

GLOBETROTTERS' JAPAN: PEOPLE  
FOREIGNERS ON THE TOURIST CIRCUIT IN MEIJI JAPAN  
BY ALLEN HOCKLEY

Picturing  
"the Japanese"

Representation &  
Misrepresentation

Urban Life /  
Rural Life

Women: Real  
& Imagined

Media &  
Messages

Sources &  
Resources

### Media & Messages

Did late-19th-century globetrotter photographs seriously misrepresent Japanese people? As so often with images, responses vary according to one's perspective. We are, of course, immediately suspicious of photographs that were staged in commercial studios. But while the painted backdrops and stage sets used for such posed images certainly appear artificial, the costumes, accoutrements, and props represent fashions and artifacts in common use at the time.

Studio inventories require a more nuanced assessment. As demonstrated above, commercial photographers emphasized some aspects of Japanese culture and customs over others. Although the globetrotter era coincided with Japan's rapid modernization and Westernization, tourist photography eschewed these contemporary developments in favor of a romanticized, often even pre-modern image of Japan. Catalogues of scenic views included Western-style infrastructure in the treaty ports (hotels, railway stations, post offices), but evidence of Japan's emerging modernity appears rarely and usually inadvertently in commercial photographs of Japanese people.



*A man wearing a Western suit and carrying a Western-style umbrella accidentally appears in the background of this image of carpenters working with traditional tools. As a rule, commercial photographers catering to the tourist trade focused their lenses away from the more modern aspects of daily life.*

*“Carpenters at Work”*

[gj20503]

One need only compare globetrotter photographs with woodblock prints documenting Japan’s rapid modernization to see two coexisting but radically different visions of Japan. Print artists avoided tradition as much as globetrotter photographers avoided modernity. While we might claim that these omissions constitute misrepresentation, it is perhaps more prudent to see both cases as convincing testaments to the power of their respective markets. Print consumers celebrated Japan’s modernization; globetrotters visited Japan seeking a different vision—one that any smart businessman with a camera would only be happy to fulfill.

## Mediums & Messages (A Counter-Intuitive Story)

*The medium is the message, we have been told, and in late-19th-century Japan this led to a curious development. The most up-to-date medium—commercial photography, devoted largely to the tourist trade—focused almost obsessively on old-fashioned, “traditional,” non-Western aspects of Japanese culture and society. The major exception was Western-style architecture. This is the “Japan” that foreigners chose to see.*

*Where, then, does one find the most graphic popular images of the dynamic transformations that took place during Meiji Japan’s long epoch of pellmell industrialization and Westernization? Ironically enough, in the traditional medium of woodblock prints. In contrast to commercial photographers, woodblock artists reveled in depicting all that was new and inspired by the West—whether this be fashions, occupations, or the very machinery of modern life.*



*From the 1870s into the 1890s, to be counted as “high society” in Japan was virtually synonymous with being seen as “highly Westernized.” Woodblock-print artists dwelled lovingly on this as well, often placing their fashionable women in scenes that included appreciation of Western music (harpsicords and chamber or choral groups). This typical commercial photo for the foreign tourist trade, by contrast, features a kimono-clad woman playing a traditional Japanese instrument, the koto.*

*“Illustration of Singing by the Plum Garden”  
by Toyohara Chikanobu, 1887*

[res.53.82] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

*“Koto Player” [gj20206] Brinkley’s Japan*



*This 1894 woodblock print, “Japanese Warships Fire on the Enemy near Haiyang Island” by Mizuno Toshikata, portrays a fiercely modern Japanese naval gun and sailors in Western-style uniforms, while the photographer from the 1890s posed two male models in traditional garb doing handicrafts.*

*“Japanese Warships Fire on the Enemy near Haiyang Island”  
by Mizuno Toshikata, 1894*

[2000.380.13] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

*“Lantern Makers”* [gj20306] Brinkley's Japan

Brinkley's *Japan* courtesy of Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College

[On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: click here.](#)

Massachusetts Institute of Technology © 2010 Visualizing Cultures

[Creative Commons License](#) 