

## PRESS RELEASE LANGHANS GALERIE PRAGUE

# Dr. Ikkaku Ochi Collection Medical Photographs from Japan around 1900

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**Curator: Walter Keller**

*Akimitsu Naruyama* discovered them in an inconspicuous wooden box that hadn't been opened in quite some time. It contained 365 photographs of people with congenital or pathological deformations. After looking at a couple of pictures, *Naruyama*, a collector and art dealer from Tokyo, knew that he had discovered an extraordinary collection of photographs.

The box belonged to the Japanese doctor *Ikkaku Ochi*. Born in 1879 in Hiroshima, he studied at the University of Okayama, the city closest to his hometown where he could study medicine. Most likely the photographs in question were handed out as instructional material to the approx. 60 students of a class. At the same time, the rare diseases elephantiasis of the testicles and breasts, syphilis in its final stages were discussed in medical journals. They were shown as copperplate prints because photographs could not yet be reproduced in print. The patients were photographed in the city's largest photo studio *Ôta Rakusui-ken*. It comes as no surprise that its owner *Tsutomu Ôta* took pictures of medical cases besides photographs of school classes as he descended from a family of doctors. He became a photographer rather by accident: while working as a security guard at a school, he first saw a camera when a student asked him to guard one.

*Dr. Ikkaku Ochi's collection* is a fascinating document of medical history. Thanks to contemporary medicine, most diseases no longer advance to the stages shown in *Tsutomu Ôta's* photographs. Yet their sad beauty distinguishes them from today's conventional medical photographs. They are sensitive portraits—with a strong Japanese folkloristic turn of the century background of people who were met with dignity and respect, although the diseased body parts were not (and still are not) fit for everyone's eyes.

We have a century of amazing progress in medicine and physics behind us. Science has brought us forward and continues to do so. But, as the consequences of the earthquake in Japan's atomic plant Fukushima or the incident in Chernobyl 25 years ago indicate, in our times it is mankind itself with its technology that is in danger to create similar images of human bodies again.

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