

BLACK SHIPS & SAMURAI

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

BY JOHN W. DOWER

CHAPTER SEVEN: GIFTS



Gifts from the Japanese

Collection of Carl H. Boehringer



Gifts from the Americans

from the official Narrative

Material culture encapsulates national culture, and this was certainly the case in Japan's encounter with Commodore Perry's America. Even as his gunboats were forcing the Japanese to abandon their seclusion policy, Perry was introducing them—and very deliberately so—to the technologies essential for survival in this challenging new world. He invited them to examine the awesome engines and gunnery on his vessels. His officers and civilian aides took pleasure in demonstrating Colt "six shooters," as well as daguerreotype photography.

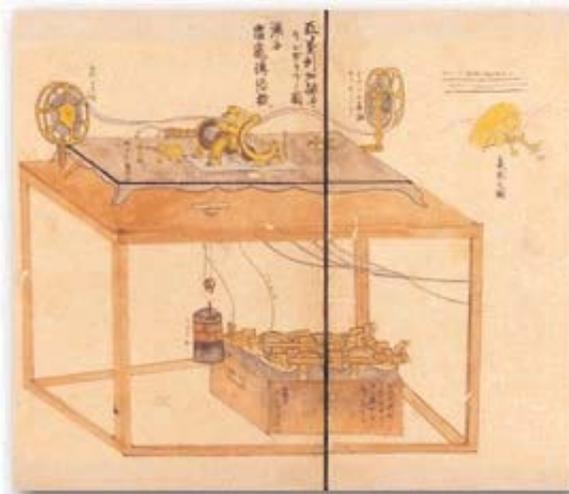


*Revolver from the time
of Perry's mission*

Tokyo National Museum

In a dramatic ceremony on March 13, 1854, the commodore presented his reluctant hosts with a variety of official gifts that ranged from the literally tasteful (including a large quantity of liquor, as well as "8 baskets of Irish potatoes") to the elegantly instructive (various books, including multi-volume sets of Audubon's costly *Birds of America* and *Quadrupeds of America*) to the technologically unfamiliar and imposing.

The latter presents, which naturally attracted greatest attention, included agricultural implements, a stove, a small printing press, a daguerreotype camera, a variety of firearms, two telegraph instruments (with three miles of wire), and a quarter-size locomotive and tender with passenger car and some 370 yards of track.



Perry's gifts, as depicted here by Japanese artists, included a telegraph apparatus, tools, casks of liquor, firearms, headgear, umbrellas, a stove, and a daguerreotype camera

Shiryō Hensanjo, University of Tokyo

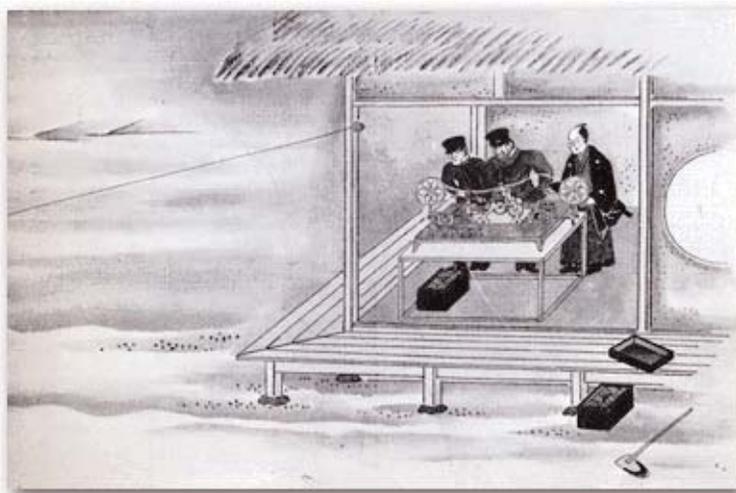
The lithograph depicting these presents being delivered to the Japanese in March 1854 may well be the best known of all of the official artwork associated with the Perry expedition. (Somewhat ironically, this is one of the few major graphics not done by Heine. It is attributed to W. T. Peters, a little-known New York artist who did not accompany the mission but apparently worked from one of Brown's now lost daguerreotypes.)



*Delivery of American presents at Yokohama, March 13, 1854.
Note the telegraph wires in the right background.*

The viewer's eye is immediately drawn to the locomotive, surrounded by Japanese officials dressed in kimono and short *haori* jackets. Its diminutive size makes it appear to be almost a toy. Closer examination reveals a keg of whiskey in the foreground, an American-style "Francis' copper lifeboat" in the rear—and, in the far distance, poles carrying the telegraph wire.

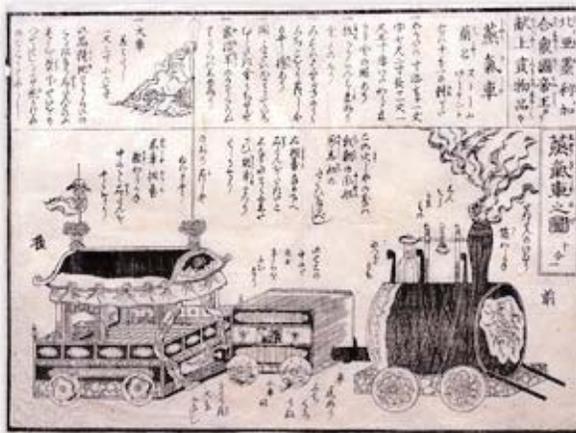
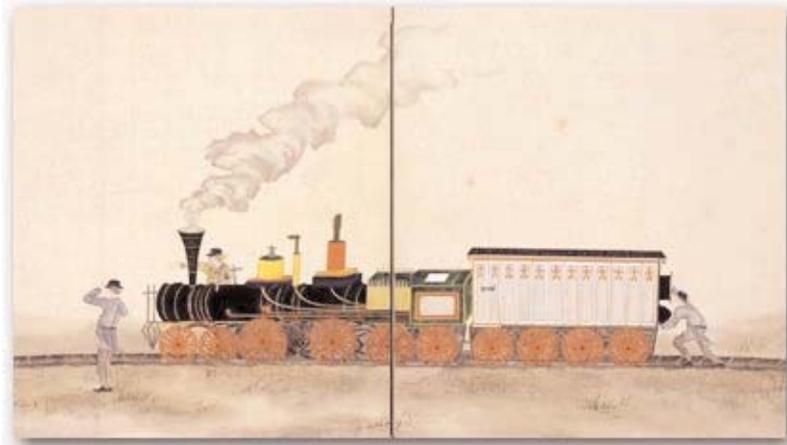
Samuel Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, personally instructed one of Perry's lieutenants in Morse code so that the instruments could be set up and demonstrated in Japan.



*A samurai official
observes two Americans
operating the telegraph*

Shiryo Hensanjo,
University of Tokyo

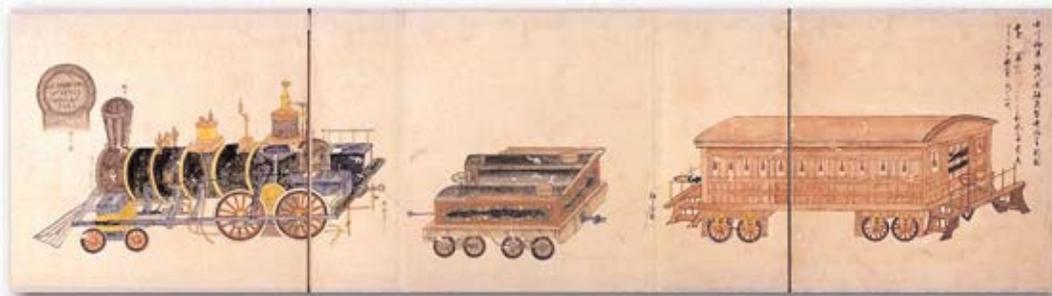
As might be expected, the small-scale train attracted particularly keen attention. By the 1870s, Japan had built its own first full-scale railway, and real smoke-spouting passenger trains had become one of the favorite subjects of wood-block artists of the new Japan.



*Three Japanese renderings
of the miniature train*

Shiryo Hensanjo, University of
Tokyo (top and bottom)

Ryosenji Treasure Museum (left)



The Japanese reciprocated with gifts of their own, albeit in a manner that served primarily to impress the Americans with the quality of traditional crafts, the exceptional care with which the Japanese packaged and presented things (the American gifts came in crates), and—clearly the strongest impression—the rather curious and even coarse nature of a great deal that was received.

The better Japanese presents included lacquered ware, porcelain, and numerous bolts of silk (virtually all of which quickly disappeared into the bowels of a warehouse in Washington). This was accompanied by bowls, pipes, fans, dolls, bamboo ware, writing paper, and other commonplace articles—as well as a number of brooms, 35 bundles of oak charcoal, 70 or so ordinary umbrellas, 200 bales of rice, and 300 chickens.



Presentation of silk to American officers, March 24, 1854
painting on paper

Collection of Carl H. Boehringer

Several small dogs of a breed that reminded the Americans of English spaniels were given for presentation to the U.S. president, but although they made an appearance in the Narrative, their subsequent fate remains unclear.

Lieutenant Preble, indefatigable chronicler of the inside story, noted in his diary that the Japanese presents also included "a box of obscene paintings of naked men and women, another proof of the lewdness of this exclusive people." These did not appear in the official report, and their fate, too, remains unknown.



Dogs presented to Commodore Perry
by the Japanese commissioners

Preble's tepid response to the Japanese gifts was typical. He found them to be a "pretty display," but concluded that "one of our presents of Audubon's Great Work on American birds was worth more than all we saw there, and our miniature railroad engine and car cost several times their value."

Everyone, the Commodore included, remarked on "the meager display and the lack of rich brocades and magnificent things always associated with our ideas of Japan.... I think these presents will prove a great disappointment to our people, whose ideas of Japan have been so exaggerated."



Japanese gifts to the Perry expedition included various artifacts and art objects, among them fans, dolls, ceramics, and decorated writing paper.

Smithsonian Institution

List of American Presents
Brought Ashore in Japan on March 13, 1854

For the Emperor:

Miniature steam engine, 1/4 size, with track, tender, and car
2 telegraph sets, with batteries, three miles of wire, gutta percha wire, and insulators
1 Francis' copper lifeboat
1 surfboat of copper
Collection of agricultural implements
Audubon Birds, in nine volumes
Natural History of the State of New York, 16 volumes
Annals of Congress, 4 volumes
Laws and Documents of the State of New York
Journal of the Senate and Assembly of New York
Lighthouse Reports, 2 volumes
Bancroft's History of the United States, 4 volumes
Farmers' Guide, 2 volumes
1 series of United States Coast Survey Charts
Morris, *Engineering*
Silver-topped dressing case
8 yards scarlet broadcloth, and scarlet velvet
Series of United States standard yard, gallon, bushel, balances, and weights
Quarter cask of Madeira
Barrel of Whiskey
Box of champagne and cherry cordial and maraschino
3 boxes of fine tea
Maps of several states and four large lithographs
Telescope and stand, in box
Sheet-iron stove
An assortment of fine perfumery
5 Hall rifles
3 Maynard muskets
12 cavalry swords
6 artillery swords
1 carbine
20 Army pistols in a box
Catalogue of New York State Library and Postoffices
2 mail bags with padlocks

For the Empress:

Flowered silk embroidered dress
Toilet dressing-box, gilded
6 dozen assorted perfumery

For Commissioner Hayashi:

Audubon Quadrupeds
4 yards scarlet broadcloth

Clock
Stove
Rifle
Set of Chinaware
Teaset
Revolver and powder
2 dozen assorted perfumery
20 gallons of whiskey
1 sword
3 boxes fine tea
1 box of champagne
1 box of finer tea

For Abe, Prince of Ise, first councilor:

1 copper lifeboat
Kendall War in Mexico and Ripley History of the
War in Mexico
1 box of champagne
3 boxes fine tea
20 gallons whiskey
1 clock
1 stove
1 rifle
1 sword
1 revolver and powder
2 dozen assorted perfumery
4 yards scarlet broadcloth

For each of the other five councilors:

1 book*
10 gallons of whiskey
1 lithograph
1 clock
1 revolver
1 rifle
1 sword
12 assorted perfumery

* The books thus distributed were Lossing, *Field Book of Revolution*; Owen, *Architecture; Documentary History of New York*; Downing, *Country Houses*; and Owen, *Geology of Minnesota*. The source for this list is Roger Pineau, editor, *The Japan Expedition, 1852-1854: The Personal Journal of Commodore Matthew C. Perry*, (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1968).

List of Articles Received from the Japanese
Government on March 24, 1854

1. For the Government of the United States, "from the Emperor":

- 1 gold lacquered writing apparatus
- 1 gold lacquered paper box
- 1 gold lacquered book-case
- 1 lacquered writing table
- 1 censer (cow-shape) of bronze, supporting silver flower and stand
- 1 flower holder and stand
- 2 braziers
- 10 pieces fine red pongee
- 5 pieces flowered crepe

2. From Hayashi, 1st commissioner:

- 1 lacquered writing apparatus
- 1 lacquered paper box
- 1 box of paper
- 1 box flowered note paper
- 5 boxes stamped note and letter paper
- 4 boxes assorted sea shells, 100 in each
- 1 box of branch coral and feather in silver
- 1 lacquered chow-chow box
- 1 box, set of three, lacquered goblets
- 7 boxes cups and spoons and goblet cut from conch shells

3. From Ido, 2d commissioner:

- 2 boxes lacquered waiters, 4 in all
- 2 boxes, containing 20 umbrellas
- 1 box 30 coir brooms

4. From Izawa, 3rd commissioner:

- 1 piece red pongee
- 1 piece white pongee
- 8 boxes, 13 dolls
- 1 box bamboo woven articles
- 2 boxes bamboo stands

5. From Udono, 4th commissioner:

- 3 pieces striped crepe
- 2 boxes porcelain cups
- 1 box, 10 jars of soy

6. From Matsuzaki, 5th commissioner:

- 3 boxes porcelain goblets
- 1 box figured matting
- 35 bundles oak charcoal

7. From Abe, 1st Imperial councilor:

14 pieces striped-figured silk (taffeta)

8-12. From each of other 5 Imperial councilors:

10 pieces striped-figured silk (taffeta)

13. "From the Emperor" to Commodore Perry:

1 lacquered writing apparatus

1 lacquered paper box

3 pieces red pongee

2 pieces white pongee

2 pieces flowered crepe

3 pieces figured dyed crepe

14. From commissioners to Capt. H.A. Adams:

3 pieces plain red pongee

2 pieces dyed figured crepe

20 sets lacquered cups and covers

15-17. From commissioners to Mr. Perry, Mr. Portman, and Mr. S.W. Williams, each:

2 pieces red pongee

2 pieces dyed figured crepe

10 sets lacquered cups and covers

18-22. From commissioners to Mr. Gay, Mr. Danby, Mr. Draper, Dr. Morrow, and Mr. J.P. Williams:

1 piece red dyed figured crepe

10 sets lacquered cups and covers

23. "From the Emperor" to the squadron:

200 bundles of rice, each 5 Japanese pecks

300 chickens

The source for this list is the official Narrative of the Perry mission.