

The Man in the Hat

The “man in the hat” is a striking, if occasional, presence in Kiyochika’s views of Tokyo. The artist’s use of a protagonist is unique in a Japanese cityscape series. It is tempting to think that this gentleman, who appears both alone and with a few companions, is Kiyochika’s surrogate. The lack of certain identification reinforces the ambiguous mood that pervades his prints.

The brimmed hat with a creased crown (*nakaore bōshi*) was introduced to Japan in 1873 or 1874, around the time of Kiyochika’s return from the provinces to a transformed Tokyo. Worn with a Western-style suit, traditional kimono, or some other culturally eclectic apparel, this hat marked the wearer as a sophisticate, open to and curious about modern developments. In Kiyochika’s series, the hat underscores his ongoing theme of observing and contemplating a changing city.

The appeal of the “man in the hat” to Nagai Kafū (1879–1959), a Japanese writer who championed Kiyochika’s works, surely was in its resonance with the notion of the flâneur. Defined as “stroller” or “saunterer,” the term *flâneur* referred to a man of leisure who would wander the streets of Paris—a city and a mode of existence dear to the Francophile author. Kafū used his collection of Kiyochika prints both as inspiration for his novels and as a nostalgic guide for his strolls through Tokyo, seeking relics of a transitional city already escaping his grasp.

Picturing Modernity

The infusion of Western technology into Japan from the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912) spurred widespread visual documentation of the new developments. Railroad transportation, telegraphic communication, gas-fueled lighting, steam-powered river and ocean vessels, and new materials and designs for bridges and buildings were crammed into the Japanese landscape over two decades. While not often technically precise, Kiyochika's renderings captured the essence of these modern innovations. In an interpretive context of light, shadow, delicately controlled chromatics, and subtle juxtaposition, he gave a highly nuanced commentary on the emerging values of the new world.

At every juncture, the infrastructures of mass production, efficient communication, and transportation led to relatively easy mobilization for war. Two wars were fought in Manchuria during the Meiji era, one with China (1894–95) and the other with Russia (1904–5). Kiyochika's best-known productions in the last twenty years of his career relate to scenes from those wars.

Bricktown

In 1873, *Rengagai* (bricktown or brick shopping row) referred to a shopping avenue stretching from Shinbashi north to Kyobashi, on a line just to the east of the Imperial Palace. In the previous year, fire had destroyed the traditional structures in this area, collectively called the Ginza. The Tokyo government seized the opportunity to create a wholesale gesture of modernity and Westernization, hiring the Irish architect-engineer Thomas Waters (1842–1898) and his associates to fill the axis with Western-style buildings. Waters obliged with a long vista of two- and three-story brick structures in the Georgian style. Expensive and more frequently leased than purchased, these structures disconcerted the Japanese and disappointed foreigners who sought the exotica of old Japan.

Ultimately, bricks did not supplant the traditional materials of wood, paper, clay, and straw-filled plaster. Ersatz structures arose in a style called *giyofū*, blending Japanese and Western design ideas and materials to fill a conceptual middle ground.

Open City

Although Edo was Japan's de facto center of political power from the early 1600s, Kyoto remained the capital until 1868, when an official transfer to Edo occurred and Edo's name was changed to Tokyo. Unlike the elegantly proportioned and stately streets of Kyoto, laid out in a classic grid pattern, the new ruling city accommodated a jigsaw puzzle of natural topography. Rivers, streams, and canals emptied into lowlands and estuaries. To the west of the Sumida River, land rose unevenly but steadily to a higher ground.

“High city, low city” was a phrase that defined both topography and social status. There were two focal points in the new Tokyo: the bustling commercial and entertainment areas along the river and, to the west, the parcels of land that grew from the central moated castle. When the shogun-daimyo-samurai societal structure collapsed, so did the reason for and population of that “retainer” culture. The city, high and low, was open to anyone—if not economically, at least for leisure activities and strolling around. Kiyochika's prints explored new vistas, not with the conventional bird's-eye view, but from a human eye at a human scale.

Nightlife

Edo had maintained a “nightlife” as a traditional city culture, but it was mainly confined to the pleasure quarters. In his studies of Tokyo, Kiyochika demonstrated how forms of illumination began to substantially transform the way life was lived. Although electric power would not be available to the city structure at large until 1886, gas-fueled streetlamps made a limited appearance in Tokyo in 1874, when around eighty were placed in the neighborhood of the Diet, or parliament building. The kerosene lamp also was becoming a fixture of modernity.

The ability to engage in labor and leisure activities during what were once largely inaccessible hours changed the city’s appearance. Kiyochika used the opportunity to describe the newly lighted night, indulging his continuing interest in light’s effects, but also offering understated meditations on the contrasts of natural and man-made light.

Spectacle and Spectatorship

Few things are more distinctive and striking in Kiyochika's views of the emerging city of Tokyo than his depictions of people. With rare exception, Kiyochika's renders the human form in silhouette (particularly in nocturnal settings) or as somehow remote, singular, and absorbed. His compositions often suggest a stage: the viewer looks at the depicted audience, which, in turn, observes an event, frequently a new phenomenon within the city or some form of light.

The pleasure traditional Japanese artists took in depicting the variety and vitality of human activity has nearly vanished from Kiyochika's scenes. Kiyochika left no written record of his intentions, but the severe disconnect between his cityscapes and those of the artists that preceded him suggests he was striving to depict a new kind of human walking the roads and traversing the bridges of Tokyo, one who is disengaged, alert, observing, and waiting.

Bridges and Gateways

As Tokyo developed, canals were constructed to facilitate movement of people and goods. Bridges, as well as ferries, became essential features of the landscape, marking land and water crossroads, dividing neighborhoods and social classes. The city is replete with local names affixed to *hashi* or *bashi* (bridge).

Bridges were places of famous or notorious assignations and events. In some instances, they also bore metaphorical meanings as transition points to other realms of existence. Buddhism recognized spiritual merit in bridge-building and understood passage over bridges as a symbol of spiritual endeavor. On the other hand, bridges also launched pleasure seekers into realms of desire.

Woven intimately into the function and myth of Tokyo, bridges inevitably appeared in Kiyochika's prints. The image of the bridge seemed to raise questions for the artist about personal and societal destinations during a period of transition.

Fire

Fire was and is a constant fear in urban Japan. The traditional building materials of wood, paper, and straw mixed with clay succumbed easily to flame. Because of their massive aftereffects, great fires figure prominently in Japan's historical chronology.

In the early months of 1881, two fires, separated by a few weeks, devastated Tokyo. On the morning of January 26, a fire started in Kanda, in the near northeast of the city's center. It quickly spread eastward along the Kanda River, turned south through Nihonbashi, and jumped the river from west to east at Ryōgoku Bridge to ravage the areas of Fukagawa and Honjo. Called the Great Ryōgoku Fire—or the Great Kanda Fire, noting its place of origin—its flames razed more than one hundred acres in the eastern part of the capital and left more than thirty-six thousand people homeless. By any scale, this was the most important fire of the Meiji era. Then, on the evening of February 11, another fire broke out in Hisamatsuchō. Kiyochika produced four distinct designs based on these two fires—some of his most visually arresting prints.

Kiyochika's personal loss in each of these fires was immense. His home, his studio, and his birthplace all were obliterated. The artist left no written record of despair; perhaps these fire meditations served that purpose. Kiyochika's visual essays on fire concluded his series of Tokyo prints.

Turning Back from the Edge

From 1856 until his death, Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) designed a suite of beautiful cityscapes in a series titled One Hundred Famous Views of Edo. The complete series actually comprises 118 woodblock prints, including a few created posthumously by other artists, often featuring witty, imposing, and cropped foreground subjects that lead the eye to a distant view. Hiroshige and his publisher initiated this series as Edo was yet again rebuilding after catastrophe, this time an 1855 earthquake and fire. The series thus was grand in scale and celebratory in spirit.

One Hundred Famous Views of Edo was the last sweeping display of the best of Edo-period woodblock print design applied as an ode to a beloved city. It also was the standard of excellence for many artists, including the young Kobayashi Kiyochika. Yet, in his stylistically unique views of Tokyo that form this exhibition, Kiyochika's references to Hiroshige are subtle at best.

Three years after the Great Kanda Fire of 1881, which ended the Tokyo project, Kiyochika initiated another series, One Hundred Views of Musashi. For unknown reasons, he completed only thirty-seven works of the projected one hundred. Unlike Kiyochika's Tokyo views, his Musashi prints are striking in their explicit evocations of Hiroshige's style. This truncated series reads as if Kiyochika had pulled back from the edge achieved in his disquieting vision of the modernizing Tokyo and, with his publisher, sought a more reliable and comfortable mode of looking at familiar views.

The Hiroshige and Kiyochika prints displayed here both represent the lumberyards at Fukagawa on a snowy evening.

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On view:

Kiyochika: Master of the Night