

Japan's Early Ambassadors to San Francisco

The word *ambassador* has multiple meanings, from the highest-ranking diplomat representing a nation abroad to the unofficial representative of a certain profession or field of endeavor. In this exhibit, *ambassador* serves as a keyword through which we examine the earliest Japanese presence in San Francisco and our city's role as Japan's gateway to America.

The story of this display of artworks begins in 1860, when two ships—one Japanese and one American—carrying Japanese diplomats landed in San Francisco. This opened an era of Japanese immigration with San Francisco at the center, giving the city unique access to Japanese culture even as it grappled with growing racism. The display ends with the story of the 1927 Friendship Dolls, sent from Japan as “ambassadors of goodwill” in order to appeal to the hearts of the American people in the wake of legislation that had halted all further Japanese immigration to the United States.



A panoramic view of San Francisco looking west from Russian Hill, including the wharf where the Japanese ships docked. The top official on the *Kanrin Maru* brought this print home with him, giving Japan one of its first impressions of San Francisco. Photo courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

PART I

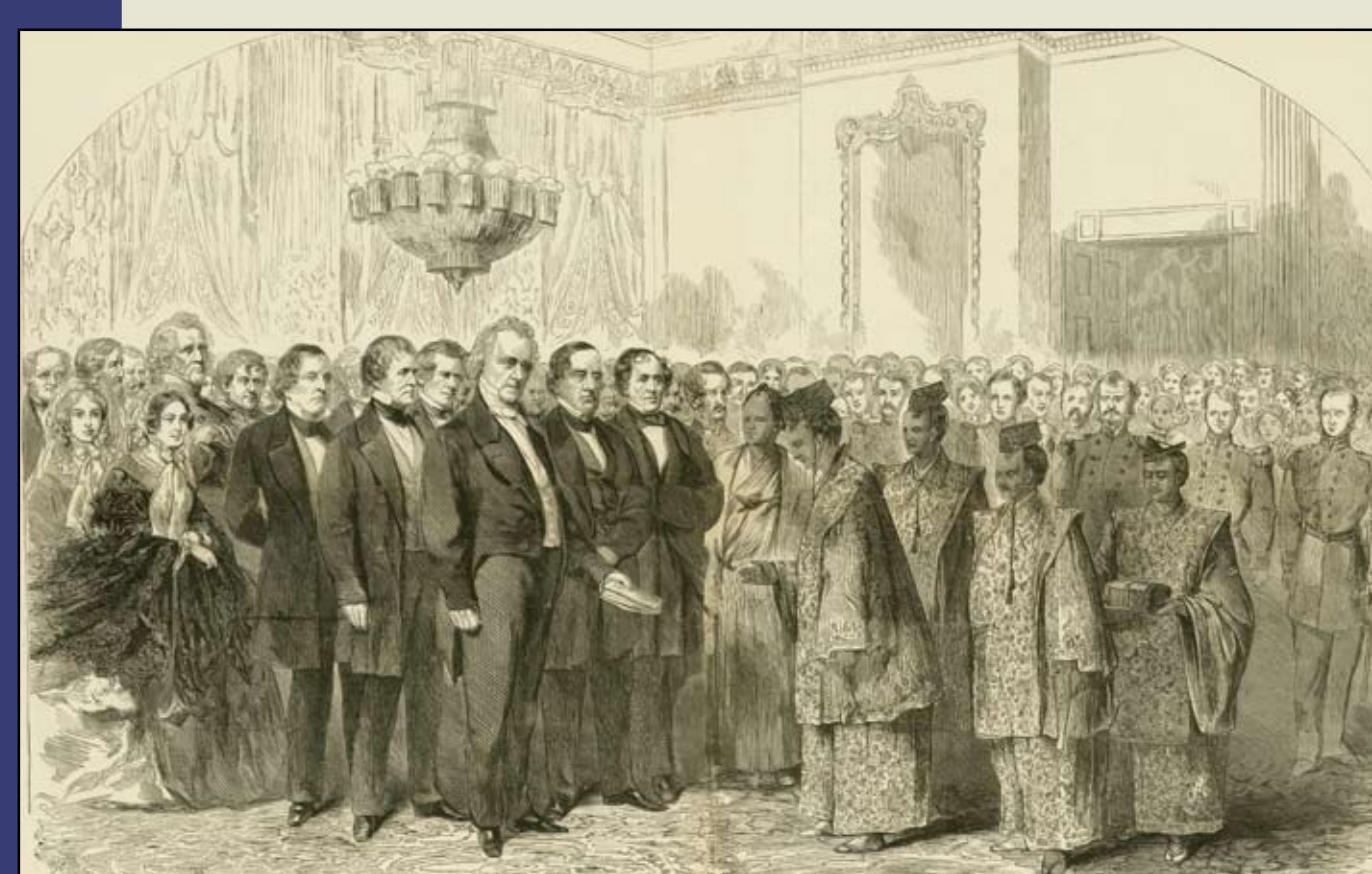
The Arrival of the *Kanrin Maru* and the First Japanese Embassy



“San Francisco streets.” Ink sketch from an 1860 diary (on view to your right) showing pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages along what may be Market Street.



“*Powhatan* [right] and *Kanrin Maru* [left] at Mare Island.” Ink sketch from an 1860 diary (on view to your right) depicting the two ships docked for repairs at the navy yard off Vallejo, north of San Francisco.



Three Japanese ambassadors presenting the ratified Harris Treaty papers to President James Buchanan, East Room of the White House, May 17, 1860. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, June 2, 1860. Photo courtesy of Tozenji Temple.

One hundred fifty years ago, the Japanese shogunate government broke its long self-imposed isolationism and sent its first official diplomatic delegation to a Western nation. This embassy was dispatched to America to deliver a ratified treaty finalized after U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry had forced Japan to open its ports to trade in 1854.

In 1860 the delegation arrived in San Francisco on two ships. The *Kanrin Maru*, the first official Japanese-owned vessel to cross the Pacific, stayed in the Bay Area close to two months before returning to Japan with news of the visit. Shortly after the *Kanrin Maru* had reached San Francisco, the U.S.S. *Powhatan* arrived with the embassy proper—three ambassadors and their entourage. Little more than a week later, they departed for Washington, D.C., where they would meet President James Buchanan. They then sailed east, around the world and back to Japan.

The Japanese emissaries received a warm welcome from San Franciscans, who quickly grasped the groundbreaking nature of the visit. Our knowledge of their stay comes mostly from newspaper accounts and from travelogues written by passengers on the two ships. The featured work in this section is the handwritten journal of one of the samurai retainers on the *Powhatan*; this diary contains ink-painted sketches of San Francisco in 1860.

In the years to follow, other Japanese diplomatic and business delegations traveled to San Francisco—most notably the Iwakura Mission (1872)—reinforcing the city's connections with Japan. Not surprisingly, San Francisco became the most popular destination for Japanese traveling to the U.S. in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Japanese Cultural Ambassadors in San Francisco

Following the 1860 mission, pictures of Western people and places took on an important role in Japanese popular culture. For those curious about the West, colorful woodblock prints offered easy access to information about manners and customs, including lessons—sometimes fanciful—on foreign languages, clothing styles, and business etiquette. As the Japanese government gradually eased restrictions on travel, printed maps and illustrated travel guides became available; these contained detailed practical advice for those planning a journey abroad.

After 1884 thousands of passports were issued for Japanese travelers bound for the United States. San Francisco became the gateway not only for diplomats and tourists but also for countless Japanese laborers and student workers seeking economic opportunities. Though many planned to save money abroad and then return to Japan, in fact thousands of Japanese immigrants ended up settling on America's West Coast.

Making one's way in the U.S. was not always easy. The darkly comic *Four Immigrants Manga*, arguably the first graphic novel, documents the hardships experienced by Japanese immigrants in San Francisco in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Its author, Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama (1885–1951), arrived in the city in 1904 and worked part time as a live-in domestic servant, or “schoolboy,” while taking classes in life drawing and oil painting. A gifted satirist Kiyama was able to capture the challenges faced by immigrants far from home.

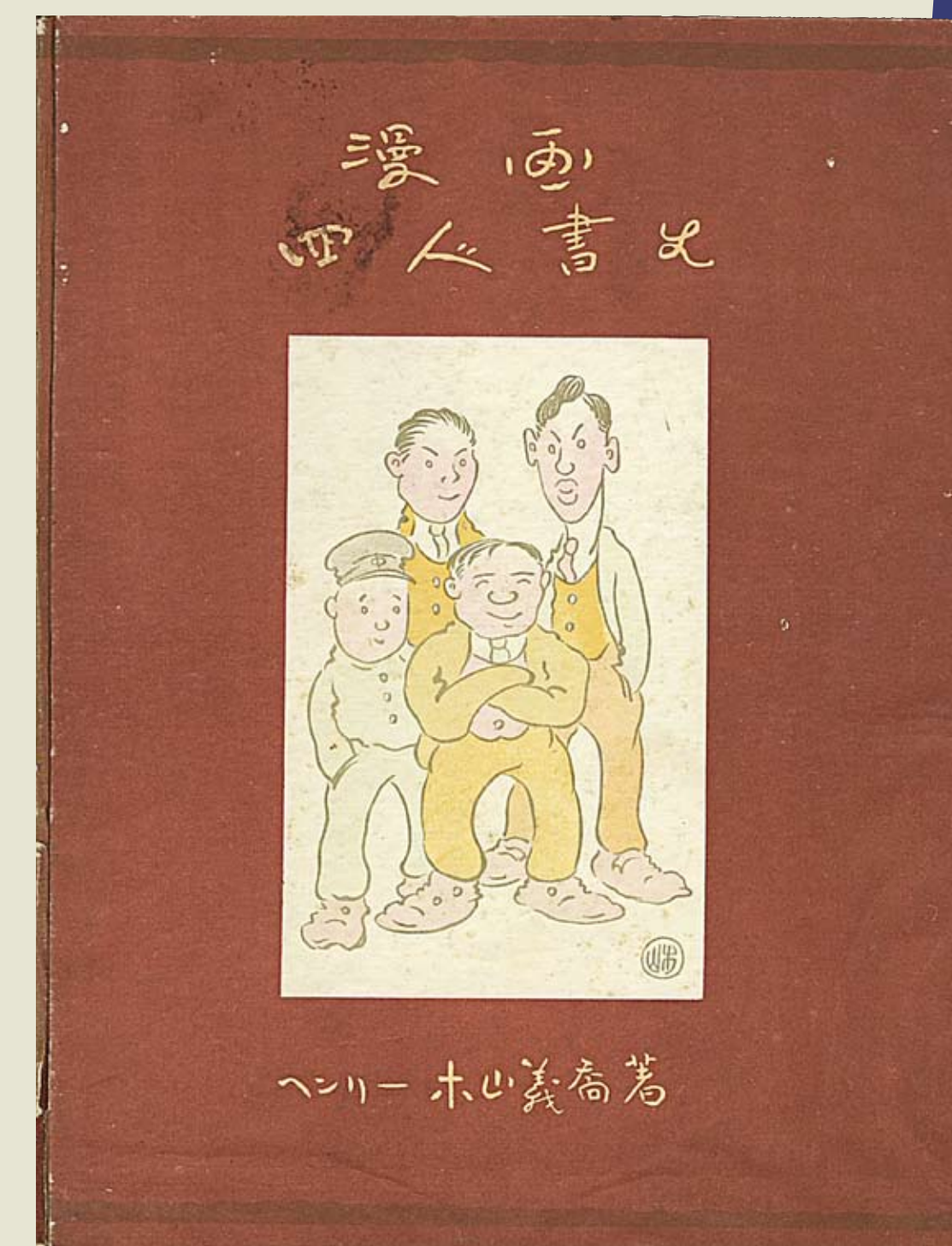
Like Kiyama, who won acclaim as an oil painter, many Japanese came to San Francisco seeking opportunities in the arts. Often they had to find creative ways to get by based on the skills, talent, and knowledge they had acquired in Japan. Paradoxically, many immigrants found work in San Francisco because a fashion for “things Japanese” prevailed in the city, even at a time of rising discrimination against Asian residents.

In May 1924, Congress passed legislation effectively banning further immigration to the U.S. from Japan. That fall the highlight of the very first production of *Madama Butterfly* by the newly formed San Francisco Opera was, ironically, a set design by the immigrant artist Chiura Obata (1885–1975):

The audience was won before a single note was sung; for the Japanese artist, C. Obata gave us such a vista of the bay of Nagasaki . . . as will remain in the memory of all who saw it as a masterpiece of stage scenery. . . . Too much can hardly be said in praise of the mise en scene [set design]. Someone who knows and loves Japan has watched over the production. We in San Francisco are nearer to Japan than are the opera producers of New York and Chicago, It is only right that we should set them an example. In “Madame Butterfly” I think we may justly claim to have done so.

— *The San Francisco Examiner*, September 27, 1924

While San Francisco was seen to benefit from the cultural contributions of its Japanese American population and its proximity to Asia, the immigrants' situation was more complex. Painting traditional Japanese themes for import stores, designing “exotic” decorations for public spaces, or fashioning peaceful Japanese gardens, they may have reinforced stereotypes about their homeland. Many had to straddle two worlds in their creative work, balancing lessons from the West with artistic issues relevant in Japan. Competing with non-Asian residents in public and civic spheres of activity, they participated in a discourse on what it meant to be Japanese in America.



Cover of *The Four Immigrants Manga*, by Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama, published in San Francisco, 1931. Courtesy of Frederik L. Schodt.



Life-drawing class at the California School of Design, approx. 1910. At least two Japanese students appear in the front row. Photo by Gabriel Moulin courtesy of the San Francisco Art Institute.



Business card (approx. 1890–1895) of Makoto Hagiwara prior to his becoming manager of the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park. Courtesy of the Hagiwara family.



Cho Cho San's bedroom, from the set design by Chiura Obata for the San Francisco Opera's first production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, 1924. Courtesy of Kimi Kodani Hill.



Postcard of Gump's department store, San Francisco, including ceiling mural and door panels painted by Chiura Obata, approx. 1915. Courtesy of Kimi Kodani Hill.