

Felice Beato's Japan: People

An Album by the Pioneer Foreign Photographer in Yokohama

by Alona C. Wilson

Essay

Photographic Terms

Chronology

Sources

Portraits From the Dawn of a New Era



The above details all derive from the portrait album introduced in this unit. Titled "Photographic Views of Japan with Historical and Descriptive Notes," the photographs were taken by Felice Beato, the pioneer foreign photographer in Yokohama, Japan's major treaty port. The album was published shortly after 1868, the year the centuries-old feudal regime headed by a hereditary Shogun was overthrown and a new, "modern" government under the Meiji emperor established. Through Beato's lens, we gain an unusually intimate view of a range of Japanese individuals on the cusp of a new era in their history.

Felice A. Beato, photographer

Felice A. Beato (ca. 1833–ca. 1909), a naturalized British citizen and extraordinary photographer, first arrived in Japan in 1863. Beato found the treaty port of Yokohama ideal for establishing a commercial photography studio. Once settled in Yokohama, Beato only made one trip abroad—to Korea to cover a British-U.S. military expedition in the mid 1870s. Established as a treaty port in 1859, Yokohama grew rapidly and bustled with the activity of foreign businessmen, merchants, seaman, and tourists, as well as a rapidly expanding population of Japanese attracted by its commercial opportunities.



*Portrait of Felice A. Beato, 1860s
by an unknown photographer (detail).*

[bjs100]

Beato's life and work are of considerable interest to scholars, curators, and collectors. His album *Photographic Views of Japan with Historical and Descriptive Notes*, published around 1869, introduces a dialogue between the photograph and the descriptive essay.

The focus of this essay is his combined use of image and text to present a 19th-century view of people and customs at a time when Western expansion into Asia coincided with the advent of photography for consumption by tourists.

Beato in Yokohama

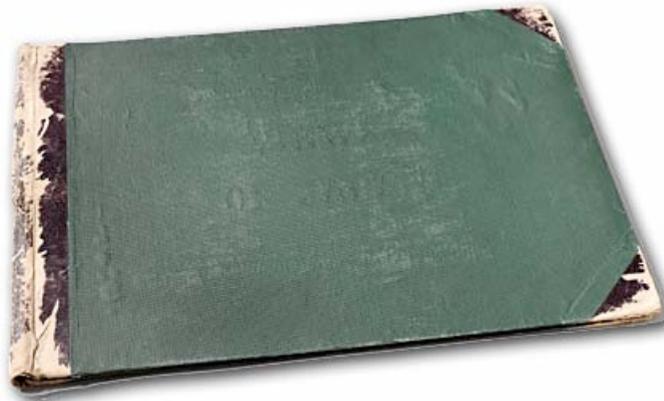
Beato resided in Yokohama for 21 years, the longest period he worked in a single place. Through his camera, he captured the transitional period between the feudal governance of the Edo period (1600–1868) and the imperial rule of the Meiji era (1868–1912) with memorable portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes. (Go to [Chronology](#) for more details of Beato's life and work.)

Documentary & Fiction

Already well known for his war photography of British expeditions in Crimea and China, Beato's reputation preceded his arrival in Yokohama. His war work is important because he was one of the first photographers to restage battle scenes to evoke gruesome events in a realistic manner. After a battle, Beato would rearrange bodies and equipment to create striking images, thus stretching the boundaries of veracity. Once his studio was established in Yokohama, his documentary style changed as he began to produce photos that catered to the taste of foreign merchants and the emerging tourist market. Some of the more memorable of these appeared in *Photographic Views of Japan with Historical and Descriptive Notes*. The contents and extraordinary craftsmanship of this album constitute an enduring contribution to the history of photography.

“Photographic Views of Japan with Historical and Descriptive Notes”

When he arrived in Japan in 1863, Beato brought with him a considerable inventory of photographs and negatives. Unfortunately, these plus the negatives he initially made in Japan were lost in a fire that swept through Yokohama and destroyed much of the city in 1866. Between 1866 and 1868, Beato worked feverishly to rebuild his stock and reestablish his livelihood. After producing hundreds of negatives, he selected a suite of photographs which he published with descriptions under the collective title *Photographic Views of Japan with Historical and Descriptive Notes* shortly after the overthrow of the feudal regime in 1868. The complete set survives in some collections, but often the images have been disassembled.

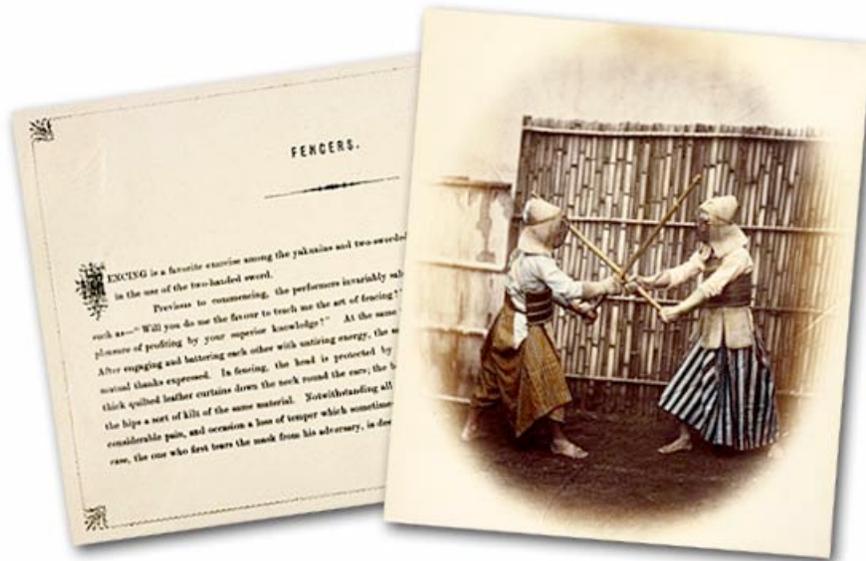


Beato's "Views of Japan" albums existed in multiple versions. The worn album cover pictured here is from the album Beato compiled shortly after 1868, held by the Smith College Museum of Art and used in creating this unit.

[bjs101]

This handsome album established a British view of "Japan" for the West. Each albumen print has a satin sheen. (For more about albumen prints, go to [Photographic Terms.](#)) The print is mounted on heavy paper to keep the thin photographic paper from curling inward after development. Almost every photograph is accompanied by a brief descriptive caption written by James W. Murray to provide an interpretive label for the viewer. The description is mounted on the opposite page and printed with distinctive type within an elegant border. When viewers turned each page of the large bound albums, they encountered not only a beautiful landscape, portrait, or scene of everyday life, but also a presumed authoritative commentary on the subject depicted.

These captions are of particular interest today not only for the stories they tell, but also for the odd and old-fashioned ways in which many Japanese names and words are "romanized." They also contain many factual errors that reveal the rudimentary level of foreign knowledge of Japan at this early stage in the nation's new relationship with the West. (The captions have been reproduced without correction here.)



"Fencers" illustrates how each photograph in Beato's album is paired with an ornately laid-out, essay-style caption on the left-hand facing page.

[bjscap42] [bjs42]

The album publication date of circa 1869 coincided with the transition from a feudal society to the restoration of imperial rule under the emperor Mutsuhito, whose reign as the so-called Meiji emperor lasted until 1912. Intent on capturing a market of buyers with strong interest in Japan, Beato hoped to sell the two-volume album to regain his financial footing. In 1871, the caricature of an enthusiastic, industrious, and flamboyant Beato, humorously identified as Count Collodion di Policastro, entertained readers of the illustrated newspaper *Japan Punch*, founded in Yokohama by Charles Wirgman, British correspondent and illustrator for the *Illustrated London News*.

Beato “as he ought to have appeared on his return from Korea,” from Japan

Punch, September 1871. This caricature of Beato in Korean cap and robe by his friend and collaborator

Charles Wirgman captures the photographer’s enthusiasm and flamboyance.

[bjs102]



Commemorative Albums & Tourism

Albums were introduced very early into the practice of photography. The albums often were bound like books, with embossed titles printed on the cover or spine. Covers were made of leather, fabric, or carved wood. In Japan, they also included lacquer with elaborate inlays. Photographers assigned to the British military expeditions often created albums for the officers to commemorate their battles. Beato created his first such keepsake album for officers who fought in the Crimean War. Often the albums were sent to their families and friends in advance of the officers’ return to Britain as a way of communicating the complexity of their lives and display of bravery for their country. Such albums, sometimes displayed in lyceums, fed a hungry public with images long after battles were fought.

As the tourist market grew in the 19th century, photo collections became a way of commemorating the traveler’s holiday. In these decades before personal cameras, tourists visited the commercial photographer’s studio to plan their itinerary or compile a selection representative of what they saw or fancied.



Covers from several commemorative albums: embossed fabric tourist’s album (left); a lacquer cover with inlays (middle); the linen cover from the Beato album featured in this site (right). The lacquer album is the cover for another Beato “Views of Japan” album featuring landscapes and tourist sites, and can be viewed in a companion Visualizing Cultures unit: [“Felice Beato’s Japan: Places.”](#)

[bjh104] [bjs103]

Coloring Black-&-White Originals

In the two-volume *Photographic Views of Japan*, landscapes and points of interest comprise the first volume and are presented in black-and-white albumen prints. In the second volume, reproduced here, the albumen portraits and genre scenes of everyday life were colored by hand.

Beato colored the photographs using several methods. The tonal shades of velvety blacks, reddish-browns, and purples were controlled through the interaction of developer chemicals and the albumen paper. To achieve more vivid colors, artisans applied watercolors to the completed print. The usual hand-applied colors were green, blue, red, and yellow. Templates were cut to ensure consistency when painting watercolors on multiple prints from the same negative.

Charles Wirgman (1832–1891), Beato's journalist friend and business partner, initially painted the photographs with watercolor. Shortly after Wirgman and Beato began partnering in the studio, however, Japanese watercolor artists were contracted for this service. Beato had a ready supply of colorists from the skilled craftsmen who had been trained to color woodblocks for traditional woodcut prints. With color photographs, Beato hoped to appeal to the prevailing taste already established by Japanese woodblock prints.



"Girl Playing the Samisen"

[bjs16]

In the delicately hand-colored photographs, Beato's sitters often are presented within an oval vignette, reflective of miniature portrait paintings. For example, the photograph "Girl Playing the Samisen" depicts a seated woman serenely facing the viewer with her stringed instrument.

Within his studio, Beato exercised complete control over the photographic process free from the laborious and precarious challenges of traveling with the cumbersome tools of his

trade. Outdoors, especially in the heat, the chemicals dried quickly, making development difficult and sometimes generating blurred photographs. Creating within the confines of the studio meant that each photograph could be made with exquisite precision.

The subtle tones of purple and brown in the samisen player's clothing were introduced during the development process by adding chemicals that interacted with the albumen paper. The bright colors that are particularly conspicuous in her hair ornaments and the yellow strings of the samisen were added later.



Details from “Girl Playing the Samisen” reveal how the manipulation of chemicals in the development process produced velvety shades of purple and brown in the clothing, while hand-applied watercolors were used to tint the hair ornaments, samisen strings, and sash. Such meticulous coloration gave a feeling of elegance and even luxury to black-and-white photos.

[bjs16]

Photographs & Captions

This portrait of “Girl Playing the Samisen” acquires additional meaning with Murray’s descriptive caption, in which he writes about the instrument and the role of music in the training of young women. As he tells it, the instrument is the equivalent of the guitar, thus establishing for the viewer a comparative model. Murray continues with a description of how the samisen is “played with a flat piece of wood, or ivory, or horn, and seldom struck with the fingers,” and goes on to impose his own Western standards by characterizing its sound as “wild and harsh” and the woman’s voice as “by no means pleasant to the ear.” These girls are “studious and diligent, and music is part of their overall education,” he states, but there is a “wonderful absence of any approach to harmony in the airs played by even the most carefully taught.”

Close acquaintances of Beato wrote descriptive captions that accompanied images in the album (right).

[bjscap16]

The captions were typeset with care and enclosed in four different decorative borders, as shown in details (below).

[bjs104]



For many Westerners unable to travel to Japan, these albums became a powerful and lasting impression of the new nation and its people. More than this, they helped establish a repertoire of stereotypes and fixed images and impressions that proved to be remarkably (and often misleadingly) durable. Murray's static description of the woman with a samisen, and his ethnocentric dismissal of the music itself, is but one example of this.

Models & "Types"

The "Views of Japan" reproduced in this unit represent portraits selected from Beato's wide-ranging opus and sold as a group by the photographer. This particular album, held by the Smith College Museum of Art, contains 50 images formerly bound in a green linen cover with the printed title, now absent, in the center of the cover. Although each photograph is different, the viewer may discern certain resemblances in the physical characteristics of the sitters. Beato usually hired his sitters and dressed them in appropriate attire for his studio photographs. The models for "Mr. Shōjirō" and "Our Painter" could almost be the same person, for example, although their descriptions differ greatly. In both images, the model holds instruments of trade in his hands. Mr. Shōjirō holds "that ingenious little calculating table of his ...," the *soroban*, or abacus. The painter stands in front of his portfolio of prints while holding his palette and brush. "A bit of a roué is our painter," Murray states, "much given to wine, and not insensible to the charms of singing girls. A good creature on the whole.... "



The models for "Our Painter" (left) and the merchant "Mr. Shōjirō" bear remarkable physical resemblance (could it be the same model?)—but the long accompanying captions single them out as very different personality types.

[bjs45] [bjs44] [bjs4544 details]

Such representation of customs, manners, and character types based upon established categories were a significant program of the post-Darwin 19th century, with long-reaching complications for cultural understanding. These photographs could be purchased individually with or without accompanying descriptions. They could be assembled into albums containing images of one or many countries. With the representation of a "type" of native, the individual is not important. With his representation of Mr. Shōjirō, most probably an invented name, Beato created the model of the Japanese businessman. The painter is nameless, however, and only identified by his profession. Physically, they may resemble each other closely, but the captions suggest very different professional temperaments.

Crime & Punishment

To some degree, the violence Beato captured in his earlier non-Japanese war photographs is evident in *Views of Japan*. During its transitional years as a treaty port, the Yokohama settlement was not entirely safe for foreigners. Often travel outside the confines of the settlement was not permitted or required hired guards. The two photographs that conclude the Smith College Museum of Art album, depicting "The Executioner" and "The Execution," are vivid reminders of the harshness of the times. Beato staged a studio portrait for the former, a nameless executioner with sword raised ready to decapitate a criminal.



“The Executioner” (detail)

The album concludes with two Beato photographs of violence. The caption accompanying this photo suggests that it depicts an actual execution ground. It was, in fact, staged in Beato’s studio.

[bjs49]

The scene is imaginary but draws from a real incident. Decapitation, Murray’s caption explains, is the most common form of capital punishment. The background view of serenely colored mountains is “representative of the execution ground” outside Yokohama where the “notorious” Shimidzu Seiji was executed in 1868 for murdering two British officers, Major Baldwin and Lieutenant Bird, four years earlier. The murderer is named, unlike the usually nameless portraits found in the album. The description thus provides an eyewitness-like account, but the image itself is entirely contrived.

By contrast, “The Execution” is an outdoor shot without imaginary props, depicting a crucified criminal and several severed heads on display. Murray’s description, one of the lengthiest in the album, serves several purposes. It describes not only the execution scene but the multiple ways in which executions were performed—crucifixion, beheading, or forced suicide. When the traveler returned home to share Beato’s photographs and Murray’s texts, he or she came away with a final impression of barbarism—an image that would have a substantial and pernicious afterlife in later foreign representations.



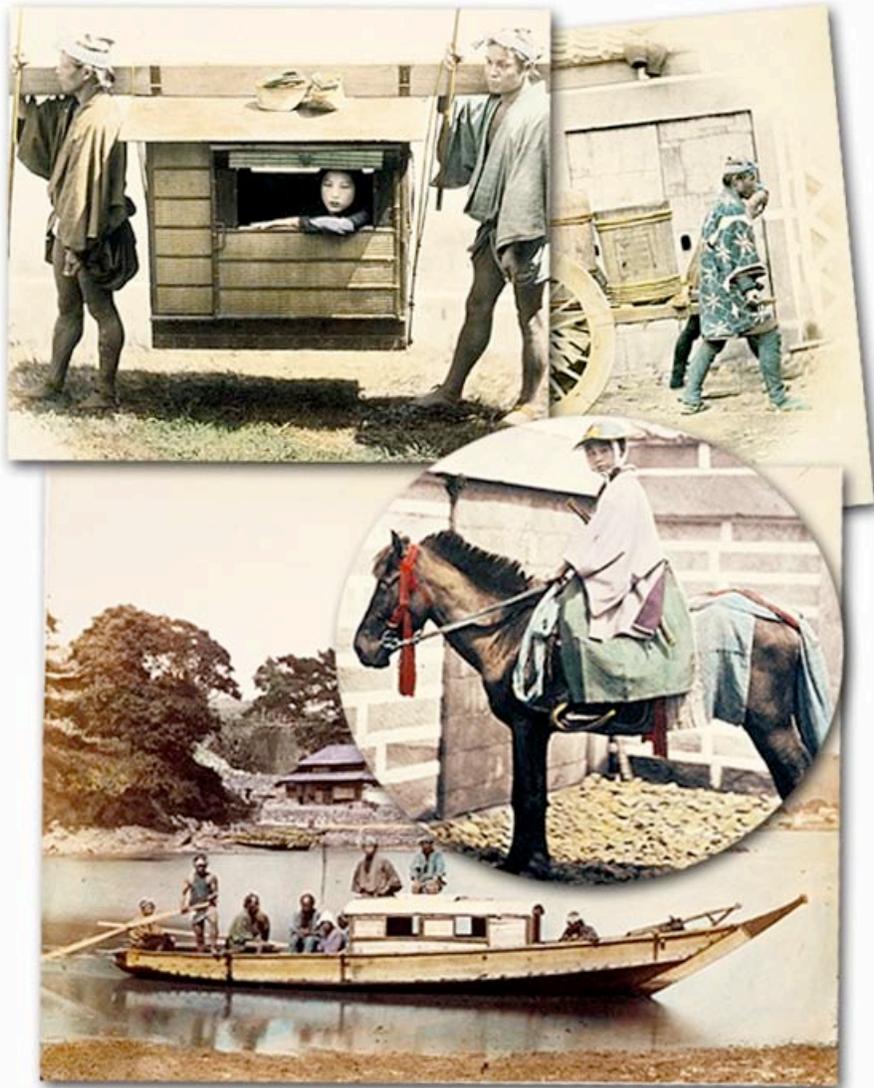
“The Execution” (detail)

The album’s closing photo was not staged at all. It depicts the severed heads of executed criminals, put on display as a warning to others. The full photograph also includes a crucified criminal.

[bjs50]

Tourism & the Western Image of Japan

With images such as these, Beato's pioneer photographs helped consolidate the impressions of Japan held by many Westerners. Perusing such albums, the viewer was able to safely travel the byways of Japan and—supposedly—witness daily life. These graphics and their captions created an iconic image of Japan that would survive the sale of Beato's studio in 1877 and even the photographer's death in 1908. With his genre scenes, Beato provided a window on an exotic country interpreted through the lens of Western culture. Such albums became mementos for tourists and, for those who would never have the luxury of visiting, a bound collection of highly selected and filtered knowledge.



Some of Beato's genre photos introduce different modes of travel and transportation. Details here include "Norimono, or Sedan Chair," in this instance involving two muscular bearers carrying a young woman of the pleasure quarters (top left); laborers pulling a heavy cart (top right); an "Escort Officer" on horseback, appointed by the Shogun's government and commonly used to protect foreigners from attack by individuals who opposed opening the country (circular inset); and a small boat manned by crewmen who, the caption tells us, were "sturdy, well-knit fellows" whose bodies were often decorated with "well drawn and nicely coloured" tattoos.

[bjs37] [bjs29] [bjs38] [bjs47]

When Beato closed his business in 1877, he sold his studio (including his stock and negatives) to Baron Raimund von Stillfried-Ratenicz (1839–1922), whose studio operated under the name Stillfried and Anderson. Stillfried purchased the business shortly after losing his own inventory to fire. He produced prints from Beato’s negatives and sold the photographs under the name of Stillfried and Anderson, a common and acceptable practice in 19th-century photography. Since these hand-colored photographs mounted attractively on heavyweight paper are embossed as Stillfried and Anderson, the identity of the original photographer, Stillfried or Beato, is often not easily determined. While this presents a challenge to photography scholars and collectors, Stillfried’s entrepreneurship kept Beato’s images in circulation. In 1885, Stillfried sold his business, including his inventory of photographs and negatives, to Adolfo Farsari (1841–1898) and Kusakabe Kimbei (1841–1934), a renowned pioneer Japanese photographer. Kimbei apprenticed with Beato and then Stillfried before opening his own studio. Beato’s images continued to be produced and sold under the names of these photographers as long as there were interested buyers.

Beato Beyond Japan

Beato left Yokohama in 1884. Over the subsequent years, he moved frequently and settled for short periods in several countries, including Sudan and Burma. In 1886, he lectured about the photographic process at the London and Provincial Photographic Society. Although he dabbled in many businesses, he continued to create and produce photographs. His last recorded residence was Mandalay, Burma, where he sold photographs, furniture, and curios until 1907. Although there is no record of his death, scholars believe he died around 1908–09 in Mandalay.

Beato album courtesy Smith College Museum of Art.

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

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