

Japanese Camera Makers

In the pre-WW2 period, several Japanese firms began to produce optical lenses, cameras, microscopes and related devices and materials. Their main objective was import substitution—replacing foreign products with domestic production. Starting from scratch, they often encountered technical problems. Some firms learned from German engineers, others sought US help but was rejected, and still others developed technology by themselves. Private technical schools and research centers were established. In all cases, Japanese engineers made enormous effort to acquire necessary technology to reach global frontiers. Just like automobiles, many, not just one or two, Japanese firms strived to attain high technology and became world leaders in camera production. Many of the early camera manufacturers still survive and prosper today.

Konica was founded by Sugiura Rokusaburo in 1873 as a photography material trading firm. In 1903, Sugiura produced the first (though simple) Made-in-Japan camera (photo). In 1923 the firm set up the Konishi Photography Technical School. In 1940, it produced the first Japanese color film.



Minolta was created by Tajima Kazuo in Nishinomiya, near Osaka. in 1928. In the following year, with the assistance of German engineers, it produced a Made-in-Japan camera. Much later, in 2003, Konica and Minolta merged to become Konica Minolta.

Olympus was established by Yamashita Takeshi in 1919 as a microscope and thermometer producer to replace foreign products. It manufactured its first microscope in 1920 (photo) and the second model in 1927. The company's initial name was Takachiho Manufacturing and its brand name was Olympus (Takachiho in Japan and Olympus in Greece were both sacred mountains where Gods resided). In 1936, Takachiho built a new factory and started camera production.



Nikon, originally Japan Optical Industry, was established in 1917 for the purpose of import-substituting optical devices such as microscope and binoculars. The Mitsubishi Group supported its establishment with business plans and finance. In the following year, production of optical lenses began. In 1921, the firm produced the first Made-in-Japan binoculars. In 1925, the first company-designed microscope was produced by inviting eight German engineers, and technology was quickly absorbed by Japanese engineers. In 1927, the firm started mass production of optical lenses with world quality. In 1931, a telescope was produced. In 1946, Nikon became the brand name of the company's cameras (photo).



Fujifilm, originally Dainippon Celluloid, was founded in 1919 by merging existing celluloid firms. Its goal was to domestically produce camera and movie films to replace imported films. To overcome technical difficulties, the firm sought cooperation with Kodak (US) but Kodak refused, so it turned to internal R&D. The Film Testing Center was created in 1928. In 1929, Kodak came back to ask partnership but this time Dainippon refused because it was already developing internal technology. In 1932, a new film factory was built at the foot of Mt. Fuji (photo). In 1933 the firm received government subsidies for import substituting effort. However, it faced severe crisis due to technical problems, rejection by Japanese movie industry because the company's quality was low, and cost-cutting competition from Kodak and Agfa. In 1934, Fujifilm was separated from Dainippon Celluloid to specialize in film production. Fujifilm began producing cameras after WW2, in 1948.

