

BLACK SHIPS & SAMURAI

COMMODORE PERRY AND THE OPENING OF JAPAN (1853-1854)

BY JOHN W. DOWER

CHAPTER TWO: PERRY



Perry, 1854

Ryosenji Treasure Museum



Perry, 1852

Library of Congress

Westerners following Perry's exploits from afar relied on photographs, or far more commonly lithographs or woodcuts based on photographs, to imagine what the commodore looked like. Around the time of the Japan voyages, we encounter him in several renderings: sour in civilian garb just before departing, for example, and posing in profile for a photo used in casting a commemorative coin soon after he had returned.



*Daguerreotype of Perry
1852*

Library of Congress



*Silver coin with Perry's profile, 1855
and the daguerreotype on which it was based*

US Naval Academy Museum



The most famous portrait, taken by the great photographer Mathew Brady after the completion of the Perry mission, portrays the commodore standing in full uniform.

In popular illustrated periodicals, where photographs were reprocessed as lithographs and the like, his features became somewhat softened.



*Daguerreotype by
Mathew Brady
ca.1856 (left)*

Library of Congress

*Lithograph from
a daguerreotype
by P. Haas*

Harvard University
Library



The best-known Japanese woodblock portrait of Perry seems, at first glance, almost a mirror image of the jowly, clean-shaven individual in Brady's famous photo.



*"Portrait of Perry,
a North American,"
woodblock print,
ca. 1854 (left)*

Nagasaki Prefecture



*Daguerreotype by
Mathew Brady (detail)
ca.1856*

Library of Congress

As sometimes happened with especially popular woodblock prints, this rendering of "Portrait of Perry, a North American" actually circulated in several versions, with subtle variations in detail and coloring. In some versions, the commodore's hair is reddish—clearly evoking the familiar depiction of the Dutch as "red hairs." And in some, the whites of Perry's eyes are blue.



Nagasaki Prefecture



Peabody Essex Museum



Ryosenji Treasure Museum



We can offer both a simple and a more subtle explanation for these somewhat startling eyeballs. In the popular parlance of feudal Japan, Westerners were sometimes referred to as “blue-eyed barbarians,” and it is possible that some artists were a bit confused concerning where such blueness resided. That is the simple possibility. It was also the case, how-

ever, that in colored woodblock prints in general—which only emerged as a popular genre during the era of seclusion—ferocious and threatening figures such as monsters and renegades were frequently stigmatized by the same strange blue eyeball. Whatever the explanation, popular renderings of Perry and his fellow “barbarians” drew on conventions entrenched in the indigenous culture.

Although commercial artists immediately rowed out in small boats to draw pictures of Perry’s fleet on the occasion of the first visit in July 1853, then and even thereafter few actually had the opportunity to behold the commodore in person. This was due, in no little part, to Perry’s decision to enhance his authority by making himself as inaccessible as possible. Indeed, he remained so secluded prior to the formal presentation of the president’s letter that some Japanese, it is said, took to calling his cabin on the flagship “The Abode of the High and Mighty Mysteriousness.”



Perry as a long-nosed tengu or goblin ca. 1854

Ryosenji Treasure Museum

Failing to see Perry personally left many artists with little but their imaginations to rely on in depicting His High and Mighty Mysteriousness, a situation that the majority of them serenely accepted and even relished. And, in more than a few cases, they leave us with lit-

tle guesswork concerning where (beyond “red hairs” and “blue-eyed barbarians”) their stereotypes were coming from. In one instance, for example, we find the commodore presented as “Tengu Perry”—alluding to the large, long-nosed goblin figures that folklore portrayed as possessing uncanny powers.



More common were prints and paintings that rendered Perry and his fellow Americans conspicuously hirsute. In several such portraits, we find him paired with Commander Henry A. Adams, his second-in-command.

Adams (left) and Perry

Ryosenji Treasure Museum

*Perry (left) and Adams,
from "The Pictorial Scroll
of the Arrival at Kurihama"
ca. 1854*

Ryosenji Treasure Museum



In another print, Perry is paired with his young son (named after Perry’s famous brother Oliver), who accompanied him to Japan—here sporting a trim mustache like his father, but lacking his father’s goatee.



*Perry and son,
woodblock print
1854*

Ryosenji Treasure Museum

A painting of Oliver Perry alone, on the other hand, portrays him not only clean-shaven, but looking remarkably like a delicate and romantic Japanese youth.

Perry's son Oliver, painting
ca. 1854

Ryosenji Treasure Museum



A well-known black-and-white *kawaraban* print of the commodore hoisting a sheathed sword and wearing a strange brimless cap features a thick mustache running parallel to bushy eyebrows.

Perry, kawaraban (broadsheet)
1854

Ryosenji Treasure Museum



A scroll painted in Shimoda in 1854, on the other hand, renders him with both bushy hair and beard and trim hair and beard—as if he had gone to the barber and returned while the artist was still at work.

Why all this facial hair? The explanation lies primarily in the power of imaginative language: ever since the distant 16th- and early-17th-century encounter, another derisive sobriquet for Westerners was “hairy barbarians” (*keto* or *ketojin*).



Two images of Perry from the “Black Ship Scroll,” 1854

Honolulu Academy of Art

On rare occasion, the commodore’s hairy visage was transparently barbaric and even demonic—as if the American emissary were truly one of the legendary demons or devils (*oni* and *akuma*) that old folktales spoke about as dwelling across the seas. The most vivid such renderings are to be found in some truly alarming close-ups of both Perry and Adams that also appear in the Shimoda scroll.

*Portrait of Perry
from the “Black Ship Scroll”*

Text: “True portrait of Perry, envoy of the Republic of North America. His age is over sixty, complexion yellow, eyes slanted upwards, nose impressive, lips red as if rouged. His hair is curled like rings and mixed with gray. He wears three gold rings. His uniform is white wool with raised crests woven in gold....”

Honolulu Academy of Art



*Portrait of Adams
from the “Black Ship Scroll”*

Text: “True portrait of Adams, Second in Command from the Republic of North America. His complexion is yellow with an earthy tone, eyes large, nose high-bridged. He is very tall. His uniform is black wool with raised crests woven with gold....”

Honolulu Academy of Art



Even this Shimoda scroll, however, suggests that appearances could be deceiving. The text that surrounds its ferocious “True Portrait of Perry” also includes the following poem, which the commodore was imagined to have composed on board his flagship:

*Distant moon that appears
over the Sea of Musashi,
your beams also shine on California.*

Apparently, even barbarians might have Japanese-style poetic souls. Indeed, when it came to painting and describing Adams’ 15-year-old son, who accompanied the mission, the “Black Ship Scroll” practically fell all over itself in portraying him as a paragon of polyglot virtues—delicate, aesthetic, muscular, martial, and a model of filial piety.

Portrait of Adams’ son from the “Black Ship Scroll”



Text: “This youth is extremely beautiful. His complexion is white, around his eyes is pink, his mouth is small, and his lips are red. His body, hands, and feet are slightly plump, and his features are rather feminine. He is intelligent by nature, dutiful to his parents, and has a taste for the martial arts. He likes scholarship, composes and recites poems and songs, and reads books three lines at a glance. His power exceeds three men, and his shooting ability is exceptional....”

Honolulu Academy of Art

As we shall see again in other renderings of interactions with the Perry mission, the commodore and his fellow Americans were also drawn from direct observation on occasion, and depicted as being simply people of a different race and culture. Their features were sharper than their Japanese counterparts. Their clothing differed. They comported themselves in occasionally peculiar ways. Clearly, however, they shared a common humanity with the Japanese.

An informal watercolor of Perry and Adams painted by Hayashi Shikyo in 1854, for example, conveys an impression of the two men as officers rather weary with responsibility.



*Perry (left) and Adams,
by Hayashi Shikyo, 1854*

Peabody Essex Museum



*Kakemono (hanging scroll)
of Perry, by Shimooka Renjo
1901*

Peabody Essex Museum

Almost a half century later, Shimooka Renjo, who had actually participated in one of the conferences with Perry, painted the commodore's portrait in watercolor and ink and mounted this as a traditional hanging scroll (*kakemono*). Here was a Perry unlike those produced in the tumult of the actual encounter: carefully executed, formal, respectful, tinged with obvious Western painterly influence—and still distinctively “Japanese.”