

The Japanese Cityscape in Print: Hiroshige to Hasui

Summary

Images of Japan's cities first appear in the early 16th century, but it is only during the 19th century that they flourish through the medium of woodblock printing. The Three Generations of artists of the *Ukiyo-e Landscape* exhibition—Hiroshige, Kiyochika, and Hasui—provide us with an excellent overview of the development of the Japanese cityscape from the 19th to the early 20th century.

In this slide lecture, I start by introducing the main subject of urban views: the city of Edo (present-day Tokyo). After the Tokugawa clan made the former castle town into its seat of governing body, it soon became one of the world's largest metropolises. Like any other great city, Edo had its fair share of landmarks, which became the subject of woodblock prints from the mid-18th century, a time when cityscapes also flourished in Europe.

Hiroshige built upon the conventions established by his predecessors and designed some of the most iconic ukiyo-e print series of his day, such as the *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō* and *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*. After briefly discussing Hiroshige's background and his leap to fame, we will look at some of the city's sights he immortalized in his prints of Edo, in particular its bridges.

Despite the rapidly changing face of Edo, renamed Tokyo after the Meiji Restoration, Kiyochika frequently designed pictures of the same landmarks as Hiroshige, although his cityscapes are characterized by elements of the city's modernization, from the newly-built brick buildings and bridges to electricity poles and trains. Stylistically, Kiyochika's prints are indebted to Hiroshige with similar exaggerated linear perspectives and large objects in the foregrounds of his compositions, but Kiyochika is more interested in light and reflections, as can be witnessed, for example, in this exhibition's wonderful juxtaposing of Hiroshige, Kiyochika and Hasui's *Dawn at Kanda Myōjin Shrine*.

Hasui designed prints of some of the same landmarks in Tokyo as his predecessors, but he occasionally also included places not usually featured in ukiyo-e prints by earlier generations. Hasui's cityscapes—centering on Tokyo's old temples and neighborhoods—are often so idyllic it can sometimes be hard to tell from them that Tokyo was a modern city with cinemas, department stores and modern infrastructure around this time. The near absence of Tokyo's modernity in Hasui's cityscapes is closely related to the audiences and publisher of his print series, a subject discussed at length in this part.

To summarize, the subjects of the prints of the three generations of artists of this exhibition—mainly the landmarks of Edo/Tokyo—are largely the same, but their perspectives, the eyes through which they saw and depicted the metropole, were different. In the final part of this presentation, the characteristics of the works of each artist are used to compare more cityscapes of the same famous sight. These differences not only reveal the stylistic differences between the artist, but also how the city itself has changed.