

“Japanese Geisha” in Nineteenth-Century Souvenir Photography from the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

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The Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, now part of the Dresden State Art Collections (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden), holds a set of three, late-nineteenth century travel albums with lacquered covers; these important materials contain an unusual travel photograph depicting two European or American men with three Japanese women sitting at a table with a tea set (**fig. 10.1**).¹ In addition to its small size, this particular image lacks the typical hand coloring seen in most of the other contemporary Japanese souvenir photographs produced by major studios. According to Dresden State Art Collection data, it seems possible that this souvenir album belonged to one of the German globetrotters—Charles Walter Palmié (1869-1938). This photograph’s departure from normative techniques associated with souvenir imagery, raises intriguing questions. Who was the photographer and what were his photographic processes? What makes this set different from typical Japanese souvenir albums from the same period? And, finally, in addition to addressing the legacy of stereotyping Japanese women—still lingering in today’s perception—this article will also address the ways in which these albums contributed to generating gender ideals. While the one photograph of three Japanese ladies and two European men does not feature any geisha, young Japanese women in kimonos sitting in a teahouse have long and frequently been labelled simply as “Japanese geishas” not only in nineteenth-century tourist accounts but also in today’s discourse on Japan.² With this nomenclature and broader context in mind, this paper will assess the origins of this cultural misreading.

Mysteries in Globetrotters’ Travel Photos

The central photograph in this inquiry depicts two Western globetrotters sitting between three Japanese ladies in a teahouse (**fig. 10.1**). The male figure on the left has his arms around two women, one on either side, while the other positions himself in the foreground on the far right. The female figures are dressed in kimonos, and one of them holds a fan. They kneel on a *tatami* mat around a tea table and collectively gaze directly into the camera.

¹ “Charles Walter Palmié -Japan I, Japan II and Japan III.” Inv. No. 51551.

² This association, already present in the Victorian mind, might have been reinforced by extremely popular plays performed in theatre, such as *The Geisha: A Story of a Tea House* (1896) and *Madame Butterfly* (1904); further it may have been fueled by living displays of tea-serving Japanese young women in the Japanese Village in Knightsbridge (1885) and several World Fairs. This Euroamerican craze for Japanese geisha continued after the turn of the nineteenth century; a number of Hollywood films on Japan released in the 1950s and 60s, with “Geisha” in the title—*Geisha Girl* (1952), *The Geisha Boy* (1958), and *My Geisha* (1962)—suggested a continued fetish with this cultural phenomenon well into the twentieth century. My gratitude to Dr. Mio Wakita for providing this information.

Within this three-volume album set labeled “Charles Walter Palmié,” are three additional photographs depicting the male sitters. Two are the same albumen print format and feature hand-coloration as the rest of the photographs in the albums (**figs. 10.2-10.3**). Both include a Western male sitting in a rickshaw, with the same worker pulling the rickshaw. Comparing the figure in the key photograph with these photos, the man sitting in the left section of the teahouse image seems to be the same person in the first rickshaw image; similarly, the man in the right section of the teahouse photo is possibly the same person who appears in the second rickshaw photo. The white cloth draped as a backdrop, the blank floor, the bare brick walls and the vegetation captured by the camera suggest that both photography sessions likely took place outside of a studio but were organized by a studio photographer. The staged setting and a careful arrangement are also visible in the stiff countenances of the sitters in the rickshaw photographs, whereas the same sitters appear more relaxed in the teahouse image, implying its private nature (**fig. 10.1**).

Comparing the collective image of the two men and three ladies with other monochrome photographs from the same album—preserved under the same storage conditions—reveals that this collodion print is more faded and the image quality reflects the photographer’s lack of refined technical skills. In nineteenth-century Japanese photo studios, photographers relied on natural lighting sources for taking photographs and commonly used curtains to regulate light. The over-exposure in the right section indicates that it was made inside a teahouse rather than in a photo studio with professional facilities. Judging from the casual setting, the photographer might have been the friend of the two globetrotters in the image. Furthermore, the print is full of black stains, another indication that person creating the photo did not have a professional level of expertise. An amateur photographer would not necessarily have technical control and his process could easily cause such stains on the glass plate. Numerous constraints influence the quality of a negative plate, and dark marks appear on the paper after the printing process, which might explain the image condition. Furthermore, the camera captured three teacups placed on the table, and geisha or teahouse servers were not allowed to drink in the presence of their guests.³ This implies the presence of three customers in this teahouse, and the photographer behind the camera could likely have been the third. All of these details lead to the fact that the teahouse image was a private photo of the Western globetrotters; it may be seen as an experiment by an amateur photographer who was possibly a friend of the album’s owner. The appearance of Japanese women in the teahouse photo is, as indicated below, closely related to the fashion of souvenir photography in nineteenth-century Japan.

Women as Subject in Japanese Souvenir Photography

Assessing the entire contents of the set, it becomes apparent that it represents a compilation of photos produced by a number of different photographers and studios. For instance, the compilation includes a photograph that belonged to the portfolio of Esaki Reiji’s 江崎礼二 (1845-1910) studio (**fig. 10.4**).⁴ In this photograph, a young woman pours water over the hands of another woman, while a third walks through a gate. They are wearing formal kimonos. The water is ladled from a wash basin called *temizu bachi*. *Temizu* 手水, literally “hand water,” is used to purify the hands and mouth. This practice is an important aspect of worshipping at a Shinto shrine where purification is performed before entering the shrine precinct. The wash basin in the photo, however, is in a garden attached to a luxurious villa—a secular space. One of the albums also features a photograph taken by Ogawa Kazumasa 小川 一真 (1860-1929) in the twenty-fourth year of the Meiji period (July 1891), published in one of his famous publications

³ Cecilia Segawa Seigle, *Yoshiwara: The Glittering World of the Japanese Courtesan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), xi.

⁴ Terry Bennett, *Old Japanese Photographs: Collectors' Data Guide* (London: Quaritch, 2006), 130.

of collotypes entitled *One Hundred Beauties of Tokyo* 東京百美人 (figs. 10.5-10.6b).⁵ This portrait was taken for the exhibition of the first beauty contest in Japan featuring 100 geisha portraits. Visitors to the exhibition, which was held at the newly opened Ryoukaku Tower 高塔凌雲閣 in the Asakusa entertainment district in Tokyo, voted on the most popular geisha. Ogawa's photograph in the Dresden collection features a geisha named Momoko 桃子, who was 15 years old at the time when her portrait was taken (fig. 10.5).⁶ Each participating geisha had a full-length and a half-length portrait. Most were taken inside the same studio using an identical setting, presumably for the sake of uniformity that would aid in a comparison of the 100 candidates. The photograph depicts Momoko dressed in a pink kimono; the color is manually applied onto the surface of the black and white photograph. Behind the staged studio balcony is a painted backdrop of an ocean shore, evoking the impression of a cozy, beach-side teahouse. The fans, one held in her hand, another hanging on the pillar, both bear calligraphy that reads "Ryoukaku 凌雲閣," signaling the original purpose of this photograph: an entry for the beauty contest at Ryoukaku.

Additionally, the set contains a finely hand-colored photograph, depicting a group of Japanese women sitting at an open-air teahouse in Kyoto, wearing delicate kimonos (fig. 10.7). This photograph, otherwise listed in Yokohama-based Kusakabe Kimbei 日下部金兵衛 (1841-1934) studio's sales catalog as *Kyoto Geisha at the Balcony*, might possibly have been taken by the other photographer, Y. Isawa (full name unknown) judging from his other extant photographs (figs. 10.8-10.9).⁷ The comparison between these three examples demonstrates that the women are identically dressed in the same kimonos yet staged in different positions; even the same choice of colors was made for the kimonos in both prints (figs. 10.7 and 10.9). Hence it can be assumed that they were possibly produced by the same studio.

These observations hinting at the miscellaneous provenance of photographs found in the same album set indicates that the photographs were collected from diverse image suppliers and bound into three photo albums. This specific example might be ascribed to the new form of souvenir photography industry that was popular in late nineteenth-century Japan. Beginning in the 1890s, a growing photography industry in Japan emerged, which centered on *dealing* in photographs, rather than *taking* them.⁸ One conjecture is that as foreign tourists arrived in Japan they could not predict their destinations, so instead of buying a souvenir album, they bought photographs in an *ad hoc* manner as they traveled throughout the country. Then at the end of their journey, they would find a studio which could combine all photos together inside a lacquer cover.⁹ This kind of album with souvenir photographs from heterogeneous image producers was called a "composite souvenir album."¹⁰ The emergence of this business was closely related to the saturation of the souvenir photography market in Japan around the 1890s. These conditions caused some photography studios, or the studios that were closing, to sell their unwanted stock and negatives.¹¹ In addition, after Kodak Eastman manufactured the first light, foldable, reasonably priced film camera in 1888, globetrotters increasingly preferred bringing their own cameras to Japan, instead of buying the souvenir photographs from professional photography studios.¹²

⁵ Kazumasa Ogawa, *Types of Japan: Celebrated Geisha of Tokyo* (Tokyo: Kelly and Walsh, 1890), 18.

⁶ "Meiji Taisho 1868-1926: 東京百美人 – The One Hundred Beauties of Tokyo," accessed January 23, 2017 <http://www.meijitaisho.net/>, accessed 23 January 2017.

⁷ Bennett, *Old Japanese Photographs*, 39; Alfred Wiczorek, ed., *Ins Land der Kirschblüte: Japanische Reisefotografien aus dem 19. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg; Berlin: Kehrler, 2011), 17.

⁸ Bennett, *Old Japanese Photographs*, 122.

⁹ Bennett, *Old Japanese Photographs*, 60–63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Bennett, *Old Japanese Photographs*, 123.

¹² Mio Wakita, *Staging Desires: Japanese Femininity in Kusakabe Kimbei's Nineteenth-Century Souvenir Photography* (Berlin: Reimer, 2013), 35. For a detailed study on a globetrotting amateur photographer, see Luke Gartlan, "'A Complete Craze': Isabella Bird Bishop in East Asia," *Photo Researcher* 15 (2011). I am indebted to Dr. Wakita for this reference.

An 1893 advertisement by the Yokohama-based photography studio A. Farsari & Co. announcing dark-room and developing services to globetrotting amateur photographers might be the earliest Japanese photo studio advertisement to refer to an amateur photographer.¹³ Around 1902, most of the advertisements placed by photography studios in Japan for foreign customers usually made quite similar statements such as: “All kinds of work can be done for Amateur Photographers,” or “Developing and Printing orders for Amateurs are promptly attended to.”¹⁴ In 1904, Kusakabe Kimbei’s studio, one of the most successful souvenir photography studios in Yokohama, even evolved its business into a photographic supplies operation, selling goods such as Kodak cameras and film.¹⁵

We can thus speculate that the photograph in the teahouse could have been taken by a Western tourist who was an amateur photographer, and possibly a friend of the album’s owner (**fig. 10.1**). A possible scenario is a globetrotting European visitor of Japan purchased photographs randomly and brought them, along with this private photograph, to a studio in Japan to compile them into one composite album. This Dresden photo album set is thus an index to the transitional period in Japanese souvenir photography during which its standard commercial features—such as “package deals” including album covers and image repertoires—were increasingly mingled with private pictures taken by traveling amateur-photographers from Europe and America.

Misreading Geisha

The Japanese female sitters in the teahouse photograph were actually not geisha, even though many people tend to regard them as such at first sight. Some museums and online databases also improperly label courtesans or *rashamen* as “geisha,” such as a photograph in the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives (no. FSA A1999.35 364). This photo depicts three girls dressed in elaborate kimonos with ornate hair accessories and includes the description, “their ornate *kanzashi* (hair ornaments) are reminiscent of those worn by *oiran* or *tayu*, the highest ranking of geisha.”¹⁶ The same photograph featuring three girls is also in the Dresden State Art Collections (no. F2015-1/3,50), labelled as courtesans due to both the *obi*, loosely knotted in front and their pinned up-do decorated with large hairpins.¹⁷ Another example is a photograph in the Bildagentur (BPK) online image bank (no. 2.00016607), which was labelled “Group of Geisha.” Yet according to their large hair ornaments and elaborate robes, the girls in the middle and the right were actually courtesans. Another photograph in BPK depicts a scene of *oiran-dôchû* (the courtesans’ parade), but it is somewhat inaccurately labeled “Geisha ceremony in Kyoto.”¹⁸

A closer look at the figures in the teahouse photo (**fig. 10.1**) reveals that they were probably teahouse servers, rather than geisha. The misreading of these figures as geisha occurred early in the novel *Madame Chrysanthème*, by Pierre Loti, based on a journal in Japan in 1885. O-Kiku-San, the prototype for Loti’s novel, was also regarded as the prototype for *Madame Butterfly* in John Luther Long’s novel and Giacomo Puccini’s opera; she was actually a *rashamen* ‘temporary wife’ of Loti during his stay in Japan.¹⁹ No

¹³ Bennett, *Old Japanese Photographs*, 250.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Bennett, *Old Japanese Photographs*, 273.

¹⁶ See the online database: <http://collections.si.edu/search/>, accessed 28 November 2017.

¹⁷ Fraser et al., *Acting Femininity*, 74.

¹⁸ See the online database: <http://www.bpk-bildagentur.de/shop>, accessed 28 February 2017.

¹⁹ Wiczorek, *Ins Land der Kirschlorbete*, 23. *Rashamen* 洋妾 (literally “Western sheep”) were the mistresses or temporary wives of Western male residents, who were officially assigned to provide sexual services exclusively to foreigners in specific institutions set up for the purpose. For a detailed discussion, see Wakita, *Staging Desires*, 82.

literary figure imprinted the idea of Japanese woman on the minds of Europeans as much as the protagonist in the opera *Madame Butterfly*.²⁰ *Madame Butterfly* long helped to shape the Western stereotype of geisha, as well as of Japanese women in general.²¹ The misreading through this famous opera spread throughout Europe, and beyond. This is why Europeans and Americans who view the teahouse photograph tend to associate Japanese girls wearing kimonos in teahouses with geisha, especially when globetrotters are also in the picture.

Interestingly, some of the female models for one of the most prestigious and commercially successful photography studios for foreign markets in Meiji Japan were indeed geisha. According to a studio sales catalogue issued circa 1893, the Japanese-run Kusakabe Kimbei Studio in Yokohama had more than four hundred stock images, more than half featuring women exclusively; some of the female models in these Kimbei Studio stock photos have been identified by Dr. Mio Wakita as actual Tokyo geisha.²² It is significant that geisha images helped Japanese souvenir photographs become iconic signs of Japan during the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, functioning as vital sources of “knowledge” in the West concerning “things Japanese.” At the same time, it was perhaps exactly these geisha images available for globetrotters from the 1880s onwards that helped to shape on-going, often incorrect, stereotypes of Japanese culture surrounding topics such as *Fujiyama*, geisha, and samurai.²³ These stereotypes still have a persistent impact on study of Japanese photographs even in the present, and young Japanese women in kimonos are frequently mistaken as “Japanese geisha.”

To reassess the albums and this key teahouse photograph that explain the circumstances of its production, we may surmise that a Western tourist who was an amateur photographer, took a photograph of his friends (one might be the album’s owner) in a teahouse with three female servers or rashamen. Along with other souvenir photographs, which the globetrotters purchased in an *ad hoc* fashion during their Japan trips, these photos were compiled into three composite albums belonging to Charles Walter Palmié; later they entered the collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.

²⁰ Wiczorek, *Ins Land der Kirschblüte*, 23.

²¹ Wakita, *Staging Desires*, 71.

²² Mio Wakita, *In the Guise of Elusive Veracity: Souvenir Photographs of Meiji Femininity in the Age of Visual Modernity*, chap. in *Shifting Paradigms in East Asian Visual Culture: A Festschrift in Honour of Lothar Ledderose*, ed. B. Jungmann, et al. (Berlin: Reimer, 2012), 333.

²³ Wakita, *Staging Desires*, 7.

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Fig. 10.1 Unknown photographer, *Two Western Men with Three Japanese Women Sitting at a Table with Tea Set*, 1870-1898, from the album "Charles Walter Palmié - Japan II," p. 122, collodion paper print, 9.8 × 14.4 cm, page: 31 × 38.8 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. 51551.62. © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.



Fig. 10.2 Unknown photographer, *A Western Man with a Pith Helmet on His Knee in a Rickshaw Held by a Japanese Man*, 1870-1898, from the album "Charles Walter Palmié - Japan I," p. 10, albumen paper print, colored, 20.2 × 26.2 cm, page: 31.2 × 38.5 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. 51550.5. © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.



Fig. 10.3 Unknown photographer, *A Western Man with a Stretched Umbrella in a Rickshaw Held by a Japanese Man*, 1870-1898, from the album "Charles Walter Palmié - Japan I," p. 8, albumen paper print, colored, 20.2 × 26.2 cm, page: 31.2 × 38.5 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. 51550.4 © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.



Fig. 10.4 Esaki Reiji, *Japanese Women Washing Their Hands*, 1870-1898, from the album "Charles Walter Palmié - Japan II," p. 108, albumen paper print, colored, 20.8 × 27.1 cm, page: 31 × 38.8 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. 51551.54. © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.



Fig. 10.5 Kazumasa Ogawa, *Momoko, Geisha from Shinbashi in Tokyo*, from the album "Charles Walter Palmié - Japan III," p. 91, albumen paper print, colored, 27.2 × 21.1 cm, page: 38.7 × 31.2 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. 51552.64. © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.

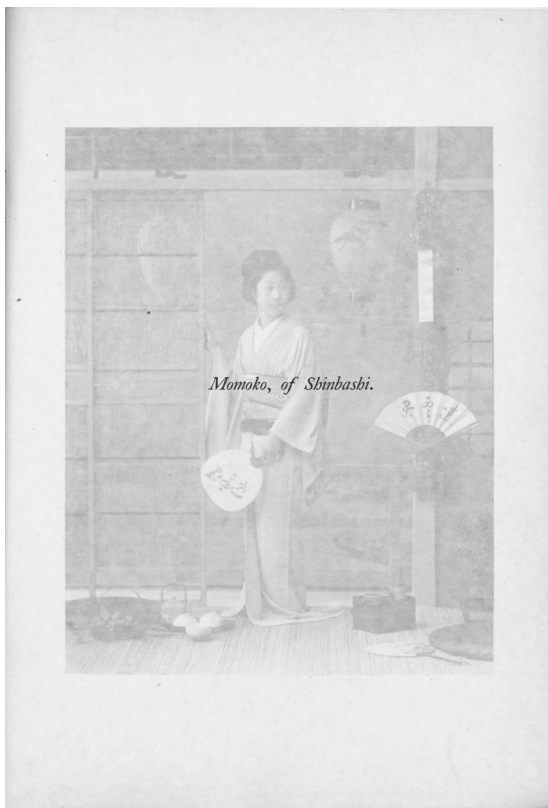


Fig. 10.6 a Kazumasa Ogawa, *Momoko*. Black and white collotype, 30 × 40.5 cm. After Kazumasa Ogawa, *Types of Japan: Celebrated Geysa of Tokyo* (Tokyo: Kelly and Walsh, 1890), 17.

Fig. 10.6 b Kazumasa Ogawa, *Momoko*. Black and white collotype, 21.5 × 27.4 cm, page: 30 × 40.5 cm. After Kazumasa Ogawa, *Types of Japan: Celebrated Geysa of Tokyo* (Tokyo: Kelly and Walsh, 1890), 18.



Fig. 10.7 Y. Isawa, *Six Geisha on the Terrace of a Restaurant Located at Kamo River (Kamogawa) in Kyoto*, from the album "Charles Walter Palmié - Japan III," p. 54, albumen paper print, colored, 20.7 × 26.4 cm, page: 31.2 × 38.7 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. 51552.27. © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.



Fig. 10.8 Y. Isawa, *Relaxing Kyoto Geishas*. After Terry Bennett, *Old Japanese Photographs: Collectors' Data Guide* (London: Quaritch, 2006), 39.



Fig. 10.9 Kusakabe Kimbei, *On the Terrace*, ca. 1880. After Alfried Wiczorek, Claude W. Sui, and Stephanie Oeben, *Ins Land der Kirschblüte: Japanische Reisefotografien aus dem 19. Jahrhundert*. (Heidelberg; Berlin: Kehrer, 2011), 17.