

Japan



David Odo, *The Journey of “A Good Type”: From Artistry to Ethnography in Early Japanese Photographs*

Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press (Harvard University), 2015.
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Photography was becoming widespread in the latter years of the nineteenth century just as Japan was making its modern entry in the world. That nation’s brilliant culture and highly sophisticated artistry caught the attention of the Western world. Enthusiasts for everything Japanese invented the term *Japonisme* to explain the influence of Japanese art, fashion, and aesthetics on Western culture. Japanese art and artifacts, particularly Buddhist items, became all the rage. It is often said that every fashionable living room in late Victorian Boston and London had at least one authentic Japanese artifact. Thousands of tourists made the long journey to Japan to see the place for themselves.

By the middle of the Meiji period (1868–1912), beautifully hand-tinted photographic prints of Japanese people, temples, and landscapes were among its earliest and most popular exports. Famous European photographers such as Raimund von Stillfried and Felice Beato opened studios in Japan as early as the 1860s, soon to be followed by their Japanese protégés Kuichi Ichida and Kimbei Kusakabe and many others. Hundreds of their photographs, collected en masse by travelers from the Boston area, were donated to Harvard University’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, where curators archived them for their ethnographic content. The biggest photographic collection at the Peabody is that of William Sturgis Bigelow, a prominent archaeologist and collector of art.

Visual anthropologist David Odo, Research Curator of University Collections Initiatives at the Harvard Art Museums, and a Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University, has created this work, *The Journey of “A Good Type,”* as an examination of the Peabody’s collection of Japanese photographs. He presents his work as an analysis of how these collections reflect the desires and preconceptions of makers and consumers alike, and the ethnographic interests of the people who collected them.

A reader may approach this elegant volume from several points of view. It is superficially a beautiful “coffee table” album of Japanese photographs from the Meiji era. And the illustrations here are indeed outstanding, especially the portraits of Japanese people of that period. But a deeper look gives the reader a fascinating ethnographic view of how photographers and collectors of these photographs wanted to view Japan. Odo sees this collection of early photographs of Meiji Japan as being more than mere art. The subjects of the photographs and the way the images are arranged in albums tell us much about how the people who took the pictures and those who assembled and/or bought the albums perceived Japan at the time. Looking at one photo of a supposed geisha, Odo writes:

The photograph teemed with tropes of Japaneseness: the woman’s elaborate hairstyle, glossy with camellia oil and punctuated with four fanciful hairpins of exotic design; the kimono, lightly clutched with her right hand, falling in graceful folds;

and the shamisen, the lutelike instrument that was part of a geisha's stock in trade, held upright with her left hand. This photograph seemed to perfectly embody certain nineteenth-century Western ideas about Japan—and Japanese women in particular—as hyperfeminine, subservient, and somehow inscrutable. (xv–xvi)

Tourists and armchair “travelers” in the United States and Europe were fascinated by everything supposedly quaint and old in Japan. We can see how Westerners of the Victorian period imagined what Japan looked like. Oscar Wilde, once commenting on this phenomenon, quipped, “In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people.” Nevertheless, these tourists raced to Japan to see the true face of traditional Japan before it was destroyed by the driving force of modernization. They wanted to buy souvenirs of the bygone feudal society of Japan—thus the surge in interest in pictures of geisha and samurai, and supposedly “traditional scenes of courtesans and kendo fighters.” However, when Japanese photographers began setting up their own studios, they focused on everything modern.

The result was a “dual market” for these photos and photo collections. One was of a modern industrializing Japan with locomotives, factories, and shipyards. The other, catering to tourists fascinated by Japan's “quaint” feudal past, created a very mythical Japan that they imagined, but which never really existed.

It is this imagined Japan that is the focus of this book. It seems that many Victorian-era tourists came with the goal of visiting an exotic land. Since most did not bring cameras of their own, they collected albums of photographs as souvenirs. These photos were available in various forms: in prepackaged, pre-bound albums; as loose photographs that could be ordered by the purchaser and bound on the spot; and as loose prints which the tourist could make into an album back home. The album pages showed Japanese people posing to fixed stereotypes—women as geisha, men as samurai, religious figures and a variety of very traditional laborers. Albums also included stereotypical scenery—Mount Fuji, cherry blossoms in full bloom, and requisite temples and shrines.

Odo examines in detail the cottage industries that grew up to support the mythical Japan that the tourists came to see. Studios hired artists to add colors to the photographs. The samurai class had been dispersed by the time photography gained a foothold in Japan, but photographers hired handsome models who dressed as samurai and posed for pictures. In the caption of a man dressed as a courtly samurai, Odo writes: “Though clearly meant to represent a warrior, the portrait was made after the samurai class had already been disempowered, so the model is not an actual samurai but rather appears in costume. He wears a wig of the by-then forbidden hairstyle of the former warrior class and has theatre-ready eyebrows” (34). Attractive women were hired to dress as geisha, and as Odo notes, most of the women hired to pose as geisha were in fact common prostitutes. Others posed as traditional laborers and even as old-fashioned doctors feeling the pulse of a beautiful young maiden. All this to fuel the highly lucrative tourist image of an exotic Japan that never really existed.

Odo introduces a section, “Vanishing Types,” that focuses on the Victorian notion that when members of “advanced civilizations” encountered primitive peoples from other racial groups, the primitive “tribes” faced the genuine prospect of extinction. “It was a widely accepted notion that colonized people were in danger of being overwhelmed by colonial cultures, which brought with them various aspects of Western societies ranging from advanced technologies to diseases. As a result, non-Europeans

were thought to be in danger of vanishing off the face of the earth” (51). The result was a drive to photograph as many of these peoples as possible—natives of Africa, South Seas Islanders, Native Americans, Australian aborigines, etc.—so that the world would not forget them after they were gone.

A market soon grew for photographs of these “primitive peoples,” and in Japan there was a rush of photographers and amateur anthropologists to capture images of the Ainu. Odo’s book has an interesting collection of pictures of tall bearded Ainu warriors, who seem to represent the quaint notion of the “noble savage.” Odo suggests that such images played a key part in the move to “salvage” the remnants of endangered cultures. It was efforts such as these that created both the popular and scientific rationale for the collecting of early photographs taken in Japan in The Peabody Museum (75).

This book will appeal to scholars interested in Japanese history, visual anthropology, and the history of photography. There are some technical terms that might confuse the general reader, but the writing is clear and is greatly enhanced by the photography. The connoisseur of the history of photography would find this work of great interest.

Odo’s *The Journey of “A Good Type”* presents a fascinating ethnographic study of how photography can be used to demonstrate how cultures view each other through the lens of a camera. The reader will come away with a much clearer understanding of how the Victorian world of the West perceived a Japan that, as Oscar Wilde noted, never really existed. The photographs included here are worth the price of the book alone. I am only disappointed that Odo did not include photographs by Japanese who wanted to portray their country as a rapidly modernizing nation.

Daniel A. Métraux
Mary Baldwin College