Kiyochika's Tokyo — I

Master of Modern Melancholy (1876-1881)

Essay by James T. Ulak

With the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Kobayashi Kiyochika (1847-1915), who had fought on the side of the defeated Tokugawa shogun, retreated to the provinces for a hiatus of six years. He finally returned to the capital in 1874. Between 1876 and 1881, he produced an unusual series of woodblock prints titled "Famous Places of Tokyo." These elegant views convey a sense of both change and loss strikingly different from the brightly colored prints of his contemporaries that celebrated Westernization in all its forms.

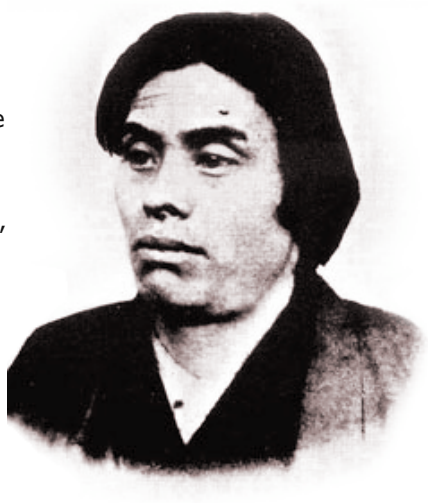
Kiyochika's return to Tokyo coincided with the beginning of Tokyo's gas-lit era. Street lighting dramatically changed the look of the city after dark, opening up a whole new field of visual investigation for artists. For Kiyochika, the impact was momentous. Twenty-five out of the ninety-three prints in his series (called Tokyo Meisho-zu in Japanese) are nightscapes. No other woodblock print series juxtaposes the vanishing and emerging Japan more evocatively.

Unless otherwise noted, all images in this unit are from the Robert O. Muller Collection of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

INTRODUCTION

Kobayashi Kiyochika (1847-1915) emerged from virtually nowhere. Born into a family of low-ranking officials in charge of government rice granaries in the Honjo district of Edo, his parents were members of the sprawling bureaucracy that served the Tokugawa family who had ruled Japan as hereditary shoguns since the beginning of the seventeenth century. Kiyochika's childhood and youth and unpredictable development as an artist coincided with an epoch of enormous political and social upheaval in Japan.

Kiyochika was around six years old when Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States brought his gunboats to Japan—not once but twice (in 1853 and 1854)—and forced the Tokugawa regime to open the secluded country to foreign trade and intercourse. He was twenty-one in 1868, when the Tokugawa shogunate was overthrown, bringing to an end over six centuries of feudal rule by the samurai class.



Photograph of Kobayashi Kiyochika (Japanese, 1847-1915), Meiji era

His emergence as an artist in the woodblock-print tradition in the 1870s occurred at a time when many fellow artists were caught up in producing colorful "brocade pictures" *(nishiki-e)*—also called "enlightenment pictures" *(kaika-e)*—that celebrated the abrupt "Westernization" of Japanese life. This was, as it transpired, a celebration that the young Kiyochika by and large resisted.

Despite their status as minor civil servants, Kiyochika's family lived on the edge of poverty. The price of rice was a source of constant turbulence in an age of social, political, and commercial upheaval, and the family relied on a meager stipend to survive. The death of Kiyochika's father when his son was still in his fifteenth year was a devastating blow to family fortunes, and the collapse of the feudal order soon after cast Kiyochika and his family to their own devices. Still, when the Tokugawa regime was overthrown in 1868, Kiyochika followed the last shogun in self-imposed exile in Shizuoka.

During his years in Shizuoka, Kiyochika tried his hand at various odd jobs from fencing master to fisherman, and became familiar with the shabby world of traveling entertainers. His illustrated diaries affirm that he had fledgling skills as an artist, although he never was able to afford sustained formal training in traditional painting or woodblock printing. Yet in 1874, on a whim, he returned to Edo—now renamed Tokyo—and soon afterwards emerged as a woodblock-print artist of note.

Beginning in 1876, Kiyochika embarked on an unfinished series of ninety-three views of the new capital city that now stands as his main claim to fame in modern Japanese art. Titled *Famous Places of Tokyo* (Tokyo Meisho-zu), his obvious inspiration was Andō Hiroshige's *100 Famous Views of Edo* (Meisho Edo Hyakkei), which Hiroshige began serializing in 1856, when Kiyochika was a youngster, and continued until his death in 1858. (Publication was completed in 1859.) This immensely popular series went through many printings, and eventually became known and admired by Western artists such as Vincent Van Gogh.

Four prints from Hiroshige's 100 Famous Views of Edo,
published between 1856 and 1859, when Kiyochika was a youth.
Left to right: numbers 6, 13, 90, 111.

[www.hiroshige.org.uk]

Hiroshige's colorful and exquisitely composed prints carried the vivaciousness of the popular woodblock-print tradition to new levels. His "famous views of Edo," however, present a very different picture than the "Tokyo" Kiyochika observed when he returned to the renamed city less than twenty years later. Hiroshige's renderings are romantic, absent Western influences, often almost pastoral, and more often than not sparkling under a midday sun. Kiyochika's city, by contrast, is somber and austere. Western intrusions are noticeable, although often just marginally, in the form of telegraph wires, gaslights, and brick buildings. Gradations of light fascinated him, shading into twilight and deepest night. The prevailing mood is one of melancholy.

Such themes and preoccupations did not set Kiyochika apart from just his distinguished predecessor, Hiroshige. They also set him apart from contemporary printmakers who cast the bright light of day on all manner of Western manifestations in the "new" Japan: gaslights and telegraph wires and Western-style buildings, to be sure, but also steamships and trains, upper-class men and women playing classical Western music, doyens of high-society (including the emperor and empress) dressed in the latest European fashions. These early Meiji-era "Westernization" prints commonly took the form of expansive and gaudy triptychs. They are what usually come first to mind when one hears the words "Meiji prints."

Utagawa Hiroshige lll,
"Locomotive Along the Yokohama Waterfront,"
woodblock print, 1871
(Detail, below)

[s1991.151a-c]

Utagawa Hiroshige lll,
"Famous Views of Tokyo: Brick and Stone
Shops on Ginza Avenue," woodblock print, 1876

[s1998.32a-c]

Kiyochika was a bystander to this flamboyant printmaking. Rather than celebrate (and exaggerate) all that was Western and new, the views of the capital he produced between 1876 and 1881 are restrained single-block prints that reflect Western influences in more subtle ways. There is some indication, for example, that he may have studied the technical teachings of Charles Wirgman (1832-1891), an English artist and cartoonist who lived in Japan from 1861 and trained many local artists in Western techniques of pictorial representation. Kiyochika's works also reveal familiarity with photography, which began to flourish in Japan beginning in the mid-1860s.

The artist himself—an autodidact with the most eclectic of imaginable trainings—never made any precise statement about his art. Over the course of his career, he was staggeringly prolific in many genres, from established woodblock techniques to still lives, animal representations, physiognomies (optical anatomies), newspaper cartoons, and a large corpus of war prints. The last of these emerged in a flood of detailed and euphoric depictions of Japan's emergence as an imperialist power at the turn of the century, when the nation defeated first China, and then Russia, in the Sino-Japanese (1894–95) and Russo-Japanese (1904–5) wars.

While the ninety-three views of Tokyo that Kiyochika produced between 1876 and 1881 remain his main claim to artistic fame in Japan, his oeuvre as a whole reflects an instinctive awareness that depiction of the novel and ambiguous was best communicated by a hybrid medium. Things that look familiar until closer examination reveal hints of the new. Kiyochika applied technical tricks that amounted to approximations of oil painting, copperplate printing, and photography. It seems clear that the collaboration he maintained with the publisher Matsuki Heikichi was committed to producing something more subtle than simply the novelty of depicting new things. The two men seemed committed to finding a different visual language to communicate this newness.

Kiyochika's 1877 woodblock print titled "Cat and Lantern," for example, is a macabre tour de force that shows a short-tailed, belled cat attempting to extract a rat trapped in a tipped and burning lantern. Placed in a competition, this was initially misread as an oil painting. Here as in many of his printed works, Kiyochika dispensed with the omnipresent outline of the keyblock print and emphasized (still using multiple printing blocks) undelineated blends of color that replicated oil pigment brushed on a canvas.

"Cat with Lantern"
Kobayashi Kiyochika
Woodblock print, ca. 1880

[s2003_8_1151]

Kiyochika was also capable of bringing a print to near photographic realism. His 1878 study of the statesman Ōkubo Toshimichi (1830-78), who was assassinated that same year, is modeled after a photograph dating from around 1870. The "engraving" qualities of the print reflect skills being acquired at the time by a number of Japanese artists under the tutelage of Western artists contracted by the Japanese government to produce currency images.

Kiyochika applied this photograph-like sense to traditional subjects as well, as seen in his depiction (also from around 1878) of a triumvirate of geisha beauties representing Kyoto, Osaka, and Tokyo—the traditional Edo-era urban meccas of courtesan culture. The choice of black-and-white, oval framing typical of portrait photography, subtle "roughing" in background areas to simulate an engraving effect, and odd arrangement of faces suggesting a photographic multiple exposure—Kiyochika plotted all this with his publisher Matsuki to introduce a subtle foreign accent to time-honored methods of woodblock-print production.

"Portrait Of Okubo Toshimichi"
Kobayashi Kiyochika
Woodblock print, ca. 1878

[s2003_8_1158]

"Three geisha: Kayo of Kyoto, Hitotsuru of Osaka, and Kokichi of Tokyo"
Kobayashi Kiyochika
Woodblock print, ca. 1878

[s2003_8_1157]

The Western influence on Kiyochika's unfinished *Famous Places of Tokyo* is less pronounced, and lies primarily in wedding techniques of light, shadow, and perspective to the traditional format and production procedures of the woodblock print. In contrast to the ebullience of fellow printmakers who celebrated the influx of Western technology, architecture, and fashions, Kiyochika's cityscapes commonly evoke images of a vanished, or vanishing, city. They tend to convey a modern sense not of progress, but rather of alienation and loss.

Decades later, in the 1910s, distinguished writers and cultural critics like Nagai Kafū (1879-1959) and Kinoshita Mokutarō (1885-1945) rediscovered this artwork by the young Kiyochika and called attention to the ambiance of loss. Kinoshita referred to the prints as images of the "Old Tokyo." Nagai Kafū regarded them as peerless documents that, as they were transferred from watercolors into woodblock prints, introduced an element of poetic realism that resurrected a lost city that essentially disappeared after the 1880s.

The distinctiveness of Kiyochika's melancholy reading of the city can be highlighted by juxtaposing his treatments against renderings of the same or similar locales by his great predecessor, Hiroshige. Take, for example, Kiyochika's depiction of Mt. Fuji as seen from the city. The hallowed mountain—located some sixty miles southwest of the capital—occupies the background of no less than sixteen of Hiroshige's views of Edo. In Kiyochika's series, on the other hand, Fuji makes but a single appearance—still stately and imposing, but presiding over a suburb that is passing through twilight toward darkness. Houselights illuminate the scene. Shadow figures walk the street. An almost silhouetted pine tree occupies the right side of the print (similar to the composition of one of Hiroshige's renderings of Mt. Fuji); and only close scrutiny reveals something in the scene that did not exist in Hiroshige's time: a faint line of telegraph wires.

Kiyochika's rendering of the signature Mt. Fuji image features a pine tree that echoes the composition of one of Hiroshige's renderings of Mt. Fuji (far right). Close scrutiny reveals something in the scene that did not exist in Hiroshige's time—a faint line of telegraph wires.

Mount Fuji from Abekawa
Kobayashi Kiyochika
Woodblock print, 1881

[s2003_8_1116]

Below: two views from Hiroshige's 100 Famous Views of Edo, *1856–1859: numbers 8 and 25.*

[s2003_8_1151]

"View of Takanawa Ushimachi under a Shrouded Moon"
Kobayashi Kiyochika, woodblock print, 1879

[s2003_8_1179]

In his rendering of Shimbashi Station, one of Tokyo's earliest railway terminals and a familiar subject among print artists depicting Western-style architecture, Kiyochika similarly adopted a characteristically different perspective—again moody and nocturnal. We are shown the station not only in nighttime, but also during a rainstorm. A crowd in the foreground, including rickshaw, carries oil-coated paper umbrellas and lighted lanterns; the light emanating from the station is replicated in lines of lantern light reflected on the wet pavement.

Kiyochika's nighttime rendering of Tokyo's earliest railway terminal, Shimbashi Station, is a moody evocation in which light is reflected in the rain-soaked streets.

"Shinbashi Station" by Kobayashi Kiyochika
woodblock print, 1881

[s2003_8_1199]

"Shinbashi Station" by Utagawa Hiroshige lll
Woodblock print, late-19th century
[s2003_8_147]

Of the ninety-three views of Tokyo Kiyochika published before abandoning the series in 1881, twenty-five are nightscapes of one sort or another. It is here that his distinctive preoccupation with light, and his fascination with shadows and the myriad faces of the night, emerge most arrestingly. Human figures, even crowds, are often silhouetted and at once together and alone—observers rather than actors in an oddly quiet landscape. Between dusk and dawn, Kiyochika's subjects, animate and inanimate, drift through moody shades of gray and blue interspersed with fireworks, moonlight, gaslight, and fireflies.

Kiyochika's series includes these rare "night and day" views of the gateway to Toshogu Shrine, Ueno, depicted from exactly the same position. Characteristically, a sense of loneliness pervades both renderings.

"View of Ueno's Toshogu in Snow" Kobayashi Kiyochika
woodblock print, 1879

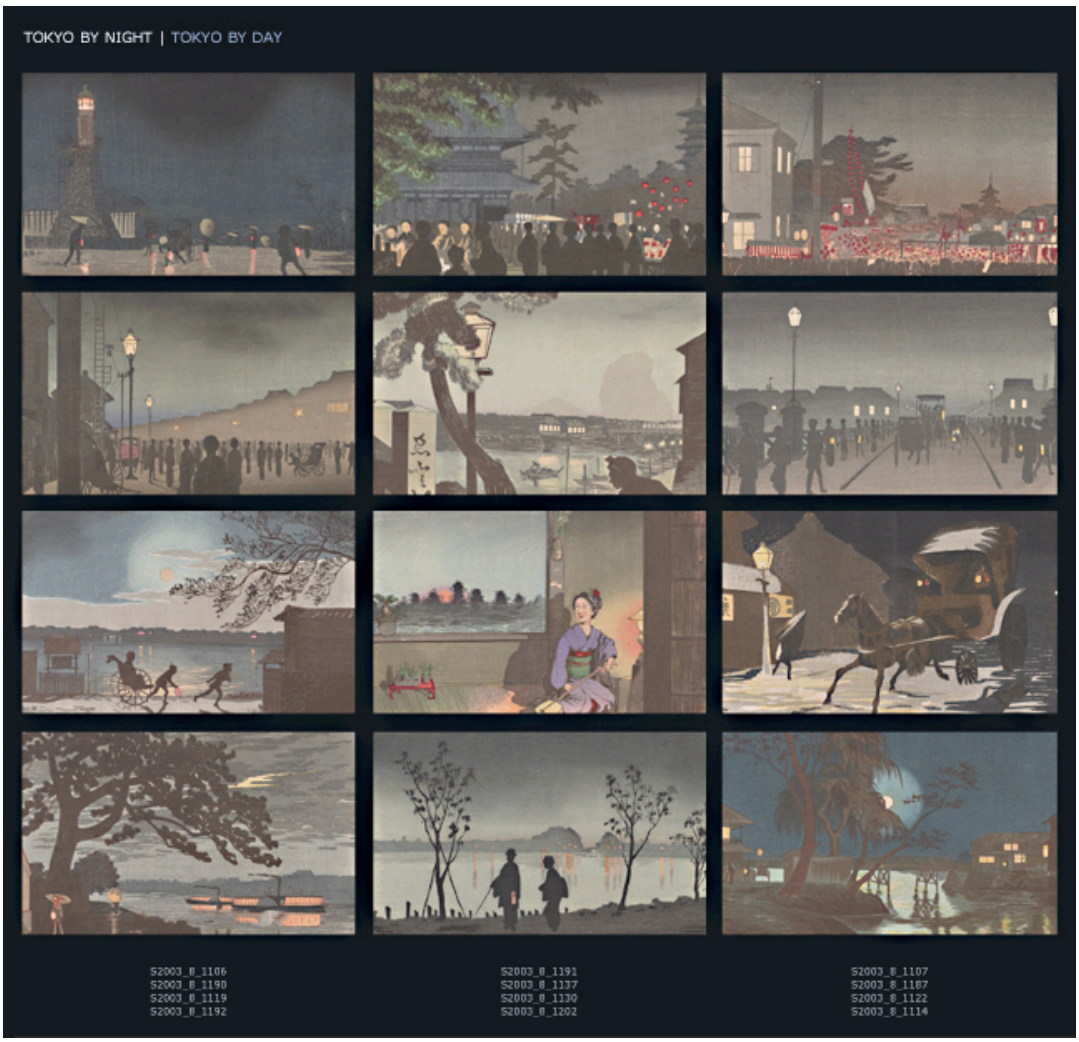
[s2003_8_1148]

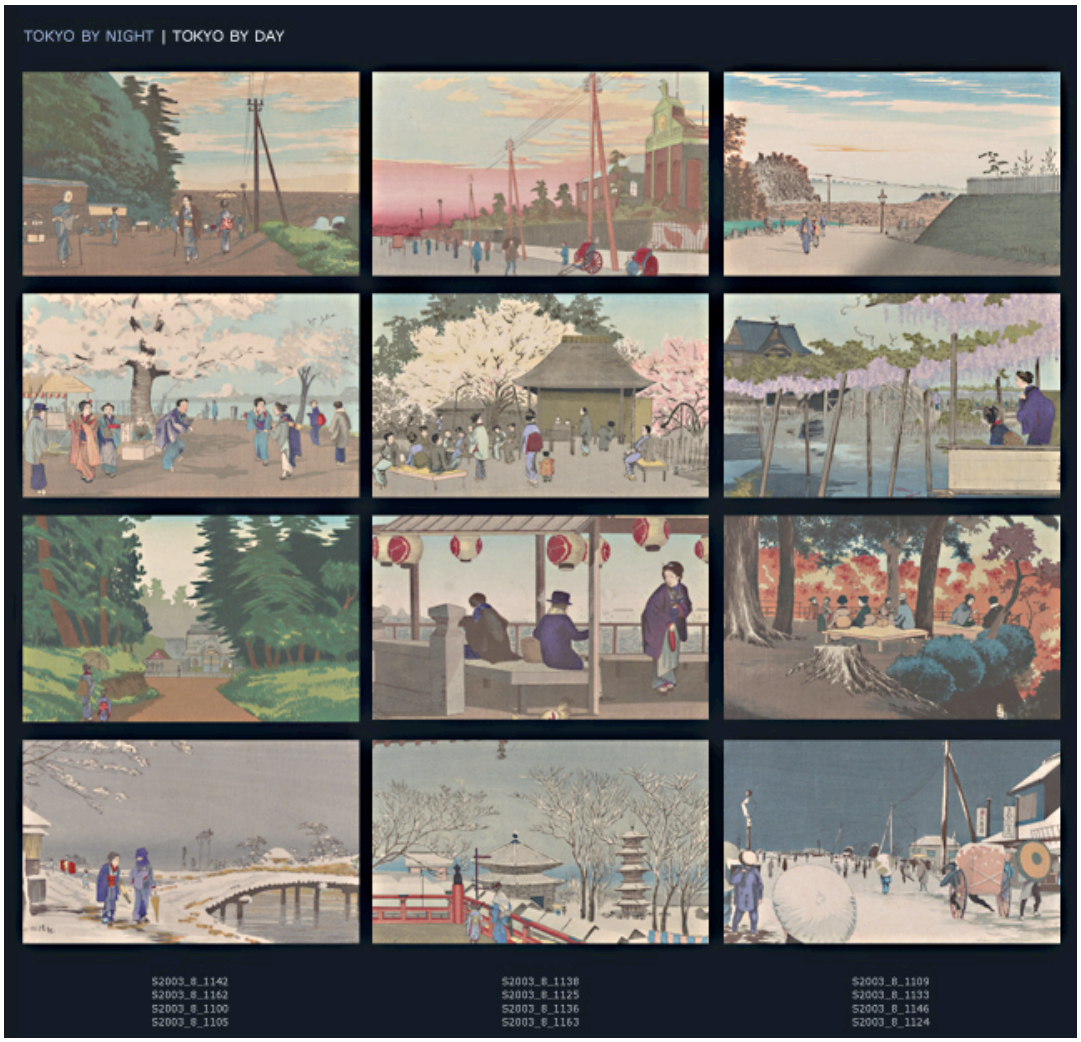
"Toshogu in Ueno at Night" by Kobayashi Kiyochika
woodblock print, 1881

[s2003_8_1149]

At the same time, however, his depictions of Tokyo by day also usually convey a somber aura—as if the ghosts of the vanished Tokugawa shogunate and disappearing samurai class that had defined the opening decades of Kiyochika's life were still hovering nearby. There is beauty in these renderings, but joie de vivre is absent. A sense of silence takes its place.

The overarching detachment and melancholy that pervade this new Tokyo by day as well as by night are present in almost every print, and come through even more strongly when the prints are viewed in clusters, or grids, such as the following:





What caused Kiyochika to end his series in 1881, after completing ninety-three views? Clearly, his model was Hiroshige's *100 Famous Views of Edo.* The answer is: fire. Long known as the "flowers of Edo," fires had consumed large portions of the old feudal capital at regular intervals, and these urban disasters continued into the new Meiji era. In the opening months of 1881, two fires separated by two weeks devastated Tokyo—jumping rivers, razing hundreds of acres, and leaving thousands homeless. Kiyochika's personal loss in each of these conflagrations was immense. His home, his studio, and his birthplace were all destroyed.

Obliteration, absence, the vanishing of old Japan in the face of foreign intrusions had imbued his *Famous Places of Tokyo* series with its nagging sense of fragility and uncertainty. Now, abruptly, obliteration had descended in the form of natural disaster. Kiyochika left no written record of his despair on this occasion, but the last four prints he produced before abandoning the project depicted the two fires and their desolate aftermath.

"Great Fire in Ryogoku Drawn from Hamacho"
Kobayashi Kiyochika
woodblock print, 1879

[s2003_8_1227]

"Ryogoku After the Fire"
Kobayashi Kiyochika
woodblock print, 1881

[s2003_8_1223]

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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 voguish 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-bellicose "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.

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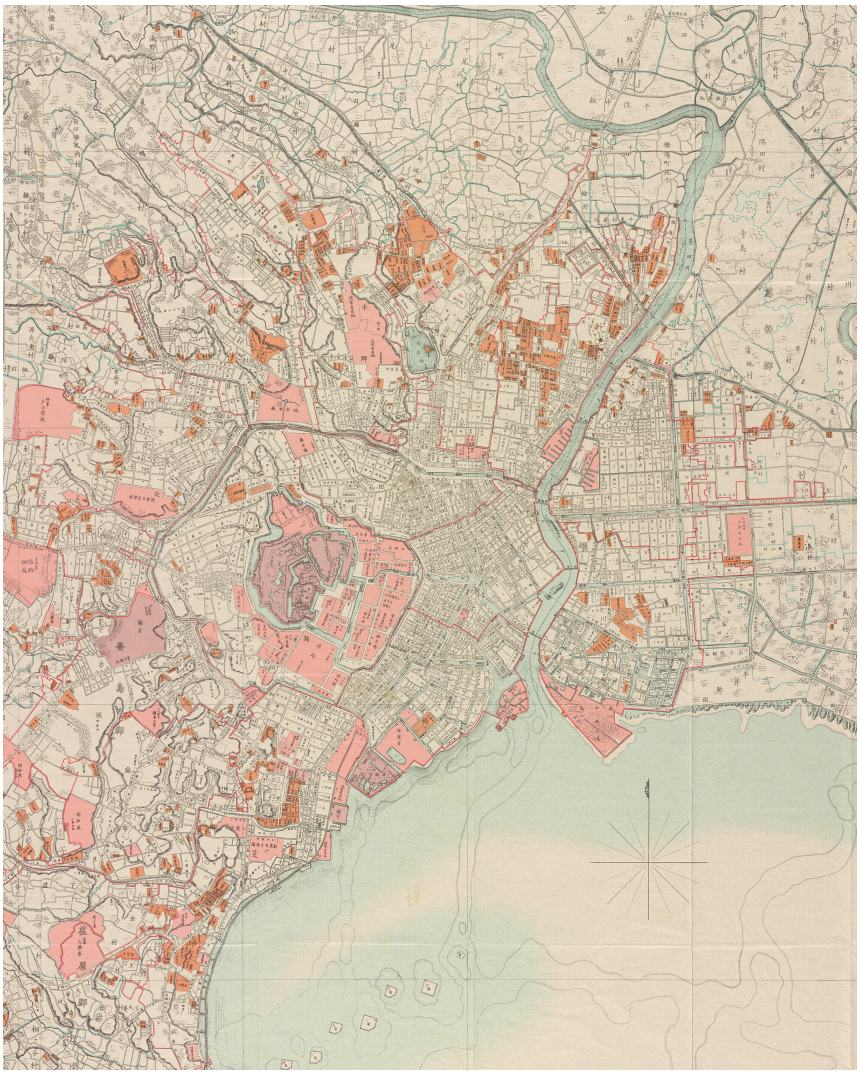
KIYOCHIKA'S "FAMOUS PLACES OF TOKYO"



Survey map of Tokyo, 1879 (detail)

[Edo-Tokyo Museum]

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