

Felice Beato's Japan: People

An Album by the Pioneer Foreign Photographer in Yokohama

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Essay

Photographic Terms

Chronology

Sources

Albums

Views of Japan

The definitive two-volume album titled "Views of Japan," published around 1869, is comprised of over 200 hand-crafted photographs by Felice A. Beato accompanied by captions written by James W. Murray and others.

The album presented here is a collection of 50 prints selected by the photographer containing portraits and "genre" scenes of everyday life in Japan. It is intact with a green linen cover and descriptive captions in the collection of Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, Massachusetts. Many other versions of Beato's albums can be found in art, history, and library collections. Often, however, the albums have been disassembled.

In its full 200-image version, the first volume features black-and-white albumen prints of landscapes and points of interest. The second volume features hand-colored albumen prints containing portraits and scenes of everyday life in Japan.

The brief essays by James W. Murray and others that accompany the photographs provide a descriptive, interpretative label for the viewer. The description is mounted on the opposite page and printed with distinctive type within an elegant border. When the viewer turned each page of the bound album, they were enlightened with an essay and a beautifully photographed image of Japanese landscapes, portraits, or genre scenes of everyday life. These albums defined a British view of Japan for the West.

As the tourist market grew in the 19th century, such albums became a collection of photographs of sites to commemorate the tourist holiday. The albums often acted as guidebooks of places to see. They also fed the traveler's fantasy of an imaginary place. At the photographer's studio, the traveler could assemble their own photographic journey by choosing their photographs and combining differing subjects and cultures. The photographs might later be bound or pasted in an album of their own making. All this, of course, was before the advent of personal cameras.

Photographic Terms

Albumen prints

The albumen print is a photographic image developed onto a thin paper coated with a solution of egg whites and silver salts and then sensitized to light. The process was invented by Louis-Desiré Blanquart-Evart in the 1850s.

The paper is prepared in several stages. First, the paper is floated in a bath of salt and whisked egg whites that has been allowed to subside and then filtered. The egg white solution penetrates the pores of the paper to make a smooth surface, producing sharp details in the developed photograph. After the albumen paper dries, the second step requires that the paper be sensitized with a light sensitive solution of salt and silver nitrate. The solution can be applied to the paper by floating or brushing the solution onto the coated paper. Afterward, the albumen paper is ready to be placed in contact with the negative.

At the time of invention, photographers often prepared their papers; however, by 1862 several companies produced the coated papers. Paper manufacturers delivered differing results based on the composition and coating of the paper. Blanchet Frères et Kléber at Rives, France, delivered papers with neutral tones. The British paper manufacturer, Whatman, was known for their red-purple tones. By 1888, the Dresden company of Albuminfabrik A.G. produced nearly nine million sheets for worldwide distribution attesting to the popularity of albumen prints.

Wet Collodion

Collodion was a highly flammable chemical mixture that was used to prepare glass negatives. The solution of dissolved gun cotton, alcohol, ether, and potassium iodide was made into thick syrup that was poured evenly over a finely polished, clean glass plate negative. After the collodion set but had not dried, the plate was sensitized in a solution of silver nitrate. The combination of chemicals produced light-sensitive silver iodide. The sensitized wet collodion plate was immediately placed in the camera for exposure. Exposure time in good light was typically about 1-10 seconds at f11.

Immediately after exposure, the plate was placed in a development solution of pyrogallic and acetic acids. The chemical solution of ferrous sulfate would later replace these chemicals. In the darkroom, the exposed plates were removed from the developer solution, washed in water, and fixed with a solution of sodium thiosulfate and dried. Finally, a protective varnish was applied to the negative. The glass negative was then ready to be printed.

The wet-collodion process delivers photographs with high resolution in the details of the highlights and shadows of the print. Invented in 1848 by F. Scott Archer and published by him in 1851, the wet-collodion process was prevalent from 1855 to about 1881. The dry-collodion process was introduced around 1855 and was a variant of the wet-collodion process.

Hand-colored photographs

In the 19th century, photographers began to color their black-and-white photographs with watercolor. The colors were applied to finished photographs. The watercolor artist of Yokohama mixed his own colors from powders and separated colors for gradation of tones. Because watercolor dried quickly, paints were mixed as needed and applied immediately to the photograph. If the artist mixed too weak a solution of pigment and fixation, the watercolor would give a yellow hue and create tension when dried. On the other hand, if the solution was too strong, the pigment would not adhere. To achieve consistency between multiple copies of the same print, templates were made for the application of watercolor.

Web sites reference:

http://www.old-japan.co.uk/article_techniques.html

<http://albumen.stanford.edu/technology/>

http://albumen.stanford.edu/library/monographs/masters/the_albumen_print.html

<http://www.eastman.org/taschen/htmlsrc/glossary.html>

Book references:

Gladwin, Gordon. *Looking at Photographs: A Guide to Technical Terms*. Malibu, California: The J. Paul Getty Museum in association with the British Museum Press. 1991

Reilly, James M. *The Albumen & Salted Paper Book: The History and Practice of Photographic Printing, 1840-1895*. Rochester, N.Y.: Light Impressions Corp., 1980.

Beato album courtesy Smith College Museum of Art.

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