

Kiyochika's Tokyo — I

Master of Modern Melancholy (1876-1881)

Essay by James T. Ulak

Kobayashi Kiyochika

From Edo to Tokyo

Kiyochika's Tokyo: Map

Sources & Credits

FROM EDO TO TOKYO

On September 3, 1868, the city called Edo ceased to exist. The word Edo literally meant “estuary,” referring to the irregular topography of its location—bayside and riverside lowlands rising slowly to westerly hills, land intersected by rivers, streams, and marshes that led to and formed the northwest liminal of a great salt-water bay.

Edo's new name became Tokyo, the “Eastern Capital.” This grand title, a self-nomination for equal status with other great capitals of the world, was one of many aspirational gestures of the Meiji government that replaced the deposed Tokugawa shogunate. Japan's new leaders were intent on achieving parity, or the perception of parity, with the powerful nations of the West.

As the seat of the shogunate and de facto capital of late-feudal Japan, Edo's population is estimated to have reached one million by the early decades of the eighteenth century, making it one of the largest cities in the world. Hundreds of daimyō lords who presided over fiefs or domains throughout the land were required to take up part-time residence in Edo annually. Commerce boomed. Popular culture thrived. Samurai warriors without wars became bureaucrats—often, like Kiyochika's family, relegated to lowly posts and a precarious existence.

When Commodore Perry's gunboat diplomacy in 1853 and 1854 forced the Tokugawa rulers to open the country to foreign trade and relations, the greatest immediate visual impact of this Western intrusion did not take place in Edo. Rather, it was to be seen in nearby Yokohama, at the time a fishing village located south of Edo. Yokohama quickly became the most dynamic and cosmopolitan of several “treaty ports” that were opened to foreign residence and commerce, beginning in 1859. It was this little village transformed into a bustling foreign enclave that inspired the first sustained burst of Japanese artistic representations of Western material culture and sartorial fashions—the colorful (and often highly imaginative) genre of woodblock prints known as “Yokohama pictures” (*Yokohama-e*).

It was only after Edo became Tokyo that the great boom in “Westernization” prints took place, centering on the renamed capital. This coincided with the new government's ardent campaign to eradicate “evil customs of the past” and seek knowledge “throughout the world.” (The words appear in a famous “Oath in Five Articles” promulgated in April 1868.) “Civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*) became a resonant slogan of the times, with both parts of the conjunction understood to refer to culture and progress as manifest in the West. This was the background to the glittery boosterism seen in the flood of Tokyo-centered woodblock prints that became so vogueish in the 1870s and 1880s, celebrating not just Westernization of Tokyo's physical features, but of its upper-class inhabitants as well. Thus the generic name “enlightenment pictures” (*kaika-e*).

Kiyochika's return to Tokyo in 1874, after years of self-imposed exile in support of the deposed Tokugawa regime, thus took place just six years after the capital acquired its new name and embarked on its epic course of transformation along Western lines. Telegraph wires had appeared here and there on the landscape before the fall of the feudal regime, but other aspects of Westernization were just making an entrance. Wheeled vehicles, for example, were prohibited under the Tokugawa shogunate (they were deemed dangerous on the mostly narrow roads), and the rikishaw seems to have made its first Japan appearance in Tokyo in 1869. Horse-drawn carriages were another post-Edo innovation. The first railway line in Japan, from Yokohama to Tokyo, was inaugurated in 1872.

The "brick shopping row" (*rengagai*) of three-story structures in the Georgian style that became famous as Tokyo's Ginza area only materialized in 1873, following a fire that destroyed the neighborhood the previous year. The first gas-fueled streetlights appeared in the capital in 1874. (Electric power did not become available at large until 1886.) On the other side of the coin, the mansions of the daimyō, whose fiefs were abolished and replaced by prefectures in 1871, had been vacated and largely left unattended—making absence as conspicuous a presence as new technologies and styles when Kiyochika made his way back to the great metropolis.

It was not until two decades after his return to Tokyo, when nationalism swamped his emotions and he redirected his talent to depicting Japan's emergence as a powerful practitioner of modern warfare against China and Russia, that Kiyochika became a champion of throwing off "evil customs of the past." Warships, artillery, soldiers and sailors in Western uniforms, days and nights filled with gunfire and gun smoke became his new passion—in woodblock prints every bit as multicolored and celebratory as the earlier, non-belligere "enlightenment pictures" of fellow artists, from which he had so noticeably distanced himself. Yet even in these later propaganda prints we see his fascination with night and the play of light.



"The Army Advancing on the Ice to Attack Weihaiwei"
Kobayashi Kiyochika
woodblock print, 1895

[2000_417]

Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



"Our Scout Reconnoiters the Enemy Encampment near the Yalu River"
Kobayashi Kiyochika
woodblock print, 1894

[2000_380_28]

Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

However we may explain his later escape from melancholy, Kiyochika's "Famous Views of Tokyo," now regarded as his finest accomplishment, are the very antithesis of celebration. Gradations of light capture his attention. Darkness beckons. Day or night, singly or in couples or in crowds, the figures on streets, pathways, and public areas of the new capital seem enveloped in silence—disengaged observers of the passing of old ways. There is little hint of what lay ahead for the city, the nation, the artist himself.



"Okura Bridge in Honjo"
Kobayashi Kiyochika
woodblock print, 1880

[s2003_8_1111]



"Summer Night at Asakusa Kuramae"
Kobayashi Kiyochika
woodblock print, 1881

[s2003_8_1190]

Kiyochika Revisited
The writers who championed Kiyochika
Text by François Lachaud

The prolific work of Kobayashi Kiyochika (1847-1915) would have remained a footnote in Japanese art history but for the efforts of three writers: Noguchi Yonejirō (1875-1947), Nagai Kafū (1879-1959), and Kinoshita Mokutarō (1885-1945).

After a brief visit to the aging painter who had almost forgotten the details of his career, Kinoshita wrote the first essay on Kiyochika's "Views of Tōkyō" (a used by critics but never by the artist) published in the magazine Geijutsu (Fine Arts) in 1913. He would write another detailed survey of Kiyochika's work in 1916—one year after Kiyochika's death—in Chōū bijutsu.

Noguchi Yonejirō (or Yone) introduced Western audiences to Kiyochika's views of the city in an essay titled "Kiyochika Kobayashi: A Modern Master of the Japanese Color-Print" (Arts & Decoration, May 1920). A connoisseur of ukiyo-e (Japanese traditional prints), Noguchi wrote extensively on Hokusai and Hiroshige. He also wrote essays on Western artists, among them a brilliant piece on James McNeill Whistler ("A Japanese on Whistler," 1914).

The last of the trio was Nagai Kafū, who first mentioned the "Views of Tōkyō" in 1913. His admiration for Kiyochika would last until his final years, as he discovered in the printmaker's unfinished and prophetic cityscapes the tenets of his own urban aesthetics. To this day, Kafū's complete works remain the most important corpus of texts written on the new Japanese capital from the days of its birth to its almost complete destruction in 1945, then slouching towards the 1960s.

Unlike Noguchi and Kinoshita (who later became a renowned dermatologist at Tokyo University and was active in French Indochina in the colonial era), Kafū never embraced the lost cause of imperialism/nationalism which may explain why his acerbic criticisms of modern Japan haven't lost any of their edge. After a long stay abroad—mostly for pleasure and to learn French—Kafū was appalled by the spectacle of modern Japan as exemplified by the visual appearance of its capital.

Noguchi, Kinoshita, and Kafū were transnational intellectuals with a strong interest in foreign cultures—not to escape Japanese realities but to reconsider them in a different light. That their paths led them towards Kiyochika's Tōkyō does not come as a surprise. All three of them rejected naturalism, praised aestheticism, championed impressionism, and were in return fascinated by Edo culture. For them Kiyochika was at the same time the artist who opened the gates towards a past they never experienced and a guide to the Tōkyō of their childhood—the city portrayed in his prints.