

BLACK SHIPS & SAMURAI

COMMODORE PERRY AND THE OPENING OF JAPAN (1853-1854)

BY JOHN W. DOWER

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION



Perry, ca. 1854

© Nagasaki Prefecture



Perry, ca. 1856

by Mathew Brady, Library of Congress

On July 8, 1853, residents of Uraga on the outskirts of Edo, the sprawling capital of feudal Japan, beheld an astonishing sight. Four foreign warships had entered their harbor under a cloud of black smoke, not a sail visible among them. They were, startled observers quickly learned, two coal-burning steamships towing two sloops under the command of a dour and imperious American. Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry had arrived to force the long-secluded country to open its doors to the outside world.



"The Spermacetti Whale" by J. Stewart, 1837

New Bedford Whaling Museum

This was a time that Americans can still picture today through Herman Melville's great novel *Moby Dick*, published in 1851—a time when whale-oil lamps illuminated homes, baleen whale bones gave women's skirts their copious form, and much industrial machinery was lubricated with the leviathan's oil. For several decades, whaling ships departing from New England ports had plied the rich fishery

around Japan, particularly the waters near the northern island of Hokkaido. They were prohibited from putting in to shore even temporarily for supplies, however, and shipwrecked sailors who fell into Japanese hands were commonly subjected to harsh treatment.



*Whale Chart, Japan in blue (detail, color added)
by M.F. Maury, US Navy, 1851*

New Bedford Whaling Museum

Nicknamed “Old Bruin” by one of his early crews (and “Old Hog” and other disparaging epithets by crewman with the Japan squadron), Matthew Perry was the younger brother of Oliver Hazard Perry, hero of the American victory over the British on Lake Erie in 1813. His own fame as a wartime leader had been established in the recent U.S. war against Mexico, where he commanded a squadron that raided various ports and supported the storming of Vera Cruz. Victory over Mexico in 1848 did not merely add California to the United States. It also opened the vista of new frontiers further west across the Pacific Ocean. The markets and heathen souls of near-mythic “Asia” now beckoned more enticingly than ever before. Mars, Mammon, and God traveled hand-in-hand in this dawning age of technological and commercial revolution.

This situation could not last. “If that double-bolted land, Japan, is ever to become hospitable,” Melville wrote in *Moby Dick*, “it is the whaleship alone to whom the credit will be due, for already she is on the threshold.” One of the primary objectives of Perry’s expedition was to demand that castaways be treated humanely and whalers and other American vessels be provided with one or two ports of call with access to “coal, provisions, and water.”

The message Perry brought to Japan’s leaders from President Millard Fillmore also looked forward, in very general terms, to the eventual establishment of mutually beneficial trade relations. On the surface, Perry’s demands seemed relatively modest. Yet, as his own career made clear, this was also a moment when the world stood on the cusp of phenomenal change.



*President Fillmore’s 1853 letter
to “The Emperor of Japan”*

New Bedford Whaling Museum

U.S. merchant firms had been involved in the China trade centering on Canton since the previous century. Indeed, “Chinoiserie”—elegant furnishings and objects d’art imported from the Far East, or else mimicking Chinese and Japanese art and artifacts—graced many fashionable European and American homes from the late-17th century on. Following England’s victory in the Opium War of 1839-1842, the United States joined the system of “unequal treaties” that opened additional Chinese ports to foreign commerce. Tall, elegant Yankee clipper ships engaged in a lively commerce that included not merely Oriental luxuries such as silks, porcelains, and lacquer ware, but also opium (for China) and Chinese coolies (to help build America’s transcontinental railway). Now, as Perry would ponderously convey to the Japanese, ports on the West Coast such as San Francisco were opening up as well. In the new age of steam-driven vessels, the distance between California and Japan had been reduced to but 18 days. Calculations concerning space, and time, and America’s “manifest destiny” itself had all been dramatically transformed.

For Americans, Perry’s expedition to Japan was but one momentous step in a seemingly inexorable westward expansion that ultimately spilled across the Pacific to embrace the exotic “East.” For the Japanese, on the other hand, the intrusion of Perry’s warships was traumatic, confounding, fascinating, and ultimately devastating.

For almost a century prior to the 1630s, Japan had in fact engaged in stimulating relations with European trading ships and Christian missionaries. Widely known as the “southern barbarians” (since they arrived from the south, after sailing around India and through the South Seas), these foreigners established a particularly strong presence in and around the great port city of Nagasaki on the southern island of Kyushu. Spain, Portugal, Holland, and England engaged in a lucrative triangular trade involving China as well as Japan.

Protestant missionaries eventually followed their Catholic predecessors and rivals, and by the early-17th century Christian converts in Kyushu were calculated to number many tens of thousands. (Catholic missionaries put the figure at around a quarter million.) At the same time, Japanese culture had become enriched by a brilliant vogue of “Southern Barbarian” art—by artwork, that is, that depicted the Europeans in Japan as well as the lands and cultures from which they had come. This new world of visual imagery ranged from large folding screens depicting the harbor at Nagasaki peopled with foreigners and their trading ships to both religious and secular paintings copied from European sources.

*The arrival of
“Southern
Barbarians,”
17th-century fold-
ing screen*

Nagasaki Prefecture



During these same decades, the Japanese themselves were venturing abroad. Their voyagers established footholds in Siam and the Philippines, for example, and a small delegation of Japanese Christians actually visited the Vatican. The country seemed poised to join in the great age of overseas expansion.

All this came to an abrupt end in 1639, when the ruling warrior government enforced a strict “closed country” (sakoku) policy: Japanese were forbidden to travel abroad, foreigners were expelled, and Christian worship was forbidden and cruelly punished.



17th-century Japanese portrait of Francis Xavier, the Spanish Jesuit who introduced Christianity to Japan in the mid-16th century

Kobe City Museum

“Hidden Christians” reluctant to recant were ferreted out by forcing them to step on pictures or metal bas-reliefs of Christian icons such as the crucifixion or the Virgin Mary known as *fumie* (literally, “step-on pictures”), and observing their reactions—a practice the Japanese sometimes forced American castaways to do as well.

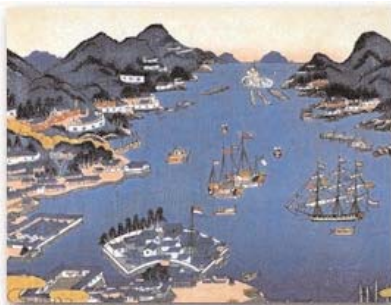
The rationale behind the draconian seclusion policy was both strategic and ideological. The foreign powers, not unreasonably, were seen as posing a potential military threat to Japan; and it was feared, again not unreasonably, that devotion to the Christian Lord might undermine absolute loyalty to the feudal lords who ruled the land.



Fumie of Virgin Mary with Christ child

Shiryo Hensanjo, University of Tokyo

The most notable small exception to the seclusion policy was the continued presence of a Dutch mission confined to Dejima, a tiny, fan-shaped, artificial island in the harbor at Nagasaki. Through Dejima and the Dutch, the now isolated Japanese maintained a small window on developments in the outside world.



The “fan-shaped” island of Dejima in Nagasaki harbor, where the Dutch were permitted to maintain an enclave during the period of seclusion

Nagasaki Prefecture (left), Peabody Essex Museum (middle, right)

Under the seclusion policy, the Japanese enjoyed over two centuries of insular security and economic self-sufficiency. Warriors became bureaucrats. Commerce flourished. Major highways laced the land. Lively towns dotted the landscape, and great cities came into being. At the time of Perry's arrival, Edo (later renamed Tokyo) had a population of around one million. The very city that Perry's tiny fleet approached in 1853 was one of the greatest urban centers in the world—although the outside world was unaware of this.

As it turned out, Perry himself never got to see Edo. Although his mission to open Japan succeeded in every respect, the negotiations took place in modest seaside locales. It remained for those who followed to tell the world about Japan's extraordinary capital city.

While the Japanese did not experience the political, scientific, and industrial revolutions that were sweeping the Western world during their two centuries of seclusion, these developments were not unknown to them. Through the Dutch enclave at Dejima, a small number of Japanese scholars had kept abreast of "Dutch studies" (Rangaku) and "Western studies" (Yogaku). And as news of European expansion filtered in, the feudal regime in Edo became alarmed enough to relax its anti-foreign strictures and permit the establishment of an official "Institute for the Investigation of Barbarian Books."

One of the earliest accounts of North America to appear in Japanese, published in 1708, reflected more than a little confusion: it referred to "a country cold and large...with many lions, elephants, tigers, leopards, and brown and white bears," in which "the natives are pugnacious and love to fight." As happens in secluded societies everywhere, moreover, there existed a subculture of fabulous stories about peoples inhabiting far-away places.

An 18th-century scroll titled "People of Forty-two Lands," for example, played to such imagination with illustrations of figures with multiple arms and legs, people with huge holes running through their upper bodies, semi-human creatures feathered head to toe like birds, and so on.



"People of Forty-two Lands" (details), ca. 1720

Ryosenji Treasure Museum

Such grotesqueries belonged to a larger fantasy world of supernatural beings that had countless visual representations in popular art. Throughout the period of seclusion, however, naturalistic depictions of Europeans in the tradition of the “Southern Barbarian” artwork continued to be produced, particularly depicting the daily life of the “red hairs,” as the Dutch in Dejima were commonly known.

Dutch dinner party
by Kawahara Keiga,
early-19th century

Peabody Essex Museum



Dutch family
by Jo Girin, ca. 1800

Peabody Essex Museum

Dutch “surgery”

Kobe City Museum

Concrete knowledge of the West, including the United States, deepened over time. The Japanese obtained Chinese translations of certain American texts, including a standard history of the United States, and the very eve of Perry’s arrival saw the publication of both a full-length “New History of America” (which, among other things, singled out egalitarianism, beef eating, and milk drinking) and a “General Account of America” that described the Americans as educated and civilized, and stated that they should be met “with respect but not fear.”



Illustrations from a Japanese book about the United States published on the eve of Perry's arrival included imaginary renderings of "Columbus and Queen Isabella" (left) and "George Washington and Amerigo Vespucci" (!)

Collection of Carl H. Boehringer

The most vivid and intimate information available to Japanese officials prior to Perry's arrival came from "John Manjiro," a celebrated Japanese youth who had been shipwrecked while fishing off the Japanese coast in 1841. Only 14 years old at the time, Manjiro was rescued by an American vessel and brought to the United States. He lived in Fairhaven, Massachusetts for three years, sailed for a while on an American whaler, and even briefly joined the gold rush to California in 1849. When Manjiro finally made his way back to Japan in 1851, samurai officials interrogated him at great length.

Manjiro praised the Americans as a people who were "upright and generous, and do no evil"—although he noted that they did engage in odd practices like reading in the toilet, living in houses cluttered with furniture, and expressing affection between men and women in public (in this regard, he found them "lewd" and "wanton"). Manjiro also regaled his interrogators with accounts of America's remarkable technological progress, including railways, steamships, and the telegraph. An account of his adventures prepared with the help of a samurai scholar in 1852 even included crude drawings of a paddle-wheel steamship and a train.



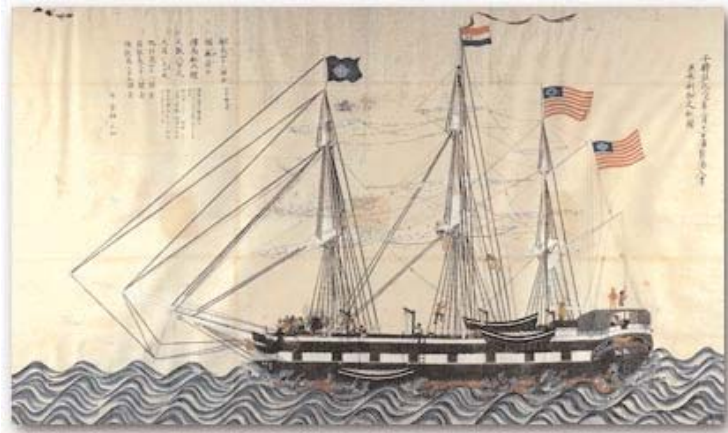
John Manjiro

When Perry's warships appeared off Uraga at the entry to Edo Bay, they were thus not a complete surprise. The Dutch in Dejima had informed the Japanese that the expedition was on its way. And John Manjiro had already described the wonders of the steam engine. As the official report of the Perry expedition later noted, "however backward the Japanese themselves may be in practical science, the best educated among them are tolerably well informed of its progress among more civilized or rather cultivated nations." Such abstract knowledge, however, failed to mitigate the shock of the commodore's gunboat diplomacy.

Perry was not the first American to enter Japanese waters and attempt to make that double-bolted land “hospitable.” Several American vessels flying Dutch flags had entered Nagasaki harbor around the turn of the century, intent on commerce. In 1837, the unarmed trading ship *Morrison* had approached Uruga on a private mission to promote not only trade but also “the glory of God in the salvation of thirty-five million souls.” At Uruga, and again at Kagoshima on the southern tip of Kyushu, the vessel was fired on and driven off. In 1845, the whaleship *Manhattan* was allowed to briefly put in at Uruga to return 22 shipwrecked Japanese sailors.

*The whaleship
Manhattan,
1845 watercolor by
an anonymous
Japanese artist*

New Bedford
Whaling Museum



The following year, two warships commanded by Commodore James Biddle entered Edo Bay and engaged in preliminary contact with Japanese officials. Biddle was not allowed to come ashore, however, and when ordered to “depart immediately” did precisely as he had been told—leaving no legacy beyond a few American and Japanese illustrations of his warships.



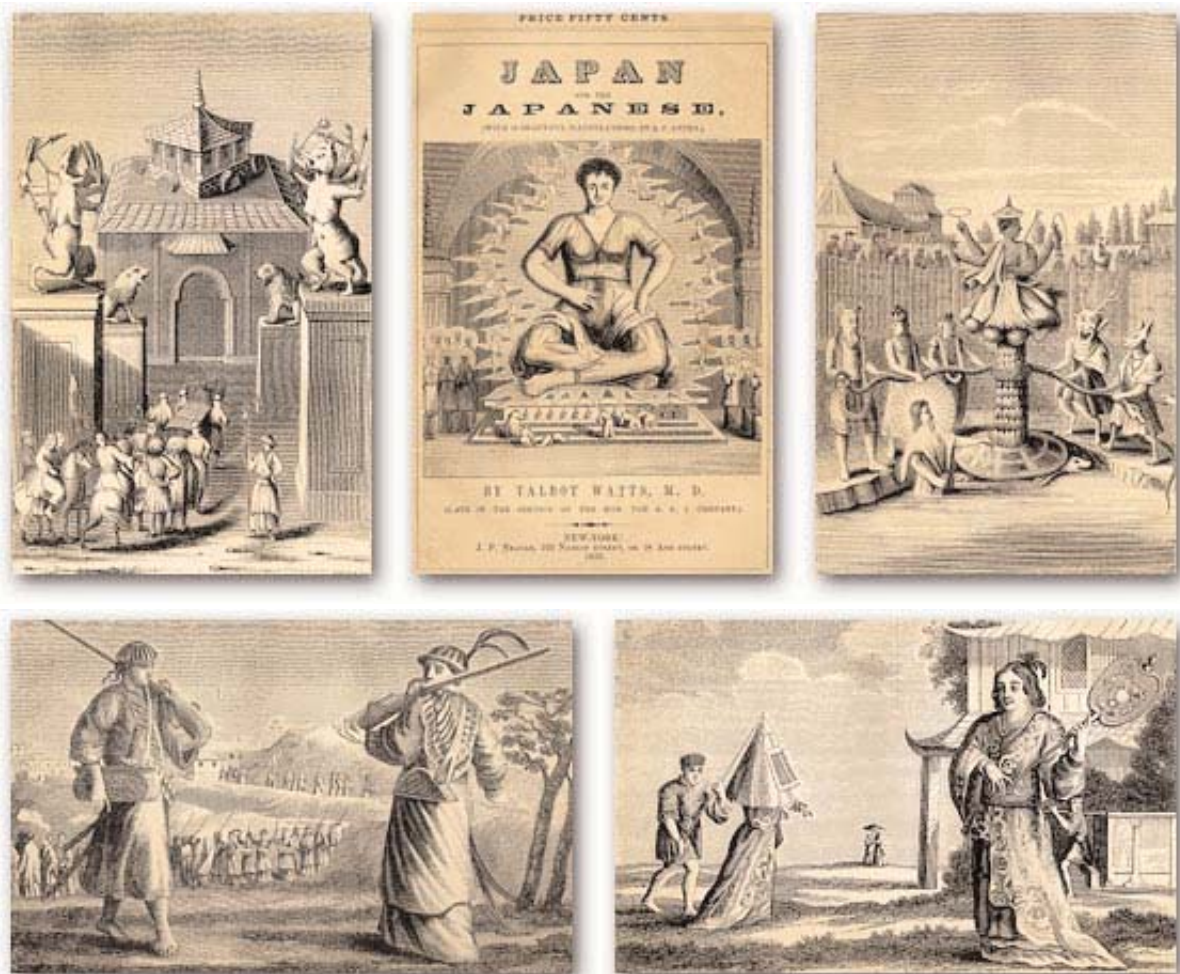
*Lithograph depicting
Commodore Biddle's ships
anchored in Edo Bay in
1846 and surrounded by
small Japanese boats*

Peabody Essex Museum

Perry possessed what his predecessors had lacked: grim determination, for one thing—and, still more intimidating, the steam-driven warships. He was not to be denied. And the erstwhile warrior leaders in Edo, who had not actually fought any wars for almost two-and-a-half centuries, quickly recognized that they had no alternative but to submit to his demands. They lacked the firepower—and all the advanced technology such power exemplified—to resist.

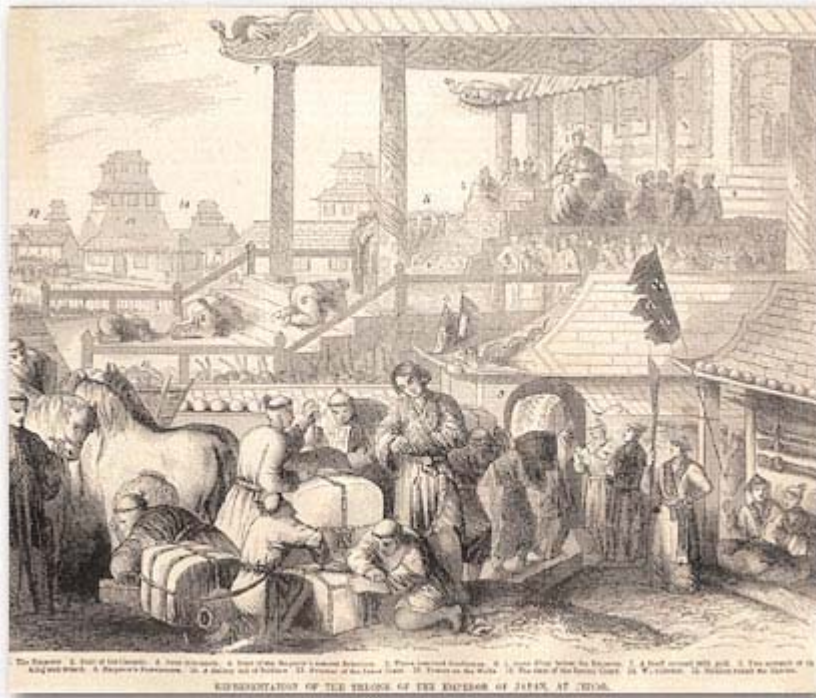
Perry prepared diligently for his mission, and immersed himself in the most authoritative foreign publications available on Japan. Some of these accounts, emanating from Europeans who had been stationed in Dejima, provided a general overview of political, economic, and social conditions. An American geography text described Japan in flattering terms as “the most civilized and refined nation of Asia,” while other accounts, dwelling on the persecution of Christians and inhospitable treatment meted out to castaways, spoke derisively of a land that had regressed “into barbarism and idolatry.”

In *Japan and the Japanese*, a small book published in America in 1852 as a send-off to the Perry expedition, a former employee of the British East India Company paired synopses of prior writings with a selection of illustrations that revealed how odd and exotic the little-known heathen still remained in the imagination of Westerners. These thoroughly fanciful graphics conjured up a world of bizarre religious icons commingled with sturdy men and women wearing Chinese-style robes, holding large and stiff fan-shaped implements, even promenading with folded umbrella-like tents draped over their heads and carried from behind by an attendant.



Illustrations in Japan and the Japanese (1852) included the worshipping of idols, “Habit of the Japanese Soldiers,” and “A Japanese Lady of Quality”

Such fantasy masquerading as informed commentary and illustration was typical. Just months before Perry's arrival in Japan, the popular U.S. periodical *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* published a dramatic engraving depicting "the emperor of Japan" holding public court in "Jeddo" (the old romanized spelling of Edo, the capital city later renamed Tokyo). Here, too—despite being annotated with 15 numbered details—the graphic was entirely imaginary. The emperor lived in Kyoto rather than Edo. His palace surroundings were not highly Sinified ("Chinese"), as depicted here. He never held public court. And Japanese "gentlemen" and "soldiers" did not wear costumes or sport hairstyles of the sort portrayed.



"Representation of the Throne of the Emperor of Japan, at Jeddo" from the April 12, 1853 issue of Gleason's Pictorial

In his private journals, Perry himself anticipated encountering "a weak and barbarous people," and resolved to assume the most forbidding demeanor possible within the bounds of proper decorum. Despite his diligent preparations, he (much like *Gleason's Pictorial*) never fully grasped where real power resided and with whom he was dealing. The letter he carried from President Fillmore was addressed "To His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor of Japan," and the report the commodore published after his mission was completed referred repeatedly to his dealings with "Imperial Commissioners." The hereditary imperial house in Kyoto was virtually powerless, however, having ceded de facto authority some seven centuries previously to warriors headed by a Shogun, or Supreme Commander. The "Imperial Commissioners" to whom Perry conveyed his demands were actually representatives of the warrior government headed by the Tokugawa clan, which had held the position of Shogun since the beginning of the 17th century.

In practice, none of this ambiguity mattered. Perry dealt with the holders of real authority, and through them had his way.



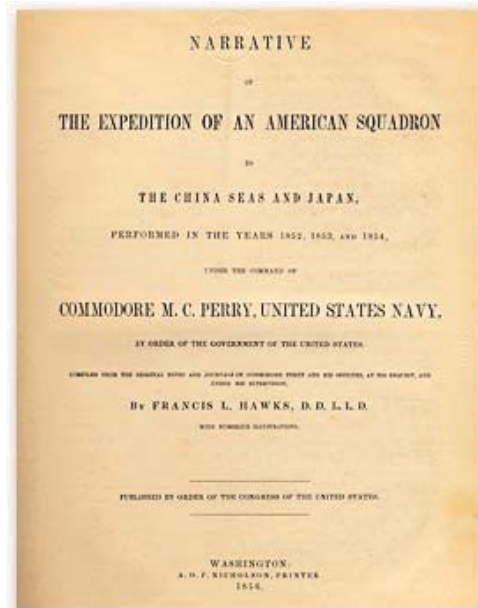
His 1853 visit was short. While the Japanese looked on in horror, the Americans blithely surveyed the waters around Edo Bay. On July 14, five days after appearing off Uruga, the commodore went ashore with great pomp and ceremony to present his demands to the Shogun's officials, who had gathered onshore near what was then the little town of Yokohama, south of Edo. Perry's entourage of some 300 officers, marines, and musicians passed without incident through ranks of armed samurai to a hastily erected "Audience Hall" made of wood and cloth. There Perry handed over President Fillmore's letter, explained that the United States sought peace and prosperity for both countries, and announced that he would return

shortly, with a larger squadron, for the government's answer. Three days later, the four American vessels weighed anchor and left.

Perry made good on his heavy-handed promise some six months later, this time arriving in early March of 1854 with nine vessels (including three steamers), over 100 mounted guns, and a crew of close to 1,800.

This second encounter was accompanied by far greater interaction and socialization between the two sides. Gifts were exchanged, banquets were held, entertainment was offered, and the Americans spent much more time on shore, observing the countryside and intermingling with ordinary Japanese as well as local officials. The high point of these activities was a treaty signed on March 31 in Kanagawa, another locale on Edo Bay, which met all of the U.S. government's requests. The Treaty of Kanagawa guaranteed good treatment of castaways, opened two Japanese ports (Shimoda and Hakodate) for provisions and refuge, and laid the groundwork for Japan's reluctant acceptance of an American "consul"—which, as soon transpired, broke down the remaining barriers to Japan's incorporation in the global political economy.

The Perry expeditions of 1853 and 1854 constitute an extraordinary moment in the modern encounter between "East" and "West." Japan was suddenly "opened" to a world of foreign influences and experiences that poured in like a flood and quickly seeped into all corners of the archipelago. And the Americans—and other foreigners who quickly followed on their heels (the British, Dutch, French, and Russians)—abruptly found themselves face-to-face with an "Oriental" culture that had hitherto existed primarily as a figment of imagination. On all sides—whether facing "East" or facing "West"—the experience was profound. Whole new worlds became visualized in unprecedented ways.



Title page of the official Narrative of the Perry mission.

This was true literally, not just figuratively. On the American side, Perry's entourage included two accomplished artists: William Heine and Eliphalet Brown, Jr. Their graphic renderings—particularly Heine's detailed depictions of scenic sites and crowded activities—were subsequently reproduced as tinted lithographs and plain woodcuts in a massive official U.S. account of the expedition (published in three volumes between 1856 and 1858, and cumulatively titled *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan, performed in the years 1852, 1853, and 1854, under the Command of Commodore M. C. Perry, United States Navy, by Order of the Government of the United States*). Additionally, a small selection of official illustrations was made available in the form of large, independent, brightly colored lithographs.

As it happened, the Perry expeditions took place shortly after the invention of daguerreotype photography (in 1839), and Eliphalet Brown, Jr. in particular was entrusted with compiling a photographic record of the mission. Although most of his plates were subsequently destroyed in a fire, we still can easily imagine what was recorded through the camera's eye, for the official narrative also includes woodcuts and lithographs of carefully posed Japanese that are explicitly identified as being "from a daguerreotype."

On the Japanese side, there was no comparable official visual record of these encounters, although we know from accounts of the time that boatloads of Japanese artists and illustrators rushed out to draw the "black ships" from virtually the moment they appeared off Uraga. What we have instead of a consolidated official collection is a scattered treasury of graphic renderings of various aspects of the startling foreign intrusion. The Americans were, of course, as alien to the Japanese as the Japanese were, in their turn, to the Americans. They were, depending on the viewer, strange, curious, fascinating, attractive, lumpish, humorous, outlandish, and menacing—frequently an untidy mixture of several of these traits.

Japanese artists, moreover, rendered their impressions through forms of expression that differed from the lithographs, woodcuts, paintings, and photographs that Europeans and Americans of the time relied on in delineating the visual world. Vivacious woodblock prints, cruder runs of black-and-white "kawaraban" broadsheets, and drawings and brushwork in a conspicuously "Japanese" manner constituted the primary vehicles through which the great encounters of 1853 and 1854 were conveyed to a wider audience in Japan. Some of this artwork spilled over into the realm of caricature and cartoon.

The complementary but decidedly contrasting American and Japanese images of the Perry mission and opening of Japan constitute a rare moment in the history of "visualizing cultures." This was, after all, an unusually concentrated face-to-face encounter between a fundamentally white, Christian, and expansionist "Western" nation and a reclusive and hitherto all-but-unknown "Oriental" society. It was also a moment during which each side produced hundreds of graphic renderings not only of the alien foreigner, but of themselves as well. It is tempting, and indeed fascinating, to ask which side was more "realistic" in its renderings—but this really misses the point. For it is only by seeing the visual record whole, in its fullest possible range and variety, that we can grasp how complex and multi-layered these interactions really were.