

# Hokusai and Hiroshige

TEACHER'S WORKSHOP

**Asian** | Education

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The following material provides a historical and cultural overview of the Edo period, which was marked by a rise in the merchant class, the decline in the prestige of the upper classes, and the growth of a vibrant urban culture in Edo. This provides a context in which to understand how Japanese woodblock prints became a popular art form for the common people, along with the development of a new genre of landscape prints. Teachers are recommended to review this material before showing slides to their students.

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Portions of the following text were taken from “Hokusai and Hiroshige” exhibition catalog by Yoko Woodson and “Yokohama Prints” teacher workshop packet by Molly Schardt.

## INTRODUCTION

From roughly 1470 to 1615, Japan was plagued by continuous civil war and internal strife as regional warlords fought for control of the country. This extended period of constant warring devastated the countryside and brought about unprecedented pain and suffering. In 1615, Japan was forcibly unified by a powerful warlord and shrewd politician, Ieyasu Tokugawa. Ieyasu ruled with an iron hand, through a hierarchy of advisors and vassals and the forced acquiescence of the emperor who lived in the old capital of Kyoto. Ieyasu established Edo (present-day Tokyo) as his new capital, transforming this previously sleepy, backwater town into the administrative center of Japan. It is from this city that the Edo period (1615-1868) derives its name. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Edo had a population of one million, making it the largest metropolis in the world. Edo was home to a literate population with the money, time, and desire for new art, entertainment, and literature.

## EDO POLITICS AND SOCIETY

After 150 years of civil war, the shogunate was determined to enforce and maintain a stable society and return the people to traditional values. Fearful of growing foreign influence and colonialism, the country was sealed off from the outside world in 1639, and remained so until 1853. Limited contact with Chinese and Dutch traders was permitted in the remote southern harbor of Nagasaki. All Japanese were forbidden to travel abroad; even those Japanese living outside the country at the time were cut off from contact.

The shogunate further extended its iron-fisted control of the people through a rigid class system with social and economic constraints. The highest class was composed of the samurai, followed by farmers, craftsmen, and at the lowest level, merchants. Nobility, Buddhist monks, Shinto priests, and social outcasts (beggars and prostitutes) were exempt from these classifications. This system reflected the social values placed on the different segments of society by the shogunate and was based on the Japanese interpretation of Chinese Confucianism. The structure was purely hereditary, and the rules of conduct, privileges, and duties of each class were strictly enforced.

### **Samurai**

Japan was ruled by the shogun (supreme military dictator), while the emperor remained a figurehead leader in Kyoto. Sworn to obey the shogun were daimyo (feudal lords deriving from the samurai), who in turn were supported by their samurai (retainers) of varying ranks.

To prevent the daimyo from becoming powerful enough to threaten civil war, Ieyasu enforced a system of alternate attendance (*sankin kotei*), which required the feudal lords to maintain three extravagant residences in Edo, as well as similar homes in their fiefs. Daimyo had to alternate every year between their provincial residence and their Edo homes. Wives and children, however, remained in Edo at all times,

making them more or less hostages in the city should rebellion break out. Sankin kotei ensured that the daimyo remained under close supervision by the shogunate, and that their resources were constantly drained, making the cost of rebellion and the danger to their families too great. Income from their land was the daimyos' only source of wealth (rice was the basis of the Japanese economy), which they squandered on lavish homes and elaborate processions to and from Edo. With such lavish living, the daimyo and samurai (who were dependent on the daimyo for their salaries) became increasingly poor. Many had to borrow money from merchants, who often exceeded them in wealth during the Edo period.

Ironically, despite their poor financial state, the samurai for the most part remained the most privileged class as the landed aristocracy. During this period of peace, samurai found themselves without the usual duties of war. Many made the transition from military to civilian leadership by taking positions in the government bureaucracy. As was expected, they regularly practiced artistic cultivation, such as the tea ceremony, ikebana (flower arrangement), calligraphy, and poetry. Others became scholars, artists, or musicians and were supported by their peers. However, less fortunate samurai, particularly those of a lower level, ended up without socially sanctioned employment. This was particularly true of the masterless samurai who lost their patronage when their daimyo dropped from favor and had his estate confiscated.

### **Farmers**

Farmers were next in social rank, as the producers of rice that was the samurai's source of wealth. They were the only citizens who had to pay taxes, which they paid for in rice. The samurai would raise taxes as much as they dared, achieving a kind of delicate balance, until some natural disaster led to famine, causing the farmers to riot. When conditions became unbearable, some of the peasants gave up their birthright as honorable farmers and joined the ranks of laborers, craftsmen, or merchants. Periodically, the shogunate would try to force them back onto the land with mixed success.

Although their lives could be hard, some enterprising farmers could purchase fields from their destitute neighbors. Some became quite rich, educated themselves and their children, and like wealthy merchants, at times commissioned art from well-known schools. The shogunate periodically issued edicts to control consumption among the farmers and other social classes, yet these attempts did not dissuade them from striving for a better life.

### **Craftsmen**

Along with merchants, craftsmen maintained the economy of the city and profited handsomely. Together, the craftsmen and merchants supplied a demand that the military had for luxurious goods of all kinds (silk, embroidery, porcelain, lacquer, painting, sculpture, prints, etc.), deemed necessities in the lifestyles and ceremonies of the upper classes. These two classes were referred to collectively as chonin (literally "residents of the block" or townspeople).

## **Merchants**

Because they did not produce anything of value for society, merchants were at the bottom of the social ladder. They nevertheless accumulated great wealth that surpassed even that of the samurai, and at times merchants acted as moneylenders to the upper classes. As Japan's economy transformed from one based on agriculture to one of mercantilism, merchants gained the power and influence to become art patrons and cultural pacesetters (Swinton, p. 26). Some of the great family businesses in Japan today, such as Mitsui Corporation, were started in Edo.

Gradually, some merchants could afford luxuries and entertainment. Strict sumptuary laws, however, prevented them from open displays of wealth. At times, these repressive laws were contemptuously ignored. When it could not completely ban an activity, the shogunate sought to exercise control over it. This was how the Yoshiwara, the official and well-defined pleasure quarter in Edo, was created. With little freedom in how to spend their money as the aristocracy, merchants splurged on entertainment for the common people, such as Kabuki theater (an action-packed, burlesque form of theater), brothels, and wrestling tournaments.

## **Decline of the Shogunate**

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the foundations of the shogunate were developing severe cracks. By the 1850s, there was widespread dissatisfaction at all levels of society. The overworked peasants, the impoverished samurai, the alienated and poor imperial family, and the wealthy but repressed merchants all desired radical change. At the end of the Edo period, Japanese society struggled for an end to feudalism, which would culminate in the revolution and restoration of the emperor in 1868.

# **EDO CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE**

Edo had a distinct consumer society born of the necessity to support the immense numbers of military living there. Although the daimyos' provinces supplied directly to them, they were nevertheless dependent on local goods and services. The professions required to build and sustain a new capital were traditionally held by men, such as artisans, merchants, construction workers, carpenters, tailors, surveyors, draftsmen, storekeepers, clerks, tatami makers, scholars, and legislators (Matsunosuke, p. 37). As a result, the city's population was primarily male. Men outnumbered women two-to-one. The city's residential areas were segregated into areas for each of the four classes.

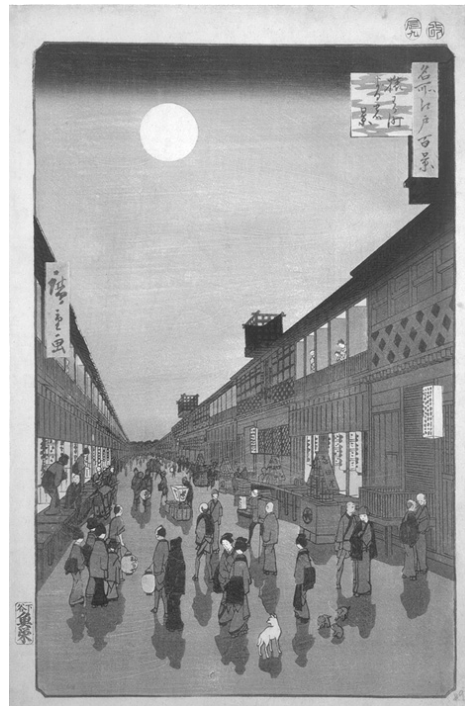
## **Lifestyles of the People**

An urban culture developed that stressed an appreciation of nature and artistic cultivation. The banks of the Sumida River, with its great bridges, provided places for outdoor activities: daily strolls, spring cherry-blossom viewing, relief from the summer heat, fireworks on summer nights, viewing the moon in autumn and snow in winter.



Following the lead of Chinese culture, women and men of all classes engaged in the traditional arts of music, painting, calligraphy, and games of skill. With their rapid accumulation of wealth, Edo townspeople also became patrons of art, creating a previously unprecedented “artistic pluralism” (Guth, p. 11). For the first time, the aristocracy no longer dictated artistic trends and production, despite attempts by

the shogunate to curtail artistic consumption among its subjects. The artistic trends in Edo reflected a growth in popular culture and a demand for art with mass appeal.



The shogunate built an extensive network of waterways and five major highways that connected the three major cities of Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka with smaller towns and ports, which facilitated increased travel among all classes. Besides business, pilgrimage was the most common reason for travel. Commoners made pilgrimages to sites of religious importance, such as famous Buddhist temples, ancient Shinto shrines, famous places such as Mount Fuji, etc. People often traveled under the pretense of religious pilgrimage, desiring to leave their routine life for awhile.

Publishers produced various types of guides and gazetteers that catered to the public’s fascination with travel and pilgrimage. Unlike

earlier travel books, which were more like works of literature, Edo period travel books were practical guides for the masses that included not only lodging information and advice on road conditions, but also historical tidbits about a place and its references in poetry. They were usually illustrated with black-and-white woodblock prints.

### **The Yoshiwara**

The Yoshiwara, the licensed pleasure quarter of the city and center of social life, added to the vibrant culture of Edo. Although there were other pleasure quarters in every major city, such as Kyoto and Osaka, the Yoshiwara was most famous. Swinton (1996) likened the pleasure districts more to fantasy theme parks of romance and adventure, rather than the crude modern-day concept of red-light districts. A self-contained community, the Yoshiwara was deliberately located away from the main section of Edo, as a conscious effort by the shogunate to prevent it from “polluting” the rest of the city. It housed approximately ten thousand people (Smith, p. 30), and was packed with brothels, Kabuki theaters, teahouses, restaurants, bathhouses, and puppet shows. People of all classes walked the streets, including samurai, street performers, beggars, gamblers, sumo wrestlers, courtesans, merchants, artisans, and travelers who had come from far away to visit this tourist destination. Whereas the rest of Edo was segregated among the classes, within the Yoshiwara, Japanese of all classes could socialize more or less as equals.

## THE WORLD OF UKIYO-E

Ukiyo-e (literally “pictures of the floating world”) is the name given to paintings and prints primarily depicting the transitory world of the Yoshiwara. It is a composite term of uki (floating), yo (world), and e (pictures). Originally, ukiyo was a Buddhist term to express the impermanence of human life. During the Edo period, however, ukiyo came to refer to the sensual and hedonistic pleasures of people, who embraced them all the more for their ever-changing nature. This concept was expressed in Asai Ryoi, “Tales of the Floating World” as quoted in Baker (p. 186):

“Living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, sun, the cherry blossoms and the maple leaves, singing songs, drinking wine, and diverting ourselves just in floating, floating, caring not a whit for the pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened, like a gourd floating along with the river current: this is what we call the floating world.”

### **Evolution of Ukiyo-e Painting and Woodblock Printing**

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ukiyo-e began as hand-painted scrolls and screens of everyday life. Paintings often depicted popular recreations and entertainment, such as street dancing, cherry blossom viewing, and festivals, and beautiful women engaged in leisurely pursuits. Previously, most painters had been commissioned to do religious paintings, illustrations on courtly hand scrolls, or seasonal scenes. In contrast, this new ukiyo-e painting greatly appealed to the chonin of Edo. In order to meet the increasing demand, ukiyo-e began to be mass-produced using carved wooden blocks at the end of the seventeenth century, due to its greater affordability.

Woodblock printing came to Japan during the eighth century and became the primary method of printing from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries. As in China, the technology was first used to duplicate Buddhist texts and then later, books of Chinese origin. It was not until the 1500s that books originally in Japanese began to be printed. Black and white illustrations were a part of these early texts, to which color was sometimes added by hand, but eventually colored prints developed around 1765 as printing techniques improved. The first colored prints in Japan were original works of art, which soon led to the publishing of the popular, single-sheet ukiyo-e.

The single-sheet prints were mass produced for consumption by the commoner and sold by street vendors and shopkeepers for pennies. As their lives became more comfortable, and they could afford to enjoy more activities, ukiyo-e became the most sought-after art form among the commoners. In attempts to control the conspicuous consumption of the merchant class, the government periodically issued edicts restricting the sizes, themes, and materials of ukiyo-e, and eventually censored the prints after 1799, to ensure subject matters were not immoral or politically subversive.

In this market-driven art form, styles often changed. The earliest prints were black and white, hand coloring being gradually adopted later. As coloring by hand was too time consuming to produce prints in enough quantity to satisfy the public's growing demand, techniques were developed to block print simple two- or three-color images. By 1765, artists like Harunobu were designing polychrome prints called nishiki-e or "brocade pictures." The addition of more colors resulted in prints that were more realistic and expressive. Pigments for these prints were water based, vegetable dyes, which produced a soft and subtle range of colors. Artists and printers collaborated to produce ever more subtle effects such as the color nuances of a reflection in water and mirrors, or seeing objects through gauze textiles. A metallic powder called mica was sometimes added to colors to give a shimmering surface. By the time of Hokusai and Hiroshige, ukiyo-e prints were produced with up to twenty different colors, virtually each requiring its own carved block. Artists were constantly trying to outdo one another in their prints, not only with beautiful colors, but also clever compositions.

## **Major Themes in Ukiyo-e Prints**

### **COURTESANS AND ACTORS**

Beautiful women of the Yoshiwara were among the original ukiyo-e subjects. These prints were the most popular and served as pin-ups, similar to posters of movie stars and celebrities today. Such overtly commercial products were considered cheap and vulgar by the nobility, although the cultured and beautiful courtesan represented the romanticized, feminine ideal among the commoners.

In addition to bijin, popular Kabuki actors achieved immortality through ukiyo-e prints. Actors (like prostitutes) were excluded from the official social hierarchy. Nevertheless, they were treated as movie stars of the day, and were depicted in prints to announce an upcoming show or celebrate a certain performance. Such prints showed actors as the characters they played, as well as in behind-the-scenes preparations for their plays.

### **LANDSCAPES**

Landscapes, a minor genre since the early period of ukiyo-e, began to appear as an independent subject in prints during the late 1820s for various reasons. In 1800, aiming at reducing the influence of the merchant class, the government issued measures to limit the production of Kabuki prints. They also restricted the use of colors in prints, and banned the use of expensive mica to create a shiny background in portraits of courtesans and actors. These restrictions, coupled with improved printing techniques that allowed for superior gradations of color and subtle expressions in sky, light, water, and snow, resulted in the rise of landscape prints.

With increased travel during the Edo period, landscape ukiyo-e also served as personal mementos and intimate souvenirs of places people had already seen or would someday visit. Hokusai and Hiroshige are primarily known as landscape artists who brought this genre to its highpoint during the 1830s.



## TRAVEL

With a keen public interest in travel among all classes, publishers asked artists, most notably Hiroshige, to document the various highways. Hiroshige created prints that carefully documented the scenic beauty of the Tokaido Road, as well as the local culture and humor of stops along the way. Ukiyo-e artists frequently used travel books to help them in their designs of famous places (meisho-e), considering that they might not have visited the places themselves. According to Swinton, Hiroshige made frequent use of gazetteers for his work, more so than any other print artist (1992, p. 64).

## MEISHO-E

Meisho (literally “place with a name”) referred to a place that had poetic, literary, spiritual, or historic connotations, especially those relating to the seasons. In the concept of meisho, it was the romantic spirit or mood of the place, rather than the place itself that was most important in art. Meisho-e (“pictures of famous places”) included not only well-known landscapes, but also scenic sights in cities, bridges, rivers, waterfalls, Mount Fuji, etc. These prints were purchased by travelers as souvenirs or to satisfy their curiosity of places not yet seen.

## Western Influences on Ukiyo-e

Although Japan was cut off from the outside world, limited trade continued in the port of Nagasaki and after the lifting of the ban on foreign books in 1720, the study of Western learning increased. Through Dutch oil paintings and copperplate



etchings, Japanese artists studied Western linear perspective. This technique utilized a single, fixed viewpoint, low horizon, systematic diminishing of size from foreground to background, chiaroscuro, and cast shadows that created visual distance and three dimensionality. Western-style perspective contrasted with the vertical perspective used in traditional Japanese art, that had a high horizon,

bird’s-eye view, and flatter picture plane. By the mid-eighteenth century, the first ukiyo-e prints using Western-style perspective appeared.

In addition, the introduction of a new blue pigment from Germany, called Prussian blue, provided Japanese artists with a lustrous dye that gave the illusion of depth and spaciousness in their landscapes. By combining Western and Japanese styles, ukiyo-e artists created a hybrid style that realistically portrayed landscape features.

## **Decline of Ukiyo-e**

The technology and artistry of ukiyo-e peaked between 1750-1850. After this time, craftsmanship gradually declined due to rising production costs. With decreasing market demand, publishers concentrated on print runs that could be produced as cheaply as possible for the least discriminating of buyers. Repetitious designs and the use of aniline dyes, instead of vegetable pigments, signaled the end of this art form. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, ukiyo-e had more or less ceased to exist, as other graphic techniques such as photography and lithography gained momentum.

While ukiyo-e declined in Japan, Western artists were “discovering” Japanese woodblock prints in the mid-nineteenth century and hailed them as artistic masterpieces. By the 1870s, many European scholars and artists were seriously studying Japanese art. Ukiyo-e prints had a particular impact on the works of progressive painters (especially the Impressionists), such as Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Edouard Manet, Vincent van Gogh, and James McNeill Whistler. Western painters were struck by the brilliant, solid colors of Japanese prints, their simplified contour outlines, and flat asymmetrical compositions with little illusionary space. Artists experimented with flattening planes in their compositions and brightening their palettes, which eventually helped form a modern abstract style.

## **THE ART OF PRINTING**

In order that ukiyo-e prints feature the latest favorites of a discerning public, prints had to be published very quickly. Publication was a complex process involving the collaboration of several people: publisher, artist, carver, and printer. Publishers were the key figures in the printing process from start to finish: assessing the market, hiring the designer, supervising production, and arranging for distribution. It was the publisher’s seal that appeared on each print, with the artist’s signature. The only other person who had a say in production was the government censor, who checked all designs to make sure they were neither immoral nor politically subversive.

After a publisher had decided upon the subject matter for a print or series of prints, he commissioned an artist to create the design. The artist would draw his composition in black ink on a thin sheet of paper. Although the artist might include notes and directions on his drawing, he was not involved in the printing process. This could sometimes lead to the artist’s dissatisfaction with the finished product, due to unexpected changes made by the printer or engraver. Hokusai apparently complained during the production of his volume of sketches (*Hokusai Manga*) that the engraver had added facial details and carved noses too much like those found in the prints of his contemporary, Utagawa Toyokuni (Williams, p. 3).

The artist’s drawing was then sent to the printer’s workshop, where it was pasted face down on a block of smooth cherrywood. Oil was sometimes applied to the paper to make the outlines more visible. The paper was then pulled away (Japanese paper was very strong and fibrous) to leave a thin layer behind with the design outlines showing through.

The engraver then cut away all the wood around the lines, a crucial task requiring great skill. The beauty and refinement of Japanese woodblock prints was dependent on his fine touch. After the block face had been carved, printers removed the residue of paper and carefully brushed black sumi ink onto the raised lines of the block. They placed the damp paper to be printed on the block, and rubbed it rigorously with a baren, a tool made of twisted cord covered with a bamboo sheath. This rubbing motion forced the paper into hard contact with the inked lines of the wood block. These line proofs were then given to the government censor for approval and to the artist for coloring. Using the artist's hand-colored proof, the engraver would cut more blocks, one for each color and each with registration marks (kento) to assure that the lines and colors would be in proper alignment on each pass. Now everything was ready for the final printing and distribution. Several printers would ink and press the paper onto each of the blocks. Colors were printed one at a time; a minimum of about ten impressions were necessary to print an average nishiki-e (Kanada, p. 46). With each impression, printers had to align the paper into the registration marks in the block, so that colors with each successive pass would fall in the proper location. Paper came in three typical sizes: chuban (literally "medium block" measuring about 10.5 x 7.5 in), aiban ("medium-large block" measuring about 13 x 9 in), and oban ("large block" measuring 10.5 x 15.5 in). Oban was the standard size used for ukiyo-e.

About 200 prints (the usual edition of any particular design) could be made in one day. Sometimes, blocks kept in storage would be reprinted, but as the wood wore down, the line quality gradually deteriorated. However, as many as 8,000 prints could be made from a block before cutting a new one. The soft, water-soluble colors, which were until the late nineteenth century derived from plant and mineral sources, were applied in relatively large flat areas bordered by the fine line drawing of the design. Even when artists borrowed shading techniques from the West, the woodblock process still created an essentially flat image, one of the special characteristics of Japanese prints.

## A LOOK AT THE ARTISTS

Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige, with thirty-seven years between them in age, were equally well rounded artists. They excelled in traditional painting, woodblock-prints for books, and single-sheet prints of bijin or sumo wrestlers. However, both are best remembered for their landscape designs. Hokusai's work could be wild in presentation, experimental, and bold. In contrast, Hiroshige depicted nature in a realistic, delicate and elegant manner, displaying a gentle humor and sympathy for the common people. Yet, despite their differences in temperaments and styles, both artists demonstrated their genius in the genre of landscapes and raised the artistry of this previously minor genre to new heights.

### **Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)**

Hokusai was born on October 31, 1760, in Honjo, Edo, of unknown parentage. While Hokusai moved at least ninety times throughout his lifetime, he never left this region. He was adopted as a child by the prestigious artisan-family Nakajima Ise, who made mirrors for the shogun. He possibly might have been a son of Ise by his mistress.

As a teenager, Hokusai was a delivery boy for a booklending shop and also apprenticed to a woodblock carver. At the age of eighteen, Hokusai began serious training in print design under Katsukawa Shunsho (1726-1792), an eminent designer in Kabuki actor and theater prints. Under the name Shunsho, Hokusai illustrated storybooks and created prints depicting beautiful women. After his teacher's death in 1793, Hokusai entered a period of wandering, searching restlessly for different styles and themes in association with artists outside the Katsukawa School.

An eccentric artist, Hokusai changed his artistic name at least twenty times. In 1797, the artist began using the name Hokusai, the best known to us. Frequently, he combined it with others, creating a variety of names, such as Sori arateme Hokusai ("Hokusai changed from Sori"), Hokusai Sori, or Gakyojin Hokusai ("A Man Mad about Art, Hokusai").

Around 1804, Hokusai studied Western styles based on Dutch copperplate prints. In his new work influenced by the Dutch prints, Hokusai gave an illusion of space and landscape elements using light and dark shadows and signed his name horizontally in imitation of Western artists.

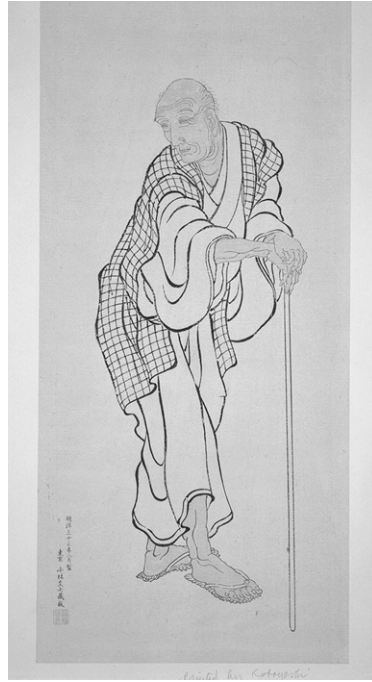
Between 1811-1830, Hokusai published an enormous number of illustrated books. The most important was Hokusai Manga ("Hokusai's Random Sketches"), the artist's lifelong project, which took thirty-eight years. Only two volumes were published at this time.

The year 1831 marked the beginning of Hokusai's most productive period while he was in his seventies. He published his monumental landscape series, Thirty-six View of Mount Fuji. Although the title indicates thirty-six, forty-six prints were made. Because of their popularity, the publisher added ten prints to the series. The series probably took a few years to complete.

Between 1833-34, three other major series were published: A Tour of Japanese Waterfalls, Imagery of the Poets, and Rare Views of Famous Bridges in All Provinces. Another important publication was One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji. From 1836 to 1845, Hokusai diligently worked on book illustrations and various commissioned works.

Hokusai was a good teacher, producing 111 students of the Katsushika School. He was a disciplined worker who rose early in the morning, painting and drawing until evening. Despite his prolific work and relative fame, Hokusai constantly battled poverty. Unlike masters of the prestigious painting schools, ukiyo-e artists were poorly paid. Hokusai's frequent name changes may have resulted from the need to sell his old names to his students, a common practice among artists. His multiple changes in residence could also have been due to poverty. Hokusai died on May 10,

1849 at age ninety at his house in Asakusa. His funeral took place the next day, paid for by pupils and friends.



### **Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)**

Hiroshige was born in 1797 in Edo. His father was the warden of the Edo fire brigade that serviced the shogun. Although his father was a low-ranking samurai, he must have raised his son with the samurai code of ethics and in a dignified atmosphere. Hiroshige's death portrait, created by his friend Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1864) shows the artist at age sixty-eight, dressed in formal clothes and seated in a dignified manner. Such an upbringing helped develop the elegant, gentle style of his art.

In 1809 at the age of thirteen, Hiroshige lost both parents and inherited his father's position. In 1810 or 1811, he sought in vain to learn ukiyo-e under the most powerful master of Kabuki actor portraits, Utagawa Toyokuni (1769-1825). Toyokuni, having more students than he could handle, turned Hiroshige over to his friend Utagawa Toyohiro (1773-1829).

Toyohiro's interest in landscape prints, a minor genre at the time, influenced his young apprentice. For some years, Hiroshige worked on book illustrations, designs of beauties, and inexpensive types of beauty prints. In 1822, at age twenty-seven, Hiroshige retired from his position as a fire warden and became a full-time artist. It is difficult to explain why Hiroshige, with his samurai status (albeit one of low rank), wanted to become an ukiyo-e artist. The financial state of the lower-ranking samurai had become increasingly difficult, and when young Hiroshige started training with Toyohiro, he might have wished to earn extra income for his household.

Hiroshige's first landscapes were ten prints of Famous Places in the Eastern Capital, published in 1825. Here, he boldly adopted Western conventions to create a new hybrid style. His work at this time already revealed his particular interest in changes in nature due to weather, time, and the seasons.

In 1832, Hiroshige reportedly traveled the Tokaido Road to Kyoto on official business; he was accompanying an entourage of the shogun's officials with their annual gift of horses to the emperor in Kyoto. The Japanese traditionally celebrated the first day of the eighth lunar month by exchanging gifts. The trip must have been an eye-opening experience for Hiroshige, a city person who had heard so much about the Tokaido Road. Returning to Edo, Hiroshige immediately launched on his monumental project of publishing the Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido Road. It was scarcely a year since Hokusai had published his famous Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji, of which Hiroshige was undoubtedly aware.

In 1835, Hiroshige was involved in publishing the Sixty-nine Stations of the Kiso Road, comprising seventy prints. The project began as a collaboration with another





artist Eisai Eisen (1791-1848), but for some reason, Hiroshige took over the project, designing forty-six prints in all. It could have been that Eisen's designs were not selling well and the publisher decided to change artists. The Kiso Road was an alternative highway connecting Edo to Kyoto through mountainous regions and was thus difficult to travel, especially in winter. Hiroshige's evocative style portrayed a true sense of nature and the people living in perfect harmony.

In 1856, Hiroshige began his largest series, One Hundred Views of Edo. For a native resident, the theme of Edo was always in Hiroshige's mind. In the vertical format of the standard oban size, Hiroshige revealed his mature style in depictions of famous places in the gigantic metropolis that fascinated all people. In 1858,

Hiroshige died suddenly at the age of sixty-two, a victim of the cholera epidemic that plagued Edo and claimed 28,000 lives.

## The People of Edo Japan

After 150 years of constant civil war, the government tried to maintain a stable society by enforcing a strict class system. During the Edo period (1615-1868), Japanese were born into certain classes, in which they remained their entire lives.

### Samurai

The samurai made up the majority of the military that ruled the country. Although there was an emperor, the country was ruled by a military dictator called the shogun. The shogun was served by daimyo (feudal lords who were higher-ranking samurai), who in turn were served by other samurai.

Higher ranking samurai (daimyo) owned land, which was their source of income. They rented their fields to farmers who paid for rent in rice. Rice was the major form of wealth in Japan at this time.

The lives of the samurai were always controlled. Strict rules governed what vehicles they used, the color and style of their clothing, even the furnishings of their homes. In order to prevent civil war and rebellion, the shogun required daimyo to maintain extravagant homes in their provinces and in Edo, and to travel constantly in lavish processions between them every year. This travel impoverished the samurai, and made sure they could be closely watched by the shogun when they lived in Edo during the year.

Along with their service to the shogun and duties of war, samurai were expected to be well-versed in the arts. Samurai regularly practiced the tea ceremony, ikebana (flower arrangement), calligraphy, writing poetry. Knowledge and practice of the arts was considered necessary for members of this refined aristocratic class.



## Farmers

Farmers were next in social rank behind the samurai. They were the producers of rice, which was the basis of the Japanese economy. They were the only citizens who had to pay taxes, since their income was the only type among the common people considered “honorable” enough to tax.

With heavy taxes, farmers’ lives were very difficult. At times, they would riot and protest, and the government would try to force them back onto their land. Some destitute peasants gave up their birthright as honorable farmer to become laborers, craftsmen, or merchants. Yet, some ambitious farmers were able to purchase fields from their poorer neighbors. Some became quite rich, educated themselves and their children, and became patrons of the arts. At times, the government issued laws to control the power of the farmers and other social classes, yet these attempts did not stop them from striving for a better life.



How did Edo Japan’s attitude towards taxation differ from that of the United States government today?

## Craftsmen

Craftsmen made up the third class in society, and included such people as carpenters, tailors, tatami mat makers, construction workers, woodblock artists, etc. Because they produced actual goods that were of value to people, they were not the lowest of the social classes. Yet, both merchants and craftsmen supplied a demand of the samurai for luxurious goods of all kinds (silk, embroidery, porcelain, lacquer, painting, sculpture, prints, etc.), necessities in the lifestyles and ceremonies of the upper classes. Together, they were called chonin (literally "residents of the block" or townspeople).



## Merchants

Because they did not produce anything of value for society, the merchants were at the bottom of the social ladder. They nevertheless accumulated great wealth that surpassed that of the military, and at times merchants lent money to samurai. Some merchants gained the power and influence to become art patrons and could afford luxuries and entertainment. For those who could afford it, merchants spent much of their money on Kabuki theater, restaurants, clothing, and sumo tournaments. Strict laws, however, prevented them from openly displaying their wealth. For instance, the government periodically issued edicts restricting their literature and art, and even specified clothing that could not be worn by them.



Towards the end of the Edo period, a blurring of class lines gradually developed. People switched roles, for instance samurai borrowed money from the lower classes, merchants could sometimes buy themselves the status as a samurai, and farmers gave up their status to become merchants. By the 1850s, there was widespread dissatisfaction at all levels of society. Farmers were overworked, the samurai were poor, the imperial family was alienated, and the merchant class were repressed. At the end of the Edo period, the Japanese wanted an end to feudalism, which led to the restoration of the Meiji emperor in 1868.

All photographs are taken in a late nineteenth century or early twentieth century studio setting.  
Library Collection, Asian Art Museum.



## Reading a Woodblock Print

On Japanese woodblock prints, there are blocks of writing which identify the print's title, series, artist, publisher, and other people involved in its production. These blocks are usually found in the same place, although their locations can vary. Japanese characters (kanji) are read from right to left, top to bottom.

Title of Print:  
"Yoshida on the Tokaido Road"

Title of Series:  
"Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji" Prints were often part of a series, which people would collect over time. Occasionally, a series would be continued with further editions of prints, depending on its popularity.

Artist's Signature:  
Hokusai



Publisher's Seal:  
The publisher was the most important person in the printing process. He decided on which designs to produce, hired the people for production, and marketed the prints. The artist would often incorporate the publisher's name in very clever ways in his design, as you see here.

The Japanese characters (kanji) for "Mount Fuji" are written as 富嶽  
Can you find them in the other prints from this series?

## Reading a Woodblock Print

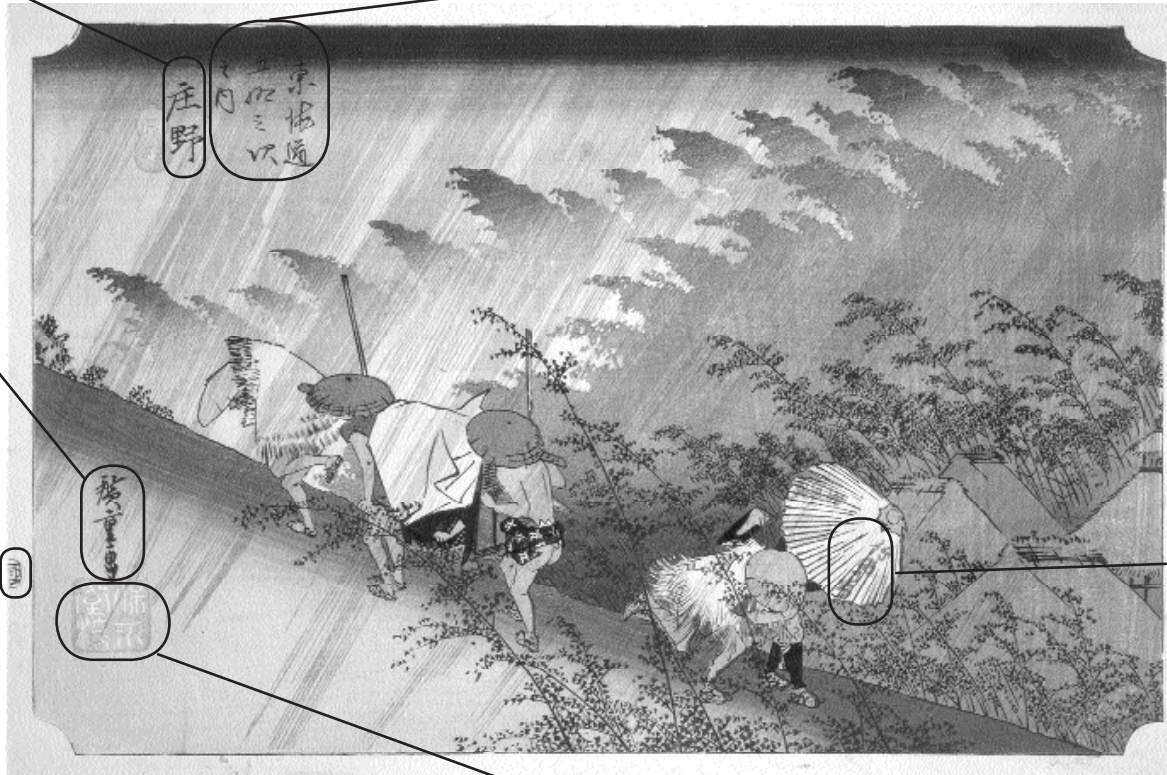
On Japanese woodblock prints, there are blocks of writing which identify the print's title, series, artist, publisher, and other people involved in its production. These blocks are usually found in the same place, although their locations can vary. Japanese characters (kanji) are read from right to left, top to bottom.

Title of Print:  
"Driving Rain at  
Shono"

Title of Series:  
"Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido Road"  
Prints were often part of a series, which people would collect over time.

Artist's  
Signature:  
Hiroshige

Censor's Seal:  
After 1799,  
government  
censors had to  
approve each print  
before production,  
to ensure designs  
were not immoral  
or subversive. A  
censor's seal was  
usually round or oval.



Publisher's  
Surname

Publisher's Seal:  
The publisher was the most important person in the printing process. He decided on which designs to produce, hired the people for production, and marketed the prints. The artist would often incorporate the publisher's name in very clever ways in his design, as you see here.

The Japanese characters (kanji) for "Tokaido Road" 東  
海  
道  
Can you find these kanji on Hiroshige's other prints of the Tokaido Road?