

## Hiroshige's colorful world of Edo

### Touring old Tokyo through the works of one of the most influential woodblock print artists

By [HUGH CORTAZZI](#)

HIROSHIGE: One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, by Melanie Trede and Lorenz Bichler. Taschen (ISBN978-4-88783-357-9), 294 pp., 2008, ¥15,750 (paper, with presentation box)

Hiroshige and Katsushika Hokusai are probably the two most famous Japanese artists in the West. They had a significant influence on the Post-Impressionists, including Vincent Van Gogh, Claude Monet and James McNeill Whistler, and on the *Japonisme* movement in European art in the latter part of the 19th century.

The publication of this sumptuous publication is timely, for this year is the 150th anniversary of Japan's first treaties with the five leading Western powers (United States, Netherlands, Russia, Britain and France — though not Italy as the introduction states), which provided for the opening in 1859 of diplomatic and trade relations.

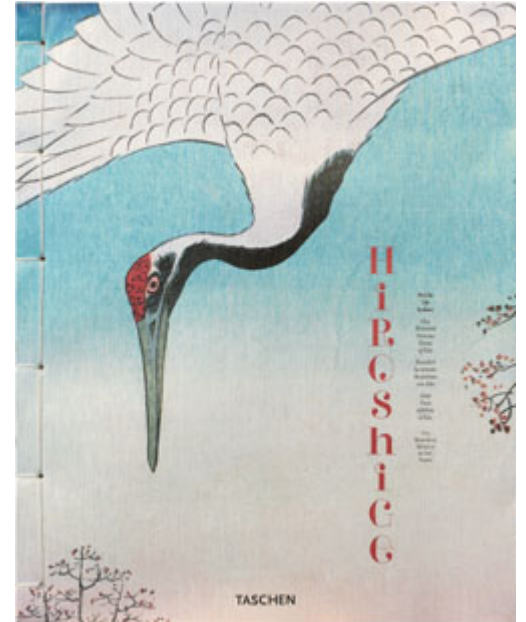
Hiroshige's 100 views of Edo were produced in the years 1856-1858 and provided a panorama of the sights in the capital. They are all upright or vertical prints in the size termed *o-ban* in Japanese. The prints that are kept by the Ota Museum in Tokyo are all from the first printing and, as they have been very well preserved, the colors are authentic and have not faded like so many other sets. The prints were the result of a cooperative effort between the artist, the woodblock cutter and the printer who applied the colors.

Although these prints are described as "100 views" there were in fact a total of 120. All of these have been reproduced in this book in full color and at the original size. Each plate is accompanied by a full description and explanation of the work. There is an informative introduction in English, French and German. The book is bound in traditional Japanese style and comes in a handsome case, also illustrated in color.

The prints were generally made to look like paintings. They functioned like modern color picture postcards and were intended as souvenirs for visitors to particular beauty spots, shrines and temples.

In a number of prints, elements of Western-style perspective, which had been imported into Japan during the Edo Period (1603-1867), were used. In some, the artist has adopted the traditional Japanese birds-eye view. The most striking feature to the Western eye is, however, the way in which the pictures were composed to draw particular attention to certain features or points in the picture. This element in Japanese prints had a particular resonance for Post-Impressionist artists.

The season plays an important role in some but not all the prints. Artists were forbidden to depict Edo castle, the palace of the shogun. As a result there is a hole in the middle of Edo!



Best views: front cover (top) of "Hiroshige: One Hundred Famous Views of Edo"; "Plum Park in Kameido" (above).



Hiroshige (1797-1858), sometimes known as Ando Hiroshige, was the son of a samurai official in Edo in charge of firefighting. After his parents died he studied art under Utagawa Toyohiro and became an *ukiyo-e* artist. He adopted techniques from other schools and developed his own style. At first he specialized in depicting attractive courtesans, but inspired by one of Japan's greatest artists Hokusai (1760-1849), he specialized in landscapes and nature subjects. His most famous series is the "Fifty-Three Stations on the Tokaido (*Tokaido gojusan tsugi*)," but the 100 views of Edo deserves at least equal status.

Anyone interested in Japanese landscape prints and in Hiroshige, or who wants an artistic view of the sights of Edo at the time the Treaties were signed 150 years ago, will want to possess this luxurious volume.

Hugh Cortazzi, a former British career diplomat, served as ambassador to Japan from 1980 to 1984.

"Sudden Shower Over Shin-Ohashi Bridge and Atake." COPYRIGHT  
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