

ART REVIEW

# Opening Japan, Through Photography

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VENICE — 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 first daguerreotypes were realized by Japanese photographers in 1857.

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Collezione Vittorio

Adolfo Farsari took this photo of two geisha around 1887.

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 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

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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 Corfù 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.

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