

The Rise and Fall of *SeiyoMegane* Spectacles in the Early Meiji Period:

— Why do People Take a Peek and Observe? —

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This paper will examine an entertainment device called *SeiyoMegane* (Western eyeglasses) in Japan. Many previous studies have mixed them up with peepshows, and the role and structure of *SeiyoMegane* have never been subjects of research in the fields of the history of vision optics or the study of Misemono spectacles. Thus, we need to study and prove that the device for showing image information existed and played a meaningful role before movies were introduced in Japan. We can get an idea of what *SeiyoMegane* were like through illustrations in newspapers and magazines of the time. The device had a small window as wide as a human face and an attached lens. Through the window, one could view an illustration. Several units of *SeiyoMegane* were brought inside a venue, and each came with an illustration. To enjoy all the illustrations, visitors needed to walk from unit to unit. The illustrations were oil or chrome paintings depicting Western European cities, famous Japanese sights, Napoleon, the pope of the time, well-known battle scenes and so on. In large-scale shows, fifty devices or illustrations were set up. By collecting materials on *SeiyoMegane* and sorting them chronologically, it was found that the devices were popular between 1871 and 1887 in the early Meiji Period. *SeiyoMegane* spectacles started in Asakusa, Tokyo, in 1871. They were well-received in the city, and people rushed to see them, bringing show managers a handsome profit. Such exhibitions were held all over Tokyo and in other cities including Nagoya, Osaka and Kyoto. After 1882, however, they started to lose their popularity. Show managers in Asakusa changed the name of their spectacles from “*SeiyoMegane*” to “*Ganso O-megane* (the Very Original Large Glasses)” and changed the illustrations. Yet, the last record of *SeiyoMegane* was in 1892. This indicates that shows of the kind went out of style around about 1893.

The early Meiji Period, when *SeiyoMegane* started to become popular, coincided with Japan's cultural enlightenment. Before that, Japan was in a period of deliberate isolation in which people rarely had a chance to learn about foreign cultures. After Japan reopened its doors to the world, Western culture and paintings quickly made their way into Japan, and imitating Western culture came into fashion. This was when *SeiyoMegane* came under the spotlight. That is, they functioned as a means of getting to know the West in the time of the opening of the country and westernization. Furthermore, people who went to see *SeiyoMegane* spectacles were considered culturally enlightened. Another reason that those exhibitions attracted so much attention is that they allowed people to see rare and precious Western oil paintings in three dimensions. Naturally, when Western culture and paintings spread widely in the country in the middle of the Meiji Period, *SeiyoMegane* became obsolete, replaced by a panorama device that showed battle scenes in a more vivid and realistic way. The popularity of *SeiyoMegane* reflected the unique characteristics of the early Meiji Period and the surge of the time.