

Discovery, Preservation and Access to the Past
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Introduction

I'll be sharing a project with you that demonstrates three things:

- (1) how tracing the origin and the history of donated rare artifacts can add value and meaning to library collections,
- (2) how technology can restore and preserve fragile items, and
- (3) how projects like this can create new research and outreach opportunities.

This particular project involved century old glass magic lantern slides. When I first assumed my UH librarian position, I inherited nearly 1,000 glass slides with very little information about them.

The definition of a magic lantern slide provided by the Society of American Archivists (SAA) states that these are “transparent images on glass, approximately 3.5 x 4 inches, that are intended to be viewed by projection.” “Lantern slides may have images that are hand-painted, printed or photographed.”

These are lantern slide projectors that I found on the web, but I've only seen projected images on YouTube myself. Here are some illustrations that show how they were used in 18th century Europe, and I found one image in our collections to help us visualize how these were used in Meiji period Japan.

A brief history of lantern slides in Europe and North America

As early as the 1600s, magic lantern slides were very popular in the western world and used to entertain and educate. While an element of entertainment remained through the early 20th century, lantern slides evolved into mostly an educational tool. In its day, magic lantern slides were the newest visual technology. It's said that millions of these slides were manufactured through early 1900s but they eventually were replaced by another “new” technology - cinema.

Interest about this medium in the western world remains alive as you see societies and interest groups like these are very active. On the contrary, very little attention has been paid to Japanese lantern slides and information about them is scarce.

In Japan

Magic lantern slides were thought to have been introduced through Holland in the mid 18th century, although this is not 100% certain. Soon after the introduction, Japanese versions were developed and known in the public entertainment media as “utsushi-e” during the late Edo period (1603-1867). The educational use began during the early Meiji period (1868-1912), when magic

lantern slides were re-introduced from the United States in 1874. The Ministry of Education commissioned two photographers to create Japanese versions of these slides to promote and educate students and the public. Made-in-Japan lantern slides and slide projectors were manufactured during this period.

Lantern slides peaked in Japan in the late Meiji period. During the 10 years before and after the Sino-Japan (1894-1895) and Russo-Japan (1904-1905) Wars, they were especially popular with the major news media. Although as in the Western world, the popularity of lantern slides was eventually replaced by cinema, they continued to be used at schools as visual media and for pre-war propaganda. Even after World War II, the U.S. occupation forces utilized them for re-education purposes through about 1955. Personally I have not seen these US military “re-educational” lantern slides. If you know where these slides were deposited and preserved, I’d appreciate the information.

Scanning & Database Creation

Because there was little information about our lantern slides and their physical condition was deteriorated, I designed a project to digitize them and do research about them concurrently. Some slides bear handwritten inscriptions such as titles, numbers, notes, and some retain the Japanese manufacturer’s identification on the frames. Therefore, both the slide images and slide frames were digitized to minimize the handling of these fragile objects. My young student assistant helped me see & read tiny inscriptions on the frames, almost like a drug company's disclaimer.

You need a scanner with a transparency unit to digitize only the slide images, but the slide frames can be captured with a regular scanner set. Therefore, we scanned the slides twice in two different configurations. As often happens with digitization, detailed images emerged that you can't see with the naked eye. We then entered the information into a database with an image file number.

Themes & Categories

As the project progressed, two distinct categories were identified. The slides were either:

1. Commercially manufactured slides containing both illustrations & photographs, or,
2. Privately created slides containing photos of books and plates, handwritten hymns and gospels, and private photos of people and events.

The themes of the commercially manufactured slides appear to be the teaching of morality and discipline at schools and PR for the general public. There are images of sentimental stories, stories about loyalty, saving money, hard work, having respect for elders, selected Japanese historical events, historical figures, landmarks & places of interest, natural disasters, and photos of disadvantaged people. Political caricatures and propaganda are also common. I was uncertain about the privately created slides until the origin of the slides was unraveled later.

History Detectives: Tracing the Origin

A breakthrough came in 2007. While I was researching records of gifts to the Library donated in the 1960s, I discovered letters describing “glass slides.” The letter indicated that the slides were donated to the Gregg Sinclair Library and the East West Center in 1965. An acknowledgment letter listed the *4x3¼" glass slides* along with the books. It also indicated that a slide projector came with them but one can assume that it was junked because its condition was described as *"badly rusted and may not be workable."* The March 1965 letter indicates that although the Japanese books went to the East West Center Library and English books to the Main Library (Sinclair Library at that time), no reference was made regarding the location of the lantern slides. Hamilton Library was built early 1970s and I can only guess that the slides were transferred when the Asian collections of the East-West Center were integrated into the Hamilton Library.

The acknowledgment letter was sent to “*Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Y. Okumura.*” It was verified that Clarence Okumura was a grandchild of a well known Hawaii Japanese American community leader, Rev. Takie Okumura.

Brief Information on Takie Okumura

Takie Okumura was born in Kochi in 1865. After graduating from a Seminary school, Okumura came to Honolulu in 1894. He later became a significant figure in Hawaii for his education efforts and work as a Christian and political leader. Those privately created slides are records of Okumura’s beliefs and activities in Hawaii, the friends/acquaintances he associated with, and his pastoral trips and conventions. He also authored many books, in which he mentioned different events and instances with photos. We can now identify many of those events, descriptions and the photos in the lantern slides.

Outreach

Once new historical materials such as these are uncovered, it's important to make them visible to researchers and the public. To help in this regard, after the digitization project, I curated a Library exhibit, “Takie Okumura’s Magic Lantern Slides,” to provide exposure to the UH research community. It drew many students from different disciplines. The exhibit and digitization also connected me with the local community and researchers involved with Takie Okumura and the Americanization movement in Hawaii. Resurrecting these forgotten images has created new opportunities for me to assist the research community in Hawaii but also different parts of the world.

Cloud Technology & Crowd Sourced

At first, I didn't have a concrete idea as to how to present the slide images on the Web. After several years passed, the Library adopted a shareware platform called “Street Print” for image collections. This “cloud” technology platform made our work much easier and gave us more options

for connecting with others. For example, thanks to the comment feature, a scholar in Japan identified and left the names for some of Okumura's associates in the photographs, which I had no information or ways to uncover. I'm hoping more comments will be generated to help fill in more of the blanks and create a community to share information.

What's Next?

Unlike in the west, I couldn't find any organized or consorted research and preservation efforts in Japan. I assume there are many more lantern slides hidden away at libraries, museums, and with individuals' possessions.

Interestingly, along the way, I found that the largest lantern slide collections on Meiji Japan are in this country at the Edward Morse Collection at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts. To my delight, the physical condition of their slides is the most pristine that I have ever seen. I assume that Morse purchased all available new lantern slides when he was in Japan, brought them back and deposited at the Peabody Essex Museum. They've never been used ever since. Unfortunately, the Peabody Essex Museum doesn't seem to be much interested in these collections yet. Since I visited there, a Japanese librarian left the museum and the position was never filled.

Linking to Other Relevant Resources for Research and Studies

Over time, more primary resources are becoming available from Japan's National Diet Library's Digital Library from the Meiji Era Site. These primary materials are invaluable resources because lantern slides were originally associated with other written materials. For example, the stories and illustrations in this title are very similar to the images among Okumura's slides (show some samples and briefly explain.) Also, this material describes in detail about Nobi Earthquake (1891) and its victims (orphans).

Finding Scholarly articles through New Japanese Databases

Moreover, a newly available database also helps us see the historical articles relating to lantern slides from the Meiji period to the present. The number of articles seems to correspond to the popularity of lantern slides at different times. The growing number of scholarly articles is now available at institutional depositories as well. Linking online primary resources and open access materials to images may stimulate new discoveries.

Digitizing these fragile artifacts and uncovering the history have resurrected the century-old images to the present and providing access through a cloud technology on the web has created a new virtual community while helping preserve an almost forgotten cultural artifact.