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## Nineteenth-Century Japanese Tourist Albums at the Art Institute of Chicago: Complex Interpretation and Material Deterioration

### INTRODUCTION

This article will cover the binding structure, materials, and conservation issues of two 19th-century Japanese tourist albums in the photography and media department at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Albums in a photography collection create an opportunity for unique cross-disciplinary collaboration between the fields of book conservation and photograph conservation. It is important for album structures to be correctly integrated into a collection database, as binding-specific information contributes to a fuller understanding of not only object condition but also provenance.

Japanese tourist or souvenir albums were, as the name suggests, a tourist commodity acquired by travelers in the 19th century on their world travels. Photography was introduced to Japan roughly in the middle of the 19th century after the country was forced to open its doors to more foreign trade. Japan, with the exception of controlled trading posts, had been closed to foreign trade and travel by a strict seclusion policy. To the outside world, Japan was a mysterious nation, especially to the United States and Europe.

Tourist photographs were printed in bulk for sale to not only those visiting Japan but also for world export to be sold closer to home. The market for images from Japan rose and expanded at an exponential rate, and the demand for hand-colored albumen prints was at its peak during the 1880s and 1890s. Felice Beato was considered the father of commercial souvenir photography, followed by Raimond von Stilfried, Adolfo Farsari, and simultaneously Japanese photographers like Kusakabe Kimbei, Tamamura Kosoburo, and many more. These photographers and their unknown contemporaries in the trade created a body of photographic stock that was, throughout the subsequent decades, lost, copied, sold, and traded among their respective studios. This practice understandably makes it

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difficult to identify the origin of an image. To a certain extent, this body of work could be considered homogeneous, as studios created similar images and subject matter; in the quest to appeal to foreign buyers, studios were not afraid to copy one another, creating similar sets and costumes. Even the same actors posing for different images can be easily identified.

Scholars have dedicated ample research to the interpretation of these images and their impact on societal interpretations of Japan. There has, however, been less attention dedicated to their material components and what their materiality tells us about these objects. Even less attention has been given to the albums and their bindings.

### A TALE OF TWO ALBUMS

Both albums are bound in accordion style (synonym: orihon or concertina binding). This means that the leaves are attached to each other in a “zig-zag” formation: one edge is attached to the previous page and the other edge to the next.



Fig. 1. Unknown artist, Japanese souvenir album, 19th century, accordion binding with lacquered boards, 20 × 15 × 5.5 cm, Photography and Media collection, Obj. 259348. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 2. Unknown artist, Japanese souvenir album, 19th century, accordion binding with lacquered boards, 20 × 15 × 5.5 cm, Photography and Media collection, Obj. 259348. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 4. Unknown artist, Japanese souvenir album, 19th century, accordion binding with lacquered boards, 20 × 15 × 6.5 cm, Photography and Media collection, Obj. 259349. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

The first album (figs. 1, 2) has two black lacquered boards. The front board has a white inlay, possibly ivory, carved in the shape of cranes and a maki-e painted background. The back board is decorated with small insect paintings. There are 24 leaves made of a thin pasteboard core with a cream wove paper laminate that is the same for the front and the back of the leaves. The album contains 22 hand-colored albumen photographs that are approximately 14 × 9 cm (5.5 × 3.5 in.) each and 22 Chinese paintings on pith paper. The album itself is approximately 20 × 15 × 5.5 cm (7.9 × 5.9 × 2.2 in.).

The second album (figs. 3, 4) has two red lacquered boards, both decorated with a cherry blossom design and



Fig. 3. Unknown artist, Japanese souvenir album, 19th century, accordion binding with lacquered boards, 20 × 15 × 6.5 cm, Photography and Media collection, Obj. 259349. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

maki-e paintings. There are 25 leaves, also made of tin pasteboard core with a cream wove paper laminate that is the same for the front and the back. The album contains 50 hand-colored albumen prints, which are about 14 × 9 cm (5.5 × 3.5 in.) each. The album itself is approximately 20 × 15 × 6.5 cm (7.9 × 5.9 × 2.5 in.). There are also tipped-in interleaves made of a stiff, thin, laid paper.

#### BINDING STRUCTURES

As figures 5 and 6 show, there are subtle differences between the albums. The first album uses a single hinge that is slit in between a cut made in the edge of the card material. The second album has two hinges, one that wraps around the outside of the leaves and one on the inside. Paper is used for the hinging material in both albums.

It is noteworthy to observe the differences between the two bindings and the effect each binding has on reading the albums. Books with text have an obvious order as the text guides the reader from page to page. Available literature on Japanese tourist photography suggests that these albums are ordered according to certain themes. Some examples of



Fig. 5. Diagram of obj. 259348 (black lacquer album).

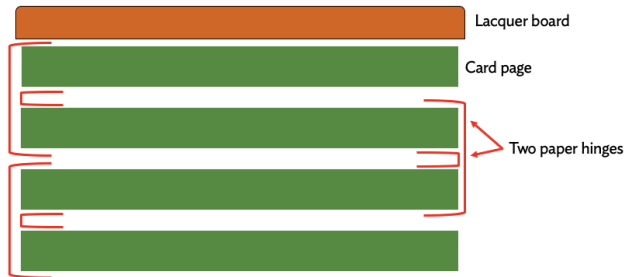


Fig. 6. Diagram of obj. 259349 (red lacquer album).

themes include “sites and locations,” “types and people,” and “craft and occupations.” These albums differ from traditional accordion bindings, where text is presented on one side of a long sheet, which is folded accordion style. The albums in question, rather, have information on both sides.

The way of opening and, in consequence, the order in which the images are viewed can vary. In other words, the way of opening determines the order in which the images are viewed. However, there is more than one way to open the albums. Handling a photographic album could be interpreted as a social event in the 19th century. They were part of a time when carte-de-visite albums and scrapbooks were parlor central objects to be shown off to visitors. Therefore, the handling of the album becomes part of the storytelling.

First, the album can be spread out in one line, facilitating continuous reading (fig. 7). Viewing the images side by side in a continuous reading motion, everything is spread out at once. The albums would first be viewed left to right, then turned so the reader could view the other side or other story. This could be done by spreading the album out on a table, or two readers would hold opposite ends of the album while viewing the images spread out between the people.

Second, the album could be held by one person and flipped through in a one-sided motion (fig. 8), first flipping the pages left to right until the end of the album is reached, then turning the album and flipping the pages from left to right until the reader is back at the front board. This way, only one side of the album is viewed at a time. The image sequence in this reading style is equal to the image sequence in the continuous reading style.

Last, again, the album could be held by one person and flipped through in a zig-zag motion (fig. 9), flipping the first page from left to right and then flipping from right to left. This way, both sides are viewed in the same reading sequence in contrast to the previous reading motions.

It is difficult to ascertain how these albums were intended to be viewed and read, if there was even a certain intended method. Between colleagues in the same conservation studio, what was considered the natural way of handling the albums was different to each person. The three handling options listed previously are undoubtedly not the only options. As resources are scarce and the individual is restricted by personal frame of reference, it is possible that there are overlooked factors.

### Continuous reading

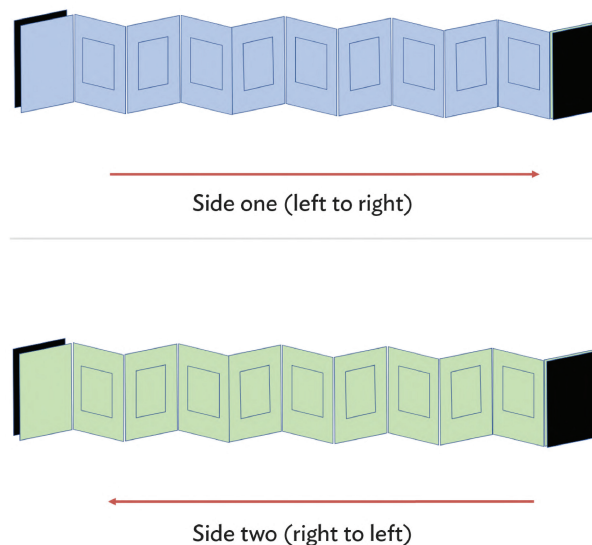


Fig. 7. Diagram illustrating a continuous reading motion facilitated by spreading the album out fully at once.



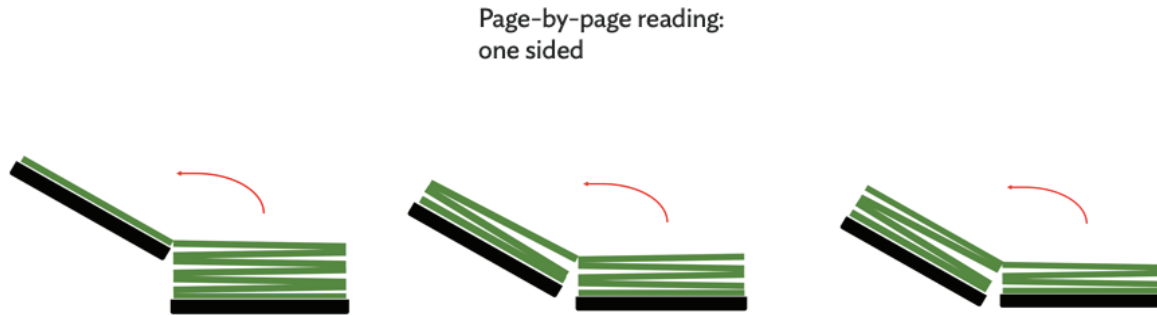


Fig. 8. Diagram illustrating a page-by-page reading motion facilitated by turning the pages consistently from one side to the other.

#### MATERIAL COMPONENTS AND CONSERVATION ISSUES

##### *Lacquer Boards*

The glossy coating over the albums' covers has been investigated by Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) and pyrolysis gas chromatography mass spectrometry (Py-GCMS) to inform conservation decisions and to help understand provenance. The FTIR spectra of samples from the coating showed a resemblance to reference data for various natural resin materials, including Asian lacquer. Py-GCMS analysis showed pyrolysis products that are characteristic of lacquer. In particular, the detection of pentadecylcatechol suggests the lacquer to be obtained from *Rhus verniciflua* (also called *urushi*) and originating primarily from Japan, China, and Korea. Additional compounds were also detected and indicated the presence of a drying oil and of a Pinaceae resin. Oils and natural resins are mentioned in the literature as additives used to improve lacquer performance. This might have been a deliberate decision to reduce lacquer preparation time and costs, thus supporting the context of the albums as tourist commodities, made for mass production and fast sale.

The lacquer boards show cracking around the outer edges, which resulted in losses. There is a loss of gloss and

fingerprints spread around the surfaces of both albums, more so on the front boards than the back boards. Urushi lacquer is susceptible to fingerprint etching, so handling the objects with nitrile gloves is imperative. Asian lacquers are also more susceptible to fluctuation of relative humidity and temperature, making it necessary for the storage environment to be as stable as possible. Urushi lacquer is also reactive to UV light, making it reactive and susceptible to UV degradation; UV sources should be eliminated to the extent possible.

##### *Binding Structures*

The albums have been mended in the past with the use of sticky tapes (fig. 10). The tapes on the album with the red lacquered board are partially failing, whereas the tapes on the black lacquered album are fully intact with the exception of the attachment between the back board and the last leaf. There is also the addition of plastic protective layers held in place by the sticky tape that cover the Chinese paintings in the black lacquered album (fig. 11).

The loose leaves of the red lacquer album pose a large issue concerning image sequence. As mentioned earlier, according to the research done by historic scholars, the image sequence is particular to the album structure and tells the story of the traveler. However, the warping of the pages is inconstant, as is the application of interleaves. There are gaps between the leaves caused by adverse warping (fig. 12). These bundles

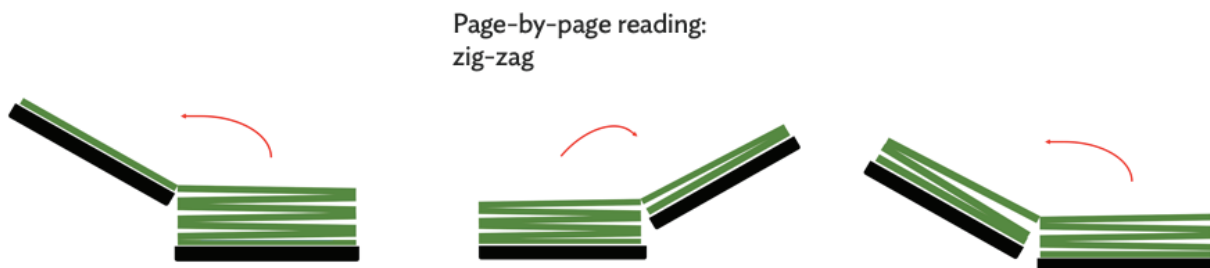


Fig. 9. Diagram illustrating a page-by-page zig-zag reading motion facilitated by turning the pages from one side to the other, each time switching on which edge the page is turned.



Fig. 10. Detail of obj. 259349 (red lacquer album) illustrating the tape application. Unknown artist, Japanese souvenir album, 19th century, accordion binding with lacquered boards,  $20 \times 15 \times 6.5$  cm, Photography and Media collection, Obj. 25934. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 11. Detail of obj. 259348 (black lacquer album) illustrating the plastic protective layer. Unknown artist, Japanese souvenir album, 19th century, accordion binding with lacquered boards,  $20 \times 15 \times 5.5$  cm, Photography and Media collection, Obj. 259348. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

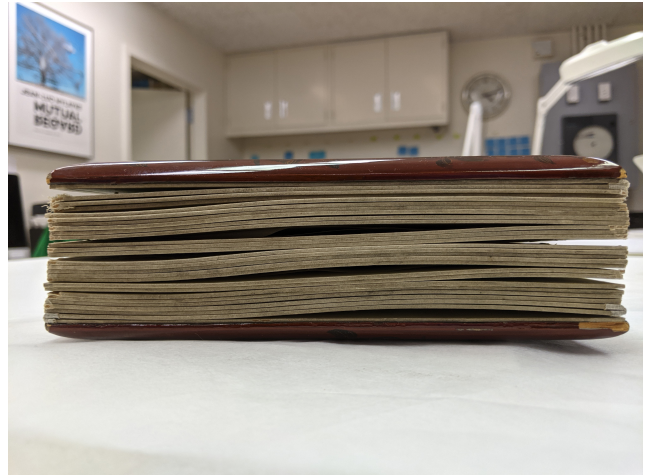


Fig. 12. Detail of obj. 259349 (red lacquer album) illustrating the warping of the leaves. Unknown artist, Japanese souvenir album, 19th century, accordion binding with lacquered boards,  $20 \times 15 \times 6.5$  cm, Photography and Media collection, Obj. 259349. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

of counter warped leaves can be turned to fit perfectly, consequently changing the order of images. In addition, the interleaving is not consistent throughout the album. Between certain pages there is no interleaving, between others there is interleaving tipped in (sometimes on the outer edge, sometimes on the inner edge), and at other times there are two interleaves. This, together with the inconsistent warping, indicates a loss of the original page order, which considerably complicates conservation treatment planning. Rebinding seems impossible when there is uncertainty about the order of pages, but at the same time, the legibility of the album also depends on the order of the images that is defined by the binding.

#### *Albumen Prints*

All photographs throughout the two albums have the same measurements ( $14 \times 9$  cm or  $5.5 \times 3.5$  in.). They all exhibit the standard aging patterns of albumen prints: surface grime accumulation, microcracking, fading, and yellowing. There has been no particular pattern observed in the microcracking or any other of the degradation.

It is interesting to note that throughout the albums, the same actors are observed posing in different scenes in other albums. For example, figure 13 is from one of the Art Institute's albums; figure 14 is from the Imperial Edition Volume 3 of Francis Brinkley's publication on Japan; and figure 15 is from the Imperial Edition Volume 1, in which the actors are the same but the scene is different. Other examples of the same images in different publications can be seen in figures 16, 17, and 18. Figure 16 is from the Art Institute's album, whereas the other two images are from other albums





Fig. 13. Unknown artist, Japanese souvenir album, 19th century, accordion binding with lacquered boards, 20 × 15 × 6.5 cm, Photography and Media collection, Obj. 259349. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 14. Photographer unknown, Francis Brinkley (1887–1888), *Japan: Described and Illustrated by the Japanese*, Boston: J.B. Millet Company. p. 91. Imperial Edition. Vol. 3. Fine Arts Library, Harvard University. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:8519091?n=250>.





Fig. 15. Photographer unknown, Francis Brinkley (1887–1888), Japan: Described and Illustrated by the Japanese, Boston: J.B. Millet Company. p. 16. Imperial Edition. Vol. 1. Fine Arts Library, Harvard University. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:8519091?n=61>.

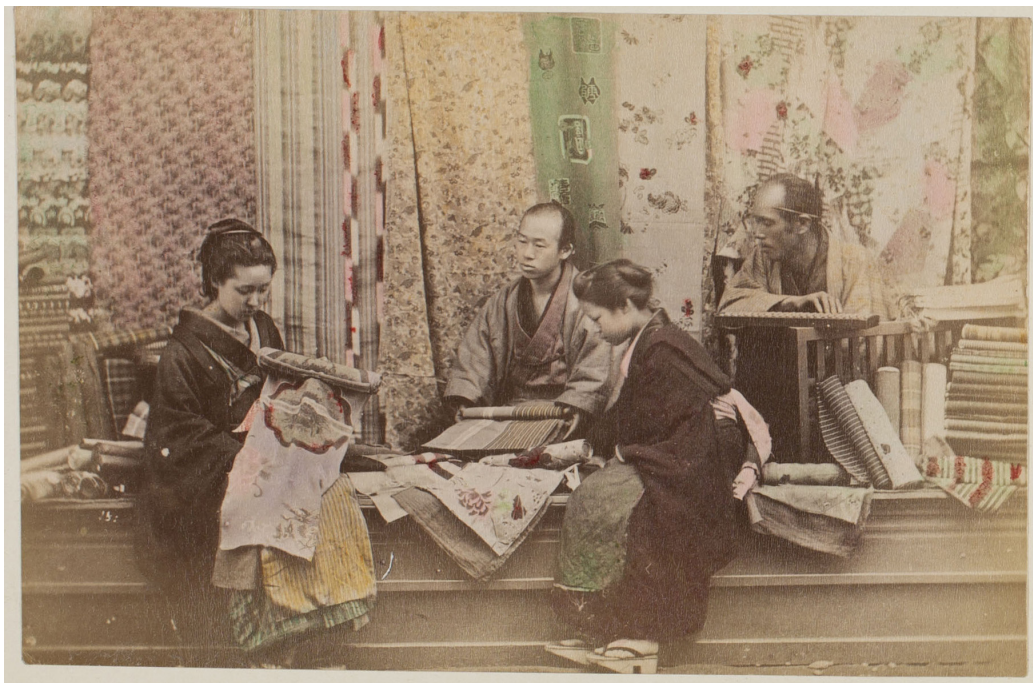


Fig. 16. Unknown artist, Japanese souvenir album, 19th century, accordion binding with lacquered boards, 20 × 15 × 6.5 cm, Photography and Media collection, Obj. 259349. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.





Fig. 17. Tamamura Kozaburo (Attr.), *Photographs of Japan* (p. 41), ca. 1880s. Special Collections EGS25.41. Harvard Fine Arts Library. <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/images/olworks577010/catalog>.



Fig. 18. Tamamura Kozaburo (attr.) ca. 1870–1883, p. 42. Special Collections K5 416 (EGS26). Harvard Fine Arts Library. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:5142487>.

in other collections. The images are not completely the same, but they stem from the same original. Because measurement information is missing from most online databases, it is difficult to compare the images and identify them as copies of the same negatives that were cut smaller, or if different negatives were used.

The hand coloring throughout the albums was first visually assessed using an optical microscope. Ten different colors were identified visually (yellow, orange, light blue, dark blue, light green, dark green, red, light red, pink, and purple/violet). Cracking and flaking of the colorants are sporadic and only happened where the colorant was applied thickly.

#### CONCLUSION

These two albums are perfect examples of the complexity of Japanese tourist albums in their material aspects, as well as in their interpretation. The literature has been particularly focused on the content of the image not considering the material implications of the accordion-style binding.

This article's purpose is to report on the observations made as part of a larger ongoing multidisciplinary research project. The albums at first sight appear to be the same, but after closer assessment they clearly have different binding structures. Understanding the complexity and varied binding styles is important for rebinding considerations, as well as for provenance studies. The analysis of the lacquer indicates that the boards are likely urushi, which informs handling and storage. It also supports the context of these albums as being tourist commodities, as the possible detection of drying oil additions shows the mass production of these objects for commercial sale. Further analysis into the colorants used for the hand coloring and treatment of the objects is ongoing, and further information will hopefully be uncovered, leading to our further understanding of these and similar photographic albums.

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