

Hiroshige: An Artist's Journey

The Honolulu Museum of Art has the world's largest collection of prints designed by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), comprising more than 3,000 examples. This is no small statement, when one considers that more than any other figure in Japan's long history (excluding perhaps his older contemporary, Hokusai), Hiroshige has attained a universal recognition that places him among the world's most iconic artists. Part of an elite group that includes such luminaries as Monet and van Gogh—both of whom also are represented in HMA's holdings—Hiroshige's works are immediately familiar, regardless of one's cultural, ethnic or political background. Indeed, both Monet and van Gogh were influenced by Hiroshige, and two of van Gogh's paintings copy his designs.

Among the Hiroshige prints in HMA's collection are multiple impressions of each design for his most famous series, *53 Stations of the Tōkaidō*, depicting the road from the political center of Edo (modern Tokyo) to the ancient capital of Kyoto. The traditional story, recounted in a biography published in 1894 and supposedly based on a statement by one of Hiroshige's students, says that Hiroshige was invited to accompany an official procession that left Edo in the eighth lunar month of 1832 (or perhaps slightly earlier) to escort the annual gift of a white horse from the shogun to the emperor. Along the way, Hiroshige made sketches of his experiences, documenting the entire journey.

When he returned to Edo, he approached Hōeidō, a relatively unknown publishing firm owned by Takenouchi Magohachi, with the idea of doing a large series of 55 prints (including the starting and ending points of Edo and Kyoto) based on these sketches. Although Takenouchi responded enthusiastically, the scale of the project was beyond the capacity of his firm, and so he entered into a collaboration with the more established company Senkakudō. Based on information included in the prints, we know that Hōeidō and Senkakudō together published eleven prints in the series, but once

he attained sufficient financial stability, Takenouchi eventually took over the project, exclusively publishing the remaining prints. He also had the names of Senkakudō and its owner, Tsuruya Kiemon, removed from the prints they originally had published together, and made other, sometimes significant, design changes at the same time.

The series was an immense success, catapulting both Takenouchi and Hiroshige into the limelight, where they stayed for the rest of their lives. Indeed, prints from the series remained popular long after Hiroshige's death, and it is thought that impressions were struck off the original (although sometimes heavily recarved) blocks well into the Meiji period (1868-1912). Later scholars have questioned many details of Hiroshige's journey, pointing out that his designs often find precedents in earlier sources or appear to be more from the artist's own imagination than from sketches of the actual locations they supposedly depict. Nevertheless, the series remains a unique opportunity to take a nostalgic journey through a now vanished landscape, and to see through the eyes of one of its most visionary artists the people, places, and experiences that defined everyday life in 19th-century Japan.

The Tōkaidō

There is music of the harp in the pine trees and the sound of the timbrel in the waves; the panting of the carriers is like the sound of flutes, and the stamp of the horses' feet like the boom of the big drum.

-Jippensha Ikku, *Shank's Mare*
(translated by Thomas Satchell)

The Tōkaidō, or "Eastern Sea Route," already had an ancient history by Hiroshige's time, being one of seven major road networks established during the Nara period (645-794) in order to consolidate political control over the distant regions of the country and facilitate tax revenues. The eastern part of Honshū, the largest of Japan's islands, was remote from the capitals of Nara, and later Kyoto, but it grew in importance significantly when the Minamoto shogunate (1185-1336) established its capital at Kamakura, and once again when the Tokugawa shogunate (1615-1868) located its capital at Edo (modern Tokyo); in each case, the Tōkaidō was the main transportation route connecting these newer political centers with the ancient capital of Kyoto, home of the emperors who retained symbolic (if not actual) authority over the shoguns.

Over the course of the Tokugawa period, the Tōkaidō continually grew in importance. Due to its key role in maintaining control over the country, the Tokugawa shoguns enfeoffed their closest supporters in the provinces through which the Tōkaidō passed, and charged them with the development of the road, along which fifty-three stations were eventually established. These stations maintained government rest houses (*honjin*) for official delegations and horses for couriers, who could make the entire trip of more than 300 miles from Edo to Kyoto in approximately four days. While the road presented a significant burden for the general population, which was expected to provide labor and supplies for its upkeep free of charge, over time non-official inns, teahouses, restaurants and

other facilities also were developed for ordinary travelers, and the communities along the Tōkaidō enjoyed increased economic opportunities, evident in the shops lining the road in many of the towns depicted by Hiroshige in this exhibition.

By the 19th century, the Tōkaidō had attained an iconic cultural status that might be compared to Route 66 (colloquially known as the Main Street of America) in modern U.S. history. Guidebooks for the Tōkaidō, eventually illustrated, were published as early as the 17th century; literature describing trips along the road became popular, culminating with Jippensha Ikku's (1765-1831) comical *Shank's Mare* in the early 19th century; and the Tōkaidō increasingly was portrayed by artists, of whom none were more closely associated with it than Hiroshige. In fact, despite his prodigious output in a wide variety of genres, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Hiroshige specialized in the Tōkaidō, designing no less than twenty-six series or prints related to it in some way over the course of more than three decades.

Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)

Hiroshige was born Andō Tokutarō to a samurai family living in the Yaesugahashi district of Edo (modern Tokyo). His father was part of the government fire brigade (an important function in a city wracked with disastrous conflagrations), a position he inherited after both his parents died at the age of thirteen. Posthumous sources indicate that in this capacity he was able to learn the rudiments of traditional Kanō School painting (an orthodox style emphasizing landscapes that received official patronage from the shogunate) from another fireman living in the same ward named Okajima Rinsai.

It is believed that he approached the prolific print designer Utagawa Toyokuni (1769-1825) when he was around fourteen or fifteen years old, but was rejected as a student, and so he turned instead to the studio of another Utagawa School artist, Toyohiro (1763?-1828), under whom he eventually took the name of Hiroshige (following the convention in which the first character of a student's name came from the last character of his teacher's name). Toyohiro was less successful than Toyokuni, and this, combined with Hiroshige's official duties, seems to have resulted in the slow and unremarkable development of his artistic career through the 1810s and 1820s. During this time, his work primarily focused on conservative subjects of beautiful women (*bijin*) and Kabuki actors, but he was overshadowed by more successful students of Toyokuni's, including his two main contemporaries in the Utagawa School, Kunisada (1786-1865) and Kuniyoshi (1797-1861).

The world of Japanese prints was revolutionized in 1830 with the publication of the series *36 Views of Mount Fuji* by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), which brought the landscape genre to the forefront of ukiyo-e, and also increased interest in the city of Edo as an artistic subject. In this sense it is not surprising that in the early 1830s Hiroshige began depicting his home city, with two major series on Edo initiated in the first years of the decade. He also started designing prints of birds and flowers, and between these two

genres, he attained a greater degree of both commercial and artistic success. James Michener had high praise for Hiroshige's bird and flower designs, describing them as "notably superior" to Hokusai's: "Hiroshige drew his [flowers] in soft whispers of spring air and his results were enchantingly poetic." Similarly, Hiroshige scholar Matthi Forrer described him as "*the* artist who recorded the famous places in Edo."

In 1832 Hiroshige turned over his hereditary government position to another member of the family, and dedicated himself full time to the arts. Within two years, he had his major breakthrough with the series *53 Stations of the Tōkaidō*, firmly establishing Hiroshige as the leading ukiyo-e landscape artist of his generation (and eventually giving him a virtual monopoly over the genre). Although Hiroshige eventually would make nearly 800 designs depicting the Tōkaidō, many consider his first set, the subject of this exhibition, to be unsurpassed, and such scenes as *Night Snow at Kambara* and *Driving Rain at Shōno* hold a special place within the staggering number of designs Hiroshige completed during his lifetime (estimated at some 4,500), as among his most immediately recognizable works.

The Life of a Design

Once Hiroshige's (or any artist's) designs were handed over to the publisher and carved into blocks, they took on a life of their own that could be subject to considerable change. Repeated printing caused wear to the fine lines of carving on the block, which over time became noticeable, resulting in poorer-quality impressions. Both block wear and careless printing could result in improper registration (the alignment of the blocks used to print different colors), so that colors bled outside of their outlines. Printers might use alternate colors for different printings, sometimes intentionally to create various effects (for example, a line of black along the top edge to indicate a night sky versus a line of blue to indicate a daytime sky), but more often to reduce costs by simplifying color schemes or using less expensive pigments, with dramatic results.

In addition, blocks could be recarved in part or even entirely replaced to make significant changes to the composition. While it is possible that this was sometimes done in consultation with the artist, there is little evidence to this effect, and in most cases changes to the blocks probably were at the discretion of the publisher (causing Michener to sigh over the "lamentable wrongs...done to Hiroshige by avaricious publishers."). In the case of Hiroshige's first Tōkaidō series, initially eleven prints were co-published by two firms, Hōeidō (owned by Takenouchi Magohachi) and Senkakudō (owned by Tsuruya Kiemon, a family name passed down through several generations). Eventually, though, Hōeidō took over the publishing exclusively, and in later printings they not only had the blocks recarved to remove Senkakudō's name from the publisher's seal, but also made other significant modifications to the designs.

For this reason, this exhibition defines the following different categories for prints: *early state*, *early impression*, *later impression* and *later state*. *Early state* indicates that the print was made from blocks as they were originally carved, or in some cases with minor modifications made early on to correct certain mistakes. In most

cases, the *early state* prints in this exhibition are also *early impressions*. While records were not kept for the number of impressions made from a set of blocks, and hence it is impossible to know how many sheets were printed, *early impressions* can be identified from the fact that the outlines are sharp and crisp, generally with precise registration, and there is no evidence of block wear.

On the other hand, *later impressions* were made from the same blocks, but show evidence of block wear, resulting in less clear outlines and problems with registration. *Later impressions* also often reveal careless printing, since cheaper printers and substandard practices were common as a print became less prominent on the market over time. Finally, *later state* indicates that the impression was made from recarved blocks with significant compositional differences from the *early state*. Although it is beyond the scope of this exhibition, it is important to remember that it is possible for both *early states* and *late states* to have both *early impressions* and *later impressions*.

James A. Michener: Building a Collection

I cannot stress too strongly the fact that the ten thousandth copy of a Tōkaidō scene is simply not a Hiroshige, even though struck off from his blocks and in something approximating his colors. I doubt if even the three hundredth copy ought to be called a Hiroshige... Today I would not hazard an opinion on any Hiroshige print until I had seen at least three versions, one very early, for I assure the reader that from a casual glance, especially at a late printing, one can not have the remotest idea of what Hiroshige might have been striving for.

-James A. Michener, *The Floating World*

Michener wrote this statement in 1954, one year before he gave the first of the Tōkaidō prints in this exhibition to the museum. Ironically, Hiroshige's first Tōkaidō series was a victim of its own success, and the enduring demand for prints from the series ultimately resulted in large numbers of impressions of less than ideal quality, caused in part by printing long after the blocks had started to show signs of wear, in part by later changes made to the designs, and in part by a failure to maintain high standards of printing.

At the same time, while Michener was intensely aware of the differences between earlier and later states, and earlier and later impressions, it is interesting to note that of the early examples of superior quality included in this exhibition, only three were donated by Michener in the 1950s, followed by a gap of fourteen years, after which a steady stream of exceptional prints entered into the museum's collection during the 1970s.

On the other hand, of the later states and later impressions in this exhibition, twenty-one were donated in the 1950s.

This suggests that although Michener felt that these later prints were "simply not a Hiroshige," he nevertheless was unable to acquire the best examples when he first started collecting (or perhaps, he was reticent to donate the best examples in his collection until his relationship with the museum was more firmly established). For more than thirty years, though, he continually improved the quality of his donations, eventually building a remarkable assemblage of early states and impressions from the series that includes many of the finest examples to survive anywhere in the world.

It should be noted that despite his comment above, Michener saw the benefit of having later states and impressions in the museum's collection as comparative examples, and seven in this exhibition were donated as late as 1991, well after he had already given a better impression.