

## Edward Sylvester Morse (1838-1925), His Life and Times

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### PROJECT STATEMENT

My project is to re-assess the historical significance of Edward Sylvester Morse (1838-1925) in a new biography that pays greater critical attention to his life and career in America than before.

One of the best-known figures in US-Japan relations of the late nineteenth century, Morse has been the subject of much scholarly and popular work that has focused on his connection with Japan. Such discussions have typically counted as his achievements: his introduction of Western science to Japan; his collections of Japanese objects (now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA); his three influential books on Japan (*Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* [1886], *Catalogue of the Morse Collection of Japanese Pottery* [1901], and *Japan Day by Day* [1917]); and his role as a catalyst who inspired other well-known American collectors and scholars to turn their attention to Japan.

Yet in total Morse spent less than two and a half years in Japan (in 1877, 1878-1879, and 1882-1883), whereas in America he enjoyed a long and varied career as a zoologist, professor, author, lecturer, museum educator, and more. Notwithstanding the central importance of Japan to Morse's life, the tendency to exclude this large portion of his activities—his American career—has limited our ability to assess his significance accurately. By interpreting Morse's thoughts and actions in the American (as well as Japanese) cultural contexts of his time, I seek to restore his struggles and achievements to their original settings and arrive at a more unified and nuanced view of his contributions including, but not limited to, those related to Japan.

One immediate benefit of the expanded scope of inquiry—paying greater attention to Morse's American life—is an enlarged pool of sources. In addition to his own myriad publications, past Morse studies, and current scholarship in American and Japanese studies, by far the most crucial sources for my project are the voluminous records left by Morse and his contemporaries. As my CV shows, I have examined such records intermittently since the 1990s and full-time since 2015, and many of them are new to Morse scholarship: papers of his friends and associates not related to Japan; contemporary press coverage of Morse as a popular lecturer and museum curator/director; and archival records of the many institutions (museums, universities, and professional societies) with which he had connections. The new information helps us understand the motives behind many of Morse's actions and pronouncements, and thereby challenges and expands our current knowledge of the man, his times, and the cultural terrains he traversed in both America and Japan.

Most importantly, investigating the whole of Morse's life, not just that in Japan, provides deeper insights into the personal narrative of his life: he established himself as a zoologist in the emerging American scientific community despite his lack of pedigree, money, and college degree

(except for the later, honorary ones), yet permanent appointments in science eluded him, and he voiced his views in a variety of capacities, on innumerable topics, and through many media, often functioning as an intermediary between specialist and lay audiences. Despite his considerable celebrity in science, on Japan, and in the museum world, Morse was an outsider. He constantly hustled for income, recognition, and social standing, and this personal dynamic dictated many of his actions; it also profoundly affected how he sought to shape his legacy. In Morse there was often a disparity, a slippage, between his actions/motives and how he portrayed them to the world. His *Japan Day by Day* (1917), published forty years after his first visit to Japan, for example, was more a legacy-making platform than an actual record of his time in early Meiji Japan. Furthermore, the only Morse biography in English, written by Dorothy Wayman in 1942, perpetuated Morse's own narrative about himself: that he was an exceptionally—even uniquely—knowledgeable, sympathetic, and astute observer of Meiji Japan. (The 2002 Japanese-language biography by Michiko Nakanishi used more sources but largely adopted a similar framework.) Morse's story as presented by himself and his past biographers has exerted a profound influence on the historical narrative of US-Japan relations, Japanism, and Japanese art history. My portrayal of Morse aims to untangle this influence and thereby re-evaluate his complicated position in history.

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With an NEAC grant, I propose to visit the following two institutions (both for the first time) for archival research in spring 2019.

At the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, I plan to spend four days reading the papers of John Mead Gould, Morse's best friend from Portland, Maine, to whom Morse remained extraordinarily close throughout his life. Given the wealth of information I have gathered from Gould's voluminous papers at the Maine Historical Society, it is imperative that I also examine, at Duke, Gould's correspondence with Morse.

At the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, I hope to spend four days reading the papers of Benjamin Smith Lyman, who worked in Japan as chief geologist and mining engineer to the Meiji government from 1872 to 1879. Comparison of Morse to other Americans who were in Japan contemporaneously—other *oyatois*, tourists, missionaries—has been a vital part of this project, and comparing Lyman and Morse, both men of science but of different backgrounds, expertise, and post-Japan pronouncements about Japan, will add substantively to this area of my research. (By the time I make this trip, I will have examined relevant parts of the Lyman Family Papers at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.)

As of this writing, I have completed approximately 80% of archival research. Writing has begun, too, and my goal is to complete the first draft of a book manuscript in 2020. It is my hope that the book will be published well before 2025, the centennial anniversary of Morse's death, so that my work can make meaningful contributions to the re-assessment of Morse which will likely occur.

## BUDGET STATEMENT

Based on the best estimates available at the time of this writing (9/2018), I request the amount of **\$2,000** (maximum allowed for this grant) as *partial* support for the two research trips I propose. Itemized list of expected expenses is as follows:

### 1.

#### **David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University (Durham, NC):**

ITEM/S TO CONSULT: John Mead Gould Papers (RL.00469)

DURATION: 4 days

EXPECTED COST: Total \$1,420

Airfare (roundtrip Boston-Durham, NC): \$300

Ground transportation: \$50 (rental car) x 4 days = \$200

Lodging: \$160 x 5 nights = \$800

Meals: \$30 x 4 days = \$120

### 2.

#### **American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia, PA):**

ITEM/S TO CONSULT: Benjamin Smith Lyman Papers (Mss.B.L982)

DURATION: 4 days

EXPECTED COST: Total \$1,160

Airfare (roundtrip Boston-Philadelphia): \$200

Ground transportation: \$10 (SEPTA) x 4 days = \$40

Lodging: \$160 x 5 nights = \$800

Meals: \$30 x 4 days = \$120

Other sources of support I have received for this project are:

- 2017-2018 New England Regional Fellowship Consortium (NERFC) Fellowship: \$5,000
  - Harvard University Archives (Cambridge, MA)
  - Maine Historical Society (Portland, ME)
  - New Hampshire Historical Society (Concord, NH)
  - Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College (Hanover, NH)
- 2016-2017 Phillips Library Research Fellowship: \$800
  - Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum (Peabody, MA [temporary location])

In addition, I am preparing an application for:

- 2019-2020 NEH Public Scholar Program