

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

Picturing
"the Japanese"

Representation &
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Women: Real & Imagined

"Girl," "Girl Sleeping," "Girl Holding an Umbrella," "Kioto Girl," "Two Girls," "Two Girls Standing," "Girls at Home," "Girls Walking," "Three Girls"—121 of Kimbei's 400 photos of Japanese have the word "girl" in their title. Dozens of others on his pricelist feature women engaged in various occupations from shopkeeper to farmer to professional performer. From Kimbei's inventory, it was possible to reconstruct in photographs an idealized woman's life from childhood through adolescence, marriage and motherhood, to full maturity. Alternatively, one could narrate with photographs a supposed complete day in the life of a woman from her morning toilet through a series of cultural pursuits and social engagements to her sleeping arrangements.



A large portion of the photo inventory of “globetrotter” Japan pertained to women, making it possible to reconstruct an idealized woman’s life from childhood through adolescence, marriage and motherhood, to full maturity.

“Little Girls Dressed for an Occasion” [gj20415]

“Arranging Flowers” [gj20905]

No such pretended full-life renderings are possible with coverage of the male population. Some commercial photographers made souvenir images of boys at play, but photographs of mature males, apart from studio samurai, focus for the most part on traditional occupations.



The same six boys were captured “at play” in these two photographs.

“Japanese Kite and Stilts” [gj20305]

“Boys Playing Kotoro” [gj20201]

Why were globetrotters so interested in—even fixated on—Japanese women? With every photograph embodying several possible readings, and with globetrotters constituting a highly diverse market, there are no simple or definitive responses. It is possible, though, to define some of the sensibilities that informed foreign preferences for images of Japanese women.

Understanding foreign fascination with Japanese women requires a global perspective. In most of the Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African countries on globetrotter itineraries, women led cloistered lives. By contrast, Westerners visiting Japan often marveled at the relative freedoms enjoyed by Japanese women of all social classes,

which, in the minds of some, compared favorably with conditions in the West. William Elliot Griffis confirmed this observation in *The Mikado's Empire*:

"The American who leaves his own country, in which the high honor paid to women is one of the chief glories of the race to which he belongs, is shocked and deeply grieved at beholding her low estate in pagan lands.... The student of Asiatic life, on coming to Japan, however, is cheered and pleased on contrasting the position of women in Japan with that of other countries. He sees them treated with respect and consideration far above that observed in other quarters of the Orient. They are allowed greater freedom, and hence have more dignity and self-confidence." (p. 551)

No other culture on globetrotter itineraries permitted such unfettered access to the domestic sphere of women as did Japan. As a result, globetrotters could see and learn more of a Japanese woman's life than any of her counterparts in other non-Western countries. The public visibility of Japanese women thus enhanced their viability as photographic subjects.

Writing in the early 1870s, Griffis also recognized the viability of Japanese women as a subject worthy of further study:

"The whole question of the position of Japanese women—in history, social life, education, employments, authorship, art, marriage, concubinage, prostitution, religion, benevolent labor, the ideals of literature, popular superstitions, etc.—discloses such a wide and fascinating field of inquiry, that I wonder no one has yet entered it." (p. 553)

Few Westerners took up Griffis' challenge, but the range of female subjects in Kimbei's inventory suggests that commercial photographers recognized the economic potential of this "wide and fascinating field of inquiry."

A global perspective on photographs of Japanese women also raises comparisons with social dynamics in the West. For example, attitudes toward motherhood and children shifted considerably in Europe and America during the late 1800s. Whereas previously children were for the most part regarded as small adults, childhood was beginning to be understood as a unique phase of human development. Globetrotters quickly recognized that the sphere of childhood in Japan was clearly defined and that childrearing was a central feature of Japanese family life, one in which women took on most of the responsibility. Griffis drew attention to the special qualities of Japanese mothers:

"In maternal affection, tenderness, anxiety, patience, and long-suffering, the Japanese mothers need fear no comparison with those who know the sorrow and rapture of maternity in other climes. As educators of their children, the Japanese women are peers to the mothers of any civilization in the care and minuteness of their training of, and affectionate tenderness and self-sacrificing devotion to, offspring, within the limits of their light and knowledge." (p. 559)

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"Japanese Mother and Children" [gj20109]

"Mother and Child" [gj20307]

Any consideration of social dynamics in the West and their effect on globetrotter attitudes toward Japanese women must reflect the changing status of women in Europe and America. The fact that European and American women traveled as much as men is a good indicator of the social mobility they were beginning to enjoy in the late-19th century. Women approached and appreciated travel differently than their male counterparts. Western views on Japanese women could thus be highly gendered. Basil Hall Chamberlain brings these considerations into perspective in *Things Japanese*. Noting that Western men sometimes fell under the spell of Japanese women, he quotes from a letter he received from a male colleague:

"How sweet," says he, "Japanese woman is! All the possibilities of the race for goodness seem to be concentrated in her. It shakes one's faith in some Occidental doctrines. If this be the result of suppression and oppression [of Japanese women], then these are not altogether bad. On the other hand, how diamond-hard the character of the American woman becomes under

the idolatry of which she is the object. In the eternal order of things, which is the higher being—the childish, confiding, sweet Japanese girl, or the superb, calculating, penetrating, Occidental Circe of our more artificial society, with her enormous power for evil and her limited capacity for good.” (p. 453.)

For some globetrotting males, the submissive, gentle, child-like Japanese women embodied in the word “girl”—the term so prominent in Kimbei’s inventory—encouraged an implicit comparison with Western women. Many photographs depict what we might understand as girlish behavior while others connect women to pre-industrial forms of manufacturing. Like the word “girl,” both images betray a desire to fix Japanese women permanently in a state of innocence and domesticity, untouched by maturity and the modernity of a rapidly industrializing world.



More than a few globetrotting males were attracted to an image of Japanese females as particularly submissive, gentle, and childlike. “Highclass” publications such as Brinkley’s Japan, with its official support from the Japanese government, catered to such tastes. There was an alternate market that featured more explicit photos of young women.

“Sleeping Accommodations for Two” [gj20510]

“A Tete-a-tete” [gj20601]

Published travel accounts in the late-19th century generally maintain a high level of decorum but an erotic undercurrent sometimes reveals itself in descriptions of Japanese women written by male authors. Griffis drew attention to this tendency:

“I shall not dwell upon the prevalent belief of foreigners that licentiousness is the first characteristic trait in her character, nor upon the idea that ordinary chastity is next to unknown in Japan.”

Griffis recognized the source of this stereotype and attempted to put it into context:

“The foreign reader must remember that I have not formed these opinions by a hasty glimpse of life at the sea-ports of Japan, where the scum of the world meets the dregs of that country.” (p. 554)

In fact, prostitution had been legal in Japan for centuries, and with official sanction from the government a brothel district intended to serve foreign residents opened in

Yokohama within months after the port was occupied. Purchasing temporary wives—hired mistresses in other words—was also commonplace, even among seemingly respectable members of the foreign community. Foreign males who indulged themselves in this manner developed discursive strategies to excuse their behavior, with most claiming the practice was acceptable in Japanese culture and women were none the worse for it. Globetrotters passing through the treaty ports and witnessing these practices could easily conclude that Japanese women were licentious. Unaccustomed to such openness toward sexuality in general and prostitution specifically, they tended to sensationalize these practices in their travel accounts. Even those who condemned prostitution (as Griffis did) only succeeded in drawing more attention to it.

Commercial photographers thoroughly capitalized on these fixations. As the Yoshiwara—Tokyo’s historic brothel district—gained credibility as a tourist attraction, images of its flower-laden boulevards, unique architecture, and even the women employed there entered studio inventories. Kimbei’s pricelist included four views of the Yoshiwara, three images titled “Yoshiwara Girls,” two views of No. 9 (a prominent Yokohama brothel), two more titled “Group of No. 9 Girls,” and an image of women in the historic brothel district in Kyoto titled “Kioto Shimabara Girls.” Prostitution—meaning the practice, its representation in photographs, and its vilification in print—were all profitable facets of the globetrotter economy.



As the Yoshiwara, Tokyo’s historic brothel district, gained credibility as a tourist attraction, benign images of its boulevards, unique architecture, and even the women employed there entered studio inventories.

“Yoshiwara district in Tokyo” [qj10720]

In studio inventories and travel narratives, the word “girl” was most often and most consistently associated with female performers—singing girls, dancing girls, and various instrumentalists. Most foreigners mistakenly assumed that all entertainers were geisha.



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“Geisha Playing Samisen” [gj20106]

“Dancing Girls” [gj20104]

Wayside inns, teahouses, and restaurants frequently employed women who possessed some basic skills in dance or *samisen* (the instrument most associated with geisha), but few if any had undergone the rigorous years of training in music and manners required of properly accredited and licensed geisha. Commercial photographers did little to dispel this misconception; most of the geisha in their photographs were models dressed for the part.



Inns, teahouses, and restaurants frequently employed women who possessed some basic skills in dance and music, but few had the rigorous training required of properly licensed geisha. Commercial photographers did little to dispel this misconception. Most of the geisha in their photographs were models dressed for the part (the same model appears in these two photos).

“Geisha, or Singing Girls” [qj20910]

“Girl Beating a Tsugumi” [qj20107]

Western opinion on geisha varied widely from fascination to condemnation. The intrepid traveller Eliza Scidmore took more than a passing interest in the subject, often commenting on differences between Nagoya, Kyoto, and Osaka geisha in her 1891 *Jinrikisha Days in Japan*. Alice Mabel Bacon, a long-term resident as opposed to a globetrotter, offered a more nuanced opinion in *Japanese Girls and Women*, also published in 1891:

“In their system of education, manners stand higher than morals, and many a geisha gladly leaves the dancing in the teahouses to become the concubine of some wealthy Japanese or foreigner, thinking none the worse of herself for such a business arrangement, and going cheerfully back to her regular work, should her contract be unexpectedly ended. The geisha is not necessarily bad; but there is in her life much temptation to evil, and little stimulus to do right, so that where one lives blameless, many go wrong and drop below the margin of respectability altogether. Yet so fascinating, bright and lively are these geisha that many of them have been taken by men of good position as wives, and are now the heads of the most respectable homes.” (pp. 286, 288-89)

It is unlikely foreigners were in a position to take authentic geisha as concubines, but by implicating Western males in this practice Bacon spoke to a broader issue. The geisha profession had been used as a front for prostitution since the mid-18th century, and this practice continued through the globetrotter era. In the male-dominated environment of the treaty ports, elevating temporary wives to the status of geisha based on some marginal skills in music enhanced the reputation of Western men who indulged themselves in this manner. Thus, in the minds of globetrotters passing through the treaty ports, “geisha” became part of a libidinal economy that tended to sexualize all Japanese women. George Rittner confirms as much in his 1904 *Impressions of Japan*:

“Geisha who are trotted out to perform before the average European might shock even many women who call themselves broad-minded; they coquette, flirt, and fling themselves about. They are little better, in fact, than the European music-hall people who profane the world by calling themselves artists; still they are better, and they act in that way because Europeans have taught them to do it. The European man has ruined the morality of the Japanese, and they will probably never regain it.” (p. 115)

Like Bacon, Rittner assigned partial responsibility to foreigners for corrupting geisha, but as with many of his fellow globetrotters, he mistakenly assumed that the women he observed were actually geisha.

Commercial photographers also produced images that we might refer to today as soft-core pornography, something scrupulously avoided in Brinkley’s sanitized and quasi-official opus. Subjects ranged from images of women with exposed breasts to others that show full frontal nudity. Such sights were common in 19th-century Japan and were sometimes mentioned in travel accounts. During hot humid summers, rural women stripped to the waist while laboring at demanding physical tasks. Communal bathing was commonplace. When staged and photographed in studios, these subjects slipped from representations of daily practice into a realm of voyeuristic pleasure. The models posed with their breasts exposed generally have elegant coiffures and wear fashionable kimono more typical of geisha than farmers. And women appear so frequently in photographs of bathing, one almost wonders if Japanese men ever washed. While these subjects might have held some intrinsic cultural interest, they were often photographed in a manner intended to exploit Western tendencies to sexualize Japanese women.

From the relative abundance of brothels, prostitutes, and “geisha” among globetrotter photographs, one could easily assume that representations of Japanese women were skewed towards a predominantly male audience. Such a conclusion would be inaccurate. Chamberlain noted that Western women frequently proclaimed the charm of their Japanese counterparts. Travel narratives affirm this observation. But unlike Griffis, Chamberlain, and Bacon, whose residencies of several years put them in a better position to understand the nuances of Japanese femininity, travelers’ experiences with indigenous women were fleeting by comparison. In such circumstances, globetrotting women generally retained their primary affinity with the West as opposed to with their gender. They were less inclined to be critical of photographic representations of Japanese women because their foreignness diminished the need to empathize with them as members of the same sex. From this perspective, some Western women found the sensuality—and perhaps even the sexuality—of Japanese women as beguiling and attractive as their male traveling companions.

While gender provides one means to break down monolithic constructions of the market for photographs of Japanese women, other factors and forces tend to re-homogenize it. The emphasis on women’s kimono provides a good example. The pace of travel created a culture in which globetrotters sought experiences that would define, in their minds at least, the most essential characteristics of the countries they visited. Indigenous costume was an obvious choice in every country and culture. Because of its ubiquity and uniqueness, women’s kimono became a globally recognized signifier of Japan, one that competed with Mt. Fuji and the colossal Buddha statue at Kamakura. Descriptions of women’s dress in travel narratives often extend for several pages and provide encyclopedic coverage of female fashion, from youth to maturity, in different seasons, and, as discussed above, across dozens of occupations.



Women's kimono became as much of a globally recognized signifier of Japan as Mt. Fuji and the colossal Buddha statue at Kamakura.

"Great Buddha at Kamakura" [gj10202]

"Mt. Fuji" [gj10109]

"A Summer Costume" [gj20804]

Some photographers took such foreign fascination with kimono to absurd extremes, with studio-posed images of women gathering seashells and feeding chickens that were little more than excuses to show off fabulous garments.

Foreign fascination with kimono is taken to absurd extremes in photos such as this studio rendering of "Gathering Shells on the Seashore." Split-toed white tabi socks would have been completely out of place on a wet beach.

"Gathering Shells on the Seashore" [gj20605]



No Japanese woman would dress so lavishly to feed livestock, and split-toed *tabi* socks would not be the footwear of choice on a wet beach. When seen from this perspective, photographs of Japanese women could just as easily be understood as photographs of kimono.



In similar poses and garb, two Japanese women have “Afternoon Tea” and a globetrotting European family don kimono for a photo souvenir.

“An Informal Afternoon Tea” [gj20911]

“A European Family Dressed in Japanese Costumes” [gj21002]

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

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