

CHECKLIST

Elizabeth Keith, British, 1887–1956
Untitled (Oriental Street Scene)
1930

Color woodcut print

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Charles E. Griffith, Class of 1915;
PR.966.111.9

Arnoldus Montanus, German, 1625–1683
*Gedenkwaardige gesantschappen der Oost-Indische Maatschappy
in 't Vereenigde Nederland, aan de kaisaren van Japan*
1669

Book with illustrated plates

Rauner Rare Book; DS808.M66 1669

Yoshimori Taguchi, Japanese, 1830–1884
Untitled (An American with a Telescope)
1861

Color woodcut print

Purchased through the Julia L. Whittier Fund; PR.964.184

Unknown artist, Japanese

Mermaid

19th century

Fish, monkey, varnish

Gift of Edwin Webster Sanborn, Class of 1878; 28.6.5098

Unknown artists

Views of Nagasaki: Photograph Album with Views of Japan
About 1862–80

Album assembled by Elizabeth Adams Hill, American, 1842–?

Albumen print

Gift of Mrs. George Pettengill; PH.183.3

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HOOD MUSEUM OF ART



INSATIABLE APPETITES

Curiosity, Consumption, and the Traveler in Historic Japan



Elizabeth Keith, *Untitled (Oriental Street Scene)*, 1930, color woodcut print. Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Charles E. Griffith, Class of 1915; PR.966.111.9

Although Marco Polo wrote about the fabled land of Zipangu in the fourteenth century, not until 1543 did Europeans accidentally stumble onto Japanese soil. Eager to trade with and Christianize the Japanese, Westerners then flooded the country. During this time period of extensive Western exploration and colonization, foreign cultures were considered exotic curiosities at best and backward barbarians at worst. Subsequently, Europeans, who considered themselves the pinnacle of the “civilized world,” were shocked to find a highly developed culture in Japan. It was, in fact, the Westerner’s turn to be unflatteringly

labeled as uncivilized. The Japanese called Westerners *nanban*—or “southern barbarians”—because of their arrival from the south of Japan and their unsophisticated manners. As writer Michael Cooper notes, Japanese contact was the “first confrontation between East and West on equal terms” (Cooper xii). While neither culture necessarily saw the other as an equal, the sovereignty of the Japanese government and culture challenged Western ideals of superiority and empire. This exhibition explores the ways that Westerners and Japanese imagined one another, creating texts and images to authenticate their ideologies and interpretations of the cultural “Other.”

Early writings and depictions of Westerners and Japanese illustrate how both cultures have romanticized, appropriated, and exoticized in

their varying attempts to reject or understand one another. As early as the seventeenth century, books written by European merchants and missionaries set the precedent for Western perceptions of the Japanese. These books described everyday life in Japan and depicted the country’s oddities. Travel accounts were frequently contradictory, their writers simultaneously impressed with the intelligence and civility of the Japanese and disgusted by their propensity for “devil worshipping” and “debaucheries.” The secondhand nature of many of these books, along with the Western public’s hunger for the fantastic, resulted in a lot of inaccurate information. Nevertheless, their images and narratives formed the basis for generations of popular travel chronicles and, as a result, public opinion.

The increasing threat of Christianization and a resentment of foreign control eventually caused the Japanese government to initiate a self-imposed isolationist policy. Except for a few Dutch merchants, all travelers were forbidden to enter Japan under threat of death. During this closed era, known as the Edo period (1600–1867), Japan remained an enigmatic and shadowy unknown to Westerners. In 1853, however, Commodore Matthew Perry and the United States Navy forced Japan to open its ports to Western trade. The open ports, along with the development of steamboats and trains, brought a new wave of Western travelers to Japan, which soon became a requisite stop on the round-the-world adventures of Westerners, as depicted in Taguchi’s print of an American with a telescope (cover image).

Travelers fascinated with “exotic Japan” brought home souvenirs ranging from the fantastic to the everyday. These souvenirs had one thing in common: they were access points to an otherwise inaccessible culture, reifying the differences between the traveler and the native. The development of photography in the 1830s and its consequent flowering as a tourist commodity served to reinforce travelers’ stereotypes of the Japanese. Because communication between the traveler and the Other was generally in one direction, the exotic Japan presented in photograph, souvenir, and travel writings remained sadly mute; the Japanese subject here could not answer back.

However, Japan did not stay quiet. By the 1860s, the Meiji government responded to the influx of Westerners by adopting Western law and behavior, so that foreigners would recognize Japan as a civilized nation; if the Japanese could not expel the Western *nanban*, they would at least stand as their equals. During this period, Western interest in the material culture of Japan influenced European art and the *Japonisme* craze of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Elizabeth Keith’s print of a

Malaysian street scene attests, Europe and America’s industrialization encouraged a Western longing for a quaint, more “authentic” past that many found in their travels in Asia. Thus, an uneasy but unprecedented visual dialogue began anew between East and West.

Although no overarching vision of Japan existed, the perceptions of foreign travelers were heavily shaped by images produced by both Westerners and Japanese. While Western travelers imposed their fantasies on Japan, their mythmaking was not unidirectional; the Japanese actively participated in their own self-presentation, often choosing to reinforce, manipulate, or subvert stereotypes propagated by Westerners. On the other hand, Westerners transformed the threat of Japanese cultural difference into consumable products such as the calling card photograph, or *carte de visite*, depicting two Japanese women imitating the “Grecian Bend”—the odd posture of Victorian women wearing dress bustles. Because travelers’ images and objects can convey different narratives, they are the perfect medium for exploring the complicated relations *between* cultures. As such, they reveal the oft-hidden histories of the renegotiation of cultural understanding and visual identity.

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Special Projects Intern

Unknown artists, *Views of Nagasaki: Photograph Album with Views of Japan*, about 1862–80, album assembled by Elizabeth Adams Hill, albumen print. Gift of Mrs. George Pettengill; PH.183.3

