Edward Sylvester Morse (1838-1925) was a great polymath - notable for his work in natural history, ethnography and art history - but, perhaps most famous for his work in bringing Japan and the West closer together.

Morse was one of the first Americans to live in Japan. He went there on a scientific expedition in 1877 and his enthusiasm and approach so impressed his hosts that he was made Chair of Zoology at the new Imperial University of Tokyo. But his interests were never limited to evolutionary theory and scientific methodology – in 1882 he turned his attention to ethnology and the documentation of life in Japan before it was transformed by Western modernization. In addition to preserving the household records of a samurai family and many accounts of the tea ceremony, Morse made notes on subjects as diverse as shop signs, fireworks, hairpins, agricultural tools, artists’ studios, music, games, printing, carpentry, the Ainu, gardens, household construction, art and architecture.

An accomplished draughtsman, his pencil and ink drawings, enliven his diaries and correspondence and make his papers a pleasure to read. He was also a great collector – his Japanese pottery are still a prized possession of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and his ethnological specimens form the core of the oriental holdings at the Peabody, where he was Director from 1880 to 1916.

He published some of his findings in Japanese Homes and their Surroundings (1886) and Japan Day by Day (1916), but there is so much more material in his archive, now awaiting the researcher. For instance:

• The original Japan diaries run to over 3,000 pages and contain over 1,300 sketches.
• Journals of visits to England, France and Germany in the 1880s show the interest of Europeans in gaining authentic insights into ordinary life in Japan and China.
• The correspondence includes exchanges with Louis Agassiz, William Sturgis Bigelow, Ernest Fenollosa, John M Gould, Percival Lowell, Frederick Putnam and Charles Weld, as well as with former students such as Chiomatsu Isahikawa.
• Scrapbooks contain a wealth of rare and ephemeral material on a myriad of subjects.
• Records of his publications and lectures reveal his interests in archaeology, art, astronomy, ethnology, religion and zoology, as well as his desire to encourage an American audience to appreciate Asian society and culture.

Morse was one of the earliest and most important mediators between American and Asian societies. It is fitting that his papers should now enable scholars to explore these links.
“It is splendid that the Papers of Edward S. Morse are now being made available in digital form. He was a crucial figure in the initial engagement between Japan and America and his papers will be of great interest not only to scholars of East Asia but also to Americanists concerned with their nation’s early contacts with the Far East.”

Professor Robert Rosenstone,
Consultant Editor,
Division of Humanities and Social Sciences,
California Institute of Technology
• The complete Edward S. Morse collection from the Phillips Library at the Peabody Essex Museum
• An essential source for those interested in the history of American relations with Japan and Japanese relations with America
• Material of interest to all East Asian Studies scholars and particularly to those focusing on social history, political history and the history of education
• Important source material for Asian art history
• Vital material for the study of ethnology

The collection can be accessed in a variety of ways:
• The existing finding aid has been expanded to provide a detailed browseable list
• All manuscripts have also been indexed (with reference to people, places and topics) and scholars can search across the descriptions and the indexing to find items of interest

We also offer valuable contextual material including a biography of Edward Sylvester Morse, a chronology and an Introductory Essay.