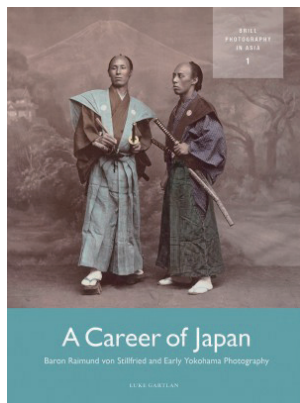


Book Review



Luke Gartlan:

A Career of Japan: Baron Raimund von Stillfried and Early Yokohama Photography

Brill Photography in Asia. Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016, 384 pp; 165 illus. ISBN: 978-90-04-28932-1; EUR 103,—

The initiation of a series of publications under the title ‘Photography in Asia’ by a publisher of the standing of Brill of Leiden comes as a welcome – one hesitates to say overdue – recognition of how the history of photography in the region has entered the mainstream of academic research, and with Luke Gartlan’s examination of the role of Baron Raimund von Stillfried (1839-

1911) in early Yokohama photography (for which he received the Josef Kreiner Hōsei University Award earlier this year) as its inaugural volume, this series promises much. Gartlan ably steers the reader through an impressive range of documentary and visual source material and renders sterling service as both guide and companion through the twists and turns of his subject’s career, presenting the fruits of his research and his supporting methodologies with a lightness of touch that provides a refreshing contrast to the stridency which often weighs down current scholarly writing on historical photography. Furthermore, as the main title *A Career of Japan* teasingly implies, this book is about a lot more than ‘photography in Asia’.

‘The East is a career’, wrote the British writer and politician Benjamin Disraeli in 1847, providing Edward W. Said with a forceful epigraph with which to open his influential 1978 thesis on Western attitudes to the East, *Orientalism*. At first sight, Gartlan appears to be extending the scope of Said’s thesis: as Said himself admitted, his analysis was limited to ‘the Anglo-French-American experience of the Arabs and Islam’ within the arena of a so-called ‘Near Orient’, thereby failing by his own admission to ‘do justice (...) to the important contributions to Orientalism of Germany, Italy, Russia, Spain, and Portugal’ while at the same time excluding the ‘Far Orient’ of India, Japan, China and ‘other sections of the Far East’ from the reckoning. As Gartlan points out, the Austrian Empire was conspicuous by its absence from Said’s exculpatory roll-call of the other nations which contributed to nineteenth-century Orientalism, and his examination of the career in Japan of the Austrian aristocrat, Baron Raimund von Stillfried-Ratenicz addresses these two omissions. Stillfried’s connection with Japan was a particularly rich one: firstly as a merchant’s clerk in Nagasaki in 1864 (the flouting – but never out-

right rejection – of the expectations of his caste was a frequent leitmotif in Stillfried's life until the prodigal Bohemian returned to Vienna for good in 1883), then as an occasional diplomat in Yokohama during 1865-69 (interrupted by two traumatic years on the other side of the Pacific as an officer in the service of the ill-fated Habsburg Archduke Maximilian during his short-lived rule as Emperor of Mexico) and most notably, between 1871 and his departure from Yokohama ten years later, as a successful commercial photographer whose beautifully produced albums of Japanese subjects won awards at international exhibitions and whose expertise earned him two brief stints of employment with the Japanese government as an *o-yatoi* in 1872 and 1878. Stillfried's 'brand' was so strong that even after his departure in 1881 two studios bearing the family name, one run by his elder brother Franz and the other by his former business partner Hermann Andersen, continued to operate in Yokohama until 1884.

This is excellent material on which to base a case study of how a career – in its literal sense as a source of employment and income – could be successfully forged in Japan in the first decade of the Meiji era by an enterprising Central European. However, we should not forget that Said chose to interpret Disraeli's epigrammatic career of the East rather as an interest in and engagement with the region and its inhabitants which, as he put it, 'bright young Westerners would find to be an all-consuming passion', not to mention the basis of a life-long vocation of explaining and interpreting an exoticised East to an audience back home. Said's cast of occidental Orientalists ranges from high-minded interpreters of Islamic culture – two prominent examples are the French philologist, historian and philosopher Ernest Renan and the British lexicographer and translator of the Arabian Nights (in expurgated form) Edward William Lane – to literary sex tourists – the French author Gustave Flaubert wins here by a head – and others, such as the British explorer, diplomat and translator of the Karma Sutra (unexpurgated), Sir Richard Burton, somewhere in between. Whether serious or salacious in intent, all were, in Said's view, equally guilty of creating an abiding image of an exoticised and eroticised Orient.

What are we to make of the career of Baron Raimund von Stillfried in this context? On the strength of ambition alone, Stillfried would score highly on the Orientalist charge sheet. In January 1872, less than six months after opening his studio, Stillfried provoked a scandal (another leitmotif in his Japanese career) by surreptitiously taking a portrait of the Emperor Meiji – the first occasion a photographic likeness was ever taken of a Japanese emperor – which he then attempted to market in Yokohama in the confident expectation that the extra-territoriality then enjoyed by foreign residents in Japan would protect him from the consequences of his illegal act. This visual hijacking of a carefully orchestrated exercise in imperial display was not appreciated by the Japanese authorities and the ensuing 'Mikado Photograph Affair', which only ended with the confiscation of the offending photograph, marked an inauspicious beginning to Stillfried's photographic career in Japan – indeed, with most of the foreign communi-

ty, and in particular the newly arrived Austro-Hungarian envoy, taking the side of the Japanese government, it had almost ended before it had properly begun. Surprisingly, however, Stillfried's act of *lèse-majesté* did not count against him when later that same year the Colonisation Agency (*Kaitakushi*) commissioned him to undertake a photographic tour of Hokkaidō. The project, completed in less than two months, resulted in an official portfolio documenting government efforts to develop the region, although Stillfried also took advantage of his assignment to create a parallel series of views and images of the indigenous Ainu inhabitants with which he augmented his commercial portfolio. Selections from both groups of photographs taken by Stillfried during his tour of Hokkaidō would later go on display at the Vienna World Exposition in 1873, while his commercial portfolio benefitted from a higher profile exposure elsewhere under the auspices of the Photographic Society of Vienna and received a 'medal for improvement' (*Fortschrittsmedaille*) from a jury of experts.

Gartlan skillfully chronicles how, during the remainder of the 1870s, Stillfried's photographic portfolio underwent a gradual transformation. While it retained its original title of *Views and Costumes of Japan*, its focus steadily shifted from the former, consisting predominately of monochrome landscapes of locations familiar to the long-term foreign resident, to the latter, with Stillfried's output increasingly characterised by exquisitely hand-coloured studies of carefully staged and costumed sitters within the controlled environment of the photographic studio conveying an image of an immutable and static Japan.

This change of emphasis reflected the shift in Stillfried's client base from long-term foreign residents in Japan to shorter-term visitors whose passage to Yokohama from New York and London was significantly eased after 1869 by the opening of the Transcontinental Railroad and the Suez Canal respectively. The growing number of tourists (for whom the term 'globetrotter' was disparagingly coined around this time by members of the established foreign community in Yokohama) came with preconceived notions of Japan as a pre-industrial idyll and often had little time in which to gratify them in Yokohama beyond a tour of the local curio shops and photographic studios. Stillfried quickly pandered to these expectations, purportedly depicting an 'authentic' Japan untouched by modernity in which 'samurai' could still be seen carrying the swords and sporting the traditional *chonmage* which in the real Japan had already been banned by imperial edict. Stillfried assiduously promoted his portfolio of costume studies not only among visiting globetrotters but further afield as well, displaying his work at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876 and undertaking in the following year a tour of lectures and exhibitions across the United States and Europe which culminated in 1878 with the exhibition of his photographs at the Exposition Universelle in Paris.

In addition to presenting an image of Japan for Western consumption through his photographs, Stillfried also embarked on a quasi-educational venture to present Japan to visitors to the 1873 Vienna Weltausstellung in the more tangible form of a Japanese

teahouse constructed near the Prater and staffed by three teahouse girls exported from Yokohama especially for the occasion. The venture fell victim to the Stock Market crash of that year and almost bankrupted Stillfried, but more significant are the undercurrents of violence and sexual exploitation which surrounded it. In a sworn deposition unearthed by Gartlan the Japanese carpenter who accompanied Stillfried's waitresses to Vienna attested to the frequent physical and verbal assaults they suffered from their employer, along with the withholding of promised wages and confinement in poor accommodation, while contemporary newspaper reports suggest that the three waitresses – 'by no means virgins' according to one Tokyo correspondent – were expected to provide more intimate services for those visitors to the teahouse prepared to pay for the privilege. Gartlan rightly contends that these instances of ill-treatment towards his female Japanese employees in Vienna cannot be divorced from the photographs of Japanese women which form such a significant part of Stillfried's oeuvre. Certainly, we can no longer look at such photographs, no matter how exquisitely staged and executed they may be, without this in mind.

Stillfried's career as an interpreter of Japan to his fellow countrymen reaches its culmination in his last recorded sighting as a *Japankenner* in March 1884 during the visit of the Emperor Franz Josef to a retrospective exhibition of Stillfried's work at the Museum für Kunst und Industrie in Vienna. A contemporary eyewitness report offers a telling vignette of Stillfried escorting the emperor through the display and deftly reprising the role of the congenial but deferential cicerone he had played for his more exalted foreign clients in Japan over a decade earlier:

Before a watercolor of Komagatake volcano in Yesso, the Kaiser remarked, pointing to the depicted inhabitants of the land: 'These appear to be half savage' ['Das scheinen Halbwilde zu sein'] – 'Your Majesty' responded Baron Stillfried, who is personally familiar with the poor conditions of these people, 'these are certainly savage,' ['das sind schon ganz Wilde'] whereupon the Kaiser laughed heartily. (p. 126)

However, as Gartlan eloquently points out, Stillfried's 'career of Japan' is far more complex than the one-sided engagement familiar to readers of Said's thesis.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of Gartlan's book is the challenge it presents to the image still prevalent among historians of photography of the expatriate photographer as somehow disconnected from their country residence. In the context of the history of photography in nineteenth-century Japan this is particularly important, since most scholarly study on the subject has accepted a binary interpretation of its development with foreign photographers on one side and Japanese practitioners on the other operating parallel to each other but seldom interacting except when the former served the latter as employers and/or teachers. As Gartlan convincingly shows, the relationship between Stillfried and the growing community of Japanese photographers in Yokoha-

ma and elsewhere was considerably more complex than that of master and pupil. This is best illustrated in the evolution of Usui Shūzaburō from one of Stillfried's assistants to perhaps his most serious rival in the increasingly crowded marketplace for images in mid-1870s Yokohama, and Gartlan's analysis of Usui's portfolio raises more intriguing questions about the authenticity of Yokohama photography.

Stillfried's relationship with the Meiji state, from his scandalous attempt to photograph the Meiji emperor on New Year's Day 1872 to two terms of employment as an *o-yatoi*, firstly in September 1872 as a documenter of the work of the *Kaitakushi* in Hokkaidō and then in November 1878 as 'Professor of Photography' at the newly established State Printing Bureau (*Shiheikyoku*, later *Insatsukyoku*) of the Ministry of Finance, provides even more striking instances of how, regardless of intention, the multi-faceted career he pursued in Japan could be of as much benefit to his chosen country of residence as to himself. The official commission Stillfried undertook in Hokkaidō in 1872 at the behest of the *Kaitakushi* played an important part not just in documenting the development of the region but also in promoting both at home and abroad the drive to integrate and consolidate the northern periphery of the Japanese empire, while his six-month term during 1878-79 as an instructor at the State Printing Bureau provided the Japanese government with a well-trained cadre of photographers who went on to extend photography's remit to the creation of Japanese self-identity by documenting a national canon of important cultural sites in Nara, Kyoto and elsewhere in Central Japan during the summer of 1879, and recording the Meiji emperor's tours of Central Honshū in 1880 and Northern Japan in 1881. Even Stillfried's ill-considered invasion of the sanctity the emperor could be turned to the advantage of the Meiji state and it is hardly a coincidence that on 25 January 1872, only a week after the Japanese authorities confiscated Stillfried's illegal portrait, the photographer Uchida Kuichi was summoned to the Imperial Palace to take the first official photograph (*goshin'ei shashin*) of the Meiji Emperor. In the course of successive sittings during 1872-73, Uchida refined the imperial likeness into an official portrait of the emperor in Western-style military uniform, creating a powerful image of Japanese modernity and a focus for national identity. One can only wonder how long it would have taken the Japanese government to actively commission a photographic *go-shin'ei* had Stillfried's unauthorised action not forced it to do so reactively.

Among the numerous insights offered by this remarkable book, perhaps the most illuminating is the realisation that a career *of* Japan could easily become a career *for* Japan.

Sebastian Dobson

*Independent scholar of the history of photography in
Japan and East Asia; co-author with Sven Saaler of
Under Eagle Eyes: Lithographs, Drawings & Photographs
from the Prussian Expedition to Japan, 1860-61 (Iudicium Verlag, 2011).*