

**Editor's Note:** Readers who are interested in this article might want to access three other Dan Métraux *EAA* features about Americans in Japan: "The Mikado, Guranto Shōgun, and the Rhapsody of US-Japanese Relations in the Early Meiji" (vol. 11, no. 3), "Jack London and the Yellow Peril" (vol. 14, no. 1), and "Serving in the Occupation: An Interview with Wilton Dillon" (vol. 17, no. 3).

# American Visitors To Meiji Japan

By Daniel A. Métraux



Woodblock print *Picture of People of the Five Nations: A Sunday*, by Yoshitora (ca. 1850–1880). From the collection of the Smithsonian Institution Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. Source: The MIT Visualizing Cultures, *Yokohama Boomtown* image gallery/American Party at <http://tinyurl.com/mwsa3xr>.

When Japan began its modernization process during the Meiji period (1868–1912), it turned to the West for advice and assistance. British, French, German, and other European influence on Japan's modernization process was immense, but Japan's ties with the United States were perhaps even deeper and more complex.<sup>1</sup> During the nineteenth century, the United States and Japan developed a more personal relationship, which, though tragically broken after Pearl Harbor, found renewal in the postwar American-dominated Occupation of Japan and endures to this day. The relationship with the United States began in earnest in 1853 and 1854 with the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry and his "black ships."

A key factor in the development of this special relationship was the constant stream of American visitors who visited Japan as early as the late 1860s. There were also many Japanese who visited, worked, and studied in the United States and contributed to the bonding of the two countries.<sup>2</sup> American politicians visiting Japan encouraged cordial relations between the two countries. American educators, including a number of influential women, had a very profound effect on the development of modern Japanese education. US writers and artists saw their work strongly influenced by Japanese culture, and at least one American army officer helped with Japanese military affairs in the early Meiji period.

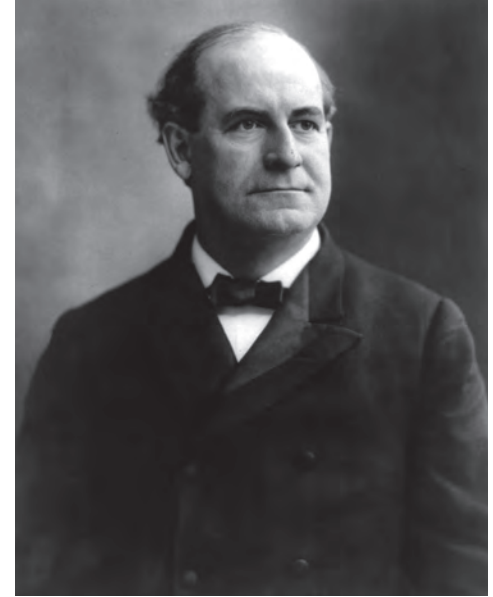
It is important to note that many of these male and female American visitors visualized what they saw in Japan in different ways. Politicians like William H. Seward and Ulysses S. Grant saw an endangered state struggling to make its way in the modern world. William Jennings Bryan saw a nation that needed Christianity as its foundation in order to survive. Missionary teachers like E. Warren Clark and William Elliot Griffis saw a people who, while not Christian, embodied many Christian virtues. Mary Eddy Kidder, one of several American women who as missionary teachers



Ulysses S. Grant portrait by Mathew P. Brady.  
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/q4h8osf>.



William H. Seward.  
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/mahxhs>.



William Jennings Bryan.  
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/n8u225k>.

*While these visitors brought attitudes with them that they used as filters for viewing an emerging Japan, the Japanese realized that each had unique contributions to offer for the betterment of Japan.*

had a profound effect on women's education in Japan, believed that for women's education to be successful, modern education must be combined with the Christian spirit. Henry Adams looked beyond the mystique of Japan and saw a nation struggling to survive, while his travel companion, John LaFarge, was enthralled with the high quality of Japanese art.

While these visitors brought attitudes with them that they used as filters for viewing an emerging Japan, the Japanese realized that each had unique contributions to offer for the betterment of Japan. Clark's and Griffis's students were willing to endure their proselytization of Christianity in order to get a

strong educational foundation in the natural sciences. Japanese government officials listened carefully to the advice of American politicians but only implemented those ideas that seemed relevant to them. Ultimately, the Japanese opened their minds to the West and listened to their visitors with care, but reconstructed their nation as they saw fit.

There were thousands of American and European visitors to Japan during the Meiji period who came to see what this unique civilization was like. The essay that follows is an account of the experiences and reactions of a small cross-section of American visitors. Each one had their own reasons for coming and different reactions to what they saw and experienced, but taken together, their reflections produce a fascinating panorama of American contributions to the modernization of Meiji Japan and of the strong bonds that developed between the two nations during the Meiji Era.

#### **American Politicians Who Visited Japan**

During the late 1800s, several American elder statesmen embarked on world tours. Such a trip took well over a year and followed a prescribed route starting in Europe; crossing the Mediterranean to the Holy Land; and then traveling down to India and Southeast Asia, on to China, and finally Japan. Others reversed the process by going to San Francisco by train from the US East Coast and then taking a steamer to Japan. Most traveled with other family members. Grant started his tour in Europe shortly after leaving the White House in 1877 and finally arrived in Japan for a three-month stay in late June 1879. Seward and Bryan went first to Japan, the former arriving there in September 1870 and staying for five weeks and the latter getting to Yokohama in October 1906 and staying in Japan for several weeks.

While Seward, Grant, and Bryan visited Japan as private citizens, they all discussed foreign policy issues with Japanese leaders and did what they could to advance ideas and policies that were consistent with American policy in East Asia, as well as beneficial to Japan. Although the United States had signed its share of unequal treaties with Japan in the 1850s and 1860s, throughout most of the Meiji period, it focused entirely on expanding commerce rather than acquiring overseas territories. It was a time of amiability in US-Japanese relations. There were no major issues dividing them, and

it was not long before American trade with Japan easily surpassed that with China. Seward, Grant, and even Bryan sought to reassure the Japanese of America's desire for a strong economic partnership based on equal respect. Seward and Grant personally denounced the unequal treaties and the coarse treatment of Japan by the major European powers.

When Seward, a former senator from New York and Secretary of State from 1861–1869, arrived in Japan in September 1870, he embarked on a lengthy tour of the country at a time when travel conditions in Japan remained quite primitive. The visit included encounters with the heads of Japan's new Meiji government, which were the first discussions between Japan's new leaders and a high-ranking citizen from the United States. Seward also had the high honor of a lengthy meeting with the Meiji emperor, the first meeting between an American official and the Mikado.

Seward was especially interested in the state of US-Japanese relations. He saw the potential for Japan's emergence as a world power, but he feared that, at the very start of the Meiji Era, it constituted a precarious situation. The Japanese government had opened itself to the West and declared its intentions to modernize, but in 1870, it sat alone and unprotected. Western warships in Japan's harbors could strike the country at any time and might if Japan did not hurry its modernization process. Seward told the Japanese that the United States was alone among the Western powers in that it had no imperialistic designs on Japan and that the US should become Japan's "tutor" to help it modernize. Seward decried the West's attacks on China's vaunted civilization and worried that Japan might face the same fate as China.

Seward thought that the Japanese could be protected by the fact that none of the European powers held a dominant position in Japan. Seward also worried that the future viability of Japan depended both on the nation's willingness to accept the entirety of European civilization and the West's decision to not forcefully seize control of Japan. Seward, however, felt that if Japan were to survive destruction at the hands of the West, it had to adopt as much of European civilization as possible. Any attempt to keep its traditional forms of civilization as the core of its society was doomed to fail. China had thus far refused to surrender much of its unique civilization and was headed for a major fall from grace. Japan had accepted some of the more superficial elements of the West—steam, the printing press, and the electric telegraph—but this was by no means far enough. Much of the core of Japanese civilization had to change as well. Seward was glad to see that the Japanese shared his view that a broadly well-educated citizenry was the key to success for a modernizing nation.<sup>3</sup>

Grant's 1879 visit is particularly significant because he persuaded Japan and China to negotiate a settlement concerning ownership of the Ryūkyū Islands (Okinawa) rather than going to war and because of the advice he gave Itō concerning the need to avoid foreign debt and how to frame Japan's Meiji Constitution. Japan's industrial and military growth impressed Grant, and he stressed that increased commercial trade between Japan and the United States would benefit both countries.

Bryan, already twice the Democratic Party nominee for President when he visited Japan in 1906 and a future Secretary of State under President Woodrow Wilson, saw a powerful Japan that had just won the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War. Bryan visited the key tourist sites and met with a number of leading officials. His meetings with ranking Japanese emphasized the need for close cooperation between Tokyo and Washington to maintain peace and stability in the Far East. Bryan was critical of Japan's seizure of Taiwan and its incursions into Korea, worrying that Japan was controlling Korea for its benefit at the expense of the Koreans. He regarded the Japanese as being a peaceful people and felt that its recent wars with China and Russia had been defensive in nature. Later, when Bryan became Secretary of State, his experiences in Japan led to efforts to strengthen ties between the two nations.

As a devout Christian, Bryan was especially interested in the progress his religion was making in Japan. He stated that Christianity was essential to the forward progress and modernization of any society and that Japan had to adopt Christianity in order to successfully modernize itself.

### **American Missionary Teachers Who**

### **Pioneered Western Education in Japan in the 1870s**

American missionary teachers played a critical role in the development of modern education in Japan. The Meiji government at its inception in 1868, realizing the importance that Western education would play in the creation of a modern Japan, authorized the hiring of several hundred teachers, many of them Americans. Several of these teachers were also lay missionaries who felt that Christianity held the key to human progress and must serve as the foundation for the spread of the progressive Westernization of the non-Western world. They believed that education and Christianity were intertwined and that one had to accompany the other. Japanese modernization ultimately was to be accomplished

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E. Warren Clark. Source: State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory, at <http://tinyurl.com/k39a9u9>.



William Griffis. Source: *Phoenixbonsai.com* at <http://tinyurl.com>.



Mary Eddy Kidder. Source: the Ferris school history page at <http://tinyurl.com/pz6vm7d>.

through the acceptance of Christianity, and the importation of Western civilization must have Christianity as its foundation. Christianity was the essence of Western life and was a key reason for the advanced state of Western technology. These teachers included William E. Griffis, his sister Margaret Clark Griffis, E. Warren Clark, Mary Eddy Kidder, and Dora Schoonmaker, all of whom worked in Japan in the early 1870s.

***American missionary teachers played a critical role in the development of modern education in Japan.***

Although their goal of converting many Japanese to Christianity met with little long-term success, the influence of these missionary teachers in such fields as education was immense. They taught many Japanese about Western life and through their letters, articles, and public lectures informed many Americans about Japan.

Clark and Griffis taught natural science at high schools and at the university level in Japan during the early 1870s and devoted much of their time to the propagation of Christianity. Their teaching played a critical role in the advent of modern natural science education in Japan. Together, they trained over a thousand young Japanese school-teachers and introduced the teaching of physics and chemistry at the institution that later became Tokyo University.

After their return to the United States, both Clark and Griffis lectured and wrote extensively about Japan, thus providing a broad American audience with an in-depth view of this emerging Asian nation. Clark embarked on several long lecture tours that included a slideshow of beautiful views of Japan, and his 1878 book, *Life and Adventure in Japan*, and many newspaper articles reached a wide audience. Griffis became the West's first modern Japanologist. His oft-republished book, *The Mikado's Empire* (1876), was one of the most widely read accounts of Japan until the twentieth century. During the time of the Russo-Japanese War, Clark and his fellow missionary teacher Sidney Gulick engaged in an extensive publicity campaign to rouse support for Japan that included Gulick's 1905 widely read anti-Russian book, *The White Peril in the Far East: An Interpretation of the Significance of the Russo-Japanese War*.

American women also played key roles in the development of Western education in Japan. Their primary contribution was the creation of several schools for women in the early 1870s that served as a key foundation for the advanced education of women in Japan. Margaret Clark Griffis was a teacher and later the principal at the first Japanese government school for girls. Located within the Imperial Palace, it later became famous as the Peeresses' School. Schoonmaker, a missionary who was sent to Japan by the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States, founded the Girls' Elementary School, which later became a part of what is now Aoyama Gakuin University.

Kidder, one of the first female American educators in Japan, was deeply interested in the status of women in early Meiji Japan. She criticized the conventional position of



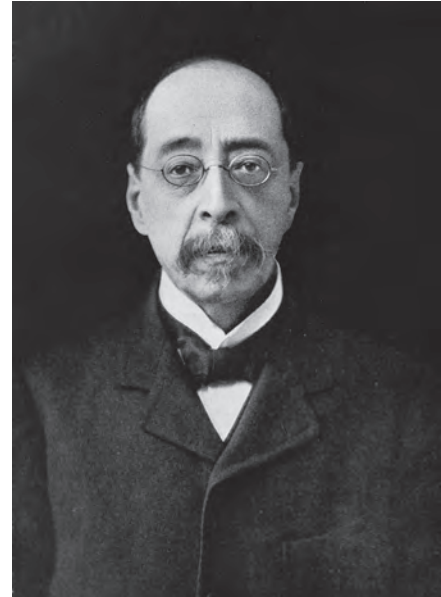
Jack London.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/lpvfvu>.



Henry Brooks Adams portrait by William Notman.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/n5rswkj>.



John LaFarge.

Source: *The World's Work*, July, 1906: <http://tinyurl.com/lxhk99e>.

women in Japanese society, stressing that women were often treated as secondary citizens in marriage and society as a whole. Kidder also felt that Christianity was an important foundation for the modernization of Japanese society because it stressed the need for both men and women to respect and teach each other in a humane manner. Husbands and wives should treat each other as equals, and women should be accorded the same respect as men throughout Japanese society. Kidder founded a school in Yokohama that offered an education for women based on Christian principles. Kidder's school later became Ferris University, which continues to flourish in Yokohama to this day.

Although Kidder, like many Victorian women, believed that a woman's proper place was at home raising children, she felt that women were entitled to an education and that it was through education that women as individuals could decide their own destinies. Kidder's educational curriculum combined the learning of English and Western culture with broad Christian principles. Kidder urged her students to become independent people, which was at the time a very novel notion in a society where fathers and husbands made important life decisions for women. Since the 1870s, many women who have become leaders in the development of women's education in Japan, especially those involved in higher education for women at the university level, were educated at Ferris.

### Henry Adams and John LaFarge's Search for Nirvana in Japan

During the latter years of the nineteenth century, both Europe and the United States were swept by a full-fledged craze for Japanese art and culture. This trend created a considerable market for things Japanese, including such arts and crafts as prints, pottery, bronzes, china, and kimonos, and can be compared to the intense fascination many young Americans have today with Japanese anime and manga. During the 1880s, there was also a shift in popular attitudes toward Japan that portrayed the country as an exotic paradise populated by genteel people with noble etiquette and serene beauty. Many Westerners felt that they would encounter a "Golden Land" in Japan that was free of many of the negatives that they viewed as afflicting the materialistic, corrupt West during the "Gilded Age." This fascination with Japan attracted visits by writers like Jack London and Henry Adams, and artists like John LaFarge.

Henry Adams's 1886 short visit to Japan with John LaFarge would fit this model. Adams had developed a highly idealistic view of Japan over the years; he and his late wife, Clover Adams, built a good collection of Japanese art. Adams believed a trip to Japan might be the perfect antidote for his grief following his wife's sudden suicide earlier that spring. When asked about why he chose Japan, Adams replied that his travels to the archipelago were his search for "nirvana." Adams's classic *The Education of Henry Adams* depicts the author's quest for a true understanding of the bewildering world around him. Adams lamented that his classical education had ill-prepared him to

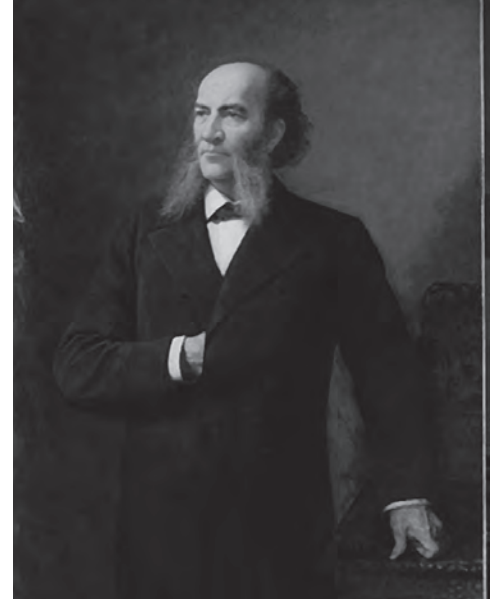
*During the 1880s, there was also a shift in popular attitudes toward Japan that portrayed the country as an exotic paradise populated by genteel people with noble etiquette and serene beauty.*



Ernest Francisco Fenollosa.  
Source: *Boston.com* at <http://tinyurl.com/m3qfjar>.



Detail from the 1888 portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner by John Singer Sargent.  
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/ppkabyu>.



Portrait of William H. Fogg by Eastman Johnson.  
Source: *Hoocher.com* at <http://tinyurl.com/lctjoyg>.



John LaFarge *Fish and Flowering Branch* Stained glass window, ca.1896  
Museum of Fine Arts (Boston). Source: <http://tinyurl.com/kdvjw9u>.

understand the great transformations taking place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since traditional education had failed him, Adams devoted his life to extensive self-education. He became a great world traveler, endeavoring to learn about other cultures while at the same disparaging what he perceived as the empty shell of American life during the Gilded Age.

What makes Adams' visit to Japan with LaFarge interesting is the monumental expectations of his idealized view of Japan, his quick realization that these preconceptions were little more than a fable, and his disappointment with the reality of a modernizing Japan. Adams's first impressions of Japan register a certain degree of disillusionment. It was not the nirvana that he had imagined, but a developing country just beginning its awakening to the West. Adams's disgust with the filth, odors, and chaos of Yokohama and Tokyo surely made him wonder whether "nirvana" was truly "out of season." Another major disappointment for Adams was Japanese women. When LaFarge hired two geisha to perform in their guest house in Nikko, Adams was not amused. He described them as "wooden, jerky, and mechanical."

Adams's viewpoints are in marked contrast to his travel companion LaFarge's, who somehow found the beautiful aspects of Japan that he had been seeking through his art. A century ago, LaFarge was easily the artist most responsible for introducing Japanese ideas and methodology into American art. Any visit to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts' collection of LaFarge's work today will allow the observer to see the great influence Japan had on his art, especially his watercolors and many examples of stained glass. LaFarge also induced many other American artists of his era to introduce Japanese elements into their art.

A number of American collectors brought Japanese art to the attention of the US public. Ernest Fenollosa was an American art historian, a professor at Tokyo Imperial University in the 1880s and avid collector of traditional Japanese works of art. Fenollosa later was influential in the founding of both the Tokyo School of Fine Arts and the Tokyo Imperial Museum, and his work led to the discovery and preservation of many art treasures throughout Japan. Fenollosa also developed his own collection of Japanese art, much of which is today housed at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Isabella Stewart Gardner and William Hayes Fogg were also avid collectors of Japanese art. Gardner and her wealthy husband traveled across Asia and Europe collecting art, which today is housed in the Gardner Museum in Boston. Fogg, a highly successful businessman who created the Japan

Trading Company with branches in Yokohama, Osaka, Nagasaki, and Shanghai, was very active in the silk trade and used part of his huge profits to collect Japanese and Asian art. Later, after his death, he willed his art collection to Harvard University and donated enough money to allow the construction of the William H. Fogg Art Museum on campus.

### Jeremiah Richard Wasson: Eccentric Military Officer

A number of American military men made their way to Japan early in the Meiji Era. Perhaps the most colorful was Jeremiah Richard Wasson, a native of Missouri and a graduate of West Point, where he studied engineering and later became known as an excellent military tactician. Wasson, who graduated first in his class, arrived in Japan to work in the American legation in Tokyo in 1873 after a tour of duty in Egypt. The Meiji government quickly hired him to teach Japanese modern surveying techniques in Hokkaidō. In 1874, Wasson trained and later led Japanese troops in the military expedition to Taiwan in conjunction with Japanese general Saigō Tsugumichi. A grateful Meiji government later bestowed the Order of the Rising Sun Award to Wasson for his Taiwan service. He was the first foreigner ever to win this honor.

### Epilogue

When I teach my college course on modern Japan, I always emphasize the special relationship that has existed between the US and Japan since the 1850s. It is the US that first opened Japan and played the key role in the Allied Occupation after World War II. I liken it to a marriage that has had moments of intense intimacy as well as violent quarrels. What is remarkable is the fact that the countries were able to renew their close relationship so quickly after a very bitter war in the Pacific.

This reconciliatory and special relationship that continues to this day may be partially explained by the strong American-Japanese cultural ties that developed in the late 1800s and continued well into the 1930s. The postwar influence of Japanese culture, including the appeal of Zen, literature, art, and poetry, as well as the huge influence of American institutions such as education in Japan, certainly played a key role in the renewal of what President Barack Obama referred to as “this special relationship” when meeting with Prime Minister Abe Shinzō in Tokyo on April 24, 2014. The Meiji era marked the birth of these long-standing cultural ties. ■

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### NOTES

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1. The Japanese government looked to the French for advice on how to build an army and a police force, to Great Britain for the navy, and Germany for their military and constitution after 1880.
2. A good example of a critically important personal relationship was that between President Theodore Roosevelt and Kaneko Kentaro, a graduate of the Harvard School of Law and a member of Japan's House of Peers. Baron Kaneko influenced Roosevelt's pro-Japanese stance during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905).
3. Seward's richly illustrated 1873 memoir, *William H. Seward's Travels Around the World*, a major bestseller in the United States, has a long chapter on Japan and is one of the first published accounts of life in Japan at the start of the Meiji Era.

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