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Throughout the latter decades of the nineteenth century, European photographers of various nationalities visited Nagasaki. Apart from the occasional intrepid commercial photographer, several talented practitioners arrived in the historic port as part of the well-organised expeditions that regularly passed through the region. Ever since the American daguerreotypist Eliphalet Brown found his place aboard the ‘black ships’ of Commodore Perry, few expeditions failed to make provisions for photographers and their requisite provisions. This article examines the role of photographers of the Austrian Mission to East Asia and South America (k. k. Mission nach Ostasien und Südamerika) on their brief visit to Nagasaki in late 1869. The Austrian Empire was slow to join the rush of nations lining up to demand preferential treatment from the bakufu authorities. Long after the diplomatic expeditions of the other treaty power nations had completed their negotiations, the Austrian naval vessels Donau and Erzherzog Friedrich embarked from Trieste on October 18th, 1868.1 The mission was well stocked with the latest photographic equipment and included several officers with experience in the medium.

The high position granted photography on the mission was due to the efforts of the explorer and scholar Count Karl von Scherzer (1821-1903).2 A member of the Photographic Society of Vienna, Scherzer had contributed a collection of eighty photographs to the inaugural Photographic Exhibition in Vienna of 1864. This portfolio consisted of ethnographic studies and views of Asia, Australia and South America compiled on his first voyage around the world in 1857-59.3 It was primarily due to his efforts that the mission secured the talents of the professional photographer Wilhelm Burger (1844-1920).4 Although still a young man of twenty-three years, Burger had already proven himself a adept outdoor photographer. In the summer of 1866, he took numerous scenic views near the alpine town of Salzkammergut, which later gained him honourable mention at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1867. Of the five thousand guldens allocated in the expedition budget to photography, Burger spent eight hundred on the requisite chemicals and equipment and received two hundred per month for his services.5 The photographer’s fifteen-year old assistant from Altaussee, Michael Moser (1853-1912), also joined him on the expedition.6 Moser had proven his worth as a photographic assistant during his master’s earlier photographic tour at Salzkammergut. In addition to these official photographers, the expedition also included the talented artist Baron Eugen von Ransonnet (1838-1926).7 He sketched almost one third of his two hundred landscape and ethnographic studies completed during the voyage in Japan. Despite his preference for the traditional media of the sketch artist, he also had a strong practical and experimental interest in photography. Before the voyage, Ransonnet had been involved in the research of colour photography and photolithography.8 As with the earlier foreign expeditions to Japan, the association of traditional and modern reprographic techniques was all-important to the expedition’s visual imagery.

After a twelve-month voyage, the Austrian frigate Donau finally sailed into Nagasaki harbour in early September 1869. During a ten-day sojourn, what activities did the expedition members undertake in the historic port? What did the photographers of the mission accomplish during their visit? As their first port-of-call in Japan, Nagasaki offered the visitors numerous attractions and advantages. Due to its historical significance as a trading port, the township was well stocked with traditional artefacts for sale in the merchant stores. Apart from establishing diplomatic and trade relations with East Asia, the Austro-Hungarian mission collected a vast array of scientific and cultural materials during their three-year voyage. According to a letter from Karl von Scherzer addressed to the Museum für Kunst und Industrie (the present day Museum für angewandte Kunst), the expedition received several traditional art objects from the Nagasaki-based Austrian merchant Max Militzer.9 In addition to these gifts, Scherzer also made clear his intention to forward other items to the museum:

In addition, I have the honour to forward with the next post a number of photographs of Chinese art objects, which constitute the beginning of an album of industrial arts. So far the photographer has succeeded in photographing some fifty objects in Shanghai and I hope that an opportunity will present itself to photograph still numerous more art objects with the wealthy daimyos in Japan.

Despite the flotilla’s embarkation for Japan, Burger appears to have remained behind in Shanghai and completed his assignment for the portfolio of applied arts. He travelled thereafter directly to Yokohama to rejoin the expedition, but soon after his arrival entered the International Hospital in order to recuperate from illness. At the suggestion of Scherzer, Burger remained in Yokohama on the expedition’s departure for South America, entrusted with a commission to photograph various Japanese art objects beyond the financial means of the expedition. As a journal column reported of these activities:

The most industrious and indefatigable photographer of the expedition, Herr W. Burger, is currently busy in Edo and Yokohama—two extremely profitable regions yet little exploited for the arts and crafts—taking similar photographs, and has obtained sole permission for this purpose to remain an additional several months in Japan. Since Herr Burger is not accompanying the mission to South America, but rather returning directly home from Yokohama, he will stay with the consent of the head of the expedition a few weeks in Hongkong and Canton in order to take many more interesting arts and crafts photographs.

Although these passages overlook the ill health that prompted the photographer’s extended stay in Japan, these letters suggest a sequence of events that reveal two important points. Firstly, Burger and Moser do not appear to have had sufficient opportunity to conduct photographic activities on the expedition’s initial arrival in Nagasaki.
Although there is some discrepancy as to the elapsed period of time, Burger was well known for his advocacy of this experimental dry plate technique. Working with a Voigtländer-Petzval portrait lens, the required exposure time of seven minutes underscores the disadvantage of such early dry plate methods. In most cases, Burger made use of the conventional and generally more reliable wet-collodion process. His shift to the dry plate may suggest an experimental impetus but was more likely prompted by a shortage of materials.

In addition to these large format landscapes, two rare views of Nagasaki survive among a group of twelve stereographs in the archives of the Nagasaki University Library (figures 2, 3). Each of these stereographs identifies the photographer and the series with bilingual captions printed either side of the prints on the orange mounts. Below each print hand written captions identify the subject as “Ansichten von Nagasaki.” These two stereographs appear to be taken from opposite vantage points of the European quarter of the township, with the distinctive architecture of Oura Catholic Church in the foreground of one view apparent in the background of the other stereograph. In the first stereograph taken from Minamiyamate, the prominent foreground placement of the church spire and crucifix, rising above the settlement and bisecting the harbour beyond, serves as a dramatic reminder of the port’s religious significance for early foreign missionaries. The theme of religious sacrifice and heritage rarely failed to receive mention in the travelogues of foreign visitors of the period. The stereograph from the opposite ridge of Higashiyamate presents a more conventional view along a major road of the European district of Nagasaki. These views depict the church at an early stage in its construction, with the two minor flanking spires apparent in numerous later photographs not yet added to the façade.

Given Burger’s stereographs of Japan are exceptionally rare, these two scenic views enhance the small oeuvre of works completed by the photographer in Nagasaki. However, these stereographs are not genuine prints taken with a stereo camera but reprints based on his standard views fabricated to mimic stereographs. When viewed through a stereoscope, they fail to produce the three-dimensional effect that results from the use of a stereo camera. Burger’s kit therefore did not extend to the possession of this item of equipment. Nonetheless, these stereographs supplement the photographer’s few known outdoor works of Nagasaki, indicating that he produced more large-format topographical scenes than are currently documented. Whether large format or stereograph in format, however, these views represent only a small fraction of his entire output in the port.

On his homeward visit to Nagasaki, Burger not only arrived without his delegation but minus his long time assistant. Moser had decided to remain in Yokohama, finding work initially in a tavern before eventually securing a permanent post as staff photographer for the illustrated journal The Far East. Although travelling in a private capacity, Burger nonetheless had certain advantages gained from his former expedition post. In Yokohama, Burger had secured the use of the studio of Shimooka Renjô 下岡蓮杖 (1823-1914) in order to assemble a portfolio of genre photographs. Similarly, Burger worked in the studio of the leading professional photographer active in Nagasaki, the renowned Ueno Hikoma 上野彦馬 (1838-1904). In both cases, the studios are identifiable through the props and settings familiar to their respective enterprises. The studio flooring, white classical column, and backdrop balustrade common to many works in the portfolio are well known to scholars of Ueno Hikoma. The surviving glass negatives of these studio-based subjects differ in size from the larger outdoor works (10.5 x 7.9 cm). Unlike the outdoor scenes, however, the studio-based works completed in the borrowed studio constitute a sizeable proportion of the photographer’s entire output in Japan. Many of these studies also formed part of the photographer’s published series of cartes de visite, cabinet cards and stereographs marketed on his return to Vienna.

Burger’s group portrait of seven young men bears the printed caption Nagasaki. Doctoren aus dem Hospital (figure 4). The relaxed, informal nature of the group belies the efforts of most nineteenth-century foreign photographers in Japan, suggesting that the studio’s
indigenous owner may well have assisted in the preparation of the portfolio. Burger may well have struggled to attract such a range of social groups before his camera without the efforts of the renowned local photographer. In my opinion, Ueno Hikoma’s influence is apparent in the cordial, almost jovial manner in which the sitters interact before the camera lens. For instance, the manner in which the central seated figure clasps the lapel of his adjacent colleague represents a gesture of camaraderie rarely permitted in the carefully controlled studio portraits of foreign photographers. Each sitter adopts a pose that exhibits a self-confident assuredness reminiscent of the studio’s finest group portrait. Behind the scenes, Ueno Hikoma’s influence permeates these group studies. The extent of his input is open to debate, but there are grounds—in the range of sitters, their apparent ease and comfort, and the lack of pretence—to assign him at least partial credit for the series. In Yokohama, Burger’s studio work betrayed a general tendency to stage-manage each scene before elaborate theatrical props. By comparison, the Nagasaki portfolio retains a few familiar props that complement rather than entrap the sitters, enabling the display of their own personal quirks and poses before the camera. In general, photographic historians have been reluctant to grant authorship as a collaborative enterprise, especially in cases that obfuscate accepted cultural boundaries, however there are strong grounds to claim that the interaction between foreign and indigenous photographers was a major component in the flourishing of nineteenth-century photography in Japan. Nor were such professional contacts beneficial to the Japanese alone. As I have suggested, Burger’s portfolio of studio portraits benefited not only from the loan of his indigenous counterpart’s studio, but also from the latter’s behind-the-scenes participation in the production of the series. Without Ueno’s experience and prestige among his fellow residents of Nagasaki, the portfolio would have been greatly impoverished.

Ueno’s association with the Austrian mission was not limited to the foreign photographer’s use of his studio. However brief the interaction between the two photographers, Burger and Ueno’s professional association reflected a broader cultural dialogue fostered through the exchange of photographs. Through the use of Ueno’s studio, materials, and not least subjects, Burger was able to return home with a sizeable portfolio that emphasised the foundations of Nagasaki society. Whereas one of his studio photographs in Yokohama depicted the legal process of the country in less than positive terms, with a detainee bound in rope before a judge, several works from Nagasaki, such as Doctoren aus dem Hospital and Akademiker aus Nagasaki (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Bildarchiv, Pk 4487, 39), refer to the intellectual traditions of the port city.

On his return to Vienna, Burger exhibited his portfolio of Japanese photographs on several occasions before an appreciative public. In the summer of 1870, a large exhibition of objects collected by members of the expedition opened at the niederösterreichischer Gewerbe-Verein. Among the hundreds of ethnotographic items exhibited by the returned members, Josef Schmucker submitted “170 Stück Photographien von kunstgewerblichem Interesse aus Siam, China und Japan. Nach der Natur aufgenommen vom Photographen der Expedition Hrn. W. Burger.” For several years, Burger continued to benefit from the renown of his portfolio. He prepared a special deluxe album of ethnographic and topographical studies of Siam, China, and Japan, dedicated to Emperor Franz Josef. This important photographic album of the expedition, exhibited to the public at the Museum für Kunst und Industrie, remains in the possession of its institutional successor the Museum für angewandte Kunst. On December 6, 1872, Burger also presented an album of one hundred and fifty photographs of art objects from China and Japan at a meeting of the Photographic Society of Vienna. His photographs of East Asia also attracted considerable attention the following year at the Vienna World Exhibition. Through such professional and public events, Burger promoted his series and its artistic merits to his compatriot audience eager for materials from the returned expedition.

Yet Burger did not have a monopoly on photographs of Nagasaki. At the same time, Ueno Hikoma became the first professional Japanese photographer to have his photographs exhibited overseas. Scholars have known for some time that the Japanese government included the photographs of Ueno Hikoma and Yokoyama Matsusaburō 横山松三郎 (1838-1884) in their official display at the Vienna World Exhibition in 1873. However, Ueno’s photographs were almost certainly exhibited three years earlier at the niederösterreichischer Gewerbe-Verein. Among those to display their possessions, Herr Ottokar Pfisterer donated an album described in the catalogue as “Ein Album mit Photographien (Ansichten von Nagasaki und Umgebung), aufgenommen von einem japanischen Photographen” (An album with photographs (Views of Nagasaki and Environs), taken by a Japanese photographer). Not only
The paper is newly written after the International Conference on Research of Old Japanese Photographs at Nagasaki University.

Notes

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All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

1 For the official account of the expedition, see Karl von Scherzer, *Die k. u. k. österreichisch-ungarische Expedition nach Indien, China, Siam und Japan*, 1868-1871, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Julius Maier, 1873).


6 Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv, Handelsministerium, Präsident 136, no. 5168, cited with the permission of the Austrian National Library, Vienna.

7 Notes

8 Notes


11 Under the imperial audience in Tokyo, the expedition party presented the photograph of Nagasaki. However, the successful compilation of an extensive portfolio of photographs was only the product of a single diligent practitioner. In addition to Michael Moser’s valuable assistance, other prominent members of the expedition such as Karl von Scherzer and Eugen von Ransonnnet either actively supported or assisted his activities during the expedition. Assistance also could be sought onshore from local photographers and suppliers as the expedition travelled from port to port. In Nagasaki, Hikoma Ueno enticed some members of the party to his studio on the expedition’s outward leg and provided vital support for its recently recovered travel photographer on his homeward journey. If Nagasaki had been the historic site of numerous foreign importations to Japan, including photography, the tradition of cultural exchange continued to characterise the port well after the Austrian mission’s departure for South America.
22 Rosenberg, Wilhelm Burger, 28.
26 Catalog verschiedener Gegenstände, 12.
27 E. von Ransonnet, Reisebilder aus Ostasien, Siam, China und Japan (Graz: k. k. Universitäts-Buchdruckerei „Styria“, 1912), 119. An earlier source stated that the Austrian Ministry of Education sent “two complete collections of all the photographs, which have been published by the Museum of Art and Industry.” Anon. “The Austrian Expedition,” Overland China Mail XXV, no. 423 (23 February 1869): 27.