

JAPAN

*'Hiroshige/Eisen: The Sixty-Nine Stations of the Kisokaido,' by Sebastian Izzard, top, and
'Hiroshige,' by Melanie Trede and Lorenz Bichler.*

PAGING through two luxurious new books filled with the work of Hiroshige, one of the great figures of 19th-century Japanese art, it's hard to believe that his woodblock prints once sold for the price of a bowl of rice, and that their initial success depended largely on their appeal to souvenir-hungry tourists — as well as advertisers who understood the concept of product placement long before Hollywood studios began putting Coke cans into close-ups.

But Western artists like Whistler, Pissarro and Van Gogh, who championed these ukiyo-e, or "pictures of the floating world," didn't care about that and neither should we. Instead, we can admire the elegant wintry stillness of a scene like "Bikuni Bridge in Snow" in Melanie Trede and Lorenz Bichler's **HIROSHIGE: One Hundred Famous Views of Edo** (Taschen, \$150), and only later be amused to discover that its most prominent piece of calligraphy is a restaurant billboard offering "mountain whale," a euphemism for wild game in a rapidly changing society where Buddhist dietary strictures hadn't entirely faded. Bichler and Trede's book is filled with this kind of striking detail, but its main appeal is its brilliant reproduction of one of the rare complete sets of Hiroshige's original views of Japan's bustling commercial capital, owned by the Ota Memorial Museum of Art in Tokyo, the city of Edo's modern-day successor. Bound from the first run, it illuminates the subtle,

painterly effects that were often lost as individual images were reprinted over and over, with less attentiveness and skill, as many as 15,000 times.

Arranged by the seasons and containing some of his most popular works, "One Hundred Famous Views of Edo" was Hiroshige's final masterpiece, not quite finished when he died, probably in a cholera epidemic, in 1858. He had come to prominence in the 1830s with a series of prints of "The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido," the great highway between the shogun's seat of power in Edo and the old imperial city of Kyoto.

This led to another project, completed in the early 1840s, documenting an important route through the central highlands, which he was asked to finish after a fellow samurai artist, the talented but feckless Keisai Eisen, left after contributing 24 prints. As Sebastian Izzard points out in his introduction and commentary in **HIROSHIGE/EISEN: The Sixty-Nine Stations of the Kisokaido** (Braziller, \$80), Hiroshige seems to have become less interested in documenting particular places than in capturing their atmosphere, using graphic elements and blocks of color to suggest elusive emotions. Especially in his haunting night scenes, bathed in moonlight, he can be seen developing the innovative impressionistic techniques that would make him, as the critic Mary Fenollosa put it, "the master of mist, snow and rain." ALIDA BECKER