

The Evolution of Photography in Early Japan

By: Aleiyah Springer

Photography in Japan began as near the 1850s, as the arrival of the new technology was well documented by Nagasaki merchant Toshinogō. In 1843, Toshinogō received a shipment from France that included a daguerreotype camera. For reasons unknown, the first camera did not stay in Japan. However, another camera arrived five years later. At first, the Japanese did not have the knowledge necessary to produce a photograph. However, after a few years of trial and error, the first known photograph (the 1857 portrait of Shimazu) was produced in Japan.¹ This essay will introduce and analyze the evolution of camera technologies and photographs produced in Japan. It will argue that the camera gave Japan the chance to showcase itself to the world and give outsiders a view of Japan in the way that the Japanese wanted.

In the 1850s, photos produced in Japan were those of emperors and royalty. The first portrait of Shimazu (Figure 1), produced in 1857, was in black and white. The man pictured is looking away from the camera and wearing traditional Japanese clothing. The photograph looks candid because Shimazu poses as if he does not realize the photo is being taken. The photograph quality is poor and there are blotches of black and white ink in the wrong places, showing the lack of skill the Japanese had producing photographs at this time. Why is this the photograph that the Japanese archived? Shimazu Nariakira was a Japanese feudal lord that was interested in Western science, technology, and military techniques.² Shimazu held a high position in Japanese society, which is why he was photographed. To further teach the Japanese about cameras and

¹ Fraser, Karen M. *Photography and Japan* London: Reaktion Books, 2011:11.

² Karen Fraser, "Introduction to Photography in Japan", 11

producing photographs, Western photographers such as [Pierre Rossier](#), [Baron Raimund von Stillfried](#), and [Felice Beato](#) came to Japan.³ As the Japanese became more skilled with photography, later known photographs were clearer and better looking.

Japanese photography, in many ways, shows parallels to Japan's interest in Western culture. In 1872 and 1873, two separate portraits were taken of the Meiji Emperor. In the portrait of 1872 (Figure 2) the emperor wears a sokutai, which is complex attire only worn by courtiers, aristocrats, and the emperor. The outfit includes baggy trousers, an outer robe, and a headdress called a kummuri.⁴ Meanwhile, the photograph of 1873 (Figure 3) shows the emperor in Western-style clothing. He is dressed in military gear with a sword at his side. These photographs are taken by the renowned photographer, [Uchida Kuichi](#), who was the only photographer allowed to take photographs of the emperor. While the timing behind these portraits are only a year, so much has changed. Not only is the style of clothing different, but the color scheme of the portrait as well. The first portrait is in black and white while the second possesses more of a black and brown image. It is inferred that only the latter image was circulated to Western countries because it holds a greater presence in scholarly work than the first image. In addition, the latter image presents the message that Japan is equipped with military presence, something that was shown off to the West.

In terms of camera technologies, Japan's development in photography was always a decade behind the Western world. In fact, the daguerreotype did not stay in Japan for that long, as it was already outdated before the Japanese figured out the process of developing a

³ Karen Fraser, "Introduction to Photography in Japan", 11

⁴ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Sokutai." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 19 Nov. 2014, www.britannica.com/topic/sokutai.

photograph. After the daguerreotype, Japanese photographs tended to be *carte-de-visites*, a small photographic portrait of a person mounted on a piece of card, or ambrotypes- a positive photograph on glass.⁵ Other than these two types of developments, Japanese photographers created a process that was different from the West. The 1890s brought art photography, a very popular Japanese style.

Near the turn of the century photography in Japan began to become more popular. Japan finally caught up with the West and no longer lagged behind in technology.⁶ We can see, through many photographs, the new sophistication in Japanese photographs. This sophistication is of no surprise, as the purpose for Japanese photographs was to be circulated around the world. During the nineteenth century thousands of Japanese photographs left Japan with tourists.⁷ This allowed for the Japanese to create their own narrative in the eyes of the West. The photographs that were sent out can be put into two categories: photographs of Japan's landscape, including Mount Fuji, and photographs of the Japanese staged, wearing traditional clothing such as a geisha.

In our own exhibition, there are many examples of staged, art photography. One example is a photograph titled "Girls Looking at Flowers" (Figure 4). When first looking at this photograph, we see two girls walking through a garden. They are both wearing kimonos and one of them holds an umbrella. But at closer look, the colors in the background are not what is expected and there is something that looks unreal in the photograph. That is because this is a staged photograph taken in a studio, rather than an actual garden with cherry blossoms. Because

⁵ Karen Fraser, "Introduction to Photography in Japan", 14

⁶ Karen Fraser, "Introduction to Photography in Japan", 14

⁷ Tucker, Anne, and Anne Tucker. "A Parallel Vision: The Evolution of Photography in Japan." *Aperture (U.S.A.)*, no. 170 (March 1, 2003): 42.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1320200646/>.

the photo is taken in a studio, the photographer is able to stage the girls however he wants and also portray the background colors in the way to make the photograph the way he wants using the cherry blossom backdrop. The cherry blossoms and the girls' clothing stand out so that the viewer's eyes are immediately drawn to them. This staged photo shows Japan to Western countries in an unrealistic way because the elements that make up the photograph are unreal.

Another photograph that is very similar is titled "Club Hotel, Yokohama" (Figure 5). This photograph was taken around the beginning of the twentieth century. The photograph depicts a port city in Japan called Yokohama. Yokohama was one of the first cities to be open to Western trade and foreign communities. In this photograph, we see many people walking down a large street that has houses, trees, flags, and lanterns that line the streets. The lanterns are brightly colored as well as the flags and some clothing that people are wearing. Yokohama was such an important port city because it allowed for Japanese and Western people to continuously interact with each other. The questions to ask about this photo, however, are: Is this a staged photo? Did the Japanese use this photo as a way to showcase Japan to the West in an unrealistic way? Elements of this photograph do look very real and it seems as if the photograph was taken at a random time while people were strolling on the street. What can be found unrealistic is how everyone is walking in one direction and no one is coming towards the camera. The people in the photograph wear an assortment of colors. A woman dressed in pink and yellow stands out while most of the other people are wearing black clothing. Perhaps this is the dressing of that time or maybe the photographer colored parts of the photograph in order to highlight them. Nonetheless, the photograph is a depiction of everyday life in Japan and Western viewers are supposed to use it in order to see into Japanese culture.

An important photography movement in Japan was the Age of Art Photography from the 1890s to the 1920s. Artists who participated in this movement would manipulate the pigment in the photograph during the printing process.⁸ The final work would be very similar to that of other Japanese techniques such as woodblock prints and ink paintings. As time went on, photography in Japan continued to evolve. In Imperial Japan, styles changed into Pictorialism, Modernist Avante-Garde Photography, realism and propaganda.⁹ Photography soon became a medium that allowed for any type of expression in Japan. “During World War 11, Japan used photography as successfully for nationalistic propaganda purposes as any Western power. However, some Japanese artists resisted the military propaganda (as did many in the West), and sought to define or redefine what was essentially "good" about their nation.”¹⁰ Photography purposes also changed as the medium was more familiar in Japan.

In early Japan, photographs were used to showcase Japan in an unrealistic way. Many of the first Japanese photographs were staged and sent to Western countries as a way to say, “This is Japan” during the time when Japan was not open to the rest of the world. These photographs were very foreign to the West, as many people have not seen the landscapes in Japan or even Japanese people before. Through photography, the rest of the world was able to learn about Japan and Japan was even able to learn about the rest of the world. Photography also served as a way for Japan to become more technologically equate. Many photographs in our exhibition give examples of Japan showing itself to the rest of the world. We often see staged photographs or

⁸ Karen Fraser, “Introduction to Photography in Japan”, 15

⁹ Karen Fraser, “Introduction to Photography in Japan”, 18

¹⁰ Anna Tucker, “A Parallel Vision”, 42

specific elements of the photograph that are not candid because the Japanese thought their outside perception was very important.

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Images



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5