Among those who played a role in introducing early photography to Japan was Nakahama Manjiro (also known as John Manjiro), a fisherman from Utsuwa bay (now Tosashimizu on the southwest tip of Shikoku). Manjiro’s first contacts with the West date to 1841 when, following his shipwreck on the far-flung Pacific island of Torishima, he was rescued by an American whaler. Dubbed by the crew John Mung, Manjiro worked his passage to Honolulu and then on to the United States. It was during his time in America that Manjiro turned his on-board learning into a more formal study of English and a wide range of new subjects.

He became a proficient navigator and much respected cultural interpreter, before cautiously returning to Japan in 1853 (technically, his unauthorised emigration remained illegal). In 1855, following his promotion to a senior rank of samurai, Manjiro was recommended as a possible interpreter for the Shogun’s trade negotiations with the US Naval officer Commodore Matthew Perry. However, it appears that the Tokugawa Shogunate objected to his presence in the talks, and eventually his skills were never put to use.

Mastering the Ambrotypes

In 1850, Nakahama Manjiro was posted with the first official overseas delegation to visit the United States. He sailed aboard the Kanrin Maru, the famous steam-propelled warship constructed in a Dutch shipyard and delivered to the Shogun government in 1851, and the first modern Japanese ship to cross the Pacific ocean.

Some time after the delegation made landfall in San Francisco, Manjiro bought a camera, with which he soon mastered the process of Ambrotypes photography. (The major discovery in England in 1851 that collodion was a commercial process obtained by Manjiro in the portrait studios of the US; and the Dutch Studies’ process learned by Ueno Hikoma and his followers in their own country. These two techniques converge in Edo in 1861.) The wet plate technique, first invented in England in 1851, arrived in Edo having circumvented the globe east- and westwards.

Figure 3 is of the samurai and interpreter of Dutch and English, Moriyama Einosuke. Moriyama was also the translator of a second edition of A Short Explanation of the Camera, a technical treatise on photography transmitted to posterity as part of the Shimazu Family papers (now located in Tokyo University and designated a national treasure). In 1854, during Commodore Perry’s second visit to Japan, Moriyama - who would eventually sign the formal reply to the American President - took part in the negotiations between both sides. Moriyama took the opportunity to report to Shimazu Narianaka whatever daguerreotype techniques he could glean from the American visitors. (Shimazu Narianaka was a Japanese feudal lord (daimyo) of the Edo period, the 28th in the line of Shimazu clan lords of the Satsuma domain. Renowned for his interest in Western learning and technology, he also researched the daguerreotype. This can be surmised from ‘Daguerreotypes: a new method of picture-taking’ (Shōzō shingi dengeki), which is appended to the rest of his report now included with the Shimazu Family Papers.)

Among other figures featured in the ‘photographic techniques’ papers of the Shimazu family are Matsuki Kooan (fig. 4) from the Satsuma domain. Almost without exception, whenever this technique of using black resin is manifest on Japanese photographs of this period, it can be read as the decisive tell-tale of an ambrotype portrait taken by Manjiro.

Chemistry experiments

During the same period of Manjiro’s activities in Edo, Ueno Hikoma, who would later open a photographic studio in Nagasaki in 1862, and his co-worker Horie Kawaijiro staged a presentation in the Edo residence of Lord Fujidai, one of Japan’s leading feudal lords (daimyo of Tsu-han, now Mie Prefecture of Tsu City). They demonstrated the technique of wet plate photography which they had learned from the Swiss photographer P. Rossier after his arrival in Nagasaki in late 1859. Not long previously, Ueno and Moriya had conducted chemist experiments under the guidance of Doctor J. Pompe van Meerdervoort, a surgeon from the Netherlands, at Nagasaki’s Naval Academy. The pair’s technical mastery now assured, they arrived in Edo with wet plate photographic cameras purchased from the Dutch merchant A. Baedeker. From a letter dated 27th July 1861, written by the scientist Utagawa Kyosai, describing photographic demonstrations that he had witnessed at Lord Fujidai’s residence one month earlier, it is evident that Ueno Hikoma and Horie had arrived in Edo in June of the same year.

Most notable among the results of Ueno Hikoma’s activities in Edo is an ambrottype portrait attributed to Horie Kawaijiro (now located in the Department of Art, Nihon University), which shows Ueno in Fujidai’s residence with medicine bottles in front of him. This photograph, the glass side of which has been coated with a black resin, is the only one of its type that can be associated with Ueno. Ueno Hikoma remained in Edo from June, until 20 October 1861, when he followed Fujidai back to his domain.

Convergence of techniques

Figure 4 is a portrait of the samurai Sadamichi. It is thought that Manjiro took the picture in July of 1861 at the Egawa mansion in Asada, Edo, and that subsequently he left Edo January 1862. During this period, supposing that Manjiro and Hikoma had exchanged the technology that each had acquired in the previous year, then the same period could also have provided the opportunity to demonstrate the technique of adding black resin. Evidently, wet plate photography in Japan emerged from two directions: a commercial process obtained by Manjiro in the portrait studios of the US; and the Dutch Studies’ process learned by Ueno Hikoma and his followers in their own country. These two techniques converge in Edo in 1861.

Some of the images that he produced are now owned by the Egawa Archive in Shikoku. Via quite a different legacy, the same archive also safeguards a collection of settei-de-viste assembled by Shibata Hyuga, a leading diplomat in the Tokugawa Shogunate, during a separate diplomatic mission to Europe. This collection includes a photograph of Shibata and the rest of the Japanese delegation during their visit to the Netherlands in 1852-1853.

Moreover will be said at the end of this article about the voyage to Holland, for it yields useful comparative insights into Manjiro’s activities in America and Japan.

What follows is a brief examination of a series of photographs on albumen paper and two ambrotypes photographs (figs. 1 and 5) which portray men typical of a class of doctors and translators who, taking the Dutch Studies (Rangaku) as their point of departure, pioneered the study of photographic techniques in Japan:

From records of formal engagements contained in the administration transcripts of the Egawa Daikan (the official in charge of the territory immediately surrounding the Shogun at Edo), we know that the photograph of the samurai Ozawa (fig. 3) was taken on the 1st September, 1860 in the Egawa mansion in Edo, and it is clear that Manjiro took the picture when he was still employed by and living in the grounds of the Egawa Daikan.

Records indicate that Manjiro stayed at the Egawa mansion itself for almost a fortnight in September 1860 during which time he was continually obliged to take photographs of a stream of visitors. Among the subjects were Matsudaira Oki (chief of the Shogun’s escort) and other important members of the military government who called at the Egawa residence.

Interestingly, other records by these various guests also show that prior to his sojourn at the mansion - during the period in which he had already returned with the Kanrin Maru - news had already spread that Manjiro was in Edo producing photographs every day.

On the protective paper enveloping the portrait of Ozawa is a note: “In the first year of the Manen reign period (1860), on the 16th day of the seventh month (1 September) at the seventh hour (i.e. 16:00), the photographer accepted a commission to take this photograph.” The evident techniques for this photograph bear all the hallmarks of what Manjiro’s eldest son Nakahama Toichiro was later to recall, namely, that his father produced the daguerreotype by using a black backing cloth or by spreading a black resin on the glass plate, either of which processes corresponded to practices then current in Europe and America.

By the end of the Edo period, Ambrotypes made in Japan were numerous. Most Japanese ambrotypes were produced by putting a black cloth or black paper between the glass photograph and the photographic case. An alternative technique was to paint Japan lacquer (a natural lacquer collected from the Urushi tree) on the glass side of the image [the non-emulsion side] which turns it a tea-brown colour yet also increases the reflectivity of the total contrast. (Un-backed or un-laquered, the fully developed Ambrotype image resembles a negative on glass. This image can be displayed against a dark background at which point the image converts to positive, since the light-sensitised silver on its surface - dark areas - reflect light and appear pale, while the un-sensitised areas allow the dark background to show through).

The reverse - non-emulsified - face of the Ozawa photograph, smeared as - is with a black resin resembling asphalt, is unlike any other example of the same period from either Edo or Yokohama (a centre for Japan’s early photographic studios).

Almost without exception, whenever this technique of using black resin is manifest on Japanese photographs of this period, it can be read as the decisive tell-tale of an ambrotype portrait taken by Manjiro.
Figure 2: Photograph on albumen paper of the samurai Sadamichi. Taken by Manjiro in July of 1861.

Figure 3: Ambrotype portrait of the samurai and interpreter Moriyama Einosuke.

Figure 4: Photograph on albumen paper of Matsuki Kooan from the Satsuma domain. Kooan was a member of the 1862 imperial mission to Europe.

Figure 5: Photograph on albumen paper of Kawasaki Dōmin, a doctor from the Saga domain and member of the 1862 imperial mission to Europe.

Figure 6: During the 1862 imperial mission to Europe, Kawasaki and Kooan visited the photographic studios of Robert Severin in The Hague.