

delight



WORKING IN JAPAN SOON AFTER IT OPENED UP TO THE WORLD IN THE MID NINETEENTH CENTURY, PHOTOGRAPHER FELICE BEATO RECORDED THE HUMANITY AND EXOTICISM OF AN EXTRAORDINARY COUNTRY.

The nineteenth-century photographer Felice Beato was a direct predecessor of the modern photojournalist. Born in Venice (he subsequently assumed British citizenship), he began recording landscapes and archaeological remains in Greece and the Middle East, but went on to become one of the first photographers to specialize in war reporting, documenting the Crimean War, the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny, the Chinese Opium War and America's early military incursions into Korea. In 1862 he arrived in Japan, following Commodore Perry's portentous landing eight years earlier, showing once again a prodigious talent for being in the right place at or soon after an important historical moment.

Beato settled in Yokohama and worked in Japan until 1877, learning far more about the country and its culture than most casual visitors. His portraits, genre studies and landscapes created a unique chronicle of Japan at the beginnings of formal acceptance of Westerners. At that time, foreigners were only gradually able to venture into the interior (movement was restricted to 24 miles inland from treaty ports and trading centres of Yokohama, Tokyo and Nagasaki), but Japan's long isolation was finally at an end.

Despite the growing presence of industry, Beato's pictures convey an impression of extraordinary refinement and natural beauty. Many of his landscape photographs were taken along the ancient route of the Tokaido, the road from Edo (Tokyo) to Kyoto originally travelled by nobles on their way to court, which by the mid nineteenth century had become an important picturesque route, regularly depicted in woodblock prints by Hiroshige and Hokusai.

Beato's portraits are also remarkable. Delicately hand-tinted prints show Japanese life in all its diversity, spectacle and vitality – nuns, geishas, samurai, Sumo wrestlers, street performers, umbrella sellers, lantern makers, silk weavers, florists, fishermen and feudal lords are all captured in his enquiring gaze. As part of the Japan 2001 arts festival, an exhibition of Beato's work together with two other major Japanese photographers is currently on show at London's Victoria and Albert Museum. It presents a rare opportunity to savour some moving and memorable images. CATHERINE SLESSOR

Out of Japan is on show at the Canon Photographic Gallery in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, until 3 February 2002. Further details tel: +44 (0)20 7942 2000; www.vam.ac.uk.