In bakumatsu Japan, the multi-artist album was an established medium within shoga, a rich field of creativity before Western-derived art history split asunder ‘painting’ and ‘calligraphy’. For the album’s owner, it could stand as testament to his network and the cultural capital he commanded. For artists, their contributions might be paid work, tokens of friendship, or a means to advertise their status or ambitions. Edinburgh Central Library holds a deluxe example of such an album, containing 106 works by an impressive array of notable figures. In the late 19th century the album entered the possession of one of the foreign specialists hired by the Meiji government. For him, it delivered a very different kind of symbolic capital, as evidence of the alien culture he had experienced. Later, within the municipal collections, the album’s role shifted once again, to stand as evidence of the global reach of local figures and as symbol of international exchange. Having lain dormant for seventy years, the album will soon go on public display for the first time, repurposed as a representative example of Japanese art in the 19th century. This paper will examine the polyvalent quality of the album, with meanings that enter and recede according to the position and context of the observing individual.

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