



THE SENTARO DAGUERREOTYPE - FIRST JAPANESE TO BE PHOTOGRAPHED

The early history of photography in Japan is still being written, despite several important volumes on the subject which have appeared over recent years.¹ Nevertheless, with regard to the important 'firsts' in Japanese photography, and especially the question of when a Japanese subject was first photographed, there seemed little margin for doubt. However, even this fundamental event in Japanese photo-history must now be reassessed.

It has long been accepted that the distinction of taking the first photographs of Japanese subjects belongs to Eliphalet Brown Junior, the photographer who accompanied Commodore Perry on the historic American mission to Japan of 1853-54. While in Okinawa in May 1853 and in mainland Japan between February and June of the following year, Brown took 400-odd daguerreotypes, a number of which were reproduced as lithographs and woodcuts in the official report of Perry's expedition.² Only six daguerreotypes by Brown have so far been discovered.³

However, while Brown may have been the first to practice the art of photography successfully in Japan, he was not the first to photograph a Japanese subject.⁴ This interesting discovery coincided with the acquisition by the writer of a unique photograph that later proved to be one of the portraits taken as part of this historic first sitting.

THE PROBLEM

The item in question was a sixth-plate daguerreotype of a Japanese man, which the writer had bought at auction in 1996. It had been described by the vendor as a portrait of a member of the diplomatic mission sent to the United States in 1860 by the Japanese government, and the subject had even been tentatively identified.

As the first official Japanese visitors to the United States, the 77 members of the mission presented a wonderful camera opportunity during their three-month tour through San Francisco, Washington DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York.⁵ As a contemporary journal noted:

*Photography has enabled the people to know just how the most notable of the Japanese Embassy appear; there is scarcely a town in the United States where any one of them could not be recognised and called by his right name. Some of the photographs are as good as a book, from which to learn the state of the arts and manners and customs of the Japanese. Our enterprising photographers in San Francisco, Washington and New York availed themselves of every opportunity of practicing their captivating art, and the Embassy have been taken almost en masse, in detail, and in all sorts of grouping. Whenever daylight falls on a Japanese, some photographer is watching to bring his camera into range. In Broadway the Embassy will run the gauntlet of a hundred cameras. The Japanese have a high appreciation of the art, and are as pleased as children to see their faces on paper. They sit patient and still, as any will observe by examining their portraits. They have also learned the art themselves, and no doubt photography will soon be practiced as successfully in Jeddo [Edo, or present-day Tokyo] as in New York.*⁶

The daguerreotype appeared to be the work of an American photographer, and given the enormous interest which surrounded the Japanese mission in 1860, it was difficult to argue with the attribution given by the auction house. Nevertheless the image retained an air of mystery.

The description in the sale catalogue had mentioned that it was unusual to find a daguerreotype portrait taken in 1860, when the collodion process was already well established. At the same time, however, it was conceded that while the daguerreotype technique would have been considered

old-fashioned, it would still have been used by some photographers, and the writer recalled having seen other portraits of members of the embassy taken by this means. ⁷

However, I was more uneasy with the identification of the sitter as a member of the Japanese embassy. In his general appearance, he differed significantly from the subjects of other portraits taken at this time. What was most striking was the shabbiness of his costume, which contrasted strongly with the elaborate attire of the subjects of other images. This, and, in particular, the lack of swords suggested instead someone of low social rank - certainly too low to be of interest to a photographer even during the embassy to the United States.

I had also noticed a more than passing resemblance between the subject of this daguerreotype and that of a very similar portrait held at the Yokohama Museum of Art. This had been part of an interesting group of four daguerreotype portraits of Japanese which had appeared on the market as two separate pairs in 1982 and 1985. The first pair, which had been found in Paris, had been acquired by Kawasaki City Museum, while the second, which had surfaced three years later in New York, was purchased by Yokohama Museum of Art. Although Japanese experts believed that the four daguerreotypes were linked, especially since both pairs had identical contemporary cases, the fact that they had appeared in two separate locations made it difficult to fit the images into any definite historical context. ⁸ I was convinced, however, that the connection between this daguerreotype and the four mystery portraits in Japan led away from the 1860 embassy to the United States. Further research was necessary.

The attribution of the daguerreotype had been based on two historical facts: firstly, that Japan was closed to foreign intercourse until the Shogunate concluded its first treaty with the United States in 1854, and secondly that there were no Japanese visitors to the United States prior to 1860. Certainly, from the point of view of official policy, both these facts are true. Contact with the outside world was strictly prohibited. Foreign vessels - with the exception of Dutch traders visiting the port of Nagasaki - were turned away, while the death penalty awaited any Japanese who went abroad and ever returned to Japan. Until 1860, no Japanese diplomatic representative had ever visited the United States. However, this ignores the existence of what one authority has called "the shogun's reluctant ambassadors" - in other words, the crews of Japanese ships fortunate enough to survive being blown out by storm into the Pacific and who had either been rescued by passing foreign vessels, or had even been washed up on the Pacific coast of the United States. ⁹

This opened up an interesting line of enquiry. The unusual appearance of the subject, which, to my mind, conflicted with that of an official visitor to the United States, now seemed quite appropriate for a member of the Japanese lower classes, to which almost all the known castaways belonged.



Documentary evidence shows that Japanese castaways were being encountered across the Pacific as early as 1617. However, as the whaling grounds off the coast of Japan and the North Pacific were increasingly exploited from the 1840s and American trading vessels began to make more regular visits to the Far Eastern waters, the frequency of these encounters increased. ¹⁰ Japanese sources consulted by Sebastian Dobson in Tokyo showed that, in the ten years before the Japanese embassy was sent to the United States in 1860, there were at least four instances of American vessels rescuing Japanese castaways. ¹¹ In most cases, they were taken to Hawaii and never visited the United States. There was one instance, however, of the entire crew of a shipwrecked Japanese vessel being brought to San Francisco in 1851, and another whereby two Japanese castaways visited Boston and New York in 1854 after working on an American whaler. ¹² It was possible to rule out the latter. Both Japanese had served on a two-year whaling

voyage before arriving in the United States, and it is hardly likely that they would still retain their traditional hairstyle and costume during this time. Pictured here is a daguerreotype from the early 1850's of an unknown Japanese, who may in fact be either of the aforementioned two castaways picked up by the 'Isaac Howland'. This left the 18-man crew of the *Eiriki-Maru*, who were brought to San Francisco in February 1851, only 45 days after they were found in the Pacific, and stayed there for almost one year.

It was particularly fortunate that one of the crew members of the *Eiriki-Maru* went on to make a name for himself and in 1897 published an account of his life and adventures. Entitled *Narrative of a Japanese*, it describes the life of Joseph Heco, who, of all the crew members, would benefit most from his contact with the outside world, returning to Japan as a naturalised American, and going on to found one of the first modern newspapers in Japan.¹³ As a thirteen year-old cabin boy, Hikotaro (as he was then called), was the youngest member of the crew, and also showed the most facility in learning the language of his American hosts. His memoirs contain a vivid account of the wreck of the *Eiriki-Maru*, the rescue of its crew, and their stay in San Francisco. Unfortunately, while Heco provides an engaging account of the first encounters by the Japanese with American life and Western technology, he makes no reference to the camera, or to having been photographed.¹⁴

This seemed to go as far as the source material would permit. There was a definite possibility that the subject of the daguerreotype was a castaway from the *Eiriki-Maru*, but that was all it was - a possibility. I was certainly no closer to establishing the circumstances under which the portrait was taken, nor the identities of the sitter and the photographer.

A BREAKTHROUGH

Then, in June 1996, there came a breakthrough when I received a FAX from a Japanese photograph researcher, Izakura Naomi. She had acquired a copy of the extremely rare New York periodical *Illustrated News* which contained an article referring to "the first daguerreotypes of Japanese individuals ever taken".¹⁵ This was very interesting since the issue itself pre-dated Brown's efforts in Okinawa by four months. What was particularly exciting, however, was to learn that the article was accompanied by woodblock reproductions of 18 portraits of the captain and crew of the *Eiriki-Maru* taken during their stay in San Francisco! [There were only 17 castaways but one of them has been inadvertently illustrated twice.]



Engraving of the article 'Japanese Sailors' which appeared in the *Illustrated News*, January 22, 1853, by kind permission of Rob Oeschle.

On the basis of this article, Ms. Izakura had already matched four of the reproductions in the *Illustrated News* with the subjects of the four hitherto unidentified daguerreotypes held in the Yokohama Museum of Art and Kawasaki City Museum.¹⁶ She had also noticed the similarity between my daguerreotype and that held in the Yokohama Museum of Art, and suggested that both daguerreotypes most closely matched the woodblock portrait identified in the article as that of 'Simpatch', the ship's cook. Although the subject's pose was slightly different, a comparison of the costume and facial features of the subjects of the two daguerreotypes and the woodblock engraving left little doubt that this was indeed the cook of the *Eiriki-Maru*.

Several significant blanks could now be filled in. According to the article, the daguerreotypes had been taken by the Baltimore photographer, Harvey R. Marks (1821-1902), who had photographed the Japanese while they were being kept in San Francisco on board the *Polk*, a vessel belonging to the United States Revenue Service. Although a specific date was not given, it was now at least possible to establish a time frame. It was known that the *Eiriki-Maru* crew had arrived in San Francisco on 3 February 1851. According to the article, they had been transferred to the *Polk* 14 days later, where they remained until they left San Francisco for Hong Kong on board the *USS St. Mary* on 13 March 1852. It is not known if Marks was already in California when the Japanese

arrived, or whether he travelled across the United States from Baltimore specifically to photograph them, so, for lack of further evidence, we must accept that the daguerreotypes were taken in San Francisco some time between 17 February 1851 and 13 March 1852. It is more likely that they were photographed in 1851, given their general unkempt appearance.

THE SEARCH FOR "SIMPATCH"

Although Joseph Heco deservedly remains the most celebrated of the former *Eiriki-Maru* castaways, there turned out to be a surprising amount of information available on 'Simpatch' or, to give him the two Japanese names by which he was known, Sampachi or Sentaro, and, although his life was short, he emerges as perhaps the most notable of the other crew members.¹⁷ The United States government hoped to use the return of the castaways as a lever in opening Japan to foreign trade, and awaiting them at Hong Kong to take them back to Japan was the *USS Susquehana*, one of the vessels in Perry's squadron. The Japanese, however, were fearful that they would be suspected of having abetted the Americans, and several left the group to try and find their own way back to Japan, while others, including Hikotaro, went back to California. When the *Susquehana* eventually set sail for Japan, only one member of the original group, Sentaro, remained on board, having learnt enough English to enlist in the United States Navy as a third-class seaman. Commodore Perry took a personal interest in 'Sam Patch', as he was nicknamed, and wrote later that by the time the expedition reached Uraga, 'Sam had taken his place as one of the crew, and had won the good will of his shipmates by his good nature'.¹⁸ However, during the ensuing negotiations with the Japanese authorities, Sentaro's American protectors were unable to make use of him as an interpreter. On the two occasions he met with the Japanese representatives, 'Sam' acted as any low-born Japanese at that time would in his situation, and immediately prostrated himself before them. He had to be ordered to rise by the ship's officers, who were embarrassed that "such obsequiousness should be shown on the deck of an American man-of-war, and under the flag of the United States, to anything wearing the human form".¹⁹ Despite repeated assurances by the Japanese that he would not be harmed, he refused to go ashore, and returned to Shanghai with Perry's squadron.

Sentaro had in the meantime been befriended by one of the marines attached to Perry's squadron, Jonathan Goble, who intended to return to Japan as a missionary after attending school in New York state, and he offered to find a place for his Japanese friend at the school and give him a Christian education.²⁰ Perry was happy to entrust Sam to Goble's care, and wrote fulsomely in his report of the expedition that:

*It is not unreasonable to hope that Sam, with the education of his faithful American friend, may be an instrument, in the event of his return to Japan, under a further development of our relations with that empire, of aiding in the introduction of a higher and better civilization into his own country. All honor be to the American Christian marine for his benevolence!*²¹

Sentaro would fail to live up to these high expectations. Although both he and Goble enrolled at Madison University in 1855, neither graduated; the former being found wanting in intelligence and the latter being expelled after marrying a local girl. Nonetheless, Sam was baptised a Christian, and on the strength of this fact, Goble secured a post in the Baptist mission to Japan. On April Fools' Day, 1860, after four years in America, Sentaro finally returned to Japan, but, rather than fulfilling Perry's dream as the representative of a 'higher and better civilization', he was now reduced to the role of cook and servant in the Goble household.²² For the rest of his life, Sentaro worked in the same capacity for several American missionaries resident in Japan. After repeated physical abuse at the hands of the short-tempered and impecunious Goble, we find Sentaro a few years later employed in the more congenial household of another missionary, Dr. James Ballagh. In 1868, he was able to visit the United States for a third time when he accompanied Mrs. Ballagh and her children on their journey home. In 1874, while still in his early forties, he died after contracting beri-beri, and was given a Christian burial by his employer.²³

The final word on Sentaro comes from one of his former employers, who concluded that 'Sam had great opportunities in the world, but he didn't have any brains to start on.'²⁴ Whatever his intellectual limitations, however, he earned a small place in history as the only Japanese to accompany Perry on his mission to Japan, and, as this article has hopefully shown, he also deserves a place in the early photo-history of Japan.

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NOTES

1. The first pioneering study in English on the subject was Clark Worswick: *Japan. Photographs 1854-1905*, New York, 1979. This was supplemented by Terry Bennett: *Early Japanese Images*, Tokyo, 1996. An excellent recent work, which focuses on Japanese photographers, is: Tucker, A, et al, *The History of Japanese Photography*, Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2003. Among the numerous Japanese works on the subject, the most important general studies are those by the Japan Photographic Association, *Nihon Shashinshi, 1840-1945*, Tokyo, 1972 and Professor Ozawa Takeshi's, *Bakumatsu - shashin no jidai*, Tokyo, 1994 and Saito Takio's *Bakumatsu Meiji: Yokohama Shashinkan Monogatari*, Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunshakan, 2004. Most recently the following two works have been published by Terry Bennett: *Photography In Japan 1853-1912*, Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2006 and *Old Japanese Photographs: Collectors' Data Guide*, London: Bernard Quaritch Ltd., 2006.

2. Francis L. Hawks (ed.): *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan. Performed in the Years 1853, 1854 and 1854*. Published by Order of the Congress of the United States, 3 volumes, Washington D.C., 1856. Worswick, op. cit., p.130.

3. These surviving daguerreotypes, all portraits, are as follows: (1) a portrait of Tanaka Kogi, a magistrate's official, taken in Shimoda; (2) a portrait of Namura Gohachiro, a Nagasaki interpreter, taken in Yokohama; and portraits of three senior retainers of the Matsumae domain, all photographed in Hakodate - (3) Matsumae Kageyu and his retinue, (4) Ishizuka Kanzo and retinue, and (5) Endo Matazaemon and retinue. (6) Kurokawa Kahei, photographed in Shimoda. (1), (2) and (5) were reproduced in Ozawa, op. cit., as nos. 8, 7 and 9 respectively.

4. Experiments with the daguerreotype process had been made several years before Brown's arrival. In 1848, the Nagasaki merchant, Ueno Shunnojo, imported a camera through the Dutch trading settlement at Deshima. This equipment was acquired in the following year by Shimazu Nariakira, lord of the nearby Satsuma domain, who ordered a series of experiments with the apparatus. These appear to have been unsuccessful, probably due to defective equipment, and it was not until 1857 that the efforts of Shimazu's retainers yielded fruit. Bennett, op. cit., pp.31-2.

5. W.G. Beasley: *Japan Encounters the Barbarian. Japanese Travellers in America and Europe*, New Haven/ London, 1995, pp.56-70.

6. 'Photography and the Japanese', *The Photographic Journal*, (London), Vol.6, no.99, 16 July 1860, pp.289-90. This article originally published in *The American Journal of Photography*.

7. Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography possesses a daguerreotype portrait of Nonomura Ichinoshin taken by the Broadway photographer C.D. Fredericks in 1860. Ozawa, op. cit., p.16, no.10.

8. Ozawa suggests that both sets of portraits may have been taken in Paris and considers the theory that they may predate the first Japanese embassy to Europe, which visited Paris in 1862. He concludes, 'it almost defies belief, but it may be worth considering the possibility that these are [portraits of] stowaways or survivors of a shipwreck.' Ozawa, op. cit., p.16.

9. See Katherine Plummer: *The Shogun's Reluctant Ambassadors: Sea Drifters, Tokyo [1984]. On probably the most famous of these castaways, Nakahama 'John' Manjiro (1827-1898), see Kaneko Hisakazu: Manjiro, the Man who Discovered America, Boston/Cambridge, 1956.*

10. Plummer, op. cit., passim. Sakimaki Shunzo: 'Japan and the United States, 1790-1853: A Study of Japanese Contacts with and Perceptions of the United States and its People Prior to the American Expedition of 1853-4', *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan, 2nd Series, Vol. 18, Tokyo, 1939.* Alexander Starbuck: *History of the American Whale Fishery, Secaucus NJ, 1989, p.98.*

11. See the chronological appendix in Tomita Hitoshi: *Umi o koeta Nihonjin Meijiten, Tokyo, 1985.*

12. The *Eiriki-Maru* and *Eikyu-Maru* were both blown off course into the Pacific and rescued by American vessels in December 1850 and March 1852 respectively. Two of crew of the latter, Yujiro and Sakuzo, signed up for a voyage on the American whaler *Isaac Howland* which returned to its home port of New Bedford on 24 April 1854. From there, the two Japanese took the train to New York and Boston for a sightseeing trip. See appropriate entries in Tomita, op. cit.; Starbuck, p.478.

13. Joseph Heco: *Narrative of a Japanese, Tokyo, 1897.*

14. Heco, op. cit.

15. 'Japanese Sailors', *Illustrated News*, (New York), 22 January 1853, p.57.

16. Ms. Izakura's discovery, together with comments by Professor Ozawa, subsequently appeared as a front-page newspaper feature. See 'Warera ga hatsu no Nihonjin Hishatai!?' *Asahi Shimbun* (Evening Edition), 4 July 1996, p.1. The other daguerreotypes are reproduced in Ozawa, op. cit.; those belonging to Kawasaki City Museum as nos. 13 and 14, and those in the Yokohama Art Museum as nos. 15 and 16. [At the time of writing, December 2006, 9 daguerreotypes of the castaways from the *Eiriki-Maru* have been identified.]

17. It was common at that time for a Japanese to be known by several names during his life, and many of the castaways listed in Tomita, op. cit. and elsewhere have similar variants on their name. Although the characters for 'Sanpachi' appear on the subject's grave at Hondenji in Tokyo, I have followed Tomita's preference for Sentaro. Interestingly, this seems to be the name that he himself used. A census compiled in Bath County, New York State, in 1855 during his stay there with Jonathan Goble describes him as 'Samuel Santaro'. Keith Seat: 'Jonathan Goble's Book', *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan, Vol. 16, 1981, p.151n.*

18. An essay on Sentaro appears in Harold S. Williams: *Shades of the Past, Tokyo, 1959.* While providing a colourful account of Sentaro's demise, it omits such basic information as the date of his death. More information in Japanese can be found in two articles in the 1978 issue of the Yokohama magazine *Shimin Gurafu* - Murakami Mitsugi's '*Kurofune no Nihonjin Suifu*', which describes Sentaro's life until his visit to Japan as a sailor in Perry's squadron in 1854, and Kodera Takeshi's '*Nami no ma ni ma ni... kikokugo no Samu Patch?*', which continues the story from his

return to Japan in 1860. The best work, however, is the recent: Calvin Parker, F. *The Japanese Sam Patch*, Cross Cultural Publication, 2001.

19. Another former castaway whose subsequent life is known is Iwakichi or Denkichi, who returned to Japan as a member of the British diplomatic mission. He worked at the British legation in Edo as an interpreter until he was murdered by a masterless samurai in 1862. See Tomita, op. cit. It is more than likely that he is the subject of one of the daguerreotypes held at the Kawasaki City Museum. Ozawa, op. cit., no.14.

20. Hawks, op. cit., p.398

21. Ibid, p.557.

22. On Jonathan Goble, see F. Calvin Parker: 'Jonathan Goble, Marine, Missionary, Maverick', Lanham: University Press of America, 1990.

23. E. Warren Clark: *Life and Adventures in Japan*, New York, 1878, pp.233-38. Sentaro's age is not easy to calculate. There is little documentation on the Japanese side. In a report submitted to the shogunate in 1854 by the Magistrate of Uraga, Moriyama Eizaemon, his age is given as 23. On the other hand, Murakami Mitsugi estimates that by this date, Sentaro would have been 26. Murakami, op. cit., p.40. The age given by Moriyama is supported by the 1855 census of Bath County, New York State, which records 'Samuel Sentaro' as being 24 years old. Seat, op. cit., p.151n. By this reckoning he would have died at the age of 43.

24. Ibid, p.41.