

**Romanticized Japan:
Contextualizing Japan Through the Western Gaze**

**An Exhibition Curated by the Students in
Japanese Modernism Across Media, Spring 2020 Seminar**



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Rebecca and Rick White Gallery
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“Romanticized Japan: Contextualizing Japan Through the Western Gaze” is an exhibition curated by students in Assistant Professor Erin Schoneveld’s spring 2020 seminar *Japanese Modernism Across Media*, which examines the revolutionary transformation of Japanese artistic and exhibition practices from the late nineteenth century through the present day. In creating an exhibition about Japanese tourist photography, students in the seminar were asked to engage with the following question: do these images accurately document life during nineteenth century Japan, or are they better suited to reveal the expectations and attitudes of the Western audience who consumed them? Through the curation and exhibition of Japanese tourist photographs and *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints from Haverford College’s Quaker & Special

Collections, students sought to answer this question by exploring methods of artistic production, confrontations between tradition and modernity, and the articulation and representation of identity—individually, culturally, and nationally—during Japan’s Meiji period (1868–1912).

INTRODUCTION

In 1853, Commodore Perry’s Black Ships steamed into Yokohama Bay demanding that Japan open up to the west. Fifteen years later, the Meiji restoration of imperial sovereignty in 1868 ended almost two centuries of relative seclusion, ushering in an era of enormous political, economic, social, and cultural change. Slogans such as “civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika* 美術富国) and “national enrichment through the arts” (*bijutsu fukoku*



Club Hotel, Yokohama ca. 1865–1912
HC12-5565

美術富国) served to highlight the aspirations of the newly established Meiji government based in the renamed capital Tokyo (formerly Edo), which now sought parity with the industrialized west through an assimilation and modeling of technology, forms of government, military, education, and fine arts. The astonishing speed and scope of Japan's modernization process meant that within just forty years the country paralleled its European and American technological and industrial models.

Within this historical context, the arrival of photography to Japan in the 1850s and '60s provided an opportunity for the documentation of various kinds of social, political, cultural, and industrial changes taking place across the archipelago. The potential for photography to create and promote a new national image of Japan was critical to the country's nation building process, with the medium itself a sign of progressiveness and an important marker of modernity. As such, photography was embraced as a new artistic medium through which to document "reality" and mediate identity. While much of Japan's early photography was dedicated to recording the transformation of its national subjects and historical moments, including imperial portraiture and war documentation, the genre of tourist photography quickly took hold in port cities such as Yokohama, home to one of the largest foreign populations living in Japan at the time.

While this official "opening" of Japan during the mid-to-late-nineteenth century witnessed the importation of various aspects of Western art and culture, elements of Japanese art and aesthetics also entered into Europe during a crucial moment of Western artistic innovation. The most significant visual media was arguably Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, whose influence on European movements such as Impressionism and Post-Impressionism is well documented in scholarship on *Japonisme*. As a result, the content and subject matter of Japanese tourist photography was also informed by Western demand for images of Japanese culture and society that, in many ways, represented the idealized and untouched exotic land. Indeed, the photographs in this exhibition represent a series of tensions taking place in Japan at the time of their production. Rather than portraying a strict representation of reality, tourist photography was a commercial venture that fed the demands of its primary consumers, providing them with a staged view that fit the West's idealized image of a traditional Japan.

This exhibition seeks to contextualize as well as pressure the content and subject matter of Japanese

tourist photography, which emphasized and promoted a static and ahistorical vision of modern Japan. By laying bare tourist photography's goals of capturing and idealizing non-Western cultures and geographies, this exhibition will offer a more nuanced frame for understanding how these images were not only created to cater to a Western imagination and foreign market, but also at odds with the reality of a rapidly industrializing modern nation state.

PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Ukiyo-e 浮世絵, or "images of the floating world," refers to Japanese woodblock prints and paintings deeply connected to and expressive of Japanese popular culture of the Edo period (1603–1868). The subject matter of *ukiyo-e* reflected the social, cultural, and political values of the age and featured a range of subject matter including famous places (*meisho* 名所); beautiful people (*bijin* 美人); and actors (*kabuki* 歌舞伎). *Ukiyo-e* was arguably the most influential artistic media on Western perceptions of Japan



Ejiri from the series *Fifty-three Pairings Along the Tokaido*
Utagawa Hiroshige (born Andō Hiroshige), 1797–1858



Crossing the Lake on Stepping Stones, Suizenji Park, Kumamoto
 HC15-5894

during the late nineteenth century. As dye chemistry and printing techniques evolved over the centuries, so too did the look and feel of *ukiyo-e* prints. By the Meiji period (1868–1912) the content and subject matter of *ukiyo-e* prints began to change as they documented and disseminated information about Japan’s rapid modernization as seen through politics, fashions, and social movements. By the early 20th century movements such as *shin hanga* (new prints 新版画) and *sōsaku hanga* (creative prints 創作版画) simultaneously revitalized and expanded upon the *ukiyo-e* tradition as the woodblock print medium and production methods began to engage with Western techniques and modernist movements.

By the 1860s, photography was utilized as a means through which to record Japan’s transition from feudal society to modern nation state. Appreciated for its so-called ability to “reflect truth,” photography was originally used by the Japanese government for military and surveillance purposes, and later became a tool for simultaneously representing reality and challenging Japanese culture and tradition with the goal of documenting social change from urban development, to war, to imperial portraiture, to the creation of a modern national identity. Tourist photography, in particular, played a significant role in shaping ideas and perceptions about Japanese culture and society to a Western foreign audience. The exoticized and manufactured export product of tourist photography grew its own market, and by the 1870s photography studios popped up all around Japan’s port cities selling content divided into the categories of “views” and “types.” Views

consisted of landscapes, cityscapes, and architectural scenes, and types consisted of genre scenes posed on location or in the studio. Examples of both categories are on display in this exhibition.

A stereoscopic image creates an illusion of depth by presenting two different perspectives of the same image that are then superimposed on one another. Thus, when two off-set images of right and left eye views on a stereocard are combined in the brain, they create the perception of a three-dimensional image. The picturesque photo series of “stereoscopic views of Japan” includes portraiture and landscape, as well as views and types. In addition to the images, on the back of each card is explanatory text that includes the description of a specific geographic location as well as observational discussions of Japanese culture, society, and daily life.

NATURE

One of the key characteristics of Japanese culture is often thought to be the relationship between the self and nature. Shinto, which acknowledges the spiritual power of natural entities, often is intertwined with many of the ways in which these elements are depicted. This exhibition consists mainly of tourist photographs, which depict nature in a very calculated manner. Much of what is depicted stems from Western influence and the Western perception of Japanese people. The staged photographs work to reinforce pre-existing beliefs surrounding Japanese culture held by Western cultures. Throughout the images, themes that



Fujiyama from Hakone
HC12-5602

persist include the power of nature and how it works in relation to other beings. When nature is pictured alone, it appears to be incredibly powerful, with an incomparable presence. When there is an individual depicted alongside nature in these works, the individual and their surroundings essentially work as one. Nature no longer carries the weight associated with being an all-encompassing, inescapable presence.

WOMEN

The Meiji period (1868–1912) marked the introduction of Western culture, norms, and values to Japan, which in turn, shifted the nation's social structure, radically changing the daily lives of people. This included the role, expectation, and representation of Japanese women. During the Edo period (1603–1868), women were subordinate to men and expected to play the role of dutiful wife and mother. This is perhaps most evident in *ukiyo-e* prints that depicted women as idealized embodiments of traditional feminine values. This portrayal was also prominent in early Japanese photography that came about in the Meiji period that followed (1868–1912). Often standing alone, women were rendered as beautiful and ethereal beings; in this way, they served as an advertisement for idealized Japanese beauty that was geared towards Japan's new Western audience. Photographs catered to this foreign perspective: as trade was opened up in Japan, photos were used to capture a stereotypical view of Japanese culture. This, of course, included women in a traditional lens. The pieces in this exhibit speak to this idealized view, and serve as examples of what was seen as the female model in daily life.



Playing on Shamisen, Fute, Taiko and Tsuzumi
HC12-5567

RELIGION

Since ancient times Shinto, or “the way of the gods” (*kami no michi* 神の道), has played a critical role in the formation of Japanese culture and identity. Shinto serves as the native faith of the Japanese people and is as old as Japan itself. Japan’s cosmology, or creation story, begins with the gods Izanagi and Izanami, who stirred the sea to create the islands from their perch in the heavens above. Deities, or *kami*, exist everywhere, thus tying the religion closely to all life forms. Shinto’s relationship with the environment also places emphasis on the natural state of being or cyclical birth and death of all things. The imperial family is said to have descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu, and people of that lineage have since claimed power and authority through a divine right. With this religion as the basis for their ruling system, the Japanese states, intending to honor *kami* and the imperial family, constructed shrines throughout the country—some of which are depicted throughout items in the exhibition.

EVERYDAY LIFE

The content of tourist photography, which was aimed towards a foreign audience, seemingly portrayed Japan in its “natural” state. Many photos depicted landscapes and scenes of people going about their daily life. However, these images were often staged, with a specific scene deliberately selected to represent Japan in such a way that would satisfy a foreign gaze. Many photographs were taken in studios with curated backgrounds, outfits, and poses, to fit foreign stereotypes. As a result, the majority of men and women in such photos are seen wearing kimonos rather than Western style clothing such as dresses and pants, as was more common at this time. Even in landscapes, Western architecture as well as any signs of industrialization was kept to a minimum. Additionally, many women are presented as geisha with strong references to the previous Edo period popular culture and entertainment. Women are often presented in elaborate kimono and makeup



The Yomeimon Gate, Shinto Temple Nikkō

HC12-5530



Lantern Shade Painters
HC12-5527

with props such as musical instruments or umbrellas. Although tourist photographs were marketed to foreigners as a “realistic” depiction of Japan, most images were staged and constructed to appeal to the romanticized imagination of a Western gaze.

CONCLUSION

In creating an exhibition about Japanese tourist photography, the students in the *Japanese Modernism Across Media* seminar explored how Japanese artists and producers wrestled with issues of identity and nationhood in an attempt to embrace foreign media and modes of representation while also translating universal conceptions of individualism and self-expression into a local vernacular. Indeed, not only does this exhibition engage with and contextualize visual content from Haverford College’s Quaker & Special Collections, but through the curation process students were also able to explore more broadly the various ways in which technological shifts and cultural transformations have shaped artistic production

and visual consumption within modern and contemporary Japanese art making and exhibition practices.

CURATORS

- Nanako Komatsubara ‘20
- Claire Mitchell ‘21
- Eve Rui ‘21
- Charlotte Skolasky ‘21
- Aleiyah Springer ‘20
- Naomi Stock ‘20
- Allison Torres ‘21
- Unique Tuberville ‘20

Professor Erin Schoneveld



FRONT COVER

Jinrikisha at Negishi, Yokohama (HCI2-5570)

REAR COVER

Detail from *Girls Looking at Flowers* (HCI2-5541)

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