

Benten-dori's Ever Changing Story

Isabelle Medina, University of Colorado Boulder



Title: Final of Re-Mix Project- Nobukuni, Enami. *"Unlabeled"*.1892, Benten-dori Yokohama

Introduction

The history of a country, city, even a single street is painted and sculpted by the many lives who call a place home. Over the course of years, even decades, people form identities tied to their community that facilitate vibrant cultures. Through storytelling, painting, photography, and other forms of artistic expression, these cultures can be preserved despite changing environments and historical transformations. Enami Nobukuni (also known as T. Enami) was a Japanese photographer who documented everyday life in

late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan.

When I visited the Rare and Distinctive Collections reading room at the University of Colorado Boulder library, I was drawn to a hand-colored photograph of Enami Photographic Studio on Benten-dori. My Remix project draws inspiration from T. Enami's photograph of Benten-dōri to explore how art preserves memories of everyday life even as cities are transformed by industrialization, natural disasters, and war. Through drawing, collaging, and hand coloring, that I created myself, that took

inspiration from Enami's original hand-colored image, I tried to express how memory continues to shape our understanding of place and history.

Enami Nobukuni was a Japanese Photographer, born in Tokyo Japan in 1859. His love for photography was evident as a student studying under Ogawa Kazumasa. When he eventually moved to Yokohama to open his first studio on Benten-dōri, Benten Street served as the backdrop for one of his most well known photographs.

This specific unlabeled photograph is the one I chose to study. The vibrant red Japanese flag, to me, highlighted the pride T. Enami had for his country, and I wanted to learn more about that. Although I later learned that the color was likely intensified by the aging process of the pigments, the flag still became an important symbol in my interpretation of the image. It reminded me that photographs are not simply records of the past; they are also shaped by the ways later viewers experience and interpret them. Enami would later hand-color the unlabeled piece, as he used numerous mediums to sell his work. Enami often sold photographs and hand-colored prints as souvenirs for tourists visiting Yokohama.

Photography captures a moment in time, preserving that very second for centuries to come. Often an artist's work reflects personal heritage, admirations, cultures, and family. Enami's unlabeled photograph scene of Benten-dōri serves as this very reflection. The photograph

dates roughly to the time of Enami's studio opening, which is the centerpiece of the actual photo I chose.

At the time his studio served as a tourist market hub, selling items like stereographs, lanterns, photo albums and even his own prints of Japan. At this time Yokohama was also filled with stores selling spices, porcelain, fine silk, and much more. Unfortunately, in 1923 his studio, along with the many small material shops along Benten-dōri, burned down in fire caused by the Great Kanto Earthquake. Although the physical streetscape was destroyed, Enami's photographs preserved a record of a community that would otherwise have been lost. This preservation became especially important because photographs captured not only buildings and businesses, but also the rhythms of everyday life. The people walking along Benten-dōri, shopping, working, and interacting with one another became part of a historical record that survived long after the street itself changed.

This catastrophic event did not keep him from sharing his love for Japanese photography, as he later reopened his studio. Today, his photographs provide a window into everyday life in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan. They offer viewers, myself included, insight into the vibrant culture of the artisan and commercial district along Benten-dōri.

Historical memory is often shaped by political events and the ways governments choose

to remember, or forget, the past. A country's government holds, and often, utilizes authority to alter or dictate the memory of its citizens. Later in Enami's life, Japan became transformed by war. In 1945, Japan, one of the Axis Powers of WWII, was actively fighting in multiple theaters. It was in 1945, that T. Enami's studio was destroyed by American B-29 fire bombings which bombed the already heavily victimized city of Yokohama.

World War II dramatically transformed Japanese cities, including Yokohama, leaving lasting physical and cultural impacts. Like many other small businesses within Yokohama, Enami never rebuilt his studio, forever altering the culture within the once vibrant artisan street of Benten-dōri. As a result, photographs like the one I studied have become increasingly valuable. They provide evidence of a place that no longer exists in the same form and allow later generations to imagine what everyday life looked like before war and redevelopment transformed the city. Photography captures a moment in time, preserving that very second for centuries to come. It remains raw and untainted by external forces. I believe the unlabeled photograph I chose by Enami serves as that very glimpse into Yokohama, a glimpse into everyday life before later disasters and wartime destruction transformed the city.

Today, the town of Yokohama looks drastically different. The once vibrant red Japanese flags that waved above Benten-dōri artisan shops have been replaced by corner grocery stores, high-tech skyscrapers, and tightly packed apartments. A scene forever changed by war and ever-growing industrialization. Through my remix I wanted to highlight that very change.

In the unlabeled photograph I chose, Enami handcolored his scene. I wanted to attempt to reflect the current day street of Benten-dōri through hand drawing. By adding elements of his actual photograph to my own piece, such as the vibrant Japanese flags, I hope it serves as a tie to the very different centuries and memory. This tie serves as a connection to unaltered or tainted by the politics of war.

By bringing elements of Enami's photograph into a contemporary depiction of Benten-dōri, my remix creates a dialogue between past and present. It demonstrates how art can preserve cultural memory even as places change dramatically over time. Just as Enami's photographs offer a window into early twentieth-century Yokohama, I hope my remix provides future viewers with a glimpse of Benten-dōri as it exists today. By placing past and present into conversation, I hoped to emphasize both what has been lost and what has endured.

Works Cited

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