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Selections from "Ukiyo-e Landscapes and Edo Scenic Places"

Nagai Kafū

Translated and introduced by Kyoko Selden and Alisa Freedman

Introduction

Author Nagai Kafū (1879-1959; given name Nagai Sōkichi) is best known for his fictionalized personal travel accounts *American Stories* (Amerika monogatari, 1908) and *French Stories* (Furansu monogatari, 1915), short stories and novellas about Tokyo courtesans and low-ranking geisha, and an extensive illustrated diary, *Dyspepsia House Diary* (Danchōtei nichijō, 1917-59). Kafū was fascinated with Edo-period (1603-1868) culture, especially that of the *chōnin*, or urban commoners. He prided himself on his resemblance to Edo literati, such as poet Ōta Nanpo (also known as Shokusanjin, discussed in the selection below), who used kyōka (playful, often satirical, poetry) as an elegant form of veiled social commentary. Kafū challenged authority throughout his career, as evidenced in his professed dislike of Meiji-period (1868-1912) leaders, his opposition to the war and Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s, and conflicts with censors and publishers.

"Ukiyo-e Landscapes and Edo Scenic Places" (Ukiyo-e no sansuiga to Edo meisho) first appeared in 1914 in the journal *Mita bungaku* (Mita Literature), the literary organ of Keiō University that Kafū helped to edit. It was reprinted, along with additional essays between 1913 and 1918 on ukiyo-e, theater, and literature, in a 1920 book *On Edo Art* (Edo geijutsu-ron) published by Shunyōdō. Perhaps in homage to the culture he describes, Kafū rewrote these essays in his own version of Edo-period prose style, influenced by classical Chinese and replete with wordplays, literary allusions, and parenthetical references. The book was published without illustrations, but his detailed descriptions enabled readers to visualize the colorful prints and sense the moods that they evoked. Kafū collected ukiyo-e in Japan and was widely read in the history of Western art.

In addition to offering a wealth of information about ukiyo-e artists, schools, and movements and introducing texts written in English and French about them, this lyrical essay epitomizes many of the themes of Kafū's literature and shows the faith he had in the ability of artists to capture the tenor of their times and the power of art to shape the ways people view cities. In particular, Kafū sought through ukiyo-e landscapes access to daily life in the Tokugawa city of Edo, which he idealized as more refined, "honest," and less pretentious than early twentieth-century Tokyo (the city that Edo became). Ukiyo-e, like kabuki and *kyōka* poetry, was also a means to understand how people expressed themselves under rigid government censorship. At the end of this five-part essay, Kafū goes as far as to say that ukiyo-e died in the Meiji period.

An annotated, illustrated translation of "Ukiyo-e Landscapes and Edo Scenic Places" in its entirety was published in the *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, vol. XXIV (December 2012): 210-32. The following excerpt (mostly from the third section), in which Kafū closely examines prints by Utagawa

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Hiroshige (1797-1858), well displays Kafū's attention to visual details, contextualization of ukiyo-e in Western and Japanese art history, and attention to the profundity of seemingly ordinary urban places and practices. Kafū's vivid descriptions of specific ukiyo-e landscapes almost seem like literary urban sketches, as if he were leading his reader through the streets of Edo and explaining how to view the scenery.

Hiroshige's Edo landscapes include single-sheet prints of simultaneously occurring scenes like those in *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (Meisho Edo hyakkei, 1856-58), *Eight Views of the Suburbs of Edo* (Edo kinkō hakkei no uchi, around 1838), *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital* (Tōto meisho, 1831-32), *Scenic Views of Edo* (Kōto shōkei, between 1833 and 1842), *Famous Restaurants of Edo* (Edo kōmei kaitei zukushi, 1852-53), and *Scenic Slopes of Edo* (Edo meisho saka zukushi, 1844-53), as well as those included in such picture books as *Edo Souvenirs* (Edo miyage, 10 vols., 1850-57) and *Famous Places in Edo with Kyōka* (Kyōka Edo meisho zue, 16 vols, 1856).



Utagawa Hiroshige, Ships Enter Tsukudajima Port (Tsukudajima irifune no zu) from the series *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital*. Courtesy of Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon.

Westerners who have a good eye for painting most likely regard Hiroshige and Hokusai as Japan's two master landscape artists. These two masters portrayed similar geographical areas numerous times based on Western perspective drawing and the study of life in ukiyo-e. However, their stylistic differences are obvious at first sight. Hokusai added elements of *nanga* and Western painting to ukiyo-e.[1] But Hiroshige seems to have exclusively followed the style of Hanabusa Itchō (1652-1724), who branched off from the Kanō School.[2] Hokusai's style is strong and firm, while Hiroshige's is gentle and calm. Despite the fact that Hiroshige's technique for depicting the study of life is often more minutely detailed, at a glance, his work always appears purer and lighter than Hokusai's *sōga*.[3] To make a literary analogy, Hokusai recalls travelogues that abundantly employ ornate *kanji* epithets, while Hiroshige resembles the flowing style of gesaku writers who smoothly describe minute details.[4] The masterpieces of Hokusai's mature period often make us sense something that is not Japanese, as I have discussed, but Hiroshige's works greet us with more Japanese, purely regional feelings. The latter's art does not exist apart from the Japanese climate. I consider Hiroshige's landscapes and Ogata Kōrin's (1658-1716) flowering plants to be the most important art that richly conveys the characteristics of the Japanese milieu.

On choosing a landscape to depict, Hokusai was not content to present the landscape itself but instead always surprised viewers with his unconventional designs. Hiroshige's approach, on the other hand, was so unvaryingly calm that he tended to be somewhat monotonous and lacking in variety. Hokusai took pleasure in presenting mountains and waters dynamically with storms, lightning, and torrents. Hiroshige was at his best in adding greater calm to a lonely night scene with rain, snow, moonlight, and bright stars. Figures in Hokusai's landscapes are strenuously at work, or if not,

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they gesture at landscapes in admiration or amazement. In Hiroshige's pictures, a boatman rowing does not seem to be in a hurry to get to a destination, and a traveler in a hat on horseback always seems tired or half asleep. Those who walk on the crowded streets of Edo look as if they were ready to spend a long day with a dog by the roadside. Through the two different approaches demonstrated in their works, we can readily see the sharply contrasting dispositions of these master landscape artists.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Ryōgoku in the Eastern Capital (Tōto Ryōgoku) from the series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*. Courtesy of Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon.

After choosing a landscape, Hokusai sharpened his awareness, set his expectations high, and invariably took great pains to come up with some new design or device. Hiroshige, on the contrary, seemed to pick up his brush with ease as he observed and as interest moved him without reserve. Hokusai's pictures are always intentional, even his fast, sketchy drawings, although they seem as if he only arrived there after painstaking effort and refinement. On the other hand, Hiroshige's simplified drawings seem like mere products of occasional improvisation. When comparing master drawings used to carve the woodblocks (*ukiyo-e hanshita*), those by Hiroshige make it seem that he never worked hard as Hokusai did. At one point, so many reprints were made from Hiroshige's woodblocks that the results were quite crude. Even if we look at his oldest and most carefully reproduced prints, his color tones rarely stir the delicate pleasure that we experience when facing Hokusai's *nishiki-e*. In particular, in One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, produced in the Ansei period (1854-59), in Hiroshige's later years, the green and red coloring, among other qualities, greatly disappoints us despite the creative designs and delightfully agile brushstrokes. Hiroshige used black ink for drawing outlines as in traditional Japanese painting and used coloring only as a convenient way to compensate for the monotony of a scene. Even so, nobody could hope to equal him in skillfully creating a complex, beautiful effect by the arrangement of two or three colors. See, for example, how he contrasts the blue flowing water and the evening glow of the pink sky against the white clouds, or how he arranges a boat with a yellow thatched roof between the blue evening river and the uniformly grey sky. The extremely simple and clear coloring is the very reason that the viewer can freely experience the feel of time, air, and light.

In the catalogue for the 1898 ukiyo-e exhibition curated by Kobayashi Bunshichi (1861-1923), the American Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908)

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comments on Hiroshige's picture of Mount Atago:[5] "A distant view of the sea, dotted with white sails, skillfully suggests soft winds and also spontaneously conveys the reflection of light in the distance. Small figures as in the work of his contemporary English master painter Turner, are often no more than a row of wooden stakes, but this also helps to emphasize various points of the landscape." About the view of the Eitai Bridge, he writes: "The presentation of the boats should be called fundamental and grammatical. The artist effectively combines two-shade coloring and black-and-white drawings, contributing to the clear demarcation of parts. It is beyond the achievements of colors in oil painting. I prefer this work to Whistler's most famous copperplate etching."

Because the [Japanese] translation is quite stiff and the explanation of the art is minimal, those who do not remember the 1898 exhibition have no way of clearly knowing which prints Fenollosa is praising.[6] However, this praise provides a sense of the characteristics of Hiroshige's prints.

Among Hiroshige's depictions of the famous places of Edo are the series of horizontal prints *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital and Scenic Views of Edo* and the series of vertical prints *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*. Although these collections depict the same landscapes of the Edo urban areas and suburbs, the dates of publication and the difference between horizontal and vertical settings naturally create distinctive artistic styles. *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital and Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaido* (Tōkaido gojū-san tsugi no uchi, 1833-34) have horizontal arrangements based on minute study of life, and the coloring is not especially vivid. Thus they make us experience the kind of charm that we have generally come to expect from ukiyo-e. On the other hand, *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* unfortunately deviates from realistic study, and despite the absolute freedom of brushwork and the extremely unconventional composition, the coloring in the prints is far from beautiful. In particular, the deep, raw red and green hues greatly disappoint us. This makes us sense how ukiyo-e printing skills degenerated with each successive year starting in the Tenpō period (1830-44). At the end of a monograph on the life of Kitagawa Utamaro,[7] Edmond de Goncourt wrote that Hiroshige strove to return color prints to what they had been in Utamaro's heyday but that he never succeeded.

To collect all the pictures of *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital* and explain them in great detail, as Goncourt did of Hokusai's and Utamaro's work, is beyond my present scope. Therefore I will select two or three important examples of the places Hiroshige enjoyed painting in different ways.

First, Hiroshige enjoyed depicting Kasumigaseki Hill, where the white walls of *daimyō* houses continue near the great Edo Castle from the Benkei Canal of Outer Sakurada. One picture presents a summer afternoon after a sudden rain shower. A large rainbow has boldly appeared at an angle in the broad sky above the hill, with a lookout station at the top, and commoners' houses and sails in the Shibaura Bay below. But aside from a woman with her umbrella half closed and the child accompanying her, no passers-by seem to notice the beautiful rainbow. Passers-by include samurai in formal clothing, each wearing a pair of swords; a townsman in a summer kimono jacket decorated in a fine pattern; and merchant venders carrying what seems to be a box of medicinal loquat leaves or fans, who shield their faces under large sedge hats, looking somewhat troubled by the wind that sweeps the hems of their clothes. These figures show the care with which the artist tries to let the viewer imagine how high the hill is. In another picture, on both sides of the climbing slope we can see long houses with grey roofs, white walls, and pale indigo

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stonewalls in their foundations, and the Sannō Shrine festival procession of floats and people wearing hats adorned with flowers. These details are accompanied by the distant view of the slope and houses as far as the eye can see, becoming gradually more distant and smaller. Needless to say, the contrast between the procession of people wearing hats with flowers or parasols and the houses on both sides seen from above and the perspective approach are extremely refreshing.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Sannō Festival Procession on Kasumigaseki (Tōto Kasumigaseki Sannōsai nerikomi no zu). Courtesy of Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon.

The landscape from the Eitai Bridge to Tsukuda Island and Teppōzu and the arc of the seashore from Takanawa to Shinagawa most easily allow Hiroshige to produce the best and simplest pictures of water and sky, bridges, and boats. First, toward the bottom left part of the long bridge depicted at an angle is a lonely night carriage and a man with his head and cheeks wrapped in a towel. To the right of the vast water, Tsukuda Island at night floats like a cloud, and to the left, specks of lamplight glow from the windows of courtesan houses in the New Yoshiwara, facing the fires of the ice-fishing boats scattered on the water. A full moon floats between the masts of large boats anchored for the night, and, in that vast sky is the faint form of cuckoo or a line of wild geese. These are the characteristics that permitted the simplest and most charming cityscapes that Hiroshige strove to depict.

Everyone knows that snow heightens the beauty of various Edo landscapes. Hiroshige's most outstanding landscapes in the snow include those of Ochanomizu, the stone steps of the Yushima Tenjin Shrine, the embankment of Susaki Bay at high tide, and Yabukōji Street in Shiba, while Mukōjima, the Nihonbashi Bridge, and the Yoshiwara embankment, contrary to expectations, did not inspire masterpieces. Hiroshige set a snowy landscape in the yearend market at Asakusa's Sensōji Temple. There, the brightly white roof of the temple rises sharply against the sky full of dancing snowflakes, as groups of countless umbrellas climb the steps. This picture is rather unexpected from the brush of Hiroshige, who always preferred loneliness and quiet grace.

The Mimeguri Shrine in Mukōjima, the Hashiba Ferry, Imado, Masaki, the San'ya Moat, and Matsuchi Hill are famous places that could inspire any artist to create great landscapes.[8] This was certainly the case for Hiroshige. What we should note, however, is that despite the fact that he was also skilled at human portraits as a student of Utagawa Toyohiro (1773-1828), he deliberately avoided the large crowds of people viewing cherry blossoms, even when depicting the Sumida River. Instead, Hiroshige consistently sought the calm of rushes and white sails. Consider *Cherry Blossoms in Full Spring along the Sumida River* (Sumidagawa hanazakari) in *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital*. Hiroshige first presents the embankment that rises like a hill. As one looks up at the cherry blossoms on the embankment from the vast river, one can only imagine the crowds of people coming and going. Also, upon the water, there are no roofed pleasure boats with courtesans, sake, and revelers. Instead we

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see fishing boats, rafts, and seagulls. Such an inclination is particularly striking in Hiroshige's representations of the Yoshiwara.

The scenes he preferred to depict were not the splendors of a magnificent district that never seemed to sleep but the loneliness of men, heads covered with cloth, hands tucked in their kimono, walking after midnight in twos and threes, looking cold outside the lattice doors along the riverbank after the courtesans have already left for their lodgings (*Edo Souvenirs*, volume 6) or an early morning scene in which the wooden gate to the Yoshiwara's main street, the Nakanochō, looks like a barrier house in the mountains (*Dawn Clouds in the Pleasure Quarters* [Kakuchū shinonome] in One Hundred Famous Views of Edo). Even when the night cherry blossoms are at their peak on Nakanochō Street, Hiroshige might provide only a view from high above of humble roof tiles with just a glimpse of the treetops. Along the Nihon embankment are commoners' houses buried in snow and the traffic of carriages having difficulty on the way, evoking the pathos of traveling rather than the sentiment of the previous night's revelry. In this respect, Hiroshige is through and through a poet representing wayfarers. The Yoshiwara that he depicts has something reminiscent of the rustic charm of a post town. The Nakanochō teahouses, each with a lit lantern under the eaves, when depicted with Hiroshige's refined touch, are no different from landscapes of Shinagawa, Itabashi, and the like. The crowded Edo Sanza theaters, which were moved to the post town of Asakusayama in 1841,[9] receive the same treatment as the Yoshiwara. In Hiroshige's landscape prints, one can no longer see the jovial din and bustle in Fukiya and Sakai that Shunrō, Toyokuni, and other artists depicted.[10] Disregarding the crowds gathering for the annual troupe performances and the splendid teahouse decorations in honor of these occasions, Hiroshige considered it enough to depict countless banners fluttering over humble roof tiles, as seen through the thick foliage of Matsuchi Hill. For the sights in front of the theaters, he showed a closed gate in the moonlight, passers-by thinning out, a dog sleeping near a rainwater barrel under the eaves, and a night palanquin waiting for a passenger, thus creating his own unique charm. In representing the precincts of the Kannon Hall of Sensōji Temple, he does not focus on the crowds near tea stalls, arrow stands, mechanical doll shows, and other entertainments, but instead, for example, makes the great lantern of the Kaminari Gate occupy the entire space, with seemingly countless umbrellas beneath.



Utagawa Hiroshige, A Shower Over the Nihonbashi Bridge (Nihonbashi no hakuu) in the series *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital*. Courtesy of Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon.

These selections are excerpted from Nagai Kafū. Ukiyo-e no sansuiga to Edo meisho *(Ukiyo-e Landscapes and Edo Scenic Places), originally published in 1914. This translation is based on the version in* Nagai Kafū zenshū *(Collected Works of Nagai Kafū), vol. 10 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2010). The English translation of the entire essay was published in* Review of Japanese Culture and Society, *vol. XXIV (December 2012): 210-32.*

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Author **Nagai Kafū** (1879-1959; given name Nagai Sōkichi) is best known for his fictionalized personal travel accounts *American Stories* (*Amerika monogatari*, 1908) and *French Stories* (*Furansu monogatari*, 1915), short stories and novellas about Tokyo courtesans and low-ranking geisha, and an extensive illustrated diary, *Dyspepsia House Diary* (*Danchōtei nichijō*, 1917-59).

Kyoko Selden (1936-2013) taught Japanese language and literature as a senior lecturer at Cornell University until her retirement in 2008. Author, translator, artist and calligrapher, she was the translation coordinator of the Asia-Pacific Journal. Her major works as translator centered on Japanese women writers, the atomic bomb, the Ainu and the Okinawans. Her major translations included Japanese Women Writers: Twentieth Century Short Fiction, More Stories By Japanese Women Writers, An Anthology, Kayano Shigeru's Our Land Was a Forest, Honda Katsuichi's Harukor: Ainu Woman's Tale, The Atomic Bomb: Voices From Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Shin'ichi Suzuki's Nurtured by Love, and Cho Kyo's The Search for the Beautiful Woman, A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty.

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of Oregon. Her books include Tokyo in Transit: Japanese Culture on the Rails and Road (Stanford University Press, 2010), an annotated translation of Kawabata Yasunari's The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa (University of California Press, 2005), and co-edited volumes on Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility, and Labor in Japan (Stanford University Press, 2013), and *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture* (forthcoming from Routledge). She has published articles and edited special journal issues on Japanese modernism, Tokyo studies, youth culture, gender, television, humor as social critique, teaching pedagogies, and intersections of literature and digital media, along with translations of Japanese literature. She is Editor-in-Chief of the *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*.

Notes

[1] *Nanga* is late Edo period painting inspired by Chinese literati painting.
[2] Founded by Kanō Masanobu in the mid-fifteenth century, the Kanō School was the dominant school of painting in the Edo period.
[3] Literally "grass-style drawing," *sōga* are simple ink paintings or light-colored drawings done with rough brush strokes.
[4] More "serious" literary works in a lofty, ornate, rhetorically-controlled style were influenced by Chinese scholarship and targeted at urban intelligentsia, while *gesaku*, intended as popular fiction, employed freer, more vernacular expressions.
[5] The preface to Fenollosa's *Catalogue of the Exhibition of Ukiyoe Paintings and Prints* is available online at Kindai Digital Library. Ernest Fenollosa was a historian of Japanese art and a professor of philosophy and other disciplines at the University of Tokyo. Kobayashi Bunshichi was a Tokyo art dealer and publisher of art books and reproductions.
[6] *Mount Atago, Shiba* (no. 79) from the series *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital*, and *Eitai Bridge, Tsukuda Island* (no. 4) from *One Hundred Famous Places of Edo* both match the description.
[7] *Outamaro, le Peintre des Maisons Vertes* (1891). Goncourt also wrote *Hokusaï, l'art Japonais au XVII Siécle* (1896). Kafū introduces these works in a separate essay on "Goncourt's Biographies of Utamaro and Hokusai." Edmond de Goncourt (1822-96) was a French writer, art and literary critic, publisher, and founder of the Académie Goncourt.
[8] The San'ya Moat is a canal drawn from the Sumida River that connected Imado and San'ya and was a route to the New Yoshiwara (Shin Yoshiwara). The Yoshiwara was a major Edo prostitution district sanctioned by the government. It was founded in 1617 near Nihonbashi. After fire destroyed the district in 1657, the New Yoshiwara was constructed on the Nihon embankment behind the Sensōji Temple. The older location was called Moto (original) Yoshiwara. Matsuchi Hill is located near Matsuchi Shōden Temple in Asakusa.
[9] Around the 1670s, there were four licensed kabuki troupes in Edo. After one was disbanded in 1714, the Nakamura troupe of Sakai-chō, Ichimura troupe of Fukiya-chō, and Morita Kobiki-chō became the official Edo Three Troupes. The Nakamura troupe's theater burned down in 1841, and the following year the Nakamura, Ichimura, and Kawarazaki (or Morita) troupes were moved to an Asakusa area called Saruwaka-chō.
[10] Fukiya-chō and Sakai-chō, along with Kobiki-chō, all in close proximity, formed a kabuki

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theater district before all theaters were moved to Saruwaka-chō.

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