

# BLACK SHIPS & SAMURAI

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

BY JOHN W. DOWER

## CHAPTER THREE: BLACK SHIPS



*"Carrying the 'Gospel of God' to the Heathen"*

Ryosenji Treasure Museum



*American warship, ca. 1854*

© Nagasaki Prefecture

On the 1853 voyage, Perry's fleet consisted of two steam-driven frigates (the *Mississippi* and *Susquehanna*) and two sloops, with a total complement of 65 guns and a little less than 1,000 men. When he returned the following year, his armada had grown to nine vessels, with the new flagship *Powhatan* joining the other two paddle-wheel warships. The crew had almost doubled to around 1,800, and mounted cannon now numbered over 100.

In Japanese parlance, the American vessels quickly became known as the "black ships"—probably from the color of their hulls, although it is sometimes said that the label derived from the clouds of smoke that hovered over the coal-burning ships.

Perry himself had played a major role in mechanizing the U.S. Navy, and the new steam technology persuaded all who saw it that the world had entered a new era. When his oldest steamer, the *Mississippi*, was launched in 1841, its huge engines were described as "iron earthquakes." On the 1854 mission, the *Mississippi* consumed 2,336 pounds of coal per hour, while the corresponding figures for the less efficient *Susquehanna* and *Powhatan* were 3,310 pounds and 3,248 pounds respectively. To conserve fuel, all of the steamers hoisted sail as well.

Japan's adoption of the "closed country" policy in the early-17th century involved not merely keeping foreigners out, but also keeping Japanese in. Thus, severe restrictions were placed on shipbuilding, and maritime activity was restricted to sailing small vessels in coastal waters. An illustration in the official narrative of the Perry mission depicted one of the single-sail "junks" that patrolled the waters outside Edo.



*Japanese "junk" as recorded by the Perry mission in the official Narrative*

Even as pure sailboats, such modest vessels obviously could not compare with the great multi-mast ships of the foreign powers. Add steam engines and a battery of cannon, and it was all the more painfully apparent how far behind Japan had fallen during its long seclusion.

Ships captivate artists, and the visual record of Perry's mission is no exception. Although Perry first arrived in Japan in 1853 with a fleet of only four vessels (and returned in 1854 with nine), in May 1852 *Gleason's Pictorial* featured a stirring illustration of seven vessels it was originally anticipated would be "composing the Japanese Squadron." In its Valentine's Day edition of the following year, Gleason's gave Commodore Perry a spectacular send-off with a two-page engraving of an even larger armada readying for departure. Titled, "A Superb View of the United States Japanese Squadron, Under the Command of Commodore Perry, Bound for the East," this now well-known illustration included twelve vessels. Here, the artist merely expanded and rearranged the already imaginary earlier rendering. (Hand-tinted versions of both of these magazine illustrations often appear on the rare books and prints market.)



*This dramatically imagined rendering of Perry's squadron appeared in the February 12, 1853 issue of Gleason's Pictorial. Perry is being rowed to his flagship on the first voyage, the steamer Mississippi. In fact, the 1853 mission was comprised of only four ships.*



*Photograph of the Powhatan,  
which remained in service until 1887*

US Naval Academy



*Model of the Powhatan,  
flagship on the second voyage*

Smithsonian Institution

The *Powhatan*, Perry's famous flagship on the second voyage, survives in photographs, small-scale models, and—most spectacularly—the romantic frontispiece of a now classic 1853 book by Charles Beebe Stuart titled *Naval and Mail Steamers of the United States*. This luminescent, painterly rendering breathes romance and even mystery into this rather stolid warship through the filtered light and near-mystic ambiance associated with the "Turner school" of high-art painting (named after the British artist Joseph Turner, who died in 1851).



*Oil painting of the Powhatan from C. B. Stuart,  
Naval and Mail Steamers of the United States, 1853*

Yokohama Archives of History

Perry's own artists captured the fleet both at rest and in turbulence, but the most provocative rendering of the black ships at sea came from a painter back home, who added a banner legend to his own imaginary artwork to remind Americans that the commodore's true mission was literally divine. Perry himself usually spoke in terms of showing the flag, opening the doors of commerce, and spreading "civilization" to a backward people.



*Perry's fleet at anchor and in turbulent seas, as depicted in the official Narrative*

At the same time, it was widely understood that he was also returning Christianity to a heathen society that had driven out such teachings over two centuries previously. Accordingly, in this graphic rendering, we behold both steamship and sailship plowing through frothy seas above a large caption reading "U.S. JAPAN FLEET. Com. PERRY carrying the 'GOSPEL of GOD' to the HEATHEN, 1853."



*"U.S. JAPAN FLEET. Com. PERRY carrying the 'GOSPEL of GOD' to the HEATHEN, 1853" by James G. Evans, oil on canvas*

Chicago Historical Society

One person's god may be another's demon, of course. In this regard, Japanese artists also gave free rein to their imaginations by depicting the steam-driven black warships, almost literally, as Darkness Incarnate. In the best-known print of this sort, the ship's hull is pitch black, smoke belches from its funnel, the figurehead on the bow is a leering monster, port-holes high in the stern glower like the eyes of an apparition, the ship's sides bristle with rows of cannon, and gunfire streaks like a searchlight from a gun near the bow as well as from another, unseen, at the stern.

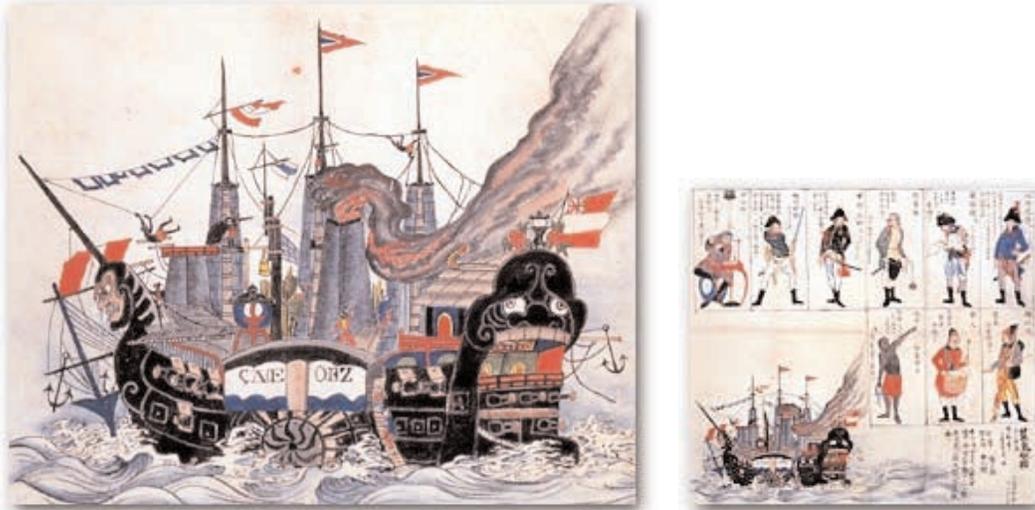


*American warship,  
woodblock print  
ca. 1854  
Nagasaki Prefecture*



Although woodblock prints as a genre were popular illustrations never intended to be confused with fine art, the detail of this demonic rendering reveals several aesthetic touches characteristic of traditional Japanese design. We see this in the stylized curves of the waves and filigreed rendering of whitecaps and splashing water, for example, as well as in the distinctive pattern of the ship's paddle-wheel.

In a demonic sister ship that was part of a larger painted montage, many of the same features are present—and a touch more. Here smoke from the coal-burning engines is streaked with forked tongues of flame. To knowledgeable Japanese, these might well have evoked classic artistic depictions of the fires of hell and the conflagrations that consumed palaces and temples in an earlier era of civil wars.



*“Black Ship and Crew,” watercolor on paper, ca. 1854*

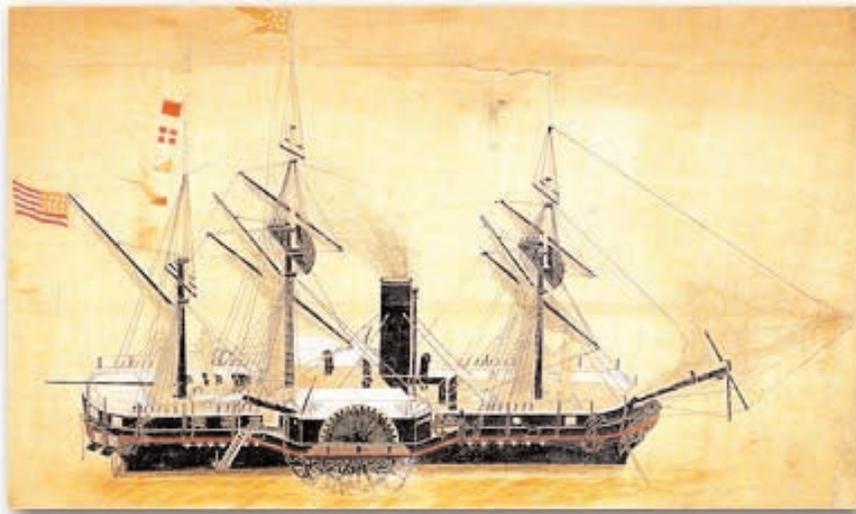
Ryosenji Treasure Museum

Like the blue eyeballs seen in occasional renderings of Perry and other “barbarians,” however, even the demon ships are more complicated and nuanced than they appear to be at first glance. Take, for example, the rendering of the stern of the vessel: in each of these graphics, this clearly has been turned into the eyes, nose, mouth of a monster. Is it not obvious that this is meant to reflect the monstrous nature of those who came with the ship? In fact, this is not so obvious—for Asian seafarers of the time sometimes placed huge demonic faces



on the sterns of their vessels to ward off evil spirits and ensure safe passage. Despite the seclusion policy, a number of delegations from Korea visited Japan during the Tokugawa

period, for example, and we know from Japanese scrolls depicting these missions that the Koreans themselves protected their fleet with fearsome markings of this nature. Could this have influenced these particular Japanese artists who sought to tell the populace about Perry's black ships? We cannot say.



*The Powhatan,  
hanging scroll  
1854 or later*

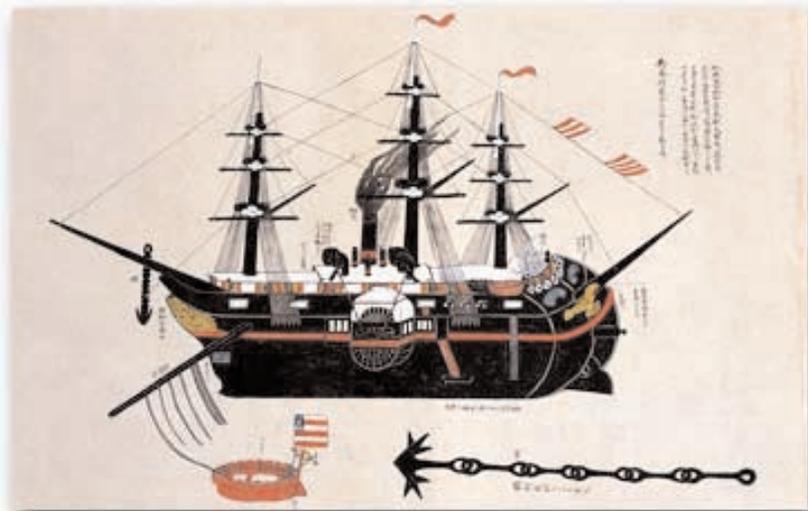
Peabody Essex Museum

Most Japanese renderings of the black ships were more straightforward, in any case, and provide a small but compelling example of how pictorial "realism" may vary depending not only on the viewer, but also on the medium of expression used. The handsome oil painting of the *Powhatan* in Charles Beebe Stuart's book, for example, was almost a mirror image of the formal photograph of that vessel—and yet worlds apart in its ambiance.

Japanese artists also portrayed the *Powhatan* and other black ships "realistically," from the same perfect-profile perspective—and yet conveyed an entirely different impression.

*"Black Ship at  
Shimoda,"  
painting  
1854*

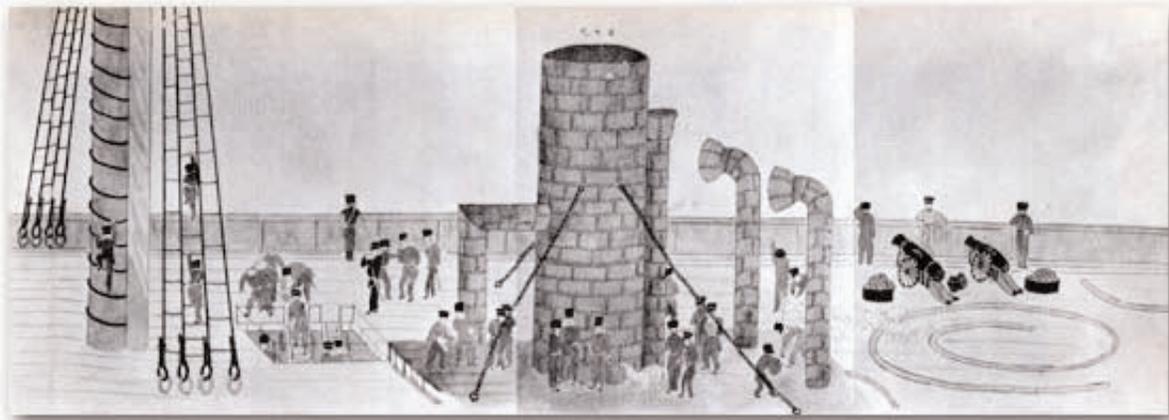
Ryosenji Treasure Museum



Perry's strategy of simultaneously impressing and intimidating the Japanese included inviting some of their representatives to tour his flagship. This made possible a small number of on-deck and below-deck depictions of the details of the black ships.



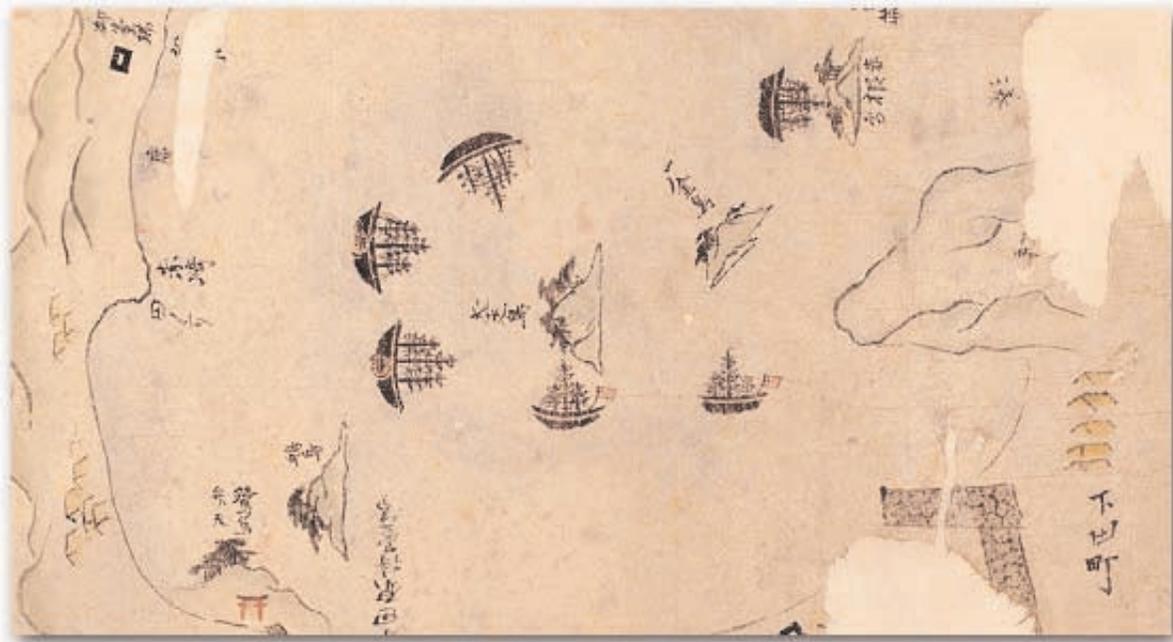
*Japanese official on board the Susquehanna from the official Narrative.*



*Japanese sketches from on board the Powhatan 1854*

Library of Congress

Other artists, meanwhile, rendered the foreign intrusion from afar with panoramic views of the American squadrons anchored in Japanese waters. Such graphics, done in both color and black-and-white, often were designed to convey detail concerning not only the black ships but also the surrounding terrain.



*Map of the harbor at Shimoda, from the “Black Ship Scroll,” 1854*

*Six of Perry’s gunboats rest at anchor. Place names (and ships) appear rightsideup, upsidedown, and sideways—a convention that developed from maps being rotated as they were read.*

Honolulu Academy of Art