

Utagawa Hiroshige The Moon Reflected

Later woodblock prints from the British Museum,
curated by Julian Opie with the assistance of Timothy Clark.

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Utagawa Hiroshige *The Moon Reflected*
Later woodblock prints from the British Museum
Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK
28 November 2007 – 20 January 2008

The Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool, UK
8 March – 26 April 2008

Curated by Julian Opie with the assistance of Timothy Clark

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Hiroshige's Last Landscapes: A World Turned on End

Henry D. Smith II

In 1853, Utagawa Hiroshige turned 59 and Matthew Perry arrived in Japan. Each was the beginning of an end, of Hiroshige's last five years on earth, and of the collapse of the Tokugawa regime fifteen years later after a period of sustained political, military and economic turmoil induced by both the threat and opportunity of newly industrialised Western imperialism. This latter tumult almost never appeared directly in Hiroshige's final landscapes, except for a glimpse of Western-style leggings on soldiers in a crowd, or a scar left on the landscape by earth removed to build island-forts in Edo Bay. Hiroshige's art revealed the profound political and economic change of the Bakumatsu period ("end of the Bakufu," the conventional later term for the years from Perry's arrival to the Meiji Restoration) in far more subtle ways, most centrally by his turn to the vertical format in his single-sheet landscape prints, of which this exhibition offers a fine cross-section.

To be sure, Hiroshige's turn to the vertical was driven by artistic concerns, not political. In retrospect, however, we can imagine that the two came to work hand in glove. The artist turned vertical in a search for new formats and new techniques of composition, but we cannot help feel that his constant breaking out of the frame and experimenting with radical juxtapositions of near and far, were efforts both to express and control the broader global reframing into which Japan was thrust headlong earlier than any other non-Western nation. It has become stereotypical – despite the frequent protests of academic historians – to depict Edo Japan as a closed world, the victim of self-imposed isolation from which it was rescued only when opened by the West. The profoundly Eurocentric and deeply misleading nature of this conception may never be erased, but suffice it to say that Japan of the early nineteenth century was in many ways the most cosmopolitan nation outside of the European world order.

Hiroshige's first sustained effort at the vertical landscape print was the series *Famous Views of the Sixty-Odd Provinces* that began in mid-1853 (just one month after Perry's arrival in July), and was largely completed by the end of the year. (There followed a blank period of almost a year, for reasons unknown, and then the sporadic appearance of the remaining twenty prints in the series until its completion in late 1857.) Precedents for vertical landscapes came most obviously from the deeply entrenched tradition of the

Chinese hanging scroll, the influence of which can be easily detected in various late Hiroshige landscapes. An inspiration more near at hand was the artist's own use of the print format known as *tanzaku*, after the traditional poem cards. *Tanzaku* prints (an elongated vertical format in a rough 3:1 ratio) became popular for bird-and-flower prints in particular, of which Hiroshige produced a large number, but he also experimented with the format for a few landscapes. It was probably his use in some of these prints of a foreground bird or flower against a distant landscape that provided the germ of the far more dramatic near-far contrasts that would appear in about one-third of his great *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*.¹

Hiroshige never designed a *tanzaku* series of more than four or five prints, so that a project of the scale of the *Sixty-Odd Provinces* represented a new departure for the artist. The proportion of an *ōban* print turned to "portrait" orientation yielded a height-to-width ratio of 3:2, stretched not as tall as a *tanzaku* but still a decisive re-orientation from the fixed "landscape" format of Hiroshige's earlier oeuvre. Except for a handful of recognized masterpieces, this series has never been favoured by aficionados of the artist, neither in Japan nor in the West, but rather by connoisseurs of printing. To Western eyes, the content seems bland and simply decorative, while to Japanese, or at least to the mainstream of serious scholars of Hiroshige, they are condemned as imitative, an artistic failing that was itself modeled after modern European notions of individual creativity, originality and mimetic truth.

It is certainly true that Hiroshige turned directly to printed gazetteers for the underlying topographical data of most of the sixty-nine landscapes in the *Sixty-Odd Provinces*. He was an armchair traveller, relying on visual information provided by a genre of illustrated gazetteers that had grown by leaps and bounds since the late eighteenth century. Broadly known as *meisho zue*, "picture-views of famous places," the genre began with the *Miyako meisho zue* of 1780, illustrating the many famous sights of the imperial capital of Kyoto. By the 1850s, when Hiroshige began the *Sixty-Odd Provinces*, dozens of such works had appeared in print, each generally dedicated to a particular region, with informative text and copious single-page or double-spread illustrations by skilled topographical artists who are for the most part known to have sketched the sites directly. The resulting books were printed in black ink, in fine detail, with place names often inscribed within the black-lined frame that boxed in the image on each page (even when two facing pages constituted a single view, as was usually the case). The viewpoint was generally a high

bird's-eye view, and such linear components as buildings were executed in traditional isometric perspective, with occasional dramatic use of Western linear perspective (the effects of which the Japanese had come to know well since its introduction in the 1740s).

However much he relied on the data of such gazetteers, Hiroshige utterly transformed their impact, both through the medium and his composition. Most obviously, these smallish black map-like drawings were transformed into large and glorious single-sheet multi-coloured "brocade prints" (*nishiki-e*), over four times the printed area of a typical book page. Most importantly, Hiroshige completely re-worked the compositions and details of his models, to provide a more direct and intimate view of each place. While up-ending the long-established tradition of single-sheet ukiyo-e landscapes by adopting a vertical format, Hiroshige also brought the topographical tradition down to earth by lowering the viewpoint of the models, establishing a horizon (either expressed by a horizon line or implied by the use of a level view) from one-fifth to half-way down the height of the print.

It is intriguing to analyse Hiroshige's transformation of the gazetteer views, a task simplified by the recent publication of a book comparing each finished print with the presumed model.² Beyond dropping the angle of view, Hiroshige often zoomed in to small details, or carved out one corner of the model view to expand it into a full-sized vertical. True to the colour print tradition, he almost always added seasonal motifs where none existed in the originals, typically spring blossoms or autumn foliage in glorious colour. Most of the human figures in the *Sixty-Odd Provinces* were miniscule or non-existent, less out of imitation of the gazetteer models than from an impulse to distance the viewer from human figures and force concentration on the larger landscape, a tendency clear in all Hiroshige's late landscapes. In this way, he moved ever closer to pure landscape, back to the ancient Chinese models in which man was wholly subjugated to an overwhelming nature, appearing ant-like if at all. This tendency is most apparent in his great set of three landscape triptychs of 1857 that appear in this exhibition. (It is worth noting that in these triptychs, which each present a unified panorama as a whole, each separate vertical panel also has a compositional unity of its own.)

The full potential of Hiroshige's new turn to vertical landscapes would be truly fulfilled only with the launching of his *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* in the spring of 1856. The *Sixty-Odd Provinces* still had a handful of prints to go, but had lost steam and would

finally be completed in late 1857. The new series brought Hiroshige back home to Edo, both geographically and spiritually, and he would continue working on it until his death in the cholera epidemic of summer 1858, by which time the number of views had reached 117, well beyond the promised one hundred. The series had the strong commitment of the publisher, Uoya Eikichi, to prints of the highest technical quality, surpassing even the *Sixty-Odd Provinces* in the lavish printing effects. In both series, later reprintings would begrudge much of this effort, and the blocks would wear thin, but the first printings of both series, and especially the *One Hundred Views*, remain among the technical masterpieces of late ukiyo-e in the *ōban* format.

For all but a few of this new series, Hiroshige turned not to gazetteers but to his personal knowledge of the places in his native city, in some cases using his own direct sketches. About one-third of the places depicted in the *One Hundred Views* had appeared frequently in earlier single-sheet landscapes both by Hiroshige and others, and another one-third had been shown occasionally, but the remainder were unique, most of them places that were not particularly famous. Even for the most stereotypical sites (such as Ryōgoku Bridge), Hiroshige devised wholly new angles of view and styles of composition, most of them clearly provoked by the new possibilities of the vertical format with which he began experimenting in the *Sixty-Odd Provinces*. He went far beyond the earlier series, however, in developing a whole novel kind of near-far composition in which a dramatically enlarged and often sharply cropped foreground object was set against a distant view. I have elsewhere tried to trace the roots of this device, interpreting it as an effort to create “moving pictures” that capture the immediacy and experiential qualities of a particular place.³ More symbolically, we can sense in Hiroshige’s ingenious experiments of the near-far variety an effort both to express a world in rapid motion, and at the same time an effort to stabilize that world by framing and attachment to familiar icons and customs.

A provocative new book-length analysis of the *Edo Hundred* (*Edo-hyaku*, a popular term for this series among ukiyo-e specialists) by Harashida Minoru offers still another level of complexity to this last great landscape effort by Hiroshige.⁴ Harashida, who died of cancer earlier this year, too soon to see the publication of his book in May, had become interested in the series when translating my own 1986 commentaries into Japanese.⁵ A long-time aficionado of Edo culture, Harashida speculated that there existed more than just a vague connection between the turbulent events of Bakumatsu Edo and the content of the *Edo Hundred*. Since each print in the series bears a censor’s seal designating an

exact month (assuming, plausibly, that each print was actually published soon after the censor's approval), he carefully combed through the major chronicles and diaries of the era in search of links between current events and the places depicted.

Using this method, Harashida was able to identify 45 prints in the series – over one-third of the total – in which he posited some connection, almost always hidden, between event and image. By far the most common connections reflected the laborious reconstruction of the city of Edo following the hugely destructive Ansei Earthquake in the 11th Month of 1854, just over a year before the series began. Harashida's first discovery, an intriguing example, was *Kinryūzan Temple, Asakusa* (p. 50), about which he posed a simple question: why should a snow scene be published in the heat of summer (with a censor's seal of 7th Month, 1856)? He soon discovered that publication of the print had been preceded in the 5th Month by the final restoration of the five-storey pagoda at this famous temple in Asakusa, which had been badly damaged in the earthquake, its spire left tottering to one side. The red gate against the white snow thus becomes an indication not of season, but rather of celebration – using the traditional festive colors of red and white – of the rebuilt pagoda. The image may even harbour a subtle reference to the earthquake damage, in the slight right-ward tilt of the top-most section of the spire.

Another example from this exhibition is *Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi and Atake* (p. 63). The event that provoked this view, Harashida proposes, was the rebuilding of the shogunal boathouses one month before the seal date of Ninth Month, 1857. The version of this famous print shown in this exhibition is an unusual early state, in which the outlines of the boathouses on the far shore can be clearly identified by their white gables to the far left. Harashida argues that the semi-concealment of these structures by dark gray overprinting in the better-known later state may reflect the publisher's reluctance to display shogunal authority so directly. In other words, it was a political adjustment, out of deference to the political authorities.

In those examples that involved such sharp near-far compositions, Harashida saw a pattern by which the close-up object – such as the great lantern hanging in the gate of the Asakusa temple – was a straightforward icon of the entire site, whereas the distant view harboured a far more hidden intimation of a recent event or some personal connection of the artist to the place. Without exception, Harashida's speculations are just that, based on circumstantial evidence. Yet his proposals are highly suggestive in bringing us much closer to the

immediate mindset of those for whom the prints were initially intended in the late 1850s. These were real, living and constantly evolving places, experienced daily by hundreds, often thousands of the residents of Edo. Today, a century and a half later, Japanese and non-Japanese alike appreciate these images from a cool distance, in far more aesthetic ways. We are now the armchair travellers, with little knowledge of the actual places. This is a wonderful kind of travel, worth the trip, but we should pause now and again to imagine the real world of the great city of Edo in an era of vast and urgent change, and hark to the distant echoes of that change that are inextricably woven into the very fibres of these lavish artifacts.

1

For more detail on this issue, see Henry D. Smith II, “‘He Frames a Shot!’: Cinematic Vision in Hiroshige’s *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*.” *Orientalia*, 31:1 (March 2000), pp. 90–96.

2

Moriyama Yoshiño and Matsumura Masako, *Hiroshige no Shokoku rokujūyoshū tabigeshiki* (Tokyo: Jinbunsha, 2005).

3

See Henry D. Smith II, *op.cit.*

4

Harashida Minoru. *Nazotoki Hiroshige ‘Edo-hyaku’*. Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2007.

5

Henry D. Smith II and Amy G. Poster, *Hiroshige, One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*. New York: George Braziller, 1986. Japanese translation, Iwanami Shoten, 1992.