

COMMODORE PERRY'S BLACK SHIPS

and the 150th Anniversary of U.S.–Japan Relations

The year 2003 marks the 150th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the United States and Japan. This special display illustrates the events that led to the first official encounter between the Japanese and the American people in 1853 and their subsequent interactions through the 1870s.

Until 1853 Japan and the United States, located on opposite shores of the vast Pacific Ocean, had almost no contact. By choice, Japan had maintained itself as a nation with closed borders for more than two hundred years before this time, restricting foreign contact to relations with Dutch and Chinese traders, who were allowed access only to Nagasaki on the island of Kyushu. In contrast, the United States, faced with fierce international competition in the Pacific, aggressively sought new markets in East Asia. Thus, the establishment of relations with Japan became a popular topic for discussion in U.S. political circles.

In 1853, as directed by President Millard Fillmore, Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Edo (now Tokyo) Bay, leading a squadron of four warships. The mysterious sight of their hulls, which had been blackened with tar to make them watertight, frightened the Japanese, who called them “black ships.”

Commodore Perry gave President Fillmore’s letter to the emperor to high officials of the shogun and sailed away. He returned in 1854 to conclude negotiations with Japan, signing the Kanagawa Treaty on March 31. This treaty opened two ports, Shimoda on the Izu peninsula and Hakodate on the island of Ezo (now Hokkaido). By 1859, the so-called Five Treaty Nations—England, France, The Netherlands, Russia, and the U.S.—had all become trade partners with Japan.

In 1856 President Franklin Pierce sent Townsend Harris to Japan as the first U.S. consul to that nation. Harris worked on a draft of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the Japanese and invited them to visit Washington, D.C., for the formal signing of the final treaty. In 1860 this series of diplomatic events came to a climax when Japanese ambassadors came to the United States to present the treaty for ratification by the Senate.

These contacts between U.S. and Japanese diplomats fostered mutual understanding and respect. As a result, people began traveling between the two nations for business, study, and pleasure. Japan entered international society. American and Japanese import and export businesses flourished.

This special display was made possible through a partnership with the Consulate General of Japan in San Francisco, the Japan Society of Northern California, and the Japanese Chamber of Commerce of Northern California. The display of objects from the museum’s collection is supported by Bank of America.

GUIDE TO THE DISPLAY

On display in this gallery are paintings, prints, and reproductions of images from books, newspapers, and magazines from the era when U.S.–Japanese relations were beginning. The images on Walls B1 and B2 illustrate the voyages of Commodore Matthew Perry’s squadron to Japan in 1853 and in 1854 as depicted by American artists aboard one of the ships in that squadron.

Wall C features some of the so-called Black Ship Scroll paintings, depictions of Americans by an unknown Japanese artist.

The images on Wall D, most of which are reproductions, illustrate the visit of the Japanese diplomats to Washington in 1860, which culminated in a reception in the East Room of the White House.

In display cases (E) in the center of the gallery are woodblock prints showing lively people—both Japanese and foreigners—pursuing their activities in the new international city of Yokohama during the 1860s and 1870s. Also displayed are three volumes of a compilation by Francis Hawks of Commodore Perry’s narratives of his squadron’s Japanese expeditions.

THE FIRST JAPANESE ENVOY TO THE UNITED STATES

In 1860 a Japanese diplomatic mission crossed the Pacific to visit Washington, D.C., on the USS *Powhatan*, which had been Commodore Perry's flagship during his 1854 expedition to Japan. The Japanese delegation included three ambassadors and their officials and aides, two interpreters and their assistants, three doctors, fifty-one servants and guards, and six cooks, along with fifty tons of baggage and a large sum of money to cover their expenses.

Arriving in San Francisco on March 29, the Japanese turned south to Panama, where they traveled cross country by steam train to the Caribbean coast. From there, they boarded another American warship, the USS *Roanoke*, for the final leg of their journey.

On May 14, 1860, they arrived in Washington, where they were ceremonially welcomed by President James Buchanan and other government officials. Though the parties knew little about each other, great hospitality and goodwill were shown by all concerned.

In retrospect we know that diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Japan were established during a short span of peace just before the outbreak of violence in both countries. The United States became increasingly focused on internal problems, soon falling into civil war. In Japan, opinion was divided into pro- and anti-Westernization factions, resulting in civil unrest, which in part brought about the end of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1867. The Meiji emperor came to power, inaugurating a period of rapid modernization.

BLACK SHIP SCROLL: A JAPANESE ACCOUNT OF COMMODORE PERRY'S EXPEDITION

This group of paintings—scenes from one of the so-called Black Ship Scrolls—is a visual account of Commodore Perry's expedition to Japan by an anonymous Japanese artist. The painter depicted the commodore's "black ships," as well as members of his crew engaging in day-to-day activities in the small town of Shimoda.

After Perry and the Japanese commissioners signed the Kanagawa Treaty on March 31, 1854, the commodore loosened the reins on his men because he knew they needed relaxation. The painter of this Black Ship Scroll followed the Americans wherever they went and scrutinized them, depicting them engaged in the activities the painter thought most interesting—such as shopping in the streets or fishing on the beach. The painter's casual attitude contrasts with that of artists aboard Perry's ships, such as the German-born William Heine, who had been appointed by the U.S. government to document the expedition and was directed in every detail of his work by the commodore himself.

There are several black ship handscrolls. One of the most famous belongs to the Japan Society of Northern California, and it is the one displayed here. Some time ago the scroll was cut into scenes, and each was mounted on a separate hanging scroll. In this wall case, twelve scenes are displayed.