

# THE DAGUERREIAN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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Dedicated to the history, science and art of the Daguerreotype



## The 2007 Kansas City Symposium

The above photograph was taken by our photographer Bob Lansdale while waiting for the official daguerreotype to be taken by Rob McElroy. It is visible evidence that Kansas City 2007 was the largest attendance we ever had at a symposium. More than two hundred lovers of photo-history registered for a weekend that was sensational in every way starting with the Thursday evening reception in Kirkwood Hall, the magnificent entrance doors of which, are just behind where our group is gathered. Keith Davis, top row with his hand sheilding his eyes brought us a weekend to remember. Thank you Keith and thank you Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

❁ *More Symposium Photos Start on Page 14* ❁

# COLLECTING JAPANESE AMBROTYPES

By Charles Schwartz

What do they say about the journey of a thousand miles beginning with a single step? Well, after seriously and assiduously collecting these images for fifteen years, I'm happy to report that private collectors, university libraries, museums, and others are finally beginning to get excited at the prospect of learning more about Japanese ambrotypes. These rare gems are an utterly unique mix of personal, social, and historical record. And they speak more eloquently than any essay on Japan's history during the highly transitional Meiji Period (1868–1912).

There have been some difficulties getting the ball rolling—difficulties that, I think, all but the most devoted dealers would rather avoid. The best specimens are hard to find. And, once found, work has to be done to properly catalog and understand them. Beautiful (and sometimes complicated!) inscriptions appear in ink on the case lids, backs, and even underneath the images themselves. Photographers' stamps have to be researched. Hence, I've found it's necessary to find someone qualified not only in translating Japanese but who is knowledgeable in Japan's history. That said, the benefits of educating the public to these images are worth the effort. And I've had the pleasure of seeing curators' eyes light up when they "get" what it is they've got in their hands. Images that families had taken to commemorate a visit to a Buddhist temple, made in a portable photo

studio or "shajo"; the last of the young samurai caste seated with their swords; children seated with older siblings for their portraits; and, one of my favorites, a prostitute holding an umbrella on which is written an advertisement for a local photo studio.

Japanese photographers came to the wet-plate process rather late in the game. But they adopted it and thoroughly made it their own, improving upon it and ultimately perfecting the technique. They got more clarity out of it; they teased a greater tonal range out of it. I think they were way more proficient at it. If you look randomly at a hundred western ambros and a hundred Japanese ambros, the tonal qualities of the Japanese are far superior. But equally special to these works' interest is the cases in which they're housed.

Were it not for these slim, feather-light boxes, the glass-plate images wouldn't have survived Japan's humid climate. The polonia wood, or in Japanese, "kiri-wood," of which they're constructed has a natural drying property, perfect for protecting ambrotypes. Each case is a handcrafted, precious, and yet practical object that fits in the palm of your hand. And I'm always delighted and amazed at how the cases add to the artistic and

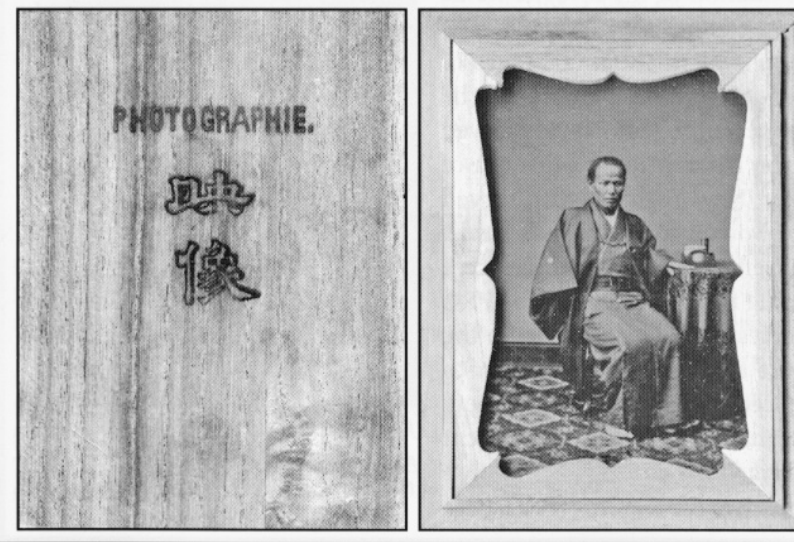


Anonymous (Japanese)

Men on the Porch of a Pleasure House, Drinking Tea, ca. 1875

4 x 3-inch Ambrotype in Original Kiri-Wood Case

An elderly man, two middle-aged men, and a young man (holding a child) sit on the porch of an establishment, which, according to the scroll that hangs behind them is named "Kinkiro"—a house of pleasure called "The Golden Tortoise." Most likely these men are clients of the house, though the scene itself seems to have been specially set up for the photograph. The hanging scroll is a Chinese poem, perhaps written by a former (and famous) client; the carved figure depicts "Hotei," one of seven gods of happiness. A fascinating communal scene.



Anonymous (Japanese)

Full-Length Portrait of Kubota Shingo, ca. 1870s

4.5 x 3-inch Ambrotype in Original Kiri-Wood Case

We know the identity of the sitter in this serious full-length portrait from inscriptions on the case, directly under the glass plate, which read: "Kubota Shingo (at age 43)." Shingo sits, one arm tucked into his kimono, next to a stand on which is placed a traditional Japanese ashtray, or "haizara." A stamp on the case lid reads "PHOTOGRAPHIE." It is very rare to see writing in a language other than Japanese on these ambrotypes. Most likely the photographer put it there to give his work an aura of Western sophistication (and to encourage his Meiji-Period clientele). Japanese characters reading "Eizo" [image] follow beneath.



historically important value of the piece. In addition to studio stamps, as I mentioned before, dates, information about the sitter, and often poems appear in the hand of the person who either commissioned or sat for the photograph. And on one rare occasion, I even discovered a rebus (an image painting that stands in for words) on a case. In it, a flying crane became the construct of a place name (see illustration). To make things even more complicated (and interesting), poems or Confucian analects can appear in the images themselves behind the sitter.

In all, Japanese ambrotypes make, for the discerning collector, a fascinating confluence of image and text. After fifteen years, I've just scratched the surface.



*Anonymous (Japanese)*

**Case Lid: Portrait of Japanese Man With Bonsai, Sept. 15, 1883**

*3.75 x 3 inch Ambrotype in Original Kiri-Wood Case*

*This rebus painting appears on the inside case lid of a man's portrait. Its simple, black-lined painting depicts a crane (TSURU) flying over a bridge (HASHI). Together, the two words would be pronounced TSURUBASHI, which is an area outside Osaka. The tradition of creating rebus (or image-word) paintings was prevalent in China, but it is extremely rare to find one coupled with a cased portrait photograph of this kind.*

Charles Schwartz

*Monmaya Studio (Japanese)*

**Japanese Prostitute Promoting Monmaya Photographic Studio, 1876**

*4.25 x 3.75 inch Ambrotype in Original Kiri-Wood Case*

*This rare image was made in the early Meiji Period, a time of great social transformation in Japan. Featured is a prostitute ["yojo"] named Misa. Though her dress and wooden platform "geta" sandals are traditional, she carries a rather unique umbrella, written on which (in Japanese) is an advertisement for the photographer's studio. It reads: "Shashinka [photographer], No. 2 (ni-ban), Shimo Kame-cho." Inscription under plate, on case [not pictured] reads, in translation: "Meiji year '9 [1876], May, taken at Monmaya Studio." A clever and very early promotional image.*