

Felice Beato's Japan: Places

An Album by the Pioneer Foreign Photographer in Yokohama

by Allen Hockley

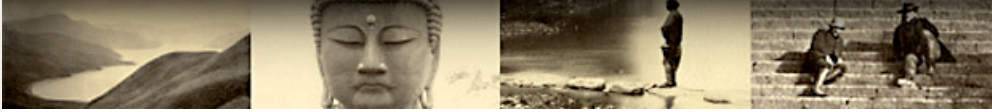
The Business of Photography

Tokaido/Kamakura

Edo/Yokohama

Journey's End: Nagasaki

Sources



A Tourist's Album of Japan

An album of scenic views by the photographer Felice Beato (ca. 1833-1908) in the collection of the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College is representative of hundreds of albums he sold to foreigners who passed through Japan in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Beato was the most successful of the first generation of commercial photographers who plied their trade in the Far East. The success of his business depended, in part, on his ability to know the interests and expectations of his clientele. Accordingly, the subjects Beato photographed were Japanese but the visual culture he created is inherently Western in its conceptualization and presentation. Using the Hood Museum album as an example, this unit examines the way in which Beato's photographs contributed to late-19th-century Western understanding of Japan, its people, and its culture.



Beato, Wirgman, and the Business of Early Photography in Japan

Beato arrived in Japan in 1863 at the invitation of Charles Wirgman (1832–1891), a sketch artist and reporter for the *Illustrated London News (ILN)*. The two met in China in 1860 while Wirgman was covering the British assault of Peking (now Beijing) and Beato was making a photographic record of the mission. This was the latest in a series of similar commissions Beato received from the British military. He photographed the Crimean war in 1855 but arrived in India too late to cover the Sepoy Mutiny of 1858. Nonetheless, he made a series of images showing the destruction wrought by the British reprisals. Beato supplemented his official commissions by selling albums of battlefield imagery mixed with individual and group portraits of officers and enlisted men who were involved in these conflicts.

Beato's early career as a military photographer influenced his later work in Japan. He learned that viable markets were to be found wherever Westerners confronted Eastern civilizations and cultures. Following the lead of his contemporaries, particularly those working in India, Beato acquired a sense of what Westerners found attractive about Eastern culture. While most of the images he produced as a military photographer focused on war and its aftermath, he also took whatever opportunities he had before, between, and after hostilities to photograph indigenous architecture and people. The albums he compiled and sold to officers and enlisted men generally included a sampling of these scenic views and genre scenes. Beato's work in spheres of conflict also provided an opportunity to hone his entrepreneurial sense and business practices. While individual photographs could generate profit in small increments, albums were a far more lucrative venture. But they required of him several skills apart from his facility with photographic technology: the ability to narrate with a sequence of photographs, the ability to capture and summarize the essence of a culture in a few images, and, most importantly, the ability to understand the expectations of his projected clientele. Beato acquired these skills in Crimea, India, and China; he then adapted them to the new markets and products he developed in Japan.



*Felice A. Beato, photographer, c. 1872.
From the collection of Sebastian Dobson.
[bjh100]*

Beato and Wirgman formed a partnership shortly after Beato's arrival in Japan in 1863. The nature of their working relationship can be surmised from a few surviving sources. The earliest reliable document confirming Beato's presence in Japan is a dispatch Wirgman filed on July 13, 1863, which appeared in the September 26 issue of the *ILN*. It mentions that many Japanese frequently visited his Yokohama home to see his sketches and Beato's photographs. This dispatch suggests that Wirgman's residence may have provided the premises for their first studio.

Beato's skills as a military photographer were put to use shortly after his arrival. British and American forces bombarded Kagoshima, the capital of Satsuma *han* (fiefdom), in August 1863 after its leaders refused to pay an indemnity for their culpability in the September 1862 murder of Charles Richardson, a British merchant. Beato arrived in Japan just prior to the bombardment of Kagoshima, but no photographs of this engagement survive. The bombardment was a ship-to-shore engagement fought in a raging storm. Photography would have been impossible under these conditions. (Wirgman made several sketches of the conflict, which were subsequently published in the *ILN*.) A similar expedition led by British, American, Dutch, and French forces was mounted in September 1864 to chastise Chōshū *han* for firing on Western ships as they passed through the Strait of Shimonoseki. Beato made several images of the Shimonoseki conflict. Following protocols he established in India and China, he also sold albums of battlefield images and portraits to the men who participated in the Shimonoseki expedition.

In the early 1860s Wirgman's sketches provided the sole prototypes for engravings that appeared alongside his reports in the *Illustrated London News*. These were often credited to "our special artist and correspondent" in captions that accompanied the images. An image of three Japanese officials in a September 1863 issue signaled a change of protocol: the caption stated that it was "from a photograph."



The caption for this image from the Sept. 12, 1863 Illustrated London News notes that the engraving was derived “from a photograph.” Previously, illustrations were typically based on sketches.

[bjh101]

It is unlikely Beato provided the photograph, however, since Wirgman filed the dispatch on June 28, 1863, prior to Beato’s arrival. Wirgman probably purchased the photograph from William Saunders (dates unknown), one of a small cadre of commercial photographers working in Yokohama at the time. Nonetheless, this precedent established a practice that would become more common throughout the 19th century. From this point forward the *ILN* and other Western news services, as well as Western publishers in general, used photographs as the prototypes for the engraved illustrations they added to their publications.

Beato’s earliest impact on *ILN* coverage of Japan can be documented with assurance around the time of the Shimonoseki conflict. The February 20 and 27, 1864 issues featured engravings of Vice-Admiral Kuper and Lt. Col. John Neale respectively, both of which were based on Beato’s photographs. The October 29 issue contains two panoramas of Yokohama based on Beato’s photographs. The November 12 issue had an image, also based on a Beato original, of the Japanese detachment assigned to guard the British consulate. The caption for an image in the December 24 edition specifically credits one of Beato’s photographs as its source. Supplying images and reports to the *ILN* was clearly an important facet of Beato and Wirgman’s partnership. The afterlives of Beato’s photographs constitute a highly important component in the West’s visualization of Japan. These are explored more fully in the Visualizing Cultures unit *Afterlives of Images*.

As attacks on the foreign community became less frequent, Beato and Wirgman began to turn their attention to other subjects and products. A price-list of their wares and services, datable to 1864 or early 1865, mentions individual photographs of various sizes, *cartes de visite*, and portraits by Beato as well as albums of sketches, watercolors, and oil paintings by Wirgman. We can safely assume that Beato provided an array of photographic products and services like those noted on his price list to his clientele throughout his active years in Japan. But at some point in the mid 1860s he began to redeploy the experience he acquired while working as a military photographer by producing photo albums for the foreign residents of treaty ports and tourists who began to visit Japan in increasing numbers. The compilation (beginning around 1868) of his widely acclaimed *Photographic Views of Japan with Historical and Descriptive Notes, Compiled from Authentic Sources, and Personal Observation During a Residence of Several Years*, marks the point when albums became his premier product. An advertisement in the February 2, 1870 issue of the *Japan Weekly Mail*, a local newspaper published in Yokohama, reaffirms this.

Signor F. Beato,

Begs to announce to the Public of Yokohama and Travellers visiting the East generally, that he has just completed a handsome collection of Albums of various sizes, containing views &c., of Japan, with descriptions of the Scenes, Manners and Customs of the people; compiled after visiting all the most interesting localities in the country during six years residence.

NO. 17 ON THE BUND

Beato placed this advertisement in the February 2, 1870 issue of Yokohama's Japan Weekly Mail to announce the completion and availability of his "Views of Japan" albums.

[bjh102]

This ad indicates that Beato had developed an inventory of pre-made albums, but he also invited customers to select their own images from his stock of negatives, which he would then bind into albums. Self-selected albums generally reflected personal itineraries and sensibilities of individual customers.

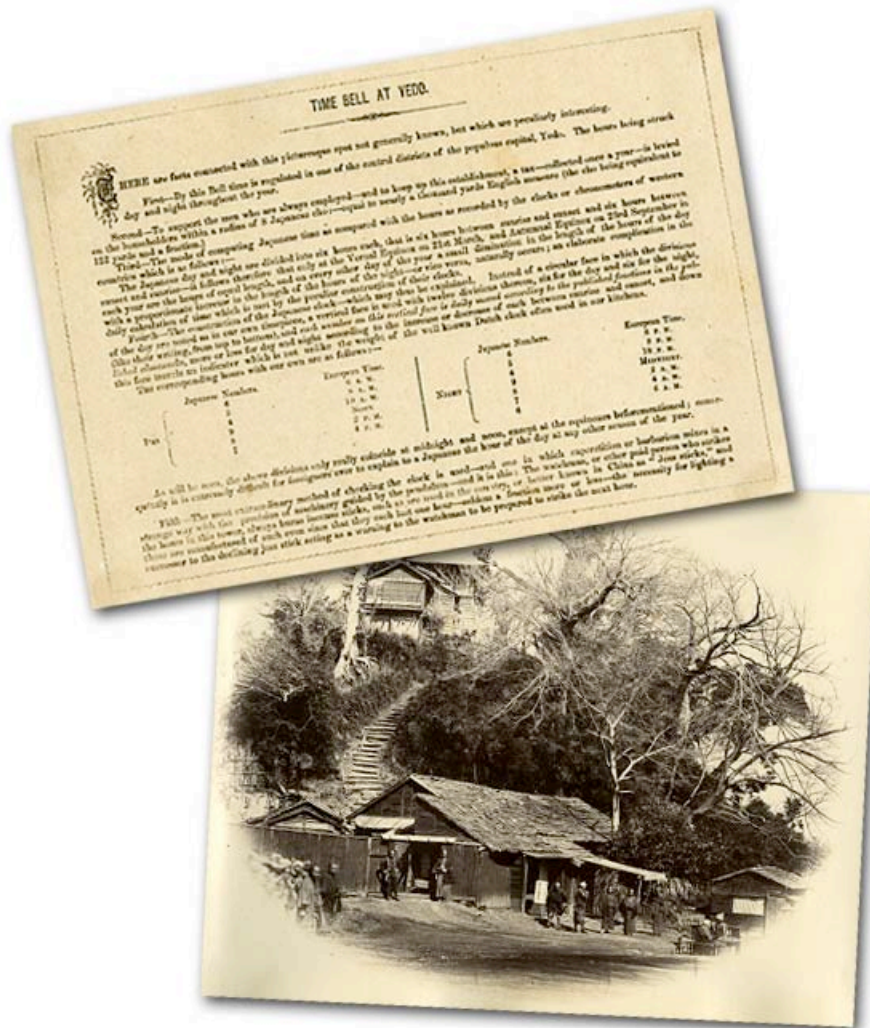
Photographic Views of Japan established protocols that came to distinguish most, if not all, of the Japanese albums Beato produced. The photographs were divided into two general categories: scenic views and genre scenes. Both terms require clarification. Scenic views (or simply views) included images of natural settings and built environments. The latter could be panorama-like images of land or cityscapes as well as street scenes and images of individual buildings and their architectural details. Genre scenes included individuals or small groups of people representing various occupations, cultural practices, or activities. Genre scenes could be photographed on site or posed in the studio using props appropriate to the subject.

Genre scenes are sometimes called "types," but owing to its etymology, this term is problematical. 19th-century anthropologists and ethnographers frequently used the term to mark racial, cultural, and class distinctions. It is a term of some consequence, in other words, in that it implies through its application notions of cultural superiority if not outright racism. 19th-century photographers working in Japan seldom used the term. Their advertisements suggest a preference for "costumes" or "manners and customs" when referring to genre subjects. Westerners who visited Japan sometimes used "types" in their travel accounts but not with enough regularity to justify its application in academic studies of early Japanese photography.

Beato produced albums in various configurations. Typically they have 25 to 50 images. Many, like the Hood Museum album, contain only scenic views. The Smith College Museum of Art album (reproduced as an independent unit here in Visualizing Cultures) is comprised of only genre images. Some Beato albums have both views and genre scenes. In these the views generally appear before the genre scenes, thus sustaining the categorical distinctions between these two types of images. Albums arranged in this manner suggest that the views define the location or set the scene for the more intimate explorations of Japanese life and customs that follow in the genre images.

Album Captions

Following the protocol established with *Photographic Views of Japan*, Beato's albums typically included captions. These were printed on separate sheets of paper and glued to the page opposite each image.



“Time Bell at Yedo” is the title of the caption that accompanies the above photograph. (The bell is in the building at the top left of the photo.) The detailed description compares timekeeping in Japan to the Western method and adds greatly to the meaning of the image. The filigree design highlighted below is typical of Beato’s album captions, which were attached to the back of the preceding page so that they appear opposite each photographic plate.

[bjhcap27] [bjh27]



HERE are facts connected with this

First—By this Bell time is regular
day and night throughout the year.

Second—To support the men who are always
on the householders within a radius of 8 Japanese
122 yards and a fraction.)

Third—The mode of computing Japanese
countries which is as follows :—

The Japanese day and night are divided
sunset and sunrise—it follows therefore
each year are the hours of equal length
proportionate increase in the
of time.

Album captions

*Album captions in this unit are transcribed verbatim
from the ca. 1869 volume. [Complete album captions
text is available in "Resources."](#)*

Each caption is titled. For scenic views, both the locale where the photograph was made (Kamakura, Nagasaki, etc.) and the specific subject shown in the photograph appear in the title. Genre images simply note the subject in the title. A decorative border surrounds many of the captions and floriated ornamentation highlights the incipit letter. Captions vary in length from 150 to 500 words. They can include one or all of the following: a description of the place or genre subject; the history of the place or cultural practice; and interpretation of the cultural activities associated with the place or practice. Several members of the Yokohama foreign community are thought to have a hand in authoring the captions. Wirgman's involvement is certain given his stake in the partnership. James W. Murray, who is mentioned on the frontispiece of *Photographic Views of Japan* but not specifically credited as an author, is another contributor. John Reddie Black, editor of the *Japan Gazette* and later *The Far East*, Yokohama's earliest newspapers, is thought to have been involved on some level since he had access to the only English-language press in Yokohama at the time. The authors of the captions also cite observations of other Westerners who wrote of their experiences in Japan. The importance of the captions cannot be overstated. As examples from the Hood Museum album demonstrate, they inflect the way the photographs were viewed and understood. These text-image relationships, explored in detail below, are especially revealing of how 19th-century Westerners came to visualize Japan and its culture.

In the late 1860s Beato began enhancing his photographs with color highlights. This was a labor-intensive process, as each photograph had to be hand-colored, often while the developing emulsion was still wet. Beato delegated hand coloring to his Japanese employees, but it has been suggested that Wirgman may have pioneered the techniques. This seems probable. Beato had competitors, and, as his business partner, Wirgman would have cause to raise the quality of their products. Wirgman's skill as a painter would have given him more incentive and the ability to develop these techniques. He is known to have instructed Japanese students in the art of watercolor and oil painting. Perhaps Beato's colorists came into his employ via this route.



“Bettoes or Grooms” is a photograph from a Beato album in the Smith College Museum of Art.

The image illustrates hand-applied color that dramatically enhances the photograph, in this case capturing the detail of the subject’s tattoo.

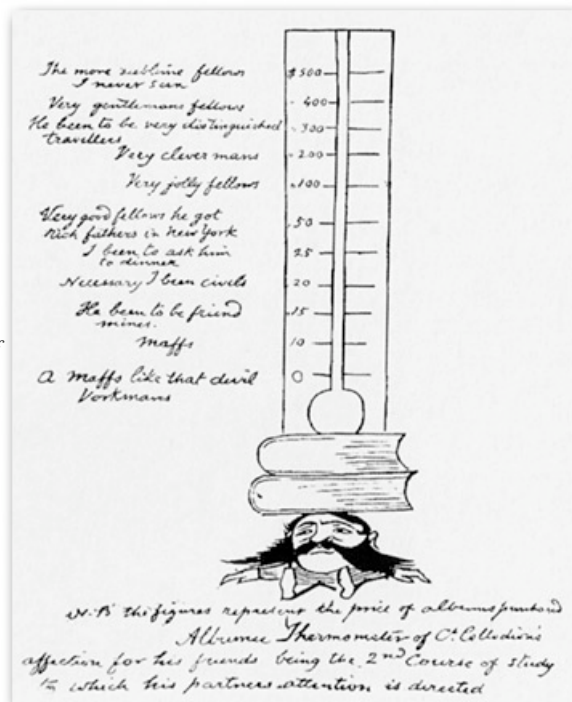
Similar photographs show that some tattoos are created completely by the colorists.

[bjs30]

As Beato and Wirgman’s partnership matured, comical sketches of Beato began to appear with regularity in *Japan Punch*, a humorous monthly Wirgman began publishing in 1862. One caricature parodies Beato’s flexible pricing scheme. Albums could vary in cost from 10 to 500 dollars depending on a loosely structured set of criteria, one of which was the gullibility of potential customers. According to the caption, “That devil Vorkmans” (i.e., Wirgman—Beato’s Mediterranean accent was a feature of every parody) got his albums for free. Evidently, Beato and Wirgman’s working relationship was rooted in a healthy friendship.

This cartoon in *Japan Punch* parodies Beato’s flexible pricing scheme for his albums. The photographer is depicted beneath the two-volume set and a thermometer showing the price of \$500 for “sublime fellows” at the top and \$0 for “that devil Vorkmans” (his friend Wirgman) at the bottom. The wording pokes fun at Beato’s thick accent.

[bjh103]



An Album of Beato's Scenic Views in the Hood Museum of Art

The covers of Beato's albums, including *Photographic Views of Japan with Historical and Descriptive Notes, Compiled from Authentic Sources, and Personal Observation During a Residence of Several Years*, are generally made of cloth-covered board. Some have a title embossed in gold letters; many do not. The Hood Museum example is an early prototype of a lacquer-covered album. It features a design of two golden pheasants in a grove of flowering trees and shrubs carved in low relief into a red lacquer base and highlighted with gold, silver, and copper leaf. Surface coats of polished lacquer give the cover a smooth glossy sheen. The floral design continues on the back cover. Filigree ornaments made of brass protect the corners of the cover from wear and frame the design in an artful way.



The cover of Beato's Photographic Views of Japan features golden pheasants in a grove of flowering trees and shrubs carved in low relief into a red lacquer base and highlighted with gold, silver, and copper leaf. The open album shows the way captions were pasted on to the left-hand pages, while photographs appeared on the right. Covers varied, this one being the album at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, that is the subject of this unit.

[bjh104] [bjh105]

The Hood Museum album cover provides insights into photography's role within the emergent tourist economy of Japan. Japanese treaty ports, especially Yokohama, were thriving commercial centers servicing the foreign community and tourists who passed through the port. Curio shops selling all manner of *objets d'art* lined Yokohama's main streets. Westerners bought pottery, *cloisonné*, fabric, metalwork, swords, and lacquer as mementos, gifts, and keepsakes, often shipping trunk loads of collectables back to America and Europe. Beato's lacquer-covered albums linked commercial photography to this curio trade in material goods. Much like other collectibles Westerners bought in Yokohama, photographs were acquired to memorialize a residence in or visit to Japan. Wrapping photographs in lacquer-covered albums added to their Japanese-ness. It was an effective means to exoticize images that were themselves already exotic. It is unlikely Westerners would have recognized the auspicious associations of the design (a mating pair of golden pheasants was a symbol of good fortune), but it would have been understood as Japanese or, at the very least, "oriental." Westerners would have also been attracted to the material and the craftsmanship of the cover as they were with other curios they acquired. The value-added qualities provided by decorated covers

were, no doubt, reflected in their price. Later photographers followed Beato's precedent, making lacquer-covered albums the mainstay of commercial studios in the 1880s and 90s.

Evidence dating the Hood Museum album suggests that Beato began experimenting with elaborate covers in 1869. The caption for a photograph of the inner moat of Edo castle (no. 37, illustrated and discussed below) reads: "The castle of Yedo, for two hundred and sixty years the residence of the Taikuns, and now [1869] that of the Mikado of Japan, was built in the beginning of the seventeenth century, by Iyeyasu, the great founder of the last dynasty of Taikuns, or Shoguns." References here are to the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which marked the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and the return of the emperor to the position of head of state. The imperial household took up residence in Edo castle in October 1868. This caption perhaps suggests a date for the Smith College album. One photograph in the Smith album shows, according to the caption, Beato's colorist. At his feet lies an album with a lacquer cover similar to the Hood Museum example.



"Our Painter" is a photograph from Smith College Museum of Art's Beato album depicting Japanese people.

The caption hints that "Our painter in full summer costume" was a colorist in Beato's studio—an impression underscored by the placement of a lacquer album cover at his feet. Beato's photographs ranged from posed studio shots to outdoor scenes.

[bjs45]

Beato's albums of scenic views possess an internal logic determined by several factors. The Treaty of Kanagawa (1858) permitted the establishment of five treaty ports: Kanagawa, Nagasaki, Hyōgō, Hakodate, and Niigata. In subsequent negotiations, the Kanagawa site was shifted to Yokohama while Hyōgō was shifted to Kobe. (Niigata was never developed.) The treaty granted exemption from Japanese law (extra-territoriality) to foreigners but restricted their movements to the vicinity of the ports. The treaty-port limits of Yokohama, for example, extended in a radius of roughly eighteen miles. This distance was reduced considerably in the direction of Edo (now Tokyo) because it was the capital of Japan and the location of the Tokugawa shogun's government. In the years immediately following the signing of the treaty, diplomats and consular officials with appropriate documentation were granted limited access to Edo. By the mid 1860s, foreign nations were permitted to establish legations in the Tsukiji district of the capital.



Westerners were permitted to live and trade only in areas established by the Treaty of Kanagawa of 1858. Of the treaty ports photographed in the Beato album, Nagasaki (left) contained the earliest Western enclave in Japan and Yokohama (right) rapidly became the largest.

[bjh47] [bjh45]



Scroll through an enlarged view of the bustling harbor at Yokohama.

The conditions imposed by the Treaty of Kanagawa also circumscribed the geographical limits of Beato's activity. His inventory consisted primarily of scenic views within the treaty port limits. While this might seem restrictive, there were in fact a remarkable variety of environments that attracted Beato. The temple district of Kamakura offered a wealth of images related to Buddhist culture. The Tōkaidō highway passed close to Yokohama and provided access to village life and natural settings. Yokohama itself was of great interest to Beato's clientele. Besides the residential areas provided for foreigners, it had a so-called "native town" consisting of residences, businesses, a theater, a Shinto shrine, a Buddhist temple, and a brothel district, all of which supplied Beato with interesting street and genre scenes.

Beato also had occasions to travel beyond Yokohama. He toured Edo/Tokyo several times, acquiring in the process views along the route from Yokohama and numerous images of sites and scenes in the capital. Beato also traveled the great Tōkaidō highway to the Hakone area. This afforded him views of small villages, natural settings, spectacular vistas, and Mount Fuji. Beato developed a small selection of scenes from Nagasaki, which he first visited in 1865. He eventually acquired views of Hakodate in northern Japan and Kobe when they began to develop as treaty ports. Even Kyoto's famous sites came into his inventory when travel restrictions to the former imperial capital were relaxed somewhat in the early 1870s.

For his pre-made albums Beato typically arranged the photographs according to their location. These locale-based groups of images were sometimes sequenced as if to suggest travel from one area to the next. Beato's customers often (but not always) followed this protocol when they drew on his inventory to compile self-selected albums. Albums personalized in this manner frequently reflect the travels of the customer. Some surviving examples focus on a relatively small number of locales while others narrate an extended itinerary to all the places accessible to foreigners.

Self-selected albums typically began in either Yokohama or Nagasaki. These were the primary ports of disembarkation: Yokohama if the traveler came across the Pacific; Nagasaki if she or he arrived from China. Similarly, views of either Yokohama or Nagasaki could conclude an album, marking these as points of departure to new ports of call. Photographs of other locations on the traveler's itinerary would appear in the order in which they were visited. It was also common to sequence views within some of the larger locales. A day's trip round the city of Edo, for example, could take in several sites, making it possible to reconstruct the outing with a series of scenic views.

The Hood Museum album partakes of organizational protocols common in Beato's albums of scenic views. It opens with a series of 16 photographs that leads the viewer along the Tōkaidō through Miyanoshita, a popular resort for foreigners, to Hakone and the Mt. Fuji highlands. The next sequence of five photographs explores temples in Kamakura. This sequence ends with images of Kanagawa and Yokohama, perhaps suggesting the conclusion of a journey that took in all the preceding sites. The next eighteen photographs suggest a trip to Edo and many of its famous sites. Three views of Yokohama follow the Edo sequence. A single image of Kamakura precedes the last identifiable sequence, which is comprised of four scenes in Nagasaki.

But the Hood Museum album also has quirks. Two images of Nagasaki interrupt the journey along the Tōkaidō and another photograph of Nagasaki appears among the Edo images. These make the Hood album somewhat of an anomaly that defies easy explanation. Perhaps the album reflects the travels of a foreign resident who visited Nagasaki several times during an extended stay in the country. Perhaps it was disassembled at some point, disrupting the original sequences (although, this would require considerable effort to ensure that the captions matched the photographs). Perhaps the album was intended as simply a collection of scenic views in no particular order. Perhaps the album was not self-selected—its arrangement of views may have been a product of Beato's studio. Perhaps someone in Beato's employ simply erred when the photographs were bound into the album.

Whatever the explanation, these quirks make the Hood Museum album difficult to re-narrate as a unified document of personal travel. Bearing this in mind, the following series of case studies explores the album on a location-by-location basis. The case studies generally follow the sequences suggested by the album. In some cases photographs from different locales have been brought together to emphasize specific points.

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