



Joseph McGrath
Lionel Jensen
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Tranquil Preparation

Acute beauty emanates from the gentle craftsmanship contained in the photograph. The background is an austere white broken only by the presence of a byōbu. It is the only infiltration of the outside into the scene, its crisp folds breaking the beautiful exquisite landscape. A dark box sits in sharp contrast to the light image behind it; closed drawers only hint at the mysterious abilities contained within. The mirror appears pockmarked, failing to provide an accurate representation of its subject, instead showing an ominously cloudy image. Yet elegance radiates from the disk, the woman staring into an opaque future riddled with mystery. It sits delicately in its simplistic stand, waiting for someone to pick it up for closer inspection. A drawer lies distinctly separate from the box. It has been pulled out, deemed vital to the imminent task. It is saturated with lightly colored objects, perhaps necessary for the beautification process that is underway.

Quiet calm permeates the scene, its participants accepting their positions with sophisticated grace. The hands are ripe with serenity: one pair waits in anticipation while the other works diligently at the obsidian locks of the kneeling woman. Carefully positioned behind her subject, the standing woman adeptly holds a delicately balanced tool: it is protracted and horizontal, seemingly for the styling of hair. On her knees, the other woman waits with a bundle of strings frayed at the edges, hinting at slight disarray in the midst of tranquility. There is a clear disparity in the status of the women, maintained through clothing in addition to action. The patterned cloth of the kneeling woman overtly juxtaposes the plain clothing – speckled with imperfections – worn by the standing woman, suggesting a power relationship with the kneeling woman as superior. A profile perspective suggests that the scene is natural, that the actions and positioning of the women is the everyday made extraordinary.

Called “Servant Fixing a Woman’s Hair”¹, this photograph was taken around 1870 in a Yokohama² studio. The photographer was Uchida Kuichi, famous for his portraits of the Meiji emperor in 1872 and 1873. Kuichi, a Japanese native, first encountered photography through study with Dutch physicians Jan Karel van den Broek and Julius L. C. Pompe van Meerdervoort and sought the patronage of foreigners³. However, while his work does indeed appear to be heavily influenced by the concept of otherness, it cannot be viewed exclusively in this manner⁴. Uchida Kuichi was well known for his portrait photography, but also participated in two world’s fairs through the display of “his Japanese ‘views.’”

Born in 1844, Kuichi entered the photography business in 1863 when he began importing photography supplies into Nagasaki. Shortly after, he joined a partner in opening a photography studio in Osaka but quickly moved away to start his own business in Yokohama as well as in two Tokyo districts. Over time, he built a reputation as Japan’s best photographer, leading to his role in photographing the ruling family in the years before his death from tuberculosis in 1875⁵.

The women play a crucial role in the photograph, but who are they? They are not the upper class women they first appear to be; rather, they are geisha, courtesans, and even rashamen – prostitutes reserved for visitors to Japan². This stemmed from an early superstition surrounding photography that these members of society ignored in order to gain publicity, a vital component in their professions. Despite the true nature of the models, they are costumed such that they are representative of social differences in Japan. Here lies a common cultural notion

¹ Dr. David Acton, Photography Curator of the Snite Museum

² <http://www.nissan-global.com/JP/TECHNOLOGY/FILES/2010/07/f4c4d24efc4bd9.jpg> (See Appendix A)

³ Gartlan, Luke. "Uchida Kuichi [Kyūichi]." Oxford Art Online. Oxford University Press, n.d. Web. 22 Nov. 2015.

⁴ Mio Wakita (2009) Selling Japan: Kusakabe Kimbei's Image of Japanese Women, *History of Photography*, 33:2, 209-223, DOI: 10.1080/03087290902768149
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03087290902768149>

⁵ "Photographers." *Early Photography of Japan*. Harvard College Library, n.d. Web. 22 Nov. 2015.

between the Japanese and the West: both cultures place significance on how the visual notates the social^{6,7}. Whereas European society customarily forces its own symbolic framework onto others, in this case the architecture is consistent between cultures. Kuichi can therefore create one image that portrays both the exotic beauty of Japan and the true figurative language of his own culture. Both women wear kimonos: the seated one wears a patterned kimono while the woman standing wears a solid color. However, neither woman has a white collared kimono, indicating that they are not full geisha, and that while the seated one is most likely a maiko, the standing one wears a kimono too plain for the typical maiko, most likely indicating that she is a servant⁸. The image “Servant Fixing a Woman’s Hair” places the female models in profile, creating shadows which delineate their faces and designating them as the foci of the photograph. However, the women do not face the camera, drawing attention to the clearly visible hairstyles worn by the women: one in progress and the other complete. This is typical of Japanese photographers such as Kusakabe Kinbei, who “does not emphasize the working process but rather the aesthetic beauty of decorative hairstyles”⁴. However, the same Kusakabe Kinbei also went on to create souvenir photograph albums that included works by Uchida as well as other artists⁹.

In order to interpret the photograph, we must consider the cultural context in which it was taken and sold. In 1868, the Meiji Restoration removed the Tokugawa Shogunate, bringing

⁶ Mio Wakita (2009) Selling Japan: Kusakabe Kimbei's Image of Japanese Women, *History of Photography*, 33:2, 209-223, DOI: 10.1080/03087290902768149 <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03087290902768149>

⁷ Pflugfelder, Gregory M. "The Nation-State, the Age/Gender System, and the Reconstitution of Erotic Desire in Nineteenth-Century Japan." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71.4 (2012): 963-74. *The Journal of Asian Studies*. Cambridge Journals, Dec. 2012. Web. 22 Nov. 2015.

⁸ Joanne. "What's the Difference between a Geisha, a Maiko and a Geiko?" *KimonoGeisha.com*. N.p., 23 Feb. 2015. Web. 25 Nov. 2015.

⁹ "Photographers." *Early Photography of Japan*. Harvard College Library, n.d. Web. 22 Nov. 2015.

about a period of Westernization with the goal of having a “wealthy country and strong arms”¹⁰. Part of the modernization of Japan was the rapid dissemination of photography¹¹, thus linking the concept to Western ideals. I believe, however, that the photograph taken of two women in the middle of 1870 by Kuichi originates from both sources: the desire to produce for the West as well as an aspiration to show the *bijin* of Japan. *Bijin-ga* describes traditional Japanese wood paintings that depict the current ideals of beauty through images of women surrounded by an aura of elegance. These images often portrayed women performing common acts such as doing makeup or writing letters. In the later nineteenth century, Western photographers began to replicate the patterns of Japanese art to sell photographs to the West – which had already seen examples of *bijin-ga* artwork. However, the genre served as a blend of cultures, as the art form was still very much in Japanese tradition at the time “Servant Fixing a Woman’s Hair” was taken.

With such an even mix of Japanese and Western cultural structure present in the photograph, it is difficult to discern its objective: was it primarily taken for Japanese enjoyment, or to show Japan to the West? Similar photographs taken by Western photographers in Japan, such as “Hairdressing (3)” by Stillfried¹², replace the traditional servant attire with more decorative garments. This serves to idealize Japan, suggesting a goal of impressing Europeans looking to “see” Japan. Kuichi’s photography, contrastingly, maintains the traditional, albeit less aesthetically pleasing, servant’s clothing. The goal of Kuichi’s photograph may, therefore, have been more focused on creating an accurate pictorial representation of Japan instead of the

¹⁰ “Meiji Restoration.” Encyclopædia Britannica. Britannica Academic. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015. Web. 23 Nov. 2015. <<http://academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic/373305/Meiji-Restoration>>.

¹¹ Fukuoka, Maki. “Selling Portrait Photographs: Early Photographic Business in Asakusa, Japan.” *History of Photography* 35.4 (2011): 355-73. Web.

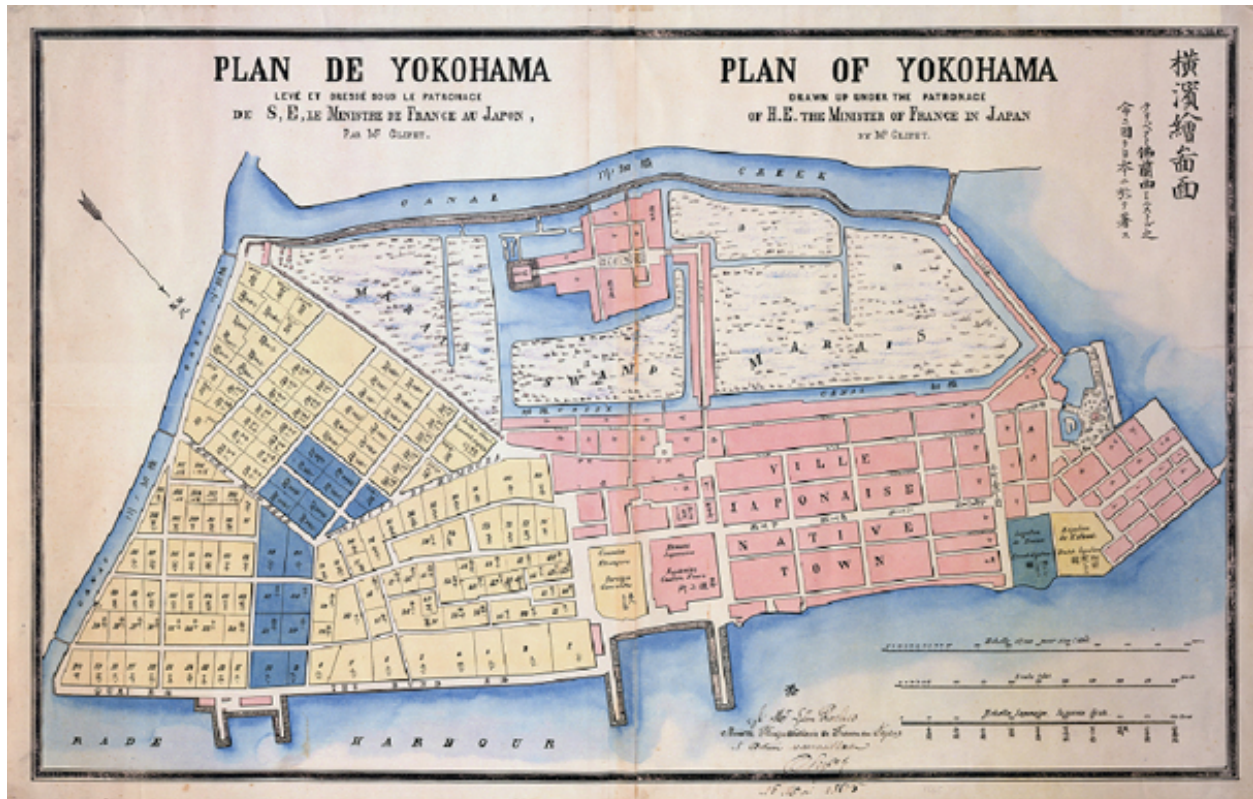
¹² “Metadata Database of Japanese Old Photographs in Bakumatsu-Meiji Period-[Record View].” Metadata Database of Japanese Old Photographs in Bakumatsu-Meiji Period-[Record View]. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Nov. 2015. (See Appendix B)

idealized version perpetuated by European society. The leading action of the photograph is another insight into an answer. Hair – one of the most noticeable features of any living creature – has a large cultural significance in many cultures. For example, Western conventions dictate that a female will have long hair in contrast to the male's short hair. However, this approach is only useful as long as we can determine a clear difference between the Japanese interpretation and the Western interpretation of hairstyling. In Europe, hair can represent wealth through its notable correlation with fashion sense. In Japan, a similar cultural lens prevails, with decorative hairstyles serving to adorn higher level geisha and courtesans. Thus, the difference in interpretive makeup in relation to hairstyle is not wide enough to come to a meaningful conclusion. A final option for interpretation appears in what happened after Kuichi took the photograph. During the 1873 and 1876 World's Fairs, Kuichi was praised for his views of Japan. These events were both prescribed and performed by Westerners, but the Japanese made the choice to allow Kuichi's work to appear as representative of Japan. The most common viewer would most likely be the Caucasian, either European or American, who wishes to learn more about so called "exotic" civilizations.

"Servant Fixing a Woman's Hair" is a photograph that accurately represents the turmoil of the times, incorporating aspects of ancient and modern Japan as the Meiji restoration induced Westernization. In a way it is an expression of conflict between East and West. It is a seemingly simplistic photograph that hides the shifting tides of culture and science.

1606 Words

Map of Yokohama, Japan circa 1882



This map from 1882 shows the Japanese living area in pink, with the foreign settlement in yellow. The diagonal streets top left are still Chinatown today.

