

BOOK REVIEWS



Hiroshige: One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, by Prof. Dr. Melanie Trede and Dr. Lorenz Bichler, Taschen GmbH, Cologne, Germany, 2007. Multilingual Edition: English, German, French, 294 pages, two essays, 119 plates with commentaries, Bibliography, Chronology of Japanese Historical Periods, Editorial Notes, Acknowledgements, 42.5 x 34 cm. ISBN 978-3-8228-4827-2, £80 (Japanese binding and bookcase).



Detail of inside front cover

THE PUBLICATION of this sumptuous collection of prints is timely. This year is the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the conclusion of the first treaties between Japan and the five leading Western powers inter-

ested in establishing relations with a country which had kept out most foreigners for some two hundred and fifty years. These five countries were the USA, the Netherlands, Russia, Britain and France (not Italy as the introduction states). The treaties signed between late July and October 1858 provided for the opening in 1859 of diplomatic and trade relations. The process had begun with the arrival of Commodore Perry's "Black Ships" in 1853, but 1858 saw the real break-through. The British Treaty with Japan was signed at Edo on August 26th, 1858. It was called "The Treaty of Yedo" (Yedo being a spelling of Edo used by some foreigners at that time).

Utogawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), sometimes known as Ando Hiroshige, was the son of a samurai official in Edo who was in charge of fire-fighting. After his parents died, when he was only twelve years old, he studied art under Utogawa

Toyohiro, adopting in accordance with tradition the surname of his master, and became an *ukiyo-e* artist. *Ukiyo-e* means pictures of the floating world which was a euphemism for courtesans. He quickly adopted techniques from other schools and developed his own style. At first he specialised in depicting attractive courtesans but inspired by one of Japan's greatest artists Katsuchika Hokusai (1760–1849) he later specialised in landscapes and nature subjects. His output was prodigious.

He produced more than one hundred and twenty illustrated books and over four thousand individual prints of scenes throughout the main islands of Japan. In the 1840s his *Tōto Meisho* was published. This consisted of ten views of scenes in the eastern capital, i.e. Edo which came to be renamed Tokyo after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. This collection was followed by what is probably his most famous set of prints, the *Tōkaidō gojūsan tsugi* (Fifty-Three Stations on the "Eastern Sea Road", the main highway between Edo and Miyako, the capital, i.e. Kyoto: there were in fact fifty-five prints in the series).

Other series of prints by Hiroshige include *Ōmi Hakkei* (Eight views of Ōmi, i.e. of Lake Biwa near Kyoto), *Edo kinkō hakkei* (eight views of places near Edo), *Kiso kaidō rokujūkyū tsugi* (Sixty-Nine Stations on the Kiso road, which was another famous route through the mountains of Central Japan). His last great collection was *Meisho Edo hyakkei* (One hundred famous views of Edo) which is just as, if not more, impressive than his more famous *Tōkaidō gojūsan tsugi*. The prints in this last series are reproduced in full colour and original size in this volume.

Hiroshige's series of one hundred famous views of Edo was 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 *ō-ban* in Japanese. The prints which are kept by the Ota Museum in Tokyo are all from the first printing and as they have been very well preserved in the museum the colours are authentic and have not faded as so many other sets have faded.

Although these prints are described as one hundred views

there were in fact a total of one hundred and twenty. Each plate in this volume is accompanied by a full description and explanation in English, German and French. The informative introduction is also in the three languages. The book is bound in traditional Japanese style and comes in a handsome case illustrated in colour.

As the introduction points out the prints represent a cooperative effort between the artist, the woodblock cutter and the printer who applied the colours. The prints were generally made to look like paintings. They functioned like modern colour picture postcards in the sense that they were intended as souvenirs for visitors to particular beauty spots, shrines and temples. The Japanese in those days greatly enjoyed, as they still do, festivals and firework displays and Hiroshige gave due prominence to these happy occasions. Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines attracted pilgrims and these, as well as famous beauty spots, including those well known for their displays of cherry blossoms, wisteria, irises and other flowers, were covered by Hiroshige. With increasing affluence Japanese at the end of the Edo period had begun to travel whenever they could, but as there was at that time no wheeled traffic on the roads journeys even of a short distance were time consuming, expensive and tiring.

The season plays an important role in some but not all the prints. Spring is depicted in forty-two prints, summer in thirty, autumn in twenty-six and winter in twenty including some memorable snow scenes. Edo like modern Tokyo generally had a few winter days when there were heavy falls of snow. Although these soon melted, Hiroshige, no doubt impressed by the contrasts brought out by Japanese winter sunshine, quickly sketched some memorable snow scenes such as *Yushima Tenjin saka no ue chōbō* (plate 117). The air of Edo was relatively unpolluted and there were no high buildings allowed. As a result Mt Fuji was often visible from Edo, as it occasionally is from modern Tokyo. So Hiroshige includes some of his best views of Mt Fuji such as that from *Suruga-chō* (plate 8).

One thing is missing. There is no picture of the Shogun's

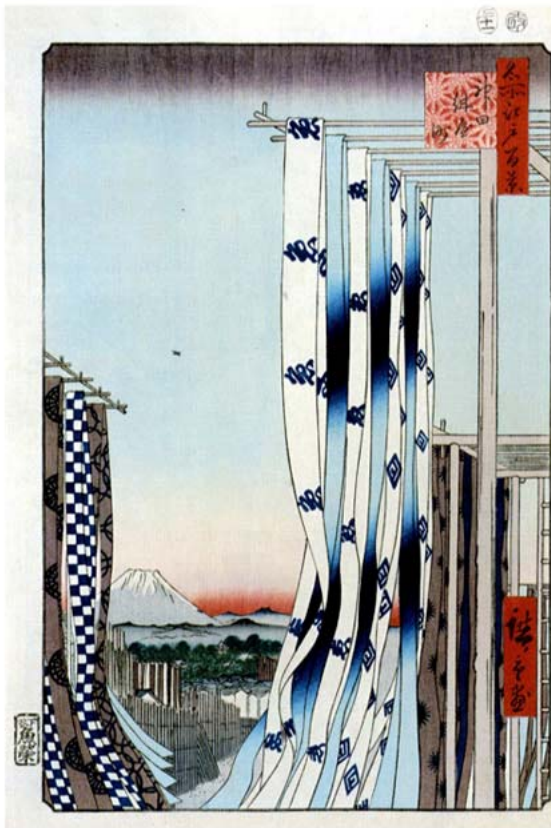


Plate 75, *The Dyers' Quarter in Kanda*

The foreground is dominated by strips of patterned cloth hung out to dry by one of the dye works in the Kanda neighbourhood. In the background are the snowcapped Mount Fuji and a shogun's castle

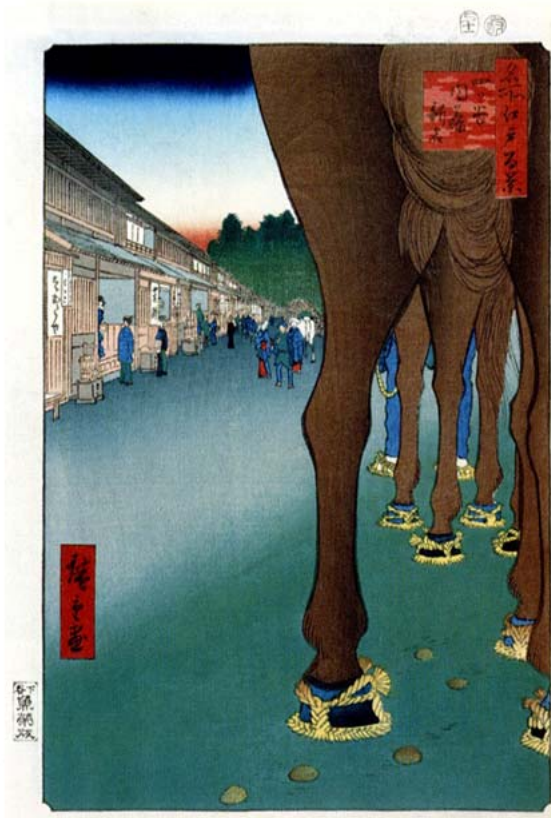


Plate 86, *Naitō Shinjuku in Yotsuya*

This print employs an extraordinary perspective. The viewpoint allows a close-up of the straw-shod hooves, hind legs and knotted tail of a horse, as well as the animal's dung on the ground

palace. Artists were forbidden to depict the palace which was in Edo castle. As a result there is a hole in the middle of Edo!

Western art techniques had been imported into Japan during the Edo period (1600–1868), despite Japan's strict seclusion policies, and in a number of prints elements of Western style perspective were used, as for instance in the night scene in Edo (plate 90). In some prints the artist has adopted the traditional Japanese birds-eye view as in the print of *Kanda Kōn'ya chō* (plate 75) or *Kanasugibashi Shibaura* (plate 80). The most striking feature to the Western eye is, however, the way in which pictures were composed to draw particular attention to certain features or points in the picture. A striking example of this technique is *Yotsuya Naitō Shinjuku* (plate 86) showing a street scene behind the back legs of a large horse. Sometimes Hiroshige's artistry seems almost too contrived to the Western eye as in *Ueno sannai Tsuki no matsu*, where the eye is drawn to the image of a pagoda behind houses in moonlight over water seen through an artificially created circle formed by a pine tree branch (plate 89).

A number of these techniques as well as the artist's vibrant use of strong colours appealed strongly to Post-Impressionist artists. Vincent van Gogh's *The Bridge in the Rain* of 1887 is stated to be after Hiroshige and is based on the print of a sudden shower on *Ōhashi Bridge* in this series (plate 58). Hiroshige's print of *Kyōbashi Takegashi* in moonlight (plate 76) inspired James McNeill Whistler's *Nocturne in blue and gold Old Battersea Bridge* (circa 1872/1875). The print *Horikiri no hanashōbu* (plate 64) influenced Claude Monet in his depiction of irises. Students of Japonisme, who have looked at the extensive literature on the subject in English will find here many other examples of direct and indirect influences on Post-Impressionist painters. (Relevant books include *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence on Western art since 1858* by Siegfried Wichmann, Thames and Hudson 1981, *Japonisme: Cultural Crossings between Japan and the West* by Lionel Lambourne, Phaidon, 2005, and *Monet and Japan*, a catalogue of an exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia, 2001).

It is difficult to select particularly outstanding prints from the wealth of striking and memorable prints featured in this volume but one of my favourites is *Minowa Kanasugi Mikawashima* (plate 102) on which the book's cover is based. Readers, familiar with Tokyo today, will know Tora-no-mon and may be fascinated by the print of *Toranomoto Aoi-zaka* showing the palace moat at night with itinerant food sellers and pedestrians with lanterns (plate 113). Another print which I find particularly attractive is that of people walking with umbrellas on the street by *Nihonbashi (Nionbashi tōri itchōme ryakuzu)* (plate 44).

When we compare these prints with early photographs of Japan and drawings and paintings of local scenes by the first Western visitors to Japan after the reopening of the country in 1859, we cannot fail to be impressed by the artistry and imagination of Japanese print artists one hundred and fifty years ago. But we should bear in mind that these prints inevitably give a romantic picture of Japan as it was in those days.

Hiroshige and Hokusai are probably the two Japanese artists most famous in the West. This is partly because of their influence on Western artists and the vogue for things Japanese which developed after Japan was reopened, but it is also because prints can be more easily reproduced and because so many Western museums have good collections of prints. Japanese screens and other paintings are fragile and can only be displayed for short periods as they are liable to be affected by light.

Anyone interested in Japanese landscape prints and in Hiroshige in particular or who wants an artistic view of the sights of Edo at the time the Treaties were signed in 1858 will want to possess this luxurious volume.

Sir Hugh Cortazzi

Sir Hugh Cortazzi is a former British Ambassador to Japan (1980–1984). He joined the Foreign Service after graduating from the School of Oriental and African Studies at University of London with a degree in modern Japanese. President of the Asiatic Society of Japan, 1982–1983, he is the author of numerous works on Asian subjects.