

# Culture

## Opening Japan, through photography

VENICE

2 exhibitions trace the revelatory work of a discipline's pioneers

BY RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

Both Katsushika Hokusai and Ando Hiroshige, celebrated masters of the woodblock print, were still alive when the Western technology of photography made its first tentative inroads into Japan. Hiroshige died the year after the

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first daguerreotypes were realized by Japanese photographers in 1857.

While woodblock prints tended to be looked down upon by many 18th- and 19th-century Japanese connoisseurs, they have long since come to be prized, both at home and abroad.

It is only over the past decade or so that 19th- and 20th-century Japanese photography has established its credentials as a historically significant art form. Scholarly research and a new appreciation of the unique level of refinement early Japanese photography achieved have led not only to growing popular interest, but also to a commensurate rise in the market value of the best examples.

Two Venetian photographers — Felice Beato and Adolfo Farsari — played key roles in the development of Japanese photography, and Venice and the Veneto are now hosts of two revelatory exhibitions of the works of the genre's pioneers, both native and foreign.

Both shows draw on a wealth of



A Kusakabe Kimbei photograph of samurai, right, taken around 1880. Below, Raimund von Stillfried-Ratenicz's portrait of a man, from around 1875, is part of the Piazzola sul Brenta exhibition. Left, an Adolfo Farsari photo of two geisha from around 1887.



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM COLLEZIONE VITTORIO

hitherto unseen material. The Venice exhibition, at the Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti, was curated by Francesco Paolo Campione and Marco Fagioli. It is the result of a program at the Museum of Cultures in Lugano, Switzerland, to study and catalog more than 7,500 images from a private collection amassed since 1975, perhaps the largest single collection of intact volumes in the world.

The second exhibition, on the mainland at Piazzola sul Brenta near Padua, was curated by Magda di Siena and contains photographs from the Collezione Vittorio and other private collections.

The Piazzola sul Brenta show begins Felice Beato's remarkable story with a number of striking images taken in the Levant before his departure for Japan. Beato was born of Venetian parents in Corfu in about 1833-34. His career as a photographer began in Istanbul in the early 1850s. He collaborated with an English photographer, James Robertson, who married his sister in 1854 or 1855. Beato's brother, Antonio, was also a photographer who spent most of his career in Egypt.

Beato made his mark when, with Robertson, he covered the Crimean War in 1855-56, taking the first photographs of their kind. He went on to capture pictures of the Indian Mutiny in 1857 and the Second Opium War in China in 1860.



By 1863 his friendship with Charles Wirgman, an English artist and correspondent for The Illustrated London News, had brought Beato to Yokohama, Japan. While not wholly abandoning his work as a photographer of conflicts in the region, Beato began to record Japanese life in landscapes, scenes and portraits in various parts of the country.

In 1866 Beato's studio was engulfed in a devastating fire that destroyed two-thirds of Yokohama. Undaunted, he traveled for a year rebuilding his photographic archive of town and country images. This systematic approach resulted in 1868 in a groundbreaking two-volume publication: "Photographic Views of Japan With Historical and Descriptive Notes, Compiled From Authentic Sources and Personal Observation During a Residence of Several Years."

But Beato also was responsible for an even more influential innovation — the painting, by teams of Japanese artists, of black-and-white albumen prints. The effort was to be the most original feature of the images produced by Western and native exponents of what came to be called the Yokohama School.

Discreet tinting of photographic images was already practiced in the West, and Beato had experimented with it in Istanbul. But with the aid of Wirgman's close contacts with Japanese artists, Beato created a far more sophisticated form of hand-colored photography.

This initiative coincided with the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the Meiji Restoration of imperial power, which was challenging the old Japan at every level and forcing traditional artists and craftsmen to find new ways of making a living. Although the images

served above all as souvenirs for visitors to contemporary Japan, they documented aspects of life, modes of dress and accoutrements — like those of the samurai — that were fast disappearing.

Having been closed to foreigners for centuries, Japan was now receiving tens of thousands of Western visitors, who provided the market for these expensively produced photographs and albums, the most luxurious of which were bound with lacquer covers decorated with ivory and mother-of-pearl inlays. The painting of a single photograph, using traditional pigments, could take a full working day or longer — single-hair brushes being employed for details such as eyes and lips.

Many photographers, like Kusakabe Kimbei and Ueno Hikoma, benefited from Beato's example and teaching, and numerous studios producing hand-painted photographs sprang up. Another leading photographer, Tamamura Kozaburo, employed more than 100 assistants. When an order for thousands of pictures arrived from Boston in 1896, the number rose to around 350.

A phenomenon that seems to have been entirely Japanese were Ogawa Kazumasa's hand-colored collodion prints of still lifes of flowers, a reinterpretation of Hokusai's floral studies of the early 1830s that also prefigured the hyperrealist works of some 20th-century artists and illustrators.

While much progress has been made recently in identifying the authors and studios of the fascinating hand-painted images displayed in both exhibitions, many works may ultimately prove impossible to attribute with any certainty. A principal reason for this was that

negatives frequently changed hands. Beato's archive, for example, was sold in 1877 to the Bohemian aristocrat-turned-artist and photographer Raimund von Stillfried-Ratenicz — who had trained with Beato and lost his own studio in another fire. The archive was later taken over by Kimbei, before being acquired by Farsari in 1886.

Farsari was flamboyant even by the standards of the other Western adventurers who worked as photographers into Japan. Born in Vicenza in the Veneto in 1841, he attended a military academy, fought in the wars for Italian independence and fled to America to escape gambling debts. He enlisted on the side of the North in the Civil War and was wounded. He married a rich American widow in New York, but fled again and spent five years at sea, fetching up in Yokohama in 1873 or 1874, where he sold cigars and published English guidebooks to Japan.

A self-taught photographer, he came to employ in his studio, which became famous for the superb quality and luminosity of its productions, 40 of the most expert local artists. As the examples in both exhibitions show, their works were some of the most exquisite of the genre.

In 1890 Farsari reappeared in his birthplace with his illegitimate Japanese daughter, Kiku. He often wore Japanese dress and wrote a drama about his life, playing the leading role himself onstage.

Photography From Japan: 1860-1910. Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti, Venice. Through April 1.

East Zone: Antonio Beato, Felice Beato and Adolfo Farsari. Villa Contarini, Piazzola sul Brenta. Through April 1.

## Sir Paul's standards, Snakeoil and a solo spin across the globe

Kisses on the Bottom. Paul McCartney. Hear Music

The music on Paul McCartney's first standards album, "Kisses on the Bottom," floats over you like a light mist on a cool spring morning in an English garden as the sun glints through the haze. You want to inhale the fresh air,

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taste the fragrance of buds blooming, as the sky clears to a serene deep blue. Mr. McCartney exudes the unassuming charm of a country gentleman in a good mood, sitting on the grass and whistling to himself.

"Kisses on the Bottom" breaks the mold of the typical standards album by a rock performer. Far from a solemn, self-conscious act of reclamation, it is more a jaunty tip of the hat to the pop music of his parents' generation. Every element of the album, produced by Tommy LiPuma, contributes to the feel of a perfectly fitted, custom-tailored suit. The rhythm arrangements by Diana Krall, who plays piano on most of the cuts, have a crispy, airy bounce. In

addition to members of Ms. Krall's band, the guest guitarist John Pizzarelli gives his instrument a buoyant, ukulele-like sound

Mr. McCartney, whose voice is almost as youthful as in the Beatles' glory days, doesn't explore lyrical subtlety. He trusts in the reliable pleasures of catchy pop tunes, of moon, June and spoon. Others might inflect "It's Only a Paper Moon" with sarcasm or deliver "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive" as a self-help harangue, but not Mr. McCartney. It is all about ease and relaxation in the moment.

The album's cheeky title comes from a phrase in the opening cut, the Fats Waller standard "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter." The gossamer orchestrations by two heavyweights — Johnny Mandel and Alan Broadbent — float like milkweed behind Mr. McCartney's voice.

A slightly wistful version of Irving Berlin's "Always" sits comfortably beside two winsome McCartney originals, "My Valentine" and "Only Our Hearts." The closest the album comes to darkness is in a moderately slowed-down "Bye Bye Blackbird" and "Get

Yourself Another Fool," a minor R&B hit, from 1949, for Charles Brown, and later recorded by Sam Cooke.

"Bye Bye Blackbird" is a celebration of chasing away the blues once and for all: no antidepressants needed. Eric Clapton's guitar lends "Get Yourself Another Fool" a blues flavor, but the hue is baby blue, not inky. Frank Loesser's trickily metered arithmetic lesson, "Inchworm," from the movie "Hans Christian Andersen," is aimed at the child inside us all.

More than 40 years have passed since Mr. McCartney infuriated the rock counterculture with the exquisite sketches of his first two post-Beatles records, "McCartney" and "Ram." The rage and contempt heaped on an artist who was dismissed as trivial and reactionary and a betrayer of the Beatles' legacy has long since dissipated. What distinguishes Mr. McCartney's music, then and now, is his utter lack of grandiosity.

As he sang all those years ago in a slightly defensive tone: "Some people wanna fill the world with silly love songs/And what's wrong with that?"

By sticking to his guns and insisting



Paul McCartney performing in Cologne in December. His new album of standards, "Kisses on the Bottom," is a jaunty tip of the hat to the pop music of his parents' generation.

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