



May-2015

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Dan (2015). Exporting Exoticism: Captain Brinkley's Japan Described and Illustrated. *Bridgewater Review*, 34(1), 26-28.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol34/iss1/9

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Silk Embroidered Front Board



Actors

Exporting Exoticism: Captain Brinkley's *Japan Described and Illustrated*

Dan Johnson

By the end of the nineteenth century, Japan was on the fast track to modernity. Since 1855, when U.S. Navy Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry's arrival effectively ended its self-imposed isolation, Japan embraced the technology of the age with fervor. Japan was quickly pulled into a dizzying vortex of steel, steam, and beaver-skin hats. By 1868, the Meiji era had sprung into existence and, increasingly, the old ways—epitomized by the now-outlawed samurai class—were tossed aside. Both railroads and electricity were introduced in the 1870s and with the defeat of Russia's powerful navy in 1905, Japan became a force to be reckoned with.

Curiously, even as the turn-of-the-century Japanese discarded the old for the new, traditional *hakama* for stovepipe trousers, Americans became infatuated with the ways of *old* Japan. The exotic travel accounts of writers such as

Americans Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) and John La Farge (1835-1910) and Briton Isabella Bird (1831-1904) were eagerly snatched up and consumed; silk kimonos embroidered with dragons, cranes and other symbolic creatures

and flowers made their appearance at parties and luncheons thrown by well-to-do Americans. Goldfish appeared in bowls in American parlors and carp swam in Japanese-influenced ponds. In American décor, everything from wallpaper to crockery to inkwells and tea sets were embellished with Japanese-derived designs. Gilbert and Sullivan's comedy *The Mikado; or The Town of Titpitu* opened in London's Savoy Theatre in March 1885, but it took only until August of that year before it opened in New York's Fifth Avenue Theatre, where it ran for almost 300 performances. Likewise, *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan* opened as a one-act play in New York in 1900.



Captain Francis Brinkley (1841-1912)
from *A History of the Japanese People* (New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1915).



Tattooed Postman



House Boat

Some of the limited editions were so costly that only a few well-heeled individuals and institutions such as libraries and collector societies could afford them.

These superficially romantic portrayals of the Japanese people and culture allowed Westerners to continue to view Japan as a primitive culture, like a fly encased in amber, unmoving and unyielding.

Americans consumed old Japan in other ways, too, perhaps no more eloquently than through the recounted exploits of Francis Brinkley (1841–1912), an Irish-born military officer who adopted Japan as his home country, living there and supporting pro-Japanese causes for more than 45 years. Born in County Meath and educated at Trinity College, he served as a military attaché to the British Embassy. In 1867, he moved to Japan for good, becoming a military advisor to the Meiji government and artillery instructor to the Imperial

Navy. Brinkley married Yasuko Tanaka, the daughter of a samurai, spoke and wrote fluent Japanese, and was author of a successful two-volume Japanese/English dictionary. He owned and edited the *Japan Mail* (which later became the *Japan Times*), the most influential English-language newspaper of the day. Brinkley had the ear of the Meiji government and promoted a Japanese agenda overseas.

Beginning in 1897, “Capt. F. Brinkley” produced one of the most opulent books of the era, a 10-volume set titled *Japan Described and Illustrated by the Japanese Written By Eminent Authorities and Scholars*. First published by the Boston-based J.B. Millet Company, the book was reprinted several times, each slightly different but always handsome.

Subsequent editions of *Japan Described and Illustrated* can be found with paper covers featuring simple decorations or in massive, 16.5 x 13-inch folio form. Some of the limited editions were so costly that only a few well-heeled individuals and institutions such as libraries and collector societies could afford them. *Japan Described and Illustrated* was reprinted in several runs, the largest being 1000 and the smallest 25. The smaller the edition, the more extravagantly bedecked the volume. While it remains uncertain who authored all of the articles in the text, Japanese scholar Kakuzo Okakura (author of *The Awakening of Japan* [1904]) was identified as one of the writers.

However, few Americans would have bought *Japan Described and Illustrated* for its prose. Instead, they were more likely to have bought it for its art, its sheer opulence, the visual and tactile experience it provided. While the subjects of the book’s images were themselves exotic, the volumes also demonstrated the state of the art of photography at the turn of the twentieth century. The unnumbered, cheaper paperboard editions had two photographs and one collotype, an image produced when a glass or metal plate was covered with



Woman Writing Letters



Women Enjoying a Garden with Electrically Powered Fountain

a gelatin and bichromate and exposed to light. But the most extravagant editions, issued in smaller and more expensive runs, were packed with just about everything Japanese Brinkley could manage to fit between two covers: brocaded silk boards, tasseled silk hand-tied and uncut pages “bound in the Japanese manner” (in each volume came a warning not to cut the pages apart), mica-flecked endpapers, hand-painted end boards, ukiyo-e prints, samples of lace and wallpaper patterns, and sundry other items. For those who could afford the indulgence (the 1000 *Yedo* [Tokyo] edition was \$40, or about \$1,200 today, for a 10-volume folio set), *Japan Described and Illustrated* by the Japanese was an armchair traveler’s delight.

Beyond accoutrements, deluxe editions of the book featured collotypes of flowers and hand-colored albumin photographs (made using egg whites and salt to bind various chemicals to produce the paper print). Between silk-covered boards lay a frontis collotype of a flower made by Kazumasa Ogawa (1860–1929). A pioneer in Japanese photography and a printer, Ogawa had published folios of collotypes of Geishas, flowers and the customs of

Japan, prior to the publication of *Japan Described and Illustrated* in 1897. Also included were three 8 x 11-inch hand-colored photographs of Japanese people at their daily toils, recreations and rest, along with landscape scenes. Several photographs depicted geishas in various stages of dishabille, which undoubtedly delighted Victorian voyeurs.

Brinkley published several more editions of his book in a smaller format as well as a follow-up offering, a two-volume set titled *The Art of Japan*, which was published in 1901. It is probably the scarcest of the Brinkley publications. In the same year, Brinkley added a treatment of China to *Japan Described and Illustrated* and the set was expanded to 12 volumes. In 1910, the last printing of this book came off the press. Today, after a long period of neglect, Captain Brinkley’s *Japan Described and Illustrated* is again stirring interest among scholars and collectors of American fine art printing. While some sets can be found intact, others, sadly, have been broken up so that the collotypes and photographs can be sold individually.

From the open editions which were printed without limit to the limited editions sold by subscription, the volumes of Brinkley’s *Japan Described and*

Illustrated are important and beautiful examples of American publishing commercialism. But they also serve as reminders of or page holders in the long and complicated relationship that developed between America and Japan in the past century and a half. Less than fifty years after the Brinkley publications were first sold, Japanese-American citizens were rounded up and placed in what were euphemistically described as “relocation camps” during World War II. The face of the exotic had been transformed into the face of the enemy. Fear of Japan replaced fascination with it. After the war, Japanese goods were marked “Made in Occupied Japan.” Americans had moved from peeping in the windows to owning the house.



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