

## Chapter XII

# Simian Amphibians: The Mermaid Trade in Early Modern Japan

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In the mid-nineteenth century, one who engaged in “the Japanese fashion of mermaid making” was one who deliberately exaggerated or embellished.<sup>1</sup> This was in reference to the Feejee mermaid, a masterpiece of Phineas Taylor Barnum showmanship of the 1840s. Although when the mermaid, or one similar, was exhibited in London in 1822 to 1823, the scientific community and press had widely denounced it as a fake, academic condemnation seemed to have no effect on ticket sales either in London or the United States. One cannot underestimate the effect of Barnum’s advertising blitz in modifying “the general incredibility in the existence of mermaids” and creating “mermaid fever.” His efforts included a certificate of authenticity from a spurious naturalist, press releases which guaranteed three different newspapers exclusivity, a sense of “now or never” by limiting engagements and an army of boys selling pamphlets on the street.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars have been fascinated with the Feejee Mermaid. She graces the title of at least four books of modern scholarship on natural history and plays a significant role in scores of others.<sup>3</sup> Harriet Ritvo, perhaps the most rigorously theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> Used in review of *History of the Indian Tribes of North America*, by T. L. McKenney and James Hall, *Littell’s Living Age* 10, issue 121 (1846): 462. See also, e.g., *Transactions of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of the State of Maryland* (1884): 69, and even more recently in Joseph Schneider, *Dona Haraway* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 40.

<sup>2</sup> P. T. Barnum, *The Autobiography of P. T. Barnum* (London: Ward and Lock, 1855), 88–90.

<sup>3</sup> In chronological order, Richard Carrington, *Mermaids and Mastodons: A Book of Natural and Unnatural History* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1957); William T. Alderson, ed., *Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992); Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997); Jan Bondeson, *The Feejee Mermaid and Other Essays in Natural and Unnatural History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999). Although Bondeson is the only one mentioning the Feejee mermaid in the title, each of these works focus primarily on Barnum’s mermaid.

of these works, saw fake mermaids of as an issue of taxonomy. She envisaged mermaids as “a tacit challenge to the definition of the physical world not only as the realm where natural laws operated, but also as the realm where specialists held interpretive sway.”<sup>4</sup> Other scholars have examined her in the context of hoaxes, showmanship or freakery. Yet fake mermaids also represent a question of East-West interaction. Barnum seemed to have deliberately obfuscated the origins of the infamous Feegee mermaid to make it more difficult to deny her reality. The Feegee mermaid did not come from Calcutta or Malacca as was rumored, or even from Fiji, but from Japan. Exports from a regulated, if not really closed, Japan were limited. Fake mermaids exported from Japan, which had not existed previous to the nineteenth century, cannot be sufficiently explained as the crossing of animal-human boundaries or the desire to defraud, but rather as a product of their specific historical context.

### Myth or Reality?

Barnum’s mermaid hoax was only successful because there was an ancient and persistent belief that mermaids might exist. Mermaids and mermen were a cross-cultural symbol, the desire to provide human face to the vast and mysterious ocean. Oanes of Babylonia, Atartagis of Mesopotamia, the Ne Hwas of the Passamaquody tribe of the American northeast, or the Mami Wata of Africa—nearly all cultures anthropomorphized the ocean. In the west, mermaids go back at least to ancient Greece, with tritons, nereids and sirens. They appear not just as symbolic images in heraldry and poetry, or popular tattoos and ship names, but as actual sightings well through the nineteenth century. One named Murgan was sainted in Ireland. Another mermaid caught off the coast of Edam in 1403 learned to spin. In the early nineteenth century there was a veritable rash of mermaid sightings in Scotland, a country with a long tradition of mermaid observation, that began in 1809 when a minister’s daughter, Elizabeth MacKay, sent a letter to the newspaper in which she described the mermaid she had seen.<sup>5</sup> Mermaids were an ingrained part of the European consciousness.

Similarly, in Japan, references to mermaids go back to some of the oldest written sources. In the *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan), an official history completed in 720, it is written that in the year 619:

<sup>4</sup> Ritvo, 176.

<sup>5</sup> “The Mermaid Seen on the Coast of Cathin,” *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Wednesday, Sep. 6, 1809, issue 12581; “The Mermaid,” *The Aberdeen Journal* (Aberdeen, Scotland), Wednesday, Oct. 20, 1819, issue 3745. Richard Carrington mistakenly says that the uproar of the MacKay sighting immediately died out but there are sightings sporadically for years. Carrington, 4.

“There was a fisherman of the province of Settsu who cast his net in the Hori-e. Something entered his net formed like a child, which was neither a fish nor a human. Its name was unknown.”<sup>6</sup>

As this excerpt suggests, in ancient times there are references to mermaids in fresh water but eventually the mermaid came to be regarded as a saltwater animal. There were reports of mermaids pulled up in fishermen’s nets in the ninth century, several washed ashore and sightings out at sea throughout the medieval period. These mermaid corpses were seen as ill portents and seem to preclude, for example, the assassinations of the second and third Kamakura *shōguns*, or the revolt by Wada Yoshimori in 1213. References to mermaids in Japanese documents increase dramatically from the seventeenth century onward.<sup>7</sup> For example, one pulled out near Karatsu in 1677 was found in the net with a two-headed tortoise, which meant doubly bad luck.<sup>8</sup>

As popular literature spread, so did references to mermaids. Ihara Saikaku, a novelist who described late seventeenth century life in great detail, refers to mermaids several times in his novels. In the tale of Gengobei, love causes the protagonist much suffering but ultimately led to the riches of his father-in-law, which included a “salted mermaid.”<sup>9</sup> In some folk tales a fisherman who caught a mermaid and let it go would prosper while in others, if one was killed it would bring about a typhoon.<sup>10</sup> Saikaku presents this latter scenario in “Inochi toraruru ningyo no umi (Sea of life-taking mermaids)” in *Budō denraiki* (Traditional warrior tales) (1687). In this story, the appearance of the mermaid was accompanied by high waves and multi-colored bubbles. When the protagonist, Chūdō Konnai, shoots the mermaid with an arrow, the disturbance at sea is calmed but the event unleashes a trail of death and dishonor that ends in a vendetta.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> William Aston, *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896), 147. Aston’s translation of “*hito*” as man has been altered to the gender-neutral “human.”

<sup>7</sup> Yoshioka Ikuo, *Ningyo no dōbutsu minzokushi* [The cultural zoology of mermaids] (Tokyo: Shinshokan, 1998), 32.

<sup>8</sup> Yamaguchi Kōjū, “Karakai zuihitsu [Random pleasurable musings],” in *Nihon zuihitsu taisei* [The Japan essay collection], 1st ser., vol. 21 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1976), 150.

<sup>9</sup> Ihara Saikaku, *Five Women who Loved Love*, trans. Theodore de Bary (Rutland, VT and Tokyo: Tuttle, 1989), 227. For some reason De Bary insists this refers to a salamander, of which there is one called *ningyo*, but the illustration clearly shows a fish/human combination.

<sup>10</sup> Ōtsuka Minzoku Gakkai, ed., *Nihon minzoku jiten* [Dictionary of Japanese ethnography] (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1972), 535.

<sup>11</sup> Ihara Saikaku, “Budō denraiki [Traditional warrior tales],” in *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikei* [New collection of classical Japanese literature], vol. 77 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten,

The origins of the mermaid myth in Japan are not clear. It is possible that it was transmitted from China as Chinese references go back at least to the Warring States Period.<sup>12</sup> The characters for the Japanese word for mermaid, *ningyo*, are a Chinese compound. This compound appears in the oldest existing dictionaries, including the *Wamyōshō* (Book of Japanese words) (931–937). There does not appear to be a Japanese word for the beast (although other Chinese compounds are used) but this does not exclude the possibility that the idea of a human/fish creature did not preexist in less developed areas of Japan. Although much later, inclusion in the *Iroha jiruishō* (Iroha dictionary) (1144–1188), a dictionary of Japanese words suggests *ningyo* was by then a common word. Regardless, the fact that *ningyo* appears in the earliest sources and consistently thereafter suggests that the idea of the mermaid was ingrained into the Japanese consciousness as much as it was in Europe.

It is the tendency in all studies of mermaids to provide some sort of cryptozoological explanation that mermaids were just embellishments on dugong (manatee), seal, or sea lion sightings.<sup>13</sup> Cryptozoology is based on the idea that mythical and anecdotal evidence is based in a scientific reality.<sup>14</sup> The decision that manatees were mermaids appears to have begun in the late sixteenth century when Portuguese explorers first encountered dugongs and manatees. These early explorers called them “*peixe mulher* (fish women)” and in English it was not uncommon to refer to them as “mermaid fish” or just “mermaids.”<sup>15</sup> It therefore seems more likely that the idea for an existing concept was applied to the animal rather than the animal giving generation to the concept.

Similarly, the cryptozoological explanation is not satisfying for understanding mermaids in Japan. Dugongs only exist significantly further south, while seals and sea lions were only found significantly further north, in Hokkaidō, yet tales and sightings of mermaids occurred all over pre-modern Japan and predate regular trade

1989), 64–69. This story was later reinterpreted by Dazai Osamu. See Dazai Osamu, *Blue Bamboo*, trans. Ralph McCarthy (New York and Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2001), 61–81.

<sup>12</sup> It is illustrated in the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 [Classic of mountain and sea]. See, Yoshioka, 15–16. Needham claims that mermaids are depicted in wall reliefs in Han 漢 dynasty tombs, but these figures do not have the fish tail, and look more snake- or dragon-like. See Joseph Needham and Ling Wang, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 163–164. Given that the Silk Road was already well traveled, Chinese depictions could just as easily have been influenced by Mesopotamian or Babylonian images.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Carrington, 3–19.

<sup>14</sup> See Peter Gwynvay Hopkins, ed., *Bernard Heuvelmans' The Natural History of Hidden Animals* (London: Kegan Paul, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> In modern Portuguese the word for mermaid is *sereia*, from siren, a word also used in English as a synonym for mermaid. Manatee and dugong are classified as *sirenia*.

with the Ainu. In a significant encyclopedic work of 1713, the *Wakan sansai zue* (Illustrated Japanese-Chinese compendium), seal, sea lion, and mermaid each have separate entries, suggesting that one was not just confused for the other. Illustrations of mermaids also suggest that they were rather small to be mistaken for any of these real animals. At the time mermaid fakes were produced, the mermaid was generally perceived to be real. Japanese fakes conform to this smaller size one, not even as large as a dugong newborn.

### Mermaids or Mermen?

Mermaid is used here as a gender-neutral term since that is the expression employed by Barnum for the Japanese manufactures and is the most common term today. In the West, mermen were predominant only in the ancient world. Since medieval times, the focus has also been primarily on the female genus. For example, *Physiologus*, a Christian work circa the second century A.C.E., was, by the Middle Ages, second in circulation only to the bible. The anonymous author writes of Sirens (a synonym for mermaid):

Those who have seen them will say, that the nature of them is as follows,  
From the waist upwards they're shaped in the form of a beautiful virgin,  
What makes the wonder so great, is from thence lower down they are fish  
like.<sup>16</sup>

Nearly all popular references, like tavern names, were female. Even the pie, an eighteenth-century delicacy made from a combination of beef tongue, pork, and bacon, was called “Mermaid Pie.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, the English word “merman” appears to date only from the beginning of the seventeenth century while “mermaid” is at least three hundred years older. One scholar, noting this gender bias, queried whether “the strange sex ratio in the records (very few mermen) was in part an artifact of reporting, somehow related to the similarly strange but factual ratio of female to male witches burned at the stake even in postmedieval times (about 50:1, Friedenthal 1969).”<sup>18</sup>

In Japan, the word *ningyo* is gender-neutral. The reference in the *Nihongi* does not use this word at all, but merely describes something that is neither fish

<sup>16</sup> Allan Wood Rendell, trans., *Physiologus: A Metrical Bestiary of Twelve Chapters by Bishop Theobald* (London: John Edward Bumphus, 1928), 87.

<sup>17</sup> When it was baked it was filled with melted butter and served cold. See, e.g., William Gelleroy, *The London Cook* (London, 1762), 227–228. Today a “mermaid pie” is coconut and chocolate covered with marshmallows.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Banse, “Mermaids: Their Biology, Culture, and Demise,” *Limnology and Oceanography* 35, no. 1 (1990): 150.

nor human. Female specific references to mermaids only go back to the Kamakura period<sup>19</sup> but graphic depictions of mermaids in Japan are not clearly sexed until the eighteenth century. The scales tend to go to armpit level, and the hair styles might be more male but are not decisively so. The *Wakan sansai zue* of 1713 has a separate entry for merman, as *teijin*. But from this time onward, the creatures are generally depicted as women or at least looking more female than male. This gender preference appears to some extent to have been influenced by increasing accessibility to Western books and their illustrations of mermaids.

### The Power of Mermaids

In Ireland, a mermaid achieved sainthood, but Murgen is at best a minor saint. In Japan mermaids had a significantly greater religious meaning. A number of littoral villages practiced a mermaid cult. Aiding a mermaid could bring great personal wealth, but killing one might bring about a terrible storm or an earthquake, as was the case of a fisherman in the early eighteenth century. His thoughtless murder brought seventeen days of high wind followed by a major earthquake that split the earth from the foothills of the mountains to the sea.<sup>20</sup>

Not only were mermaids part of folk superstition, they also made their way into established religion. In one account of the miracles of Kannon, the goddess of mercy, the thirty-third miracle occurred when a traveler (in some accounts this was Prince Shōtoku, 574–622, author of the Seventeen Article Constitution) is asked by a mermaid to create a temple. Once the temple was constructed, the mermaid was born to a higher plane.<sup>21</sup> This temple reputedly still stands in Azuchi, Shiga and has, among its collections, a mummified mermaid. It is just one of many examples that lie scattered around Japan.<sup>22</sup> Other temples have claimed to have “mermaid bones” or *tumuli* for mermaids.<sup>23</sup> Generally, as in the West, mermaids were thought

<sup>19</sup> Hanasaki Kazuo, *Edo no ningyotachi* [The mermaids of Edo] (Tokyo: Taihei Shoya, 1978), 85.

<sup>20</sup> Kikuoka Senryō, “Shokoku rijin dan [Discussions of various regions and their inhabitants],” in *Nihon zuihitsu taisei*, 2nd ser., vol. 24 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1975), 427.

<sup>21</sup> The tale is related in William Griffis, *The Mikado's Empire*, vol. 2 (New York and London: Harper Brothers, 1906), 390.

<sup>22</sup> George John Younghusband, *On Short Leave to Japan* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, & Company, 1894), 195, saw a mermaid in Nara. Others include Myouchi Temple in Kashiwazaki, Niigata, Karukayadō in Hashimoto, Wakayama. According to Lafcadio Hearn, there was one shown at the Tōdaiji in Nara too. Elizabeth Bisland, ed., *The Japanese Letters of Lafcadio Hearn* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 410.

<sup>23</sup> The bones are in Ryūgūji Temple in Hakata. Stone monuments can be found, e.g., in Hino (illustrated in Shiba Kōkan's diary).

of as ill omens, but the mermaids were probably preserved in temples for the power they embodied, their rarity and their ability to prevent disaster.

Mermaids did not just wield power, it was part of their very fiber. While it seems vaguely cannibalistic, it was believed that eating a mermaid would provide immortality. This belief goes back at least as far as the Kamakura period.<sup>24</sup> There is a famous fairytale called *Yao bikuni* (Eight hundred year old nun) that says that the leaves of the white camellia never turn brown because it was the favorite flower of a nun who lived for eight hundred years because she mistakenly ate mermaid flesh.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in the anonymous story of Wasōbyōe, a sort of “Japanese Gulliver” who traveled to a land where people lived forever and craved death, “Mermaids were cheap and plentiful, slices piled on dishes, as well as whole ones hanging from the eaves of every cook shop.”<sup>26</sup> In some parts of Japan, people who do not appear aged are greeted with the query, “Have you eaten mermaid?”<sup>27</sup> Additionally, Takizawa Bakin (1767–1848) mentions the benefits of mermaid oil in *Hakkenden* (Tale of eight dogs). The oil did not provide immortality but if lit, would burn forever, and if rubbed on the body, would make one waterproof. Mermaids were supposed to taste and smell delicious, which is why someone might ingest them without thinking. Ingestion of merman meat was given as the reason one woman was albino. Known as “the white nun,” she made a living as a sideshow in 1449.<sup>28</sup>

Mermaids were even believed to have medicinal qualities in both the West and East. A Divine Elixir hawked by Robert Wilmere in mid-eighteenth century London purportedly contained mermaid tongues, phoenix livers, and hearts of mandrake distilled with sunbeams. It was a panacea that could supposedly “baffle death.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, an actual medicine, “*ningyosui* (mermaid water),” was sold in Edo.<sup>30</sup> However, the properties of mermaids were also widely studied as a serious

<sup>24</sup> Hanasaki, 85. A reference to this in e.g., Ihara Saikaku, *Some Final Words of Advice*, trans. Peter Nosco (Rutland, VT and Tokyo: Tuttle, 1980), 185. A woman is described as youthful beyond her years even though she never ate mermaid meat.

<sup>25</sup> Umenoya Aruji, “Ume no chiri [The dust of plums],” in *Nihon zuihitsu taisei*, 2nd ser., vol. 2 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1973), 362–363. This is based on a text from 1618, *Wakasaki*.

<sup>26</sup> Basil H. Chamberlain, trans., “Wasaubiyauwe, the Japanese Gulliver,” *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* 7 (1879): 295.

<sup>27</sup> Yoshioka, 84.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew L. Markus, “The Carnival of Edo: *Misemono* Spectacles from Contemporary Accounts,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45, no. 2 (1985): 503.

<sup>29</sup> *The harangues, or speeches, of several celebrated quack-doctors, in town and country: ...Concluding with the character of a quack, several merry...* (London, [1750?]), 35–36.

<sup>30</sup> It is found in Yanagisawa Nobutoki’s diary. Hanasaki, 121. In the west there was a patent medicine of this name as evidenced by bottles with “mermaid oil” along the sides but it is not known if this was a brand, an ingredient, or even what this medicine was supposed to cure.

scientific topic. The idea that mermaid parts could serve as actual medicine, rather than an absurd elixir of immortality appears to have come from the West. There are a number of traditions surrounding mermaids and medicine. For example, in Scottish lore, a grieving lover was instructed by a mermaid to use mugwort or St. Fabian's Nettle to cure tuberculosis.<sup>31</sup> In Portugal, a suppository of mermaid bones was used to cure hemorrhoids.<sup>32</sup>

Japanese sources on mermaids as medicine are not evident until the eighteenth century, and consistently refer to Dutch sources. *Wakan sansai zue* claimed that Dutch sources advocated mermaid bones as a cure for poison. Ōtsuki Gentaku (1757–1827), a significant scholar in the diffusion of Western knowledge, wrote in his discourse of mermaids that the bones had coagulating properties.<sup>33</sup> His illustrator, Shiba Kōkan (1738/47–1818), went on to comment briefly on many marvelous properties mermaid bones were thought to have in his work on Western painting, *Seiyō gadan* (Discourse on Western painting).<sup>34</sup> Perhaps because of these magical properties, *netsuke* made from “mermaid bone” were also sold, although in reality these were from the jawbone of some sort of fish.<sup>35</sup>

Another doctor, Katō Eibian, reported that in 1819, a mermaid was pulled out of Edo Bay. Woodcuts of her were sold on the street because it was believed they would protect the owners from being caught up in the horrible measles epidemic going around Edo. Pictures of other fish were tried, but only those of mermaids were effective in preventing infection.<sup>36</sup> The illustration is very similar to Western illustrations.<sup>37</sup> For the next ten years or so, images of mermaids were posted on doorposts or the body as a prophylactic measure.<sup>38</sup> Using a mermaid image for

<sup>31</sup> T. F. Thiselton Dyer, *The Folklore of Plants* (New York: Appleton, 1889), 296; William Black, *Folk Medicine: A Chapter in the History of Culture* (London: the Folklore Society, 1883), 184.

<sup>32</sup> Jan Bondeson, *The Two-Headed Boy and Other Medical Marvels* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 54.

<sup>33</sup> Ōtsuki Gentaku, “Rokumotsu shinshi [A new examination of six substances],” in *Edo kagaku koten sōsho* [Edo science classics], vol. 32 (Tokyo: Kōwa Shuppan, 1980).

<sup>34</sup> Shiba Kōkan, “Seiyō gadan [Discourse on Western painting],” in *Shiba Kōkan* [Shiba Kōkan: Writings of Shiba Kōkan], ed. Nakai Sōtarō (Tokyo: Atoriesha, 1942), 60.

<sup>35</sup> Marcus B. Huish, “The Evolution of a Netsuke,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the Japan Society* (London), vol. 3, sec. 2 (1893): 15. The description of mermaid bone *netsuke* can be found in Inaba Tsūryū, *Sōken kishō* [An appraisal of sword fittings] (1781). Huish says this is a shark called *oni-buta* but there is no commonly known fish by this name. It might have been angel shark.

<sup>36</sup> Katō Eibian, “Waga koromo [Our coverings],” in *Nihon shōmin seikatsu shiryō shūsei* [Documents of the lives of common people], vol. 15 (Tokyo: San'ichi Shōbō, 1971), 409.

<sup>37</sup> *History of Amboina* by Francois Valentijn (see below). This illustration in turn was based on a work by official VOC painter Samuel Fallours.

<sup>38</sup> Yoshioka, 78.



protection was therefore very similar to the use of mermaid tattoos in the West.

### **The Natural History of Mermaids**

Some date the beginning of zoology to Aristotle (384 BC–322 BC), others date modern zoology to the works of Swiss naturalist Konrad Gessner (1516–1565). Gessner devoted a great deal of study to monsters of the sea in his *De historia animalium* (1551–1558) and, although Gessner himself cribbed from earlier sources, he in turn seems to have been the inspiration for other works, including Joannes Jonstonus' *An History of the Wonderful Things of Nature* (1657) which was to have such significant influence in Japan. All of these works illustrated creatures that were part fish and part human.

In the West, natural history really only made significant leaps when Linnaean taxonomies were introduced to the animal world. Until then, mermaids were included in all important natural histories, including Linnaeus' own *Systema Naturae*. Unable to classify a specimen from Brazil in 1758, he called it a "siren." First published in 1735, this tome went through thirteen editions, gradually expanding from a slim volume to over three thousand pages in the last edition of 1770. Over this time, the siren was identified as a manatee and classified as a mammal. Nevertheless, in 1749, in response to a mermaid sighting reported in Stockholm papers, Linnaeus urged a hunt to "catch this animal alive or preserved in spirits," although he does suggest they might be "fable and fantasy."<sup>39</sup> There is what appears to be an apocryphal tale that Linnaeus was chased from a Dutch town for proclaiming a mermaid fake, but for a long time Linnaeus himself was not clear on mermaids.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, while the publication of these taxonomies was a landmark, acceptance into general scientific thought was a slow process. Dismissal by Linnaeus by no means represented a widespread recognition that mermaids might not exist. For example, a popular work of 1786 by Thomas Boreman classified mermaids as part of the insect family.<sup>41</sup> A hundred years after Linnaeus was published, in *The Cabinet Cyclopaedia* (1835) well-respected zoologist William Swainson (1789–1855) wrote of the existence of mermaids. "Can it be supposed

<sup>39</sup> Lisbet Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 93.

<sup>40</sup> David Starr Jordan, *Fishes* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1907), 149. Jordan, or his source, might have confused the mermaid with a hydra owned by the Burgomaster of Hamburg. See Wilfrid Blunt, *Linnaeus: The Compleat Naturalist* (Oxford and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 89–90.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Boreman, *A Description of Three Hundred Animals* (London, 1786), n.p. Boreman lists the mermaid in the contents but does not describe or illustrate one.

that the depths of the ocean are without their peculiar inhabitants, whose habits and economy rarely, if ever bring them to the surface of the watery element?" He likened mermaid doubters to a Swiss mountaineer who would disbelieve in the existence of ostriches because they would be unable to "inhabit his alpine precipices." Swainson was interested in a taxonomic system known as Quinary or Circular. Species are organized in overlapping circles because, "for the most part, every individual species in one group, or kingdom, has its representative in another."<sup>42</sup> This now-discredited system was an influential intellectual trend through the nineteenth century.

It wasn't until the end of the eighteenth century that some scientists began to classify individual observation into larger bodies of knowledge based on the Linnean system. George Buffon, in his enormous *Natural History*, began to search for a natural order, but ultimately this knowledge really only served as a springboard for developments in the nineteenth century. Buffon doesn't come out clearly on the mermaid question, but relates the accounts of others in a rather long discourse of seven pages, ending in an inconclusive quote from Peter Artedi (1705–1735) of not judging rashly what one has not seen.<sup>43</sup> The quote from Artedi is interesting because he was a partner and friend of Linnaeus who conceived of *System Naturae* with him, and was responsible for most of the portion on fish. Conversely, the explosion of empirical studies on natural history made it very difficult to remain abreast of scientific knowledge.<sup>44</sup> For the most part, natural scientists seemed to remain agnostic on the subject of mermaids.

Given the wooliness of natural scientists about the existence of mermaids, it is no surprise that popular opinion remained on their side. Among the advocates for the reality of mermaids, prominent was the judge, philosopher, and eccentric, James Burnett Lord Monboddo (1714–1799). Although he was derided at times for his opinions, modern scholars have resurrected him as a proto-Darwinist because he traced the origins of man to the orangutan and the father of comparative historical linguistics. Despite some very strange opinions, Lord Monboddo was influential during his day, entertaining Robert Burns, Thomas Boswell, and others at his "learned suppers." Although sometimes ridiculed for claiming the reality of mermaids, in fact his opinion was much more modulated. In the third volume of

<sup>42</sup> *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, & c. for the Year 1835*: 728–729. See also, Peter Dance, *Animal Fakes and Frauds* (Maidenhead: Sampson Low, 1975), 39–40.

<sup>43</sup> Georges Louis Le Clerc Buffon, *Natural History of Birds, Fish, Insects and Reptiles*, vol. 3 (London: 1798), 296–303.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Lawrence Farber, "Aspiring Naturalists and Their Frustrations: The Case of William Swainson (1789–1855)," in *From Linnaeus to Darwin: Commentaries on the History of Biology and Geology*, ed. Alwyne Wheeler and James H. Price (London: Society for the History of Natural History, 1985), 55.

*Antient Metaphysics*, he merely says that:

“But if it were certain that they [mermaids] no longer existed; for we are sure that there are whole species of animals which were once in certain countries but are now not to be found there, such as wolves in Britain.”<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps an equally controversial figure to Lord Monboddo, John Stewart (1744–1822) had another interesting theory as to the possible origin and scarcity of mermaids, suggesting:

“Mermaid, unicorn, centaur and other fabulous animals may be admitted into the rant of ideas, because there is a possibility from irregular copulation of animals, that an interminable variety of monsters may be generated but the possibility is so distant, that they merit the discriminator term *facile ideals*.”<sup>46</sup>

Much more recently, Karl Banse postulated that ecological changes that had caused an excess of jellyfish meant they might have all been stung to death.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, *An Historical Miscellany of the Curiosities and Rarities in Nature and Art* is probably most representative of mainstream thought about mermaids in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The article, “Natural History of the Mermaid,” sandwiched between discourses on marble and hermaphrodites, comments:

However naturalists may doubt of the reality of mermaids or mermen, we have testimony enough to establish it; though how these testimonies may be authentic, we cannot take upon us to say.<sup>48</sup>

Therefore at the end of the eighteenth century, at the inception of this mermaid trade, there was no definitive idea as to the reality or falsity of mermaids.

In Japan, early studies of natural history were heavily influenced by Chinese works, which generally contained mentions of mermaids. It was not until Kaibara Ekiken’s *Yamato honzō* (Japanese pharmacopeias) (1709) that an original Japanese

<sup>45</sup> Monboddo, James Burnet, Lord. *Antient Metaphysics*, vol. 3 (London, 1784), 262–263. The whole argument is laid out over pages 248–263.

<sup>46</sup> John Stewart, *The Revolution of Reason: Or the Establishment of the Constitution of Things in Nature, of Man, of Human Intellect, of Moral Truth, of Universal Good* (London: J. Ridway, 1790), 166.

<sup>47</sup> Banse, 152.

<sup>48</sup> *An Historical Miscellany of the Curiosities and Rarities in Nature and Art*, vol. 2 (London: J. W. Myers, 1794–1797), 255.

work was produced. In this work, a substance called *heishimeru* was described as mermaid medicine named, for the Portuguese words for “fish woman,” *peixe mulher*.<sup>49</sup> As interest in Western science grew in the eighteenth century, books such as the Jonstonus’ natural history were brought out of storage from the shogunal library. Western scientific learning only became a formalized program of study a half century later. The study of natural history in Japan initially focused on botany because of the deep interest in pharmacology. Moreover, for the most part, their teachers, who were generally doctors associated with the Dutch factory, were interested in botany for the same reason. Engelbert Kaempfer, Carl Peter Thunberg, and Philipp Franz von Siebold all published treatises on botany. Zoological studies did not develop until the later part of the eighteenth century.

The fact that books did not enter Japan at the time of their publication, but rather in a somewhat haphazard manner, must have made things difficult for Japanese *rangakusha*, or students of Western science. Thus, *The Natural History* of Pliny the Elder (23–79) entered at roughly the same time as Ambroisé Paré’s *On Monsters and Marvels* (1575) and François Valentijn’s *The Natural History of Amboina* (1726), in the first half of the eighteenth century. Greater access to Joannes Jonstonus’s *History of the Wonderful Things of Nature* (1633) also occurred during this period. Although Thunberg was a student and disciple of Linnaeus, it appears that *System Naturae* was not known among the *rangakusha*.<sup>50</sup>

One of the most significant scholars to engage with mermaids was Ōtsuki Gentaku. He not only studied all of the Western texts listed above, but also saw one. He wrote:

“About 1744 my uncle and aunt took a boat at Hirado. When their boat was running on the Genkai-nada, a human head came suddenly out of the water at a distance of about 3 yards from the boat. Everyone on board was surprised as it was the last thing expected on the surface of the sea. It had a white face like that of a woman, with brown hair. It smiled at the people on board and soon went down again below the waves. But it came out a second time and then they saw its body, which resembled that of a fish.”<sup>51</sup>

Gentaku, who was trained as a physician, was certainly interested in their application to medicine. A generation later, Itō Keisuke (1803–1901), a botanist and physician who studied with Philip Franz von Siebold in the 1820s, also gave

<sup>49</sup> Yoshioka, 85. He identifies the language as Spanish, but Portuguese seems more likely.

<sup>50</sup> Kimura Yōjirō, *Nihon shizenshi no seiritsu* [The rise of natural history in Japan] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1971), 358.

<sup>51</sup> Matsura Seizan, “Kasshi yawa [Tales of the days of the wood and the rat],” 20; quoted and translated in *We Japanese*, combined ed. (3 vols. in 1) (Miyanoshiba: Fujiya Hotel, 1950), 318.

serious attention to mermaids. He provided several drawings of them in his work on fish, one set resembling traditional images and one set resembling the nineteenth century fakes.<sup>52</sup> There does not seem to have been much controversy in Tokugawa Japan over the existence of mermaids, and the imports of Western books on natural history only supported existing beliefs. Certainly, there was some incredulity, as the saying, “mermaid sushi and phoenix eggs” that was used to refer to something unlikely to happen might suggest, but study of Western science supported rather than contradicted the existence of mermaids.

### The Fakes

In both the East and West, belief in the physical reality of the mermaid persisted through much of the nineteenth century. The Japanese belief in mermaids did not come from the West and Western belief in mermaids did not come from Japan. In such fertile ground, it is no surprise that charlatans would step in. While it has sometimes been suggested that these mermaid mummies were first made in China, or originated there, this misconception seems to have been generated by Barnum. In order to give validity to his specimen, he manufactured a Dr. Griffin (partner Levi Lyman) who proclaimed the mermaid’s veracity, alleging to have purchased it in China.<sup>53</sup> I have found no accounts of any mermaids manufactured in China that predate the Feegee mermaid. The one at the famous “Temple of Horrors” in Canton—which Rudyard Kipling called, “a Chinese Madame Tussaud’s”<sup>54</sup>—where figures were shown in the torments of hell, was most likely brought back from Japan by a Chinese trader.<sup>55</sup> It is probable that in an effort to avoid an absolute refutation, Barnum deliberately made the origin of the mermaid mysterious.

The fakes consisted of a real fish tail attached to some sort of constructed humanoid portion. Philipp Franz von Siebold wrote of one that it was “the upper half of an ape” united to “the lower half of a fish.” He called it the product of some fisherman’s “ingenuity.”<sup>56</sup> As a result of Siebold’s writings, or because that is what they were believed to be, most contemporary descriptions report the mermaids to be monkeys or amalgamated from monkey parts. Those that have survived have

<sup>52</sup> Itō Keisuke Collection, Nagoya University Library. Online access: [http://www.nul.nagoya.ac.jp/db/keisuke/index\\_e.html](http://www.nul.nagoya.ac.jp/db/keisuke/index_e.html).

<sup>53</sup> Alleged, e.g., by Jordan, 149.

<sup>54</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *From Sea to Sea: Letters of Travel* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1907), 287.

<sup>55</sup> Edward Dorr Griffin Prime, *Travel through Many Lands and Over Many Seas* (New York: Harper, 1872), 153.

<sup>56</sup> Philip Franz von Siebold, *Manners and Customs of the Japanese* (London: John Murray, 1852), 61.

proved to be in fact significantly more complex in construction. Scans of the speciemans in the Museum voor Volkenkuden in Leiden have shown that they contain some monkey bones, but were primarily constructed from a variety of bones and papier mâché. In addition to the monkey bones and hair, some contain dog bones and shark's teeth. They resemble neither traditional Eastern nor Western depictions of mermaids, but some entirely new, realistic looking horror.

Mermaid manufacturers in Japan were unable to produce these fakes before the late eighteenth century because they were lacking one significant area of knowledge—taxidermy. Taxidermy was a natural and necessary corollary to the study of natural science because careful examination and study are necessary for classification. Fish are one of the most difficult animals to preserve through taxidermy, and even today can comprise as much of half a of full taxidermy course.<sup>57</sup> Without preservation, the scales would flake off and it would reek. Edward Donovan's 1794 treatise describes the treatment of fish:

...they are best preserved in spirit of wine, and only require to be washed clean from all slimy matter before they are put into the bottles.

Some species of Reptiles, and a few of Fishes, may be preserved by opening them, and taking out all the inside, then being strewed with the preserving powder, and filled with tow; after which they should be covered with two or three coats of copal varnish.<sup>58</sup>

Some descriptions of mermaids describe the tails as shiny suggesting they were preserved in this manner.<sup>59</sup>

Siebold's contention that the fakes were produced by some fishermen is highly unlikely. Itō Keisuke is known to have learned taxidermy techniques, but given Buddhist proscriptions against taking life and the handling of dead bodies, Japanese scholars of natural history must have trained someone lower down on the social scale to do this work for them, most likely the outcaste *burakumin*. It was their ingenuity that was responsible for the trickle of mermaid fakes to the West. There was a history of mermaid fakes in the West, from a mermaid hand in a cabinet of curiosities to public exhibitions, but the conception of these simian amphibians was Japanese.

<sup>57</sup> Jane Desmond, "Displaying Death, Animating Life: Changing Fictions of 'Liveness' from Taxidermy to Animatronics," in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2002), 163.

<sup>58</sup> E. Donovan, *Instructions for Collecting and Preserving Various Subjects of Natural History; as Animals, Birds, Reptiles, Shells, Corals, Plants, & c.* (London: privately printed, 1794).

<sup>59</sup> See e.g., John Timbs, *Popular Errors Explained and Illustrated* (London: Tilt and Bogue, 1841), 338 and succeeding versions by him.

It should be noted that mermaids were not the only monsters constructed through these methods. The Volkenkunde museum in Leiden has in its collections, in addition to two mermaids, a bat with a human head, two devil's heads, and a few other such creatures. They were collected in the first half of the nineteenth century by Dutch factory employees J. K. Overmeer Fisscher and Jan Cock Blomhoff.<sup>60</sup> While these were probably shown in sideshow attractions and temples in Japan as frequently as the mermaids, they had no where near the same popularity abroad.

## The Trade

Chronology suggests that the mermaids were not made to trick Westerners, but rather to profit off the local market. While temples have anecdotal accounts of their mermaids that date them anywhere from the first millennium to the seventeenth century, none of these stories have been verified by dated donation documents. Given the skills needed to produce a convincing fake mermaid, it is more likely that the temples were among the first to be taken in by these hoaxes, or knowingly purchased them as sources of income. The earliest account is from 1777, where one was reported at a sideshow on the temple grounds of Asakusa.<sup>61</sup> The first pictorial representation of a sideshow attraction mermaid is from 1801 in Santō Kyōden's *Ko wa mezurashiki misemono-gatari* (Tale of rare attractions).<sup>62</sup>

Why did it take almost fifty years for a mermaid to fall into the hands of inquiring Westerners? Mermaids were found outside of Japan before the famous St. James exhibition in 1822. For example, one was exhibited in the shop of Charles de Villet in Cape Town at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but none seem to predate the nineteenth century.<sup>63</sup> Francis Hawks, the chaplain and official editor of the book produced on the Perry expedition, wrote that the mermaid or one like it was sold to one of the Dutchmen after the furor over the mermaid had "well nigh run its course," but there were a number of other limiting factors, especially in regard to the way trade was conducted in Japan.<sup>64</sup> There is no indication that mermaids suddenly fell out of favor. The pattern of trade from the end of the seventeenth century consisted of Dutch East India Company monopoly goods and

<sup>60</sup> Matthi Forrer and Ken Vos, *Griezelen in Japan: De verbeelding verbeeld* (Leiden: Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, n.d.), n.p.

<sup>61</sup> Hanasaki, 114.

<sup>62</sup> It was later copied into a one sheet print by Utagawa Yoshiki.

<sup>63</sup> Nigel Worden, Elizabeth van Heyningen, and Viven Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town: The Making of a City, an Illustrated Social History* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1998), 119.

<sup>64</sup> Francis Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan* (New York: Appleton, 1856), 69. This is almost verbatim from Siebold's *Manners and Customs of the Japanese*, 185.

private trade of other goods. Cash could not be taken in exchange and the amount that could be traded was capped by position. While price is not known, one can surmise that mermaids were not cheap, especially those with expensive parts such as ivory fingernails. Moreover, Dutch contact with the Japanese was severely limited.

While travel was restricted, occasionally the Dutch would venture off their island into Nagasaki. In addition, every year in the eighteenth century, and every four years in the nineteenth century, the Dutch merchants made a trip to Edo to visit the shogun. It is possible that Dutch merchants may have seen an outdoor exhibit or visited a temple such as Zuirūiji (Tetsugenji) in Osaka on their annual journey through Osaka on the way to visit the shogun. Jan Cock Blomhoff visited a number of temples on his court journey to Edo in 1818.<sup>65</sup> Overmeer Fisscher, who spent nine years in Japan, acquired several of these fabulous animals at a temple and believed the mermaid was an object of worship, which suggests the latter.<sup>66</sup>

Another possibility is pet shops, although all these accounts occur after the “opening” of Japan. Francis Hall, who was an American merchant in Yokohama, had exhibited his interest in seeking out these mermaids even before he arrived in Japan in 1859. In a published letter he wrote of mermaids, “During my stay in Japan, I shall make this a subject of special inquiry, and shall procure one or more specimens, if possible to do so.”<sup>67</sup> He found his mermaid in a pet shop, as did Rutherford Alcock, the British Consul.<sup>68</sup> Edward de Fontblanque reported finding several specimens of these mermaids for sale in a pet shop made of “paper, pulp, leather and glue.” When confronted with the fraud, the owner brazenly admitted it, but said that the many sailors to whom he had sold these animals never doubted that they were real.<sup>69</sup>

First mate on the brig *Cadet*, Charles Tyng was one such sailor. He and Captain Magee, fascinated by tales of the Feegee Mermaid, sought one out when they arrived in Batavia in 1822. They were able to purchase one from a Dutch merchant for five hundred dollars, a tenth of what Eades had paid for the Feegee mermaid. Tyng later bought out the captain for two hundred dollars. When the *Cadet* arrived in Manila, people crowded on board to see it. A purse of a thousand dollars was

<sup>65</sup> Tenjin and Shitennōji among others. Nationaal Archief Blomhoff 10.

<sup>66</sup> “Collection of Japanese Curiosities at Amsterdam,” *The London Literary Gazette*, Oct. 8, 1831, no. 768: 650–651. See also, Matthi and Vos, *Griezelen in Japan: De verbeelding verbeeld*.

<sup>67</sup> “A Veritable Mermaid,” *Liverpool Mercury etc* (Liverpool, England), Friday, Jan. 27, 1860, issue 3730.

<sup>68</sup> Rutherford Alcock, *The Capital of the Tycoon: A Narrative of a Three Years' Residence in Japan*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green 1863), 311.

<sup>69</sup> Edward B. de Fonblanque, *Nippon and Pe-Che-Li* (London: Saunders, Otley & Co., 1862), 141.



made up to have her dissected but Tyng refused. Tyng had a case made for his mermaid in Canton. Finally he sold half interest to two other unnamed American captains who paid five hundred dollars each and were supposed to provide Tyng with half interest in the take from showing her. Although the mermaid was reputed to have been shown around Boston, Tyng never got a penny from the buyers.<sup>70</sup> A number of sightings, like the “dozen or more of all sizes” observed by P. T. Barnum at a museum in The Hague, suggest that a surprising number of these taxidermic concoctions emigrated from Japan.<sup>71</sup>

### The Reaction

The Feegee mermaid is believed to have arrived in London in 1822, under the auspices of a Captain Samuel Eades who sold the ship of which he was only part owner to buy it from the Dutchmen who charged him a small fortune for the animal. While this has been well documented, it is worth noting the popularity with the public, where it toured successfully for at least two years, and elicited the beginning of a scientific response to the mermaid myth. Japan, which was perceived as closed, unknown, and exotic, seemed the perfect home for such a creature. None of the mermaid exhibits in the previous century excited nearly the same reaction.

Discreditation of the mermaid is credited to Sir Humphry Davy (1778–1829). Davy was known for discovering the properties of nitrous oxide, and inventing electro-chemistry and an arc lamp for miners. Davy described the animal as “the head and bust of two different apes fastened to the lower part of a kipper salmon.”<sup>72</sup> However, even Sir Davy did not absolutely deny the existence of mermaids, but merely stated, “It might please God to make a mermaid, but I do not believe God ever did make one.” Davy said they just wouldn’t make sense because the human head is designed for erect posture, and the hands for ‘manufacture’ and not swimming. “So poorly designed for its elements, it would not be able to move and be easy prey for other fish.”<sup>73</sup> Davy’s criticisms were based on advances in comparative anatomy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century made by Georges Cuvier and Etienne S. Hillaire. By 1840, when the First Secretary of the Ottoman Embassy in Paris told the Academy of Science there that his father, an Admiral, had recently spotted a mermaid in the Bosphorus, it was the subject of a

<sup>70</sup> Charles Tyng, *Before the Wind: The Memoir of an American Sea Captain 1808–1833*, ed. Susan Fels (New York: Viking, 1999), 94–96, 99, 101, 103–104.

<sup>71</sup> P. T. Barnum, *Struggle and Triumph: Or Forty Years of Recollections* (Buffalo: The Courier Press, 1993), 163.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (Apr. 1855).

<sup>73</sup> Humphry Davy, *Salmonia: Or Days of Fly-Fishing in a Series of Conversations* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1840), 179–180.

great deal of hilarity.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, when Barnum brought the mermaid to New York twenty years later, the mermaid question was far from decisively settled. Barnum brought the Feegee mermaid to naturalist Emile Guillaudeu (1812–1860) for verification; Guillaudeu proclaimed it was manufactured. But when he was asked why he had come to this conclusion, the naturalist replied, “Because I don’t believe in mermaids.”<sup>75</sup> Barnum used Guillaudeu as a foil, as he did all the controversy around the mermaid, including a lawsuit threatened in South Carolina, to sell tickets. The Feegee mermaid was actively discussed and her authenticity debated not only in popular newspapers but in serious scientific journals like *The Lancet*.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, despite the vast developments in natural science, taxonomy, and zoology, as well as wider public education and greater literacy, scientists weren’t sure and most people still wanted to believe in mermaids.<sup>77</sup> The popularity of these exhibits continued through the nineteenth century. Although the latest reference I find to one being exported was a Captain Braiden of Plymouth, who purchased a mermaid in Yokohama and brought it back to England in 1866,<sup>78</sup> this was probably not the end. In 1873, Charles Dickens wrote, “How many mermaids there are at this present moment boxed up in caravans rambling from one country fair to another, it would be hard to guess; but some there are, beyond question.”<sup>79</sup>

In the United States, mermaids eventually migrated to dime museums, a venue that conveniently arose roughly around the time that mermaids came into being. The inventory of the Peale Museum contained two mermaids, and another such mermaid was shown in The Gaiety Museum in Boston, opened by Benjamin Franklin Keith (1846–1914) in 1883.<sup>80</sup> In their original form, these museums were supposed to be both recreational and educational. This was even true of Barnum’s American Museum, which exhibited the Feejee mermaid. The museum stood in Manhattan from 1841–1865 and contained exhibits that were pointedly intended to

<sup>74</sup> Timbs, 339.

<sup>75</sup> P. T. Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum: Written by Himself* (New York: Sampson Low, 1855), 231.

<sup>76</sup> See, e.g., Jane Goodall, *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) or James W. Cook, *The Art of Deception* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>77</sup> This fact is deplored, for example in *The Fisheries Exhibition Literature*, vol. 3 (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1884), 84. This was a commissioned book for the International Fisheries Exhibition of 1883.

<sup>78</sup> Francis Trevelyan Buckland, *Curiosities of Natural History* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1882), 137.

<sup>79</sup> Charles Dickens, “Mermaids,” *All the Year Round* 9, no. 230 (Apr. 26, 1873): 562.

<sup>80</sup> Richard M. Ketchum, *Will Rogers: His Life and Times* (New York: American Heritage Publishing, 1973), 104.

preach education and temperance.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the dime museum was in a state of decline. Museums moved further toward the goals of edification, separating from the freak show environment that was to characterize Coney Island, New York.<sup>81</sup> As a result, Japanese mermaids lost their natural environment. According to one observer at the end of the nineteenth century:

In dime museums and county fairs one may still find among the attractions a mermaid, dried and stuffed...the invention has become so common of late, that it is found in the curio shops of every town, and as an eye-catching device is often put into show-cases of some merchant who deals in anything rather than mermaids.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless, as late as 1890 in the Orkneys, a mermaid hunt was even organized to bag the one that was haunting the coast, and a decade later, people still lined up in Atlantic City to see a mermaid.<sup>83</sup> It is possible that these were old constructions that continued to circulate, but since the wear and tear of travel would have taken its toll, it is probable mermaids were produced and exported through the nineteenth century, if not even later.<sup>84</sup> The demand was such that similar fakes were produced in the United States.<sup>85</sup> Those that made their way into museum collections generally were admitted with little documentation.

### **The Tail End**

In the furor over and ridicule of the Feegee mermaid, it is easy to dismiss these Japanese exports as merely a genius for hucksterism or creative license. Because they were intentional fakes, very little is definitively known about their manufacture or original sale. But rather than as monstrosities, it is more useful to think of

<sup>81</sup> See Andrea Stulman Dennet, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), 129–130.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Montgomery Skinner, *Myths and Legends of Our New Possessions and Protectorate* (Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott, 1900), 78–79.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew Lang, “The Sign of the Ship,” *Longmans Magazine* 22, no. 128 (1893): 183. The one in Atlantic City was billed as Chinese. Henry Pearson Gratton, *As a Chinaman Saw Us* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), 97.

<sup>84</sup> David Starr Jordan claimed they were still being produced in 1907. Jordan, 149.

<sup>85</sup> C. F. Holden claimed to be acquainted with a taxidermist “in the East” who had produced “some of the finest mermaids exhibited in the country.” C. F. Holden, “Humbugs,” *Parry’s Monthly Magazine* 6 (1890): 288. William McGuigan, a taxidermist associated with Titian Peale was reputed to have made some as well.

manufactured mermaids as a side-effect of the advancement of the science of natural history that occurred in late eighteenth century Japan. Harriet Ritvo has written that, “Exhibited mermaids...concretely challenged the established order of nature, which offered them no place.”<sup>86</sup> Conversely, it is the modern fixation on the concrete that has misdirected the place of the mermaid in natural history.

The Japanese fake mermaids came into being at a time when the natural order was far from distinct. The nineteenth century represented a time of great public interest in the outside world, and natural history had evolved from the scientific community to a public past time. In Japan there was an understanding of Western science based partially on dated texts that supported existing belief in mermaids. The fact that mermaids were exhibited with other freaks of nature, rather than an imaginary bestiary, suggests that they were regarded as more than the products of overactive imagination. Perhaps John Locke described the mermaid phenomenon best when he wrote:

And though there neither were nor had been in nature such a fish as a mermaid; yet supposing these names to stand for complex abstract ideas that contained no inconsistency in them, the essence of a mermaid is as intelligible as that of a man; and the idea of an unicorn as certain, steady, and permanent as that of a horse.<sup>87</sup>

In other words, it didn't matter if Japanese mermaids weren't real; enough people wanted them to be real in Japan and the West that there was an ongoing demand to see them. The manufactured fakes were a physical manifestation of this desire.

Francis Buckland was mistaken when he wrote in 1882, “Mermaids seem to have gone out of fashion about the same time as the dried heads of New Zealanders.”<sup>88</sup> That the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale and its Disney spinoff remain perennially popular is evidence enough to contradict Buckland, but more significantly in this context, the vision of mermaids formed by unnamed taxidermists in Japan remained a part of the mental image of the unknown. The persistence is not demonstrated merely by later embellishments on classic themes, such as a sideshow in 1875 at the Cattle Show in London that had a live mermaid from Japan, with a Japanese handler, consisting of a monkey with a fish tail attached (exhibited in the same tent as a six-legged sheep).<sup>89</sup> Much more recently, after the tsunami of 2003, photographs inspired by Japanese manufactures circulated on the

<sup>86</sup> Ritvo, 178.

<sup>87</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1796), 452–453.

<sup>88</sup> Francis Trevelyan Buckland, *Curiosities of Natural History* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1882), 134.

<sup>89</sup> Frank Buckland, *Log-book of a Fisherman and Zoologist* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1876), 27–28. This was probably one of the first non-government émirés.

Internet that were identified as mermaids washed ashore by the upheaval of the ocean. There are mermaids because these nineteenth century manifestations, the result of a junction of folklore, science, and Japanese artistry, live on.

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**Figures**

- Fig. 1 Mermaid, from Terajima Ryōan *Wakan sansai zue* (1713).  
Collection of the National Library of Medicine.
- Fig. 2 Fur seal from Terajima Ryōan *Wakan sansai zue* (1713).  
Collection of the National Library of Medicine.
- Fig. 3 Mercreatures from Conrad Gessner, *De historiae animalium*, vol. 4, 175.  
Collection of the National Library of Medicine.
- Fig. 4 Mermen from Joannes Jonstonus, *Historiae Naturalis de Quadrupedibus...*
- Fig. 5 Mermaids exhibited successively in the Years 1758, 1775, and 1794.  
Engraved by J. Pass, for *Encyclopaedia Londinensis*, 1817.  
Collection of the Library of Congress.
- Fig. 6 “The Mermaid” George Cruikshank, 1822.  
Collection of the City of London Guildhall Library Print Room.
- Fig. 7 Mermaid made in Japan ca. 1825.  
Collection of Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden.
- Fig. 8 Mermaid.  
Collection of the Milwaukee Public Museum. Although card in case reads “Caught off the Sea of Japan 1823.” This may be an American imitation.

水滸三才圖會

入口嚼斷鯨之舌根鯨至斃故鯨畏之諸魚皆然矣惟  
 鱣鱠能制魚虎而已如入網則忽嚙破出去故漁者取  
 之者稀焉初冬有出于江邊矣蓋以猛魚得虎名爾猶  
 有蟲蠅虎蝎虎之名非必變為虎者之本草有變為虎者之有字以可考  
 鱣鱣鱣逆上龍門化竜亦然矣  
 城樓屋棟瓦作置龍頭魚身之形謂之魚虎其未和蓋置啣  
 吻於殿脊以辟火災者有所以啣吻詳於



人魚

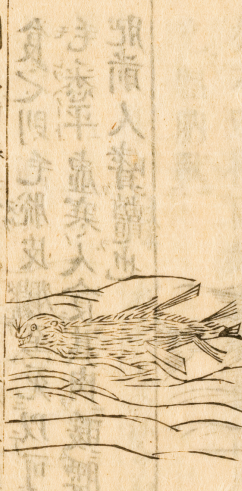
うんぎょ

鮫魚

和名抄引兼名苑云人魚鮫魚身人面者也  
 本綱引稽神錄云有謝仲玉者見婦人出沒水中腰已下  
 皆魚又有查道者奉使高麗見海沙中一婦人肘後有紅

甘美唯熬油為燈油耳西國處處亦有之其聲畧似犬  
如言於宇蓋海獺海鹿一物重出備考合

藥集 寂然如之類 小至如狗之類 必以名之類



膾膾膾

骨狢 海狗

膾狢狢 三字同 胡人呼之曰 阿慈勃他倫

本細膾膾膾諸說區多女直國撒馬兒罕朝鮮突厥國等  
北海有之又如三佛齋國南海亦有之毛色似狐尾形似  
魚足形似狗而無前兩足呼其外腎曰膾者連膾取之也  
膾膾膾大補中益腎氣暖腰膝又治驚狂癩疾  
△按膾膾魚州松前海中有之大者二三尺全體魚類而  
有毛乃此魚與獸半者矣頭似猫而口尖有眼鼻而無  
耳垂止有小孔其齒上一行下二行相叟長短齟齬其

和莫二才圖會

## De Cetis.

175



**M**ONSTRUM marinum ex tabula quadam excusa in Germania olim. Visum hoc aiunt esse Romæ in Ripa maiore, tertio die Novembris, anni Salutis M. D. XXIII. magnitudine pueri quinquennis, ea omnino specie qualis hic exprimitur.

GERMAN. Ein Meerwunder zu Rom gesehen / im Jar M. D. XXIII.



**M**ONSTRUM marinum quod hic pingimus, sicubi extat, Pan uel Satyrus marinus, aut Ichthyocentaurus, aut Dæmon marinus appelletur. Iconem à pictore quodam olim accepit: qui talis monstri sceleton Antuerpiæ depictum se accepisse aiebat. Alius etiam retulit simile monstrum aridum è Noruegia in Germaniam inferiorem aduectum, marem & foeminam. Fidem ei facere possunt similitum monstrorum effigies, proximè à nobis exhibitæ. Hoc quoniam humana specie supra lumbos & cornutum est, Pâna marinum, aut Satyrum marinum, quoniam simum quoque est, appellabimus. Pâna piscem quendam cetaceum uocari, in eoque asteritem lapidem inueniri, qui à Sole accendatur, & utilis sit ad philtrea, Aesopus Mithridatis anagnosta tradit, Suidas in *Hydræ*. In mari circa Taprobanen insulam cete quedam Satyrorum speciem similitudinèque præ se ferre tradunt, Aelianus. Eugenio quarto Pontifice apud urbem Sibiricum in Illyrico captus est marinus homo, qui ad mare puerum trahebat. Is à currentibus, qui rem aspexerat, lapidibus sustibusque uulneratus, in sicum tetractus est. Huius effigies penè humana, nisi quod cutis Anguillæ similis erat, & in capite duo parua habebat cornua. Manus quoque duorum tantum digitorum formam exprimebant. Pedes autem in duas ueluti caudas finiabantur: à quibus ad brachia alæ, ut in Vespertilione, extendebantur, Baptistæ Fulgosi. Plura leges in Historia Aquatilium nostra in Tritone.


GERMAN. F. Ein Meerweisfel.

Pan uel Sa-  
tyrus mar.  
Ichthyocen-  
taurus.  
Dæmonmar.

P 4







*Engraved by Geo. Cruikshank*      *Pub. by S. Humphrey 27 St. James's St. London*  
*Oct. 20<sup>th</sup> 1822*

*The Mermaid!*  
*Now Exhibiting at the Turf Coffee-house*  
*39 St. James's Street.*



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