

Catching light

Gamal Nkrumah is introduced to the animating spirit of photography as it captures the essence of historical objects

Kazuki Sugimoto is a quiet, unassuming man, which he explains is characteristic of his profession. He is in many respects the quintessential photographer, except that he specialises in photographic documentation of objects of historical value. Currently, he and his colleagues are developing the technical capabilities of Egyptian conservators with the Conservation Centre in the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM-CC).

"The objective of the workshop is to enable conservators of the GEM-CC to take high-level photographs as part of documentation for museums and conservation," Kazuki Sugimoto told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

It is his first professional trip to Egypt and he is savouring every moment of it. He has worked in Japan, China, and now he finds himself in Egypt. "Photography plays an important role in museum activities such as the preparation of an inventory, documentation research, recording during conservation and preparing descriptions of exhibits," he elaborates. He seeks to convey technical expertise and knowledge concerning the recording of image information that documents the current condition of historical objects visually, the photograph has a different nature from literal information. Everyone could read the same visual information, whichever experience and expertise he or she has. "The photograph possesses the value of academic information," he explains.

Kazuki Sugimoto, photographer and leader of the group of three Japanese professionals invited by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to train Egyptians as part of a technical assistance programme that has a definitive cultural slant, was accompanied by two conservators – Shigeo Aoki and Akiko Nishisaka. The Japanese experts were enthusiastic about the functions of the camera and surrounding equipment, the lighting methods, and digital image processing. All three are attached to the Waseda University Egyptian Archaeological Mission. "It is necessary to acquire appropriate skills and techniques of photography for conservators of the GEM, in order to fully understand museum collections and take out more accurate information. The two-week training course is designed to provide a series of techniques of photography," Akiko Nishisaka elaborates. But is photography art or science? "I guess it is a bit of both," he chortles.

The Japanese team and their Egyptian collaborators conducted workshops in both Sakkara and the Giza Plateau. Hard at work in the Supreme Council of Antiquities Store-room (Salim Hassan Storage Museum) in Sakkara and in the plush new state-of-the-art building which houses the GEM in Giza, the three Japanese experts agree to sit down and talk about their mission during a short lunch break. Japan, they are keen to point out, was a pioneer in the art of conservation. It houses the oldest conservation cultural centre in the world in Nara. Today, the Institute of Ancient Art Research in Nara, Japan, is a leading international institute that trains students from all over the world in an ancient art.

"The most important aspect of this course is that we learn



the art of photography in a systematic and thematic fashion. The technical expertise is utilised to project the historical information in a particular object; a relief painting, a sculpture, an ancient textile or household utensil, or even a mummy," Dahlia Abdel-Aal told the *Weekly*. She was an exchange student in Japan and she cherishes her experience there. Now she is participating in the GEM-CC course. "What I admire most about the Japanese is their sense of teamwork. It is extremely professional. Everyone in the team knows exactly what he or she is doing. It is such a joy to work with the Japanese."

Her experience in Japan was invaluable, she stresses. Her professional specialisation is manuscripts. She learnt about

the relevant equipment that she must use for her work. I am a specialist in textile conservation. This is an art. And it is a science as well." Indeed, the concept itself was celebrated last year at a symposium in Tokyo entitled "Opening Up the Future at the Crossroads of Science and the Arts" commemorating the partnership between the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research (better known by its Japanese acronym RIKEN) and the Tokyo University of the Arts (Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku). "An art can be a means of advancing science. As an aspiring conservator, I was astounded to find textiles from the early Byzantine or Coptic period in Japan. We were assigned to an all-female institution of higher learning,

a faculty at the Tokyo University of Arts. It was a novel experience, one that left a lasting impression on me."

Abdel-Aal noted how enriching her experience of combining aesthetics with art history, photography with science, was. She related how she enjoyed the highly specialised knowledge conveyed in seminars, workshops, and special lectures with individual guidance. "I was intrigued by the use of simple methods of documentation in a country like Japan with such sophisticated state-of-the-art technology." For Akiko Nishisaka, however, "It is the function that dictates what technique is used."

Professor Kazuki Sugimoto elaborates: "There are three basic principles, three basic requirements. First, there is a basic way of thinking, a particular perspective, that sheds light on the artefact in question. Secondly, there is the familiarity of the photographer with the quality and the finer points of the camera he or she uses. What can the photographer expect of his or her camera? Thirdly, to what purpose do you want to put the camera to use? These are the basic questions. You don't necessarily need sophisticated equipment for that purpose. We noted that many institutions in Egypt and elsewhere purchase state-of-the-art equipment and then it dawns on them that nobody, not even the professors and the technicians concerned know how to use them. This is a waste of funds, a waste of precious resources. There are three basic starting points in photography for conservation purposes. First, there is the strength of the light. Secondly, the ideal distance between the camera and the object has to be established. Thirdly, the technical competence of knowing how to shed light is prerequisite."

The backgrounds of the trainees who are responsible for the conservation and restoration of cultural heritage for the Conservation Centre are especially varied – something the Japanese trio took into account. Image processing is at once an artistic and a scientific process. The nature of photographic technique depends on the quality of stone or wooden object. "But when it comes to conservation it is a different story altogether," the professor concedes. Using normal light, oblique light, top light, backlight, shadow processing and Halatian ... are all tools that the artist can put to the best effect. Mechanism of photographs, diaphragms, shutter speed, depth of field, exposure, ISO sensitivity, white balance – among other techniques," the professor carries on excitedly. Image saving format JPEG, TIFF, Infrared Ultra Violet Light (UV light) ... "By now I am certain that, alas, we are talking science rather than art."

So how does the GEM-CC compare with the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo? The three Japanese experts look at each other knowingly, and say in unison: "You must come to Japan and see for yourself."