

Constructing a First Impression of Japan: Recreating a Photo Album of Felice Beato

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With the dawning of the Meiji period in the nineteenth century, following the two hundred years of isolation and xenophobia of the Tokugawa era, Japan was opened to foreigners, albeit with extensive restrictions which served to confine their movements to treaty port cities such as Yokohama and Nagasaki. Nevertheless, despite such constraints, westerners arrived at the country in the early 1860s to witness with their own eyes the exoticism and tradition of the Japanese people and landscape and also to cash in on the extreme popularity and allure that Japan held in the west. Commercial photographers established studios, particularly in Yokohama, and began stockpiling images of the Japanese countryside and its people, selling these souvenir travel photographs and albums to tourists as keepsakes of their journeys. By the late 1860s and early 1870s, the production of these photo albums became a prosperous and competitive business, primarily pioneered by the European photographer and entrepreneur Felice Beato, who would leave an indelible impact on future photographers in the country, both western and Japanese.

In my paper, I will specifically examine the influential photographer, Felice Beato. A most interesting character and true Renaissance man, Beato traveled the world from India to Japan to Burma as a military and commercial photographer, a real estate investor, an antiques dealer, and an importer of purses and rugs, among many other things. In particular, I will investigate Beato's role as a commercial photographer in Japan in the late 1860s and early 1870s,

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specifically attempting to recreate one of his popular and influential tourist albums.² In doing so, I will briefly analyze selected images of this recreated album, trying to decipher what they would have communicated to westerners and the possible Japanese stereotypes they would have reinforced. After all, these tourist albums, when they arrived back in the west, were some of the first and only images of Japan that many people saw and as such served as constructed and contrived first impressions of the country.

Born on the island of Corfu in Greece in 1825, Felice Beato had already become an established photographer in Malta by 1850. Five years later, he was sent to Constantinople to document the Crimean War, at which time he solidified his reputation as a successful military photographer. Following the war, Beato became a British citizen and traveled to the Near East and India. In 1860, he continued his travels to China where he met Charles Wirgman, a cartoon illustrator for *The Illustrated London News*; the friendship would deeply affect the course of his life.³ From August to November of 1860, Beato recorded the Second Opium War, accompanying the military campaign and photographically documenting the European imperial triumph.

While in China, whenever possible Beato traveled throughout the country, photographing religious sites, imperial architecture, and the Chinese people. In fact, Beato was one of the first

² In terms of my methodology, I was able to discover the typical layout and composition of Felice Beato's album not only through monographs on early Japanese photography and Felice Beato but also with the help of a website at Smith College Museum of Art, which has archived and posted images from extant albums (see Hockley and Wilson in the bibliography).

³ Sebastian Dobson, "I been to keep up my position': Felice Beato in Japan, 1863-1877," in *Reflecting Truth: Japanese Photography in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere and Mikiko Hirayama (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2004), p 30. Beato's work is generally acclaimed and much of it survives either in private or institutional ownership. As an aside, I found one of Beato's albums for sale on the internet—it was going for over \$4000.

photographers to “capture on film the fragments of this legendary land.”⁴ Furthermore, Beato compiled many of these photographs into albums which he sold to British military officers and personnel. As such, in his early career as a military and pioneering travel photographer, Felice Beato had already gotten his feet wet in the commercial aspect of the medium. In addition, in China Beato discovered that there was a market for the exotic and mysterious East. He brought these insights with him to Japan where he exploited the commercial aspects of photography to their fullest potential.

In 1861, Charles Wirgman went to Japan and encouraged his friend to join him there. Finally arriving in Yokohama in 1863, Beato and Wirgman established a studio, the firm of “Beato and Wirgman, Artists and Photographers,” whose main aim was the “commercialization in the west of that great novelty, Japonisme, the craze for all things Japanese.”⁵ While other western photographers were opening studios in Yokohama at this time, Beato was distinctive among them because he was already well established and consequently he quickly became the leading photographer in Japan in the 1860s.

In 1866, a rampant fire in Yokohama burned the studio of “Beato and Wirgman, Artists and Photographers” to the ground, destroying their inventory of stock photographs and negatives. For the next year, Beato worked assiduously to rebuild his repertoire of stock images and by 1868, with a series of scenic views and studio portraits completed, he was back in business. In addition, in 1868 Beato published these photographs in two volumes, *Views of Japan* and *Native Types*, which were published jointly under the lengthy appellation, *Photographic Views of Japan*

⁴ David Harris, *Of Battle and Beauty: Felice Beato's Photographs of China* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1999), p. 8.

⁵ Margarita Winkel, *Souvenirs from Japan: Japanese Photography at the Turn of the Century* (London: Bamboo Publishing Ltd., 1991), p. 25.

*with Historical and Descriptive Notes, Compiled from Authentic Sources, and Personal Observation During a Residence of Several Years.*⁶

By 1869, Felice Beato and Charles Wirgman had ended their creative partnership, with the latter focusing on painting and sketching while the former continued in the business of photography with his own studio, “F. Beato and Company, Photographers.” The business remained open until 1877 when Beato sold both the studio and his stock of negatives. However, Beato did not leave Japan for several more years and while he was no longer a photographer, he pursued many other entrepreneurial avenues in the country. According to the Yokohama Archives of History, after 1877 Beato “owned land and several studios, had a financial interest in Yokohama’s Grand Hotel, was a property consultant, and a prosperous dealer in imported carpets and women’s bags.”⁷ Beato did not leave Japan until 1884, when bankruptcy forced him to depart for London, the Sudan, and finally Burma, where he was an antiques dealer.⁸ In a life full of wanderlust and continuous travel, the two decades spent in Japan represent the longest time Felice Beato resided in any one place. In his tenure in Japan, Beato saw a country that had been virtually unexplored by Europeans, at least away from the treaty ports. He made (and lost) a fortune with his successful photographic studio, cashing in on the widespread Japonisme trend in the west with his tourist photo albums

At this point, it is now possible to examine the types of photographs that would have typically been in one of Beato’s photo albums, its construction, and its organization. As stated previously, these albums were purchased by travelers as a memento of their trip or as a gift for family friends. Also, many albums were directly exported to the west where they were sold to

⁶ Both albums had one hundred images each of landscapes and portraits, the latter of which were hand-colored. Both of the albums are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

⁷ Terry Bennet, *Early Japanese Images* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1996), p. 39.

⁸ Winkel, p. 26.

armchair travelers who never would have had the opportunity to make the trek to Japan. With the craze for all things Japanese, it is logical and savvy that entrepreneurs like Beato and Wirgman would seek to benefit from the fad. In his photographs, Beato satisfied the public's extreme curiosity of Japan, creating views of famous landscapes and locales and images of local people, which he then sold for a profit.⁹

The album itself was usually bound on the left edge with a cover of either cloth or leather, often embossed with a title of gold letters (FIGURE 1). Later photo albums were more elaborate and made of lacquer. Most albums would have sold from anywhere from ten to five hundred dollars. The photographs were typically accompanied by captions, a separate sheet of paper that was glued onto the opposite page (FIGURE 2). Each caption was titled according to the location of the specific view or the custom depicted. Usually 150-500 words long and surrounded by a decorative border (FIGURE 3), the caption served to describe the scene by containing a description of the location, the history of the place or custom, or an interpretation of the custom. Many of these captions were written by Charles Wirgman or other members of the foreign community in Yokohama. As one might expect, the captions helped to guide the viewer in his or her interpretation of the foreign scene.¹⁰

As to the typical format for tourist albums, most contained anywhere from twenty-five to one hundred highly diverse images. In fact, it was common to find landscapes and depictions of manners and customs all in one album. While studios in Yokohama sold individual photographs, it was the photo album which was the mainstay of the business. After all, the owner of the studio would only get minimal compensation for individual images while an album would have cost significantly more. A testament to the prestige and demand for photo albums is found within the

⁹ Winkel, p. 27-9.

¹⁰ Allen Hockley, "Felice Beato's Japan: Places," http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027j/beato_places/fb_essay_01.html (last accessed 3/11/08)

plethora of advertisements published by photographers in local newspapers, including one by Felice Beato placed in an 1870 issue of *Japan Weekly* (FIGURE 4).

In the text, it is clear that by 1870 the photo album had become Beato's most popular item and was the foundation of his business, for the advertisement exclusively deals with a description of the many types of albums he had to offer. That is, Beato has just "completed a handsome collection of albums of various sizes, containing views of Japan and customs, with descriptions of the scenes, manners, customs, and people."¹¹ The advertisement further alludes to the increasingly competitive photographic industry in Japan, for Beato validates his expertise with the statement that he has resided in the country for several years. In addition, from the advertisement one learns that in the early 1870s most of Beato's albums were sold pre-fabricated and as such, he was the impetus not only behind the images that were selected but also the text that accompanied them.¹²

The advertisement also indicates the two main subjects within the photo albums, which correspond to his massive two-volume work of 1868: views and types of Japan. Most likely, it was Beato himself who introduced this format to Japanese photography, a carryover from his work in the Mediterranean where such a dichotomy was commonly utilized.¹³ While some of his albums contained only views or types, most of the compilations contained a combination of both. In the case of an album with both views and types, the views precede the types and essentially set the stage for the customs that follow.

The views of Japan are arranged according to location and follow the common tourist route. For example, most western tourists arrived in Yokohama and thus many albums began

¹¹ Allen Hockley, "Packaged Tours: Photo Albums and their Implications for the Study of Early Japanese Photography," in *Reflecting Truth: Japanese Photography in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere and Mikiko Hirayama (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2004), p. 69.

¹² That is, views of Japan and types of people and customs.

¹³ Hockley, "Packaged Tours," p. 84.

with images of this port city, proceeding to the Tokaido Highway, Kamakura, Edo/Tokyo, Hakone, and finally Nagasaki (FIGURE 5). Many of these photographs focused on religious sites and architecture, such as the Kamakura Daibutsu [Buddha] and the Hachiman Temple, both of which figure prominently in Beato's albums and could have possibly represented generic religious sites. Consequently, within this broad category of cities there were numerous more specific images.¹⁴

In general, the views of Japan served to give the impression to westerners that the foreign and exotic country was untainted by industrialization and modernism. In short, Japan was a quaint country with charming villages and spectacular imperial and religious architecture and monuments. The captions included with the views served to further accentuate the beauty of the landscape. However, these photographs contradict the reality that in the late nineteenth century, Japan was rushing towards industrialization and quickly becoming a modern world power—but such modernism was not captured in Beato's photographs. After all, Europeans wanted to see a country that was untainted by modernism and this was exactly what Beato gave them, being the astute businessman that he was.

Despite their often times contradictory nature, the images of the Japanese countryside are arguably the most lyrical and breathtaking scenes created by Felice Beato. Though taken by a western photographer, the landscape photographs exhibit a Japanese flavor and were clearly influenced by *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints.¹⁵ The similarity can be seen clearly in a comparison of a typical *ukiyo-e* print by Utagawa Hiroshige, *The Plum Gardens at Kameido*, and one of Beato's photographs of Yokohama (FIGURES 6 & 7). In Beato's work, the harbor of Yokohama

¹⁴ Hockley, "Packaged Tours," p. 73-5.

¹⁵ Winkel, p. 25-6. Clark Worswich suggests that it was through Charles Wirgman that Beato learned the Japanese tradition and the artistic conventions used in these woodblock prints. Charles Wirgman was also probably the one who urged Beato to hand-color his photographs, which was also in keeping with the Japanese woodblock tradition.

unfolds in the distance. However, it is not merely an uninterrupted panoramic shot of the treaty port city. Rather, Beato positions a framing device within his composition by capturing a tree in the foreground. Numerous Japanese woodblock prints exhibit this same convention, which is utilized as a framing device; the tree is clearly demarcating the foreground and the background in Hiroshige's print as well. There is no doubt that Beato became familiar with Japanese artistic styles and incorporated selected elements into his work. With the use of these Japanese characteristics, Beato demonstrated a nuanced sensitivity to the land and the culture.

Following a collection of views of Japanese cities and landscapes, Beato included a plethora of images depicting genre scenes of various activities, including Japanese people going about their daily activities in shops and markets as well as staged portraits of the various classes, complete with costumes, props, and paraphernalia, capturing the "otherness" of the Japanese. In his collection of stock images, Beato had photographs of almost every possible social rank, with various local types, women, samurai, Buddhist priests, street performers, courtesans, and workers. Most of these types were hand-colored and vignette in format.

Similar to the views of Japan, the types also do not reflect the modernization of the country. That is, the depictions of various social types reflect Japan's feudal history, not its emergence as a modern society. For example, images of samurai are prevalent within Beato's photo albums, but in reality the samurai class was being wiped out of existence by the latter half of the nineteenth century (FIGURE 8). However, the reality of diminishing samurai is contradicted in the images of the photo albums and the western viewer would be led to believe that Japan was continuing in her feudal capacity rather than marching towards a burgeoning modern era. Also, the posing of the samurai created an impression of daring and power, with the actor (and not actual samurai) staring confidently out toward the viewer. In doing so, the

samurai almost appears to be facing the challenge of the west head on, as the westerner looks at the photograph from the comforts from his or her own home.¹⁶

Girl Playing Samisen is another obviously staged scene from Beato's studio and supports the impression of an antiquated and quaint Japanese people, with a girl in a traditional kimono playing the Japanese instrument. A serene and tranquil scene, the photograph is accompanied by text which explains the exotic activity (FIGURE 9):

The Japanese guitar of "samisen" is a very simple instrument—a small box of wood covered with parchment, and with only three strings. It is generally played with a flat piece of wood, or ivory, or horn, and is seldom struck with the fingers.

The music does not strike one as being harmonious, but wild and harsh. The airs are occasionally plaintive, but the voice in singing is never natural, and seems to be an acquired sort of falsetto, which is by no means pleasant to the ear.

Music is part of the education of most girls of any pretensions; and to its acquirement a great deal of time and labour are devoted—yet there is a wonderful absence of any approach to harmony in the airs played by even the most carefully taught.¹⁷

In reading the caption, the westerner learns that the "Japanese guitar or 'samisen' is a very simple instrument" and the music produced by it is not harmonious but rather "wild and harsh." Additionally, the lack of a melody, a travesty to western ears, is accompanied by unpleasant singing. Beato's text does not completely criticize the samisen for in the ending paragraph he states that the foreign sound has a "wonderful absence" of harmony. In reading such a description, a western tourist might be struck by the backwardness of the Japanese who play instruments made of fragile parchment and accompany it with shrill singing. Nevertheless, it was just these types of images that

¹⁶ Haruko Iwasaki, "Western Images, Japanese Identities: Cultural Dialogue between East and West in Yokohama Photography," in *A Timely Encounter: Nineteenth Century Photographs of Japan*, eds. Melissa Banta and Susan Taylor (Cambridge: Peabody Museum Press, 1988), p. 30.

¹⁷ Alana C. Wilson, "Felice Beato's Japan: People." http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027j/beato_people/fb_essay_04.html (accessed 3/11/08)

westerners wanted to see: strange customs.

In conclusion, Felice Beato was so successful in his endeavor of producing tourist photo albums not merely on account of his skill in the medium of photography but also because of his ability to predict what his clientele wanted and being able to summarize the heart and soul of the country in only a few images.¹⁸ In his photo albums, Felice Beato was able to consolidate the common impression westerners had about Japan and they were able to visually travel through the exotic country, viewing its architecture and landscape and reflect upon the strange and antiquated customs of its people. While some might have believed what Beato was showing in his albums was reality, it was in fact often a highly construed construction, created to satisfy the needs of a western audience that craved all things Japanese. The west did not want to see the modernization occurring within Japan and the disintegration of the samurai class—they wanted to see an untainted landscape of pristine lakes, quaint villagers, and antiquated customs. And this was exactly what Beato gave them. As such, in his photo albums Beato constructed an impression of Japan that would be held by many westerners in the late nineteenth century.

¹⁸ Bennett, p. 33.

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Figure 1
Album Covers
(Hockley, "Felice Beato's Japan: Places")



Figure 2
Example of a caption (*Girl Playing Samisen*)
(Wilson, "Felice Beato's Japan: People")

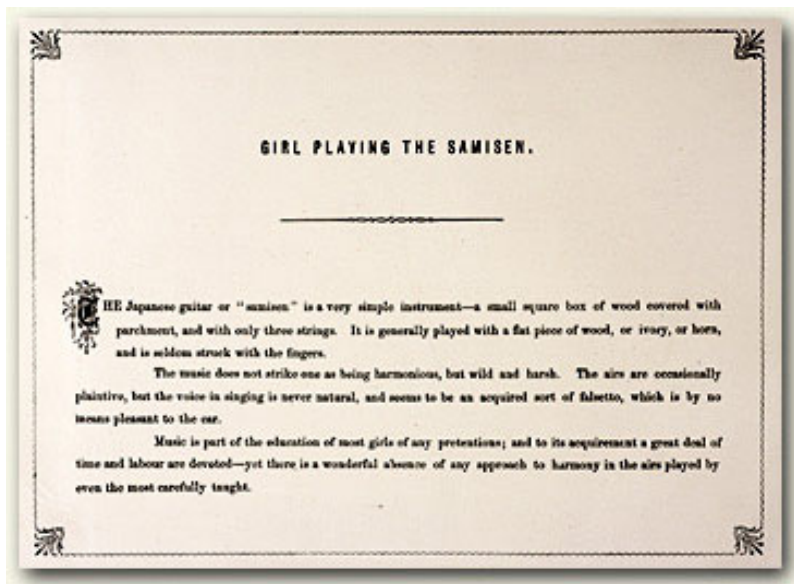


Figure 3
 Borders
 (Wilson, "Felice Beato's Japan: People")



Figure 4
 Advertisement, *Japan Weekly*, 1870
 (Hockley, "Packaged Tours," p. 69)

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

Figure 5
Kamakura Daibutsu, 1860s
(Hockley, "Felice Beato's Japan: Places")



Figure 6
Yokohama, 1860s
(Hockley, "Felice Beato's Japan: Places")



Figure 7

Utagawa Hiroshige, *The Plum Garden at Kameido*, from *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*
(1797-1858)

(<http://www.trussel.com/ukiyo-e/ukiyo-e5.gif>)

**Figure 8**

Samurai in Armour, 1860s
(Bennett, *Early Japanese Images*, p. 75)



Figure 9
Girl Playing Samisen, 1860s
(Bennett, *Early Japanese Images*, p. 78)

