Saunders, Beth. "More Than a Honeymoon: The Influence of Japan on Adolf De Meyer's Photographs." More Than a Honeymoon: The Influence of Japan on Adolf De Meyer's Photographs. April 3, 2018. Accessed October 16, 2018. <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2018/adolf-de-meyer-honeymoon-japan>.

⁵ Welle

⁶ Ibid.

De Meyer fled Europe for the United States at the beginning of World War One (WWI).⁷ The family's fortune was destroyed, and the couple was forced to the US.⁸ This was when de Meyer came onboard *Vogue* as their first fashion photographer.⁹ Together with Olga, the couple was known to be "notoriously chic and decidedly cosmopolitan",¹⁰ the aristocrats and artists of their social circles served as de Meyer's source of inspiration.

The legacy of de Meyer's works can be seen in Man Ray and Horst P. Horst. Both are established artists in their own field, the former as an avant-garde artist around the times of Dada and Surrealism, the latter a legendary fashion photographer of the 20th century.

Artistic Style

De Meyer subscribed to the school of Pictorialism. This photographic movement lasted from 1890s till the First World War (WWI). It was fuelled by the photographer's attempts to elevate their works to the standards of Fine Art, most photographs were also characterised by a blur and diffused look.

The Metropolitan Museum show, *Quicksilver Brilliance: Adolph de Meyer Photographs*, had introduced de Meyer as "A master of photographic flattery". During his time, Alfred Stieglitz showed de Meyer's images in his Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession and published them in the acclaimed magazine, *Camera Work*.¹¹

His earlier works featured mostly society women before shifting to theatrical personalities and dancers in his later works.¹²

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Adolph De Meyer." Adolph De Meyer | Broadway Photographs. Accessed October 6, 2018. <https://broadway.cas.sc.edu/content/adolph-de-meyer>.

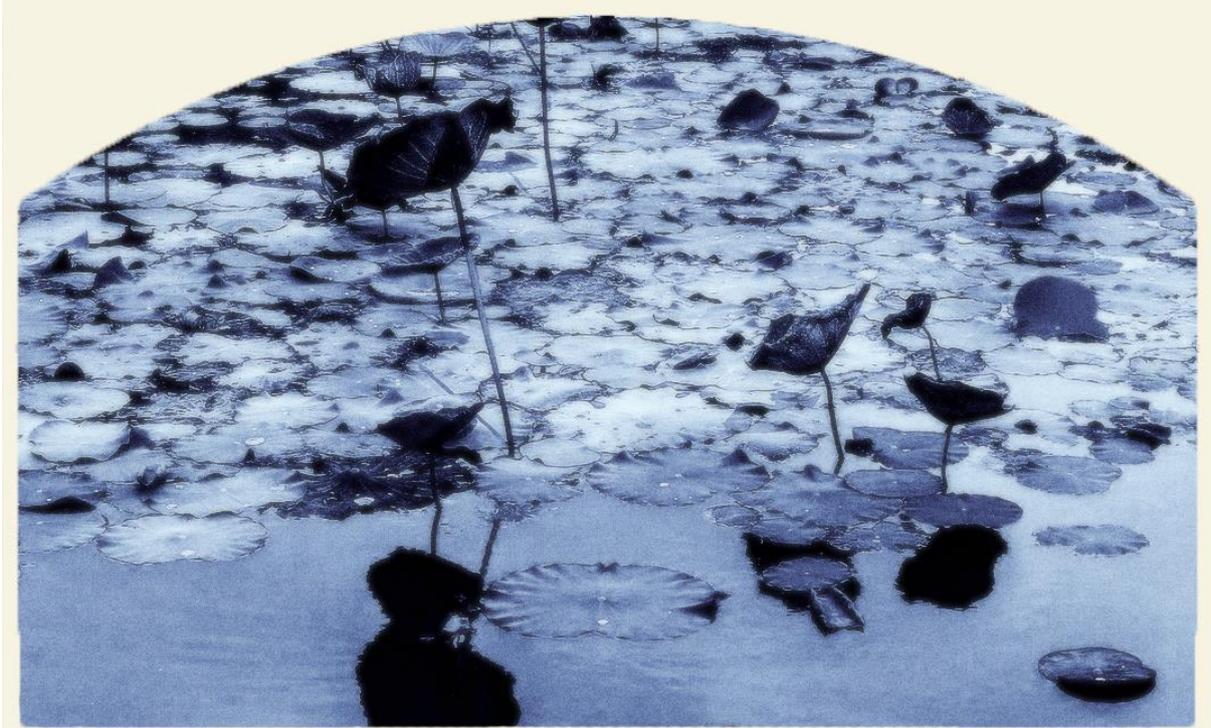
⁹ Yaeger, Lynn. "Saluting Baron Adolph De Meyer, Vogue's First Staff Photographer." *Vogue*. February 01, 2017. Accessed October 5, 2018. <https://www.vogue.com/article/adolph-de-meyer-birthday-vogue-photographer>.

¹⁰ Saunders

¹¹ Welle

¹² N.A.

Japanese Influence



During de Meyer's honeymoon to Japan, he graced sites¹³ popular amongst travellers during Meiji-era. Despite being a travelogue, de Meyer was also experimenting with the camera in these works, including composition strategies derived from Japanese art.¹⁴ In the image above, I imitated de Meyer's use of the arc border, this reminds me of Monet's waterlilies paintings. The painter shared the same fever for Japanese aesthetics and went as far as to build himself a Japanese garden in his Giverny home. (see left: *The Water-Lily Pond*, 1899)

¹³ Such as, monumental Buddhas, temples in Kyoto, Torii gates at Shinto shrines, Tokyo's Edo castle, gardens, and distinctive landscapes surrounding Nikko.

¹⁴ Saunders



View through the window of a garden, 1900. Platinum print, 13.8 x 20.3 cm

de Meyer's compositional studies can be seen in how he used the Japanese architecture to frame his images. The wooden structures like doorjamb and mullions formed "a flattened grid parallel to the picture plane".¹⁵ Furthermore, he leaves out the horizon of the landscape featured in the window, presenting a "compressed layering of structures and vegetation"¹⁶ rather than a three-dimensional space.



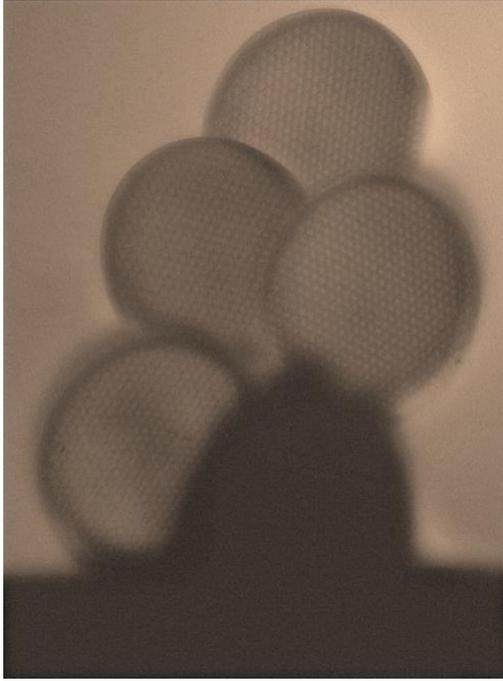
Building on his investigation with windows, de Meyer also took photographs of his wife and himself in the interiors, flanked by Japanese sliding doors. This influenced his later works, it developed his characteristic style of posing a figure within "a highly aestheticized space".¹⁷

Taking after the look of these photos, I shot at Singapore's Japanese Garden. I choose the place for its very picturesque and Oriental architecture and landscaping. I found that the lure of Japonisme still retains in contemporary times. Instead of having grids, I opted for receding frames. Yet they do not connote a sense of depth but reemphasises flatness as the images within the frames are removed from their spatial context with the tight cropping.

¹⁵ Saunders

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.



The Shadows on the Wall, 1906, Platinum print, 34.7 x 26.7 cm

After returning home, his still lifes of flowers was a continuation of his attempts to negotiate Japanese aesthetics into his works. In *Shadows on the Wall*, de Meyer works with very austere forms of merely the flowers' shadows and a blank wall. "He is bent, in fact, on translating his material into a fantasy of abstract beauty"¹⁸. Leaping off from his idea, I decided to get creative with some lighting equipment. In my imitation of de Meyer's work, I used a reflector and a handful of honeycombs to compose a shadow image. I found it interesting that I was still able to retain textures (honeycomb) while achieving the same flatness as de Meyer did with his chrysanthemums.



Glass and Shadows, 1912

¹⁸ Taken from a 1914 article in the American Arts and Crafts movement periodical the Craftsman effused of de Meyer and his still lifes.

The compacted space in de Meyer's compositions alluded to the lacquered screens in Japan. Such a look was possibly created through a combination of directional and backlighting.¹⁹ This lighting technique continued to serve him for his fashion works, presenting "dynamic abstract backdrops for the elegant silhouettes of haute couture".²⁰ His works with shadows were interesting for how they looked like line drawings rather than modelled forms—another way he has flattened the three-dimensional world. While attempting to imitate his *Glass and Shadows*, I struggled a lot to get the crispness of his shadows. This really leads me to wonder how much experimentation with lighting it must have taken for de Meyer to reach his level of control. It was also very amazing that he managed to capture the opacity of the various objects he shot though the shade of their shadows.

De Meyer's interest in Japonisme might also be linked to his close friendship and influence from James Whistler.²¹ The painter was known for his harmonious colour balance and using form as an expression of mood; de Meyer had peach- and cerulean-tinted carbon prints of his Japanese pictures—an early example of the artist's exploration of colour and its tonal effects.²²

Fashion Photography (images on the left are by me, images on the right are de Meyer's)



unknown

de Meyer was "one of the first to merge artistry with commerce via photography"²³, this has led some to see him as the father of fashion photography. He was the first fashion photographer at American and worked for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vanity Fair* after his stint with *Vogue* from 1913-21. He carried over his pictorial style to fashion photography²⁴ and helped bring the focus on fashion to style rather than wealth.²⁵

¹⁹ Saunders

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Welle

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Feeney, Mark. "At the Met, Meet the First Fashion Photographer - The Boston Globe." At the Met, Meet the First Fashion Photographer - The Boston Globe. January 04, 2018. Accessed October 6, 2018.



Elizabeth Arden Perfume, 1926

Unlike the stiff and awkward works by others, his was dreamy and beautifully lit.²⁶ A tell-tale sign of de Meyer's works is how his models are often posed like statues under a soft focus.²⁷ His experiments with lighting was innovative, including "putting a lit bulb under a skirt or placing gauze on the camera lens".²⁸ More importantly, he had an uncanny talent to capture not only the likeness but the spirit of his sitters.²⁹ Or more eloquently put, there was "a quality of impersonality to the images, a sense of persons being sublimed into statues,"³⁰ However, when I was trying to pose his photos, I realised that fashion models probably owned a few more joints than most of us. The shots did allow the sitters to show a more flair and their elegance but it was also dexterous to execute. It would have been interesting to see how de Meyer interacted with his models in the studio.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/art/2018/01/04/met-meet-first-fashion-photographer/3lxleSUIjgd30zkHvHMTVM/story.html>.

²⁶ Yaeger

²⁷ Welle

²⁸ Feeney

²⁹ Welle

³⁰ N.A.



Advertisement for Elizabeth Arden Cosmetics, 1927



Dolores by Adolph de Meyer, Vogue 1921

After my arduous attempts to shoot in the style of Adolph de Meyer, I feel a greater sense of awe for his works. I cannot imagine how he shot all these images on film. Perhaps, having travelled widely really trained his eye to be more discerning and allowed him to come up with what would be radical poses for his times. His ability to synthesise the Japonisme sets his works apart from some of his peers as he approaches perspective differently. Conversely, his bold use of patterns, shows the same artistic influence from the Middle East as did earlier painters like Matisse. That was one of the things I was interested to try out but did not managed to within the short span of this assignment.

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