

BLACK SHIPS & SAMURAI

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

BY JOHN W. DOWER

CHAPTER SIX: PORTRAITS



S. Wells Williams

Shiryō Hensanjo, University of Tokyo



Okinawan official

from the official Narrative

As already seen in their diverse renderings of Commodore Perry, Japanese artists did not hesitate to resort to outright fantasy when drawing portraits of the foreigners. Even when they were ostensibly drawing “from life,” their attempts to capture the spirit or personality of their subjects gave a touch of caricature to the resulting portrait. We see this in an ostensibly realistic pair of paintings of Perry and Commander Henry Adams, his second-in-command, for example, as well as in anonymous woodblock portraits of a decidedly fop-pish Adams and an alarmingly sharp-visaged “American Chief of the Artillery-men.”



Perry (right) and Adams, ink and color on paper, 1854

Ryosenji Treasure Museum



Left: “American Chief of the Artillery-men”

Right: “The North American Adjutant General (Adams)”
woodblock prints, ca. 1854

Peabody Essex Museum

Full-figure renderings of the foreigners as they were observed in Kurihama or Yokohama or Shimoda or Hakodate followed the same free style. Often these figures were lined up in a row like a droll playbill for a cast of characters who had chosen to strut their stuff on the Japanese stage.



“Pictorial Scroll of Black Ships Landing at Shimoda” (detail)

Ryosenji Treasure Museum

“Pictorial Record of the Arrival of Black Ships” (detail) ca. 1854

Ryosenji Treasure Museum



A particularly dramatic cast of characters accompanied one of the monstrous black ships introduced earlier, in the form of a gallery of nine individuals. In addition to Perry, the accompanying text identified them (right to left) as an interpreter, the crewman who sounded the ocean's depth, a high officer, the chief of the "rifle corps" (marines), a navigator, a marine, a musician, and a crewman from a "country of black people," usually called upon "to work in the rigging or dive in the sea." Colorful and idiosyncratic, they comprised a motley crew indeed.



*Detail from
"Black Ship and Crew"
ca. 1854*

Ryosenji Treasure Museum



Some sketches by Japanese artists were clearly drawn from direct observation, with close and annotated attention to every article of attire and piece of equipment.



From an artist's sketchbook, 1854

Shiryo Hensanjo, University of Tokyo

The most “realistic” run of portraits of the Americans dates from March 8, 1854, when Perry landed in Yokohama to initiate his second visit. Commissioned by the *daimyo* of Ogasawara, the original sketches were drawn by Hibata Osuke, a performer of classical Noh drama who studied under the famous woodblock artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi. With some difficulty, Hibata managed to situate himself in the midst of that day’s activities and record a great variety of subjects and events.

Other artists subsequently copied his keenly observed renderings of the commodore and five others: Commander Adams; Captain Joel Abbott; S. Wells Williams, a missionary from China who knew some Japanese; a Dutch-Japanese interpreter named Anton Portman (communication often required using Dutch as an intermediary language between English and Japanese); and Perry’s son Oliver, who served as his personal secretary. The posing was highly stylized—all in half-profile—and each subject possessed the prominent nose that set Caucasians apart in Japanese eyes. At the same time, each was unmistakably imbued with individuality.



Two colored renderings based on Hibata Osuke's 1854 sketches of Perry and five others. From right to left (above): Commodore Perry, Commander Adams, English-Japanese translator S. Wells Williams, translator Anton Portman, Captain Joel Abbot, and Perry's son Oliver

Shiryō Hensanjō, University of Tokyo (above) Chrysler Museum of Art (below)

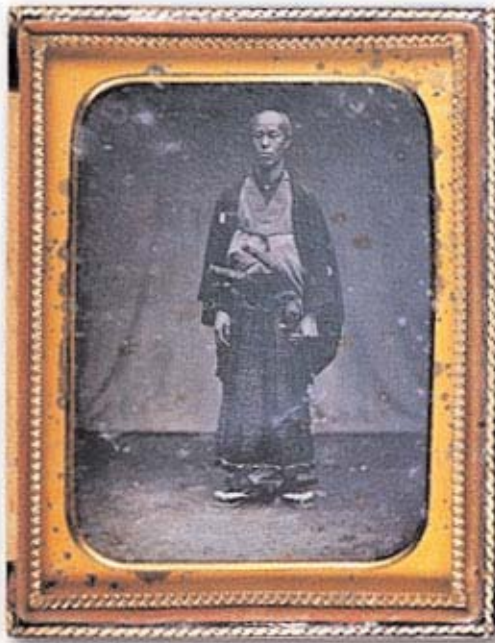


The Americans brought a very different—and very recent—perspective to their individual portraits. Where Japanese depictions of the foreigners essentially came out of well-established rhetorical and pictorial conventions, the Americans brought the eye of the camera. Two different photographic processes—calotype and daguerreotype—had been introduced in the West in 1839, and the latter dominated the world of photography into the 1850s.

Daguerreotypes were distinguished by their grainless and exceptionally sharp images, but had the disadvantage of producing a single, fragile, non-reproducible original. There was no negative, and thus no possibility of making multiple copies. Producing one of these plates involved a complex (and toxic) chemical process, and was exceedingly time-consuming. Although a daguerreotype camera was obtained by an enterprising Japanese as early as 1848, it was the Perry mission that actually made the first photographic portraits of Japanese.

The entertaining “Black Ship Scroll” rendering of three Americans photographing a courtesan (seen in the previous section) actually depicts the mission’s chief photographer, Eliphalet Brown, Jr., and his assistants. Although Brown is known to have taken more than 400 daguerreotypes of scenery and individuals, all but a handful have been lost. Some were given to the individuals who were photographed, and those brought back to the United States were destroyed in a fire while the official report was being prepared for publication.

The few originals that have come down to us—mounted in the heavy gilt frames that commonly enhanced and protected these precious images—portray samurai. Among them are depictions of Namura Gohachiro, an interpreter summoned from Nagasaki; Tanaka Mitsuyoshi, a low-ranking guard in Uruga; and officials in the new treaty ports of Hakodate and Shimoda.



Tanaka Mitsuyoshi, a low-ranking guard in Uruga. Daguerreotype by Eliphalet Brown, Jr., 1854

Collection of Shimura Toyoshiro

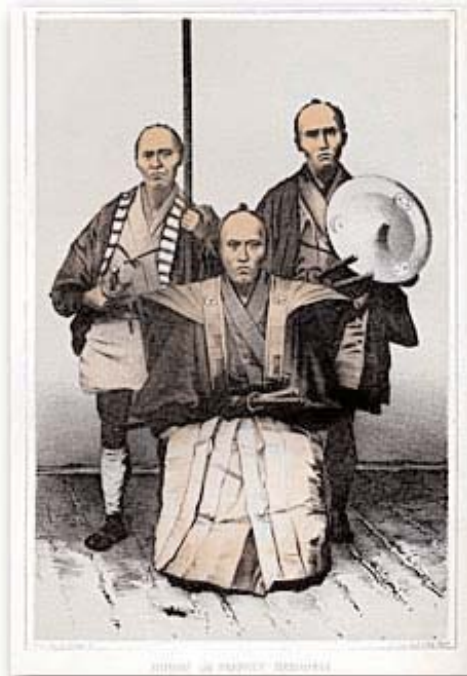


Namura Gohachiro, an interpreter summoned from Nagasaki. Daguerreotype by Eliphalet Brown, Jr., 1854

Bishop Museum of Art

The posed portraits of Namura and Tanaka, similar at first glance, have subtle stories to tell. Barely visible behind Tanaka’s feet, for example, is the foot of some sort of wooden stand—believed to be a prop used to assist subjects in holding steady for the long exposure that the daguerreotype process demanded. Additionally, whereas Tanaka appears as the eye would see him (kimono folded left over right, and swords carried on the left), Namura confronts us in reverse image (kimono folded right over left, and swords on the right—where a samurai, trained to fight right-handed, would be unable to draw quickly). Since the daguerreotype produced a mirror image, it is Tanaka who is the anomaly. To appear properly in the photo, he folded his garment and mounted his sword improperly. Namura did not do this.

Another of Brown's surviving "magic mirror" daguerreotypes exposes, in and of itself, this same issue of how to pose. In this daguerreotype, which has deteriorated over time, the seated *bungo* or prefect of Hakodate holds center stage, while two retainers stand behind him. Like Tanaka, the prefect maintained proper appearance by reversing his sword and garment for the camera; and, like Namura, his attendants did not bother to do so. As fate would have it, however, the prefect's fastidiousness did not carry over to the wider world of publishing. The official Narrative contains a lithograph of the same three men—apparently based on another daguerreotype taken at the same sitting—in which the two aides have changed sides, but so have the prefect's sword and kimono-fold. Somewhat inexplicably, all three men now appear to be improperly dressed and armed.



Endo Matazaemon, a local official in Hakodate, and his attendants. 1854 daguerreotype by Eliphalet Brown, Jr. and a near mirror-image lithograph of the three men from the official Narrative of the Perry mission published in 1856

Yokohama Museum of Art

Despite the loss of Brown's original work, the official record actually contains a number of woodcut and lithograph portraits that are explicitly identified as being based on his daguerreotypes. Thus, the camera's eye remains, even though the photographs themselves have disappeared. Its focus falls not just on samurai, but on anonymous commoners as well—and not just on the Japanese, but also on residents of the Ryukyu ("Lew Chew") Islands, which did not formally become part of Japan until the 1870s.



Like the official illustrations that included artists sketching and painting, the Narrative actually gives us a subtle “double exposure” of the photographer at work. Thus, close scrutiny of a bucolic illustration by Heine titled “Temple at Tumai, Lew Chew” reveals Brown at stage center preparing to photograph several seated figures.

*“Temple at Tumai, Lew Chew”
with Eliphalet Brown, Jr.
preparing to take a daguerreo-
type portrait (detail at right)*



*“Afternoon Gossip, Lew Chew”
lithograph based on Brown’s daguerreotype*

Some twenty-plus pages later, we are treated to a charming, tipped-in lithograph titled “Afternoon Gossip, Lew Chew,” depicting three men—surely these very same subjects—seated on a mat beneath a tree, smoking and seemingly at perfect peace with the world.

While dignity pervades the individual portraits that grace the Narrative, informality such as this is rare. Usually, those who held so still for so

long—as the slow daguerreotype process demanded—tend to seem immobilized, almost frozen. They inhabit a world far removed from the animated, colorful, half imagined or even entirely imagined “Americans” we encounter on the Japanese side.

In subsequent years, the verisimilitude of photography and technical ease of both shooting and reproducing pictures would gradually render paintings, woodblock prints, lithographs, woodcuts, and the like outdated and even obsolete as ways of visualizing other peoples and cultures for mass consumption. And, indeed, immediately following Perry’s opening of

Japan, both native and foreign photographers hastened to produce a rich record of the people and landscapes of the waning years of the feudal regime (the Shogun's government was overthrown in 1868). In this regard, Eliphalet Brown, Jr.'s daguerreotypes and the portraits copied from them were a harbinger of what was to come.

A Gallery of Portraits from the Official Narrative



Court interpreter, Ryukyus



Chief magistrate, Ryukyus



Buddhist priest



Mother and child, Shimoda



Prefect of Shimoda



Women, Shimoda



"Priest in Full Dress," Shimoda



"Prince of Izu"



Interpreters



Women in Shimoda