

The Last Samurai:
Jacques-Philippe Potteau's Photographs of the Japanese
Missions to Europe, 1862 and 1864

Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

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This exhibition presents fourteen mounted albumen prints and two related engravings from the important Takenouchi mission to Europe (1862) and the Ikeda mission to France (1864). Sent by the Tokugawa Shogunate to renegotiate the terms of earlier trade agreements, the thirty-strong ambassadorial delegations visited numerous European cities during voyages lasting between six and twelve months abroad. Prompted in part by concern for Japan's silk industry, while also seeking to limit the extent of foreign influence in the country, the Takenouchi mission – which travelled principally to Paris, London, The Hague, Berlin, St. Petersburg and Lisbon – negotiated the closure of the 'two ports and two cities' for longer than had previously been agreed under the so-called 'unequal treaties' of the 1850s. The 1864 mission, led by Ikeda Nagaaki, was shorter and less successful than its predecessor, failing to secure the treaty revisions which were its goal, but nonetheless both visits excited



1951.11.63.104

1951.63.105

田辺太一

Two portraits of Taichi Tanabe, officer and secretary on the Ikeda mission to France, which ultimately failed in its objective to postpone the opening of the trading port of Yokohama to the western treaty powers.

Photographs by Jacques-Philippe Potteau. Paris, France. 1864.



1951.11.63.82

福沢諭吉

Yukichi Fukuzawa.

*Photograph by Jacques-Philippe
Potteau. Paris, France. 1862.*



1951.11.63.111

西吉十郎

Kichijūrō Nishi.

*Photograph by Jacques-Philippe
Potteau. Paris, France. 1864.*



1951.11.63.108

田中廉太郎

Rentarō Tanaka.

*Photograph by Jacques-Philippe
Potteau. Paris, France. 1864.*



1951.11.63.112

斎藤次郎太郎

Jirōtarō Saitō.

*Photograph by Jacques-Philippe
Potteau. Paris, France. 1864.*



Private collection

Members of the Takenouchi mission to Europe, pictured wearing traditional dress and each carrying a *daishō* or pair of swords (*katana* and *wakizashi*). This engraving, published in *Le Monde illustré* in April 1862, was based on photographs taken in the Paris studio of Nadar, whose plate camera can be seen depicted in the background.

considerable interest and were widely reported in the printed press of the day.

The photographs, which were taken in Paris by Jacques-Philippe Potteau (1807–1876), show individual members of the two missions – the envoys, officers, interpreters, even a hairdresser – who were also among the last generation of samurai before their abolition following the Meiji Restoration (1868) only a few years later. Potteau, who was an assistant at the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle, had been trained in scientific techniques and methodology, but his photographs were not a paid commission and appear to have been taken of his own accord. Working from a studio beside the Jardin des Plantes, he photographed a wide range of passing visitors, his pictures here recording the occasions of Japan’s earliest diplomatic encounters on European soil. Typically interpreted as model examples of nineteenth-century anthropological photography, this exhibition for the first time places Potteau’s Japanese portraits within the political and historical context of the late Edo period, highlighting their significance during a decade of extraordinary change. The prints, a selection from a larger set of work, were donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum by Herbert Coghlan of the Newbury Museum in 1951.

Displayed alongside Potteau’s photographs are two contemporary woodblock prints by Toyohara Kunichika and Utagawa Kunisada (also known as Utagawa Toyokuni III); a *katana* and two *wakizashi*, examples of the finely crafted blades worn by samurai as signifiers of their rank or status; and four hand-coloured albumen prints sold by the Adolfo Farsari studio in Yokohama. Farsari’s photographs, which were taken around 1886, in the port city at the centre of a growing tourist trade, can be seen as an indication of the changes which had occurred since the Bakufu missions two decades earlier, being produced as Japan was opening rapidly to the West and as the West was beginning its long and ongoing fascination with Japan.