



“A Good Type”

TOURISM & SCIENCE
IN EARLY JAPANESE
PHOTOGRAPHS

Following more than 250 years of official seclusion, Japan allowed foreigners into the country during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Enticed partly by beautiful photographs, tourists poured in, eagerly purchasing them as souvenirs at the hundreds of photography studios and curio shops that dotted the cities of Yokohama, Tokyo, and other popular destinations. The beautifully hand-colored photographs of geisha, samurai, cherry blossoms, temples, and other subjects came to represent the essence of Japan and Japanese culture for many Westerners.

Japan experienced rapid industrialization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the eyes of many observers, this process threatened to destroy the very traditions that captivated Westerners. Tourist photography focused on idealized, stereotyped views of traditional Japanese culture, and seemed to offer a way to “salvage” endangered cultural features before they vanished forever.

Scientists shared tourists’ fascination with Japan and its photography. At the same

While photographs may forever capture a moment in time, the meaning that the viewer takes from the image is not static.

time, photography was becoming increasingly important in scientific research; many anthropologists believed that a photograph could capture essential physical characteristics of the body in an objective way. An image reduced an individual to a “physical type” by removing historical and cultural context. The “type” could then be generalized to represent an entire group, allowing for comparative research of sociocultural traits across populations. “Type” photography was ultimately discredited in the early to mid-twentieth century.

The photographs in this exhibition have transcended the intentions of the photographers, who meant for their work to be sold on the tourist market. These photographs, collected by scientists from medicine, anthropology, and other fields, were brought into the radically different context of an American museum of anthropology.

When the Peabody Museum acquired photographs of Japan, the institutional context imparted scientific authority to the images, despite their commercial origins. As museum objects, they became “objective” documents of Japanese culture, even though they had been created using models, costumes, staged scenes, and extensive overpainting. Today, we can examine these images in yet another light: as evidence of Western ideas about Japan at a particular historical moment in both tourism and anthropology.

The photographs on display have been digitally reproduced from original albumen prints in the Peabody Museum’s collection. Examples of vintage prints are available to view in the flat files in the exhibition gallery.

This exhibition was curated by visiting curator David Odo and supported in part by a grant from the Edwin O. Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies, Harvard University.

Anatomy of a Scientific Photograph

This popular studio image was titled “Singing Girl” in a tourist album. “Singing Girl,” a common term for “geisha” in 19th-century Japan, displays the visual signs of her profession: elaborate dress, hairstyle, and a *shamisen*, a three-stringed, fretless, banjo-like instrument. Archived in the museum under “Japan,” and captioned by its collector as “A Good Type,” the image was generalized into a purported representation of typical female dress.

Opposite: “Singing Girl.” Raimund von Stillfried, c. 1870s.

Gift of Mary Lothrop from the William S. Bigelow Collection.

Cover: Man dressed as a samurai, photo by Raimund von Stillfried, c. 1870s.

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Geographic location used as basis for H-Board archival filing.

Subtle use of color enhances model's presence, creating an illusion of depth against untinted background.

Costume and prop have been arranged and painted to emphasize model's “exotic” occupation.

Harvard-educated surgeon from prominent Boston family. Lived in Japan for seven years. Converted to Buddhism. His vast art collection went to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, but most photographs went to the Peabody Museum. Lothrop was Bigelow's niece.



Museum number given to this photograph when it was accessioned. Tourist souvenir transformed into scientific object.

Studio backdrop—which recalls a European landscape—used in many von Stillfried photographs.

This image appeared in many albums of the time which call this photograph “Singing Girl.”

Imparts authority and guides meaning.

Generalizes woman and dress. Is she really “typical”?

↑ Baron von Stillfried: One of the most important early photographers to have worked in Japan (active 1870s). His photographs are still highly collectible today.