

# Bridges Depicted in Ukiyo-e

**Bridges are often depicted as motifs in ukiyo-e woodblock prints, which often portray in vivid detail the lively everyday activity of the people. Tando Masako, curator at the Edo-Tokyo Museum, explained the presence of bridges in ukiyo-e.** (Text: Morohashi Kumiko)

Ukiyo-e was born as an art genre in the late 17th century and became widely popular as a form of entertainment for the masses during the Edo period (1603 – mid-late 19th century). The names of Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige are perhaps the first that come to mind as representative ukiyo-e artists.

Tando says, “Katsushika Hokusai, who lived from 1760 to 1849, is an ukiyo-e artist who, in his creative career spanning about seven decades, drew *shinrabansho*,<sup>1</sup> and left behind masterpieces in a variety of media, including *nishiki-e*,<sup>2</sup> book illustrations, and *nikuhitsu-ga*.<sup>3</sup> Utagawa Hiroshige, who lived from 1797 to 1858, on the other hand, was an ukiyo-e artist who painted, in a profoundly lyrical manner, scenes of Edo (present-day Tokyo) and other parts of Japan. Although his art spanned a wide variety of subjects, including *bijin-ga* (“paintings of beautiful women”) and *kacho-ga* (“flower-and-bird paintings”), he is regarded in the history of ukiyo-e as a leading artist of Japanese landscape painting in particular. Both Hokusai and Hiroshige are also known for their influence on Western impressionist painters such as Vincent van Gogh and Edgar Degas in the late 19th century.”

According to Tando, the works of these two artists are part of a rich legacy of ukiyo-e masterpieces that feature bridges as motifs.

“Over a period of about 250 years after the establishment of the Shogunate, the city of Edo was transformed in a series of expansions and improvements. As a key element of the transportation infrastructure, bridges served both as crossings for large numbers of people going about their everyday business and as important local landmarks. Their interesting appeal and beauty, which stood

out from the natural scenery, and their presence as symbols, must have made bridges quite attractive to the eyes of ukiyo-e artists.”

Hokusai’s *Kameido Tenjin Taikobashi* (“Drum Bridge at Tenjin Shrine, Kameido”) from the series *Shokoku Meikyo Kiran* (“Famous Bridges in Various Provinces”) is one of his masterpieces that dynamically capture the appearance of bridges.

“This is one of a series of 11 ukiyo-e prints that feature bridges in various provinces. The Drum Bridge at Kameido Tenjin Shrine (Koto City, Tokyo) is depicted in an exaggerated manner to look larger than it actually is. Although the bridge was popular as a wisteria viewing spot, the artist deliberately did not depict the flowers, focusing the structure of the bridge and the composition of the painting.”


Another masterpiece, this one by Hiroshige, is *Ohashi Atake no Yudachi* (“Bridge Ohashi and Atake in Sudden Shower”).

“It depicts people running across a bridge over the Sumida River (present-day Shin-Ohashi, Koto City, Tokyo), bent over and covering their heads in a sudden summer evening shower. What is special about this print is the line of the rain legs is characterized by being expressed with changing those angles using two types of woodblocks. This work is also famous as a source of inspiration for Vincent van Gogh, who copied it using oil painting techniques”.

Ukiyo-e prints depicting bridges convey the lifestyle of the period.

“For instance, traditional Japanese hairstyles (top-knots) differed depending on social status and age, and there were various fashion trends in the patterns and shapes of clothing (kimonos). From this perspective, ukiyo-e prints also represent a valuable source of information on the lifestyle and culture of the era when they were created.”

Tando also hopes that viewers will appreciate the beauty of the colors as well as the carving and printing techniques.

“The vibrant colors and the uneven, textured surfaces typical of woodblock prints that have been reproduced over and over again can only be appreciated firsthand. If you have a chance, make sure to visit the museum and see the actual prints,” emphasizes Tando. 

1. A Japanese concept that signifies all things in nature, the whole of creation
2. A type of multi-colored ukiyo-e woodblock print that gained popularity around 1765 with the development of woodblock printing technology. The publisher directed the creative process, which was performed by an artist who made the preliminary drawings, an engraver who carved separate woodblocks for each color, and a printer who printed the images on paper.
3. A type of original painting done with a brush and color ink directly on paper or silk. The formats of *nikuhitsu-ga* include folding screens, hanging scrolls, rolled-up scrolls, *shikishi* (squares of thick colored paper for painting and calligraphy), fans, etc.

# 北斎



Above: *Onmayagashi Yori Ryogokubashi no Sekiyo o Miru* ("Viewing the Sunset over Ryogoku Bridge from the Onmaya Embankment"), from the series *Fugaku Sanjurokkei* ("Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji") (Katsushika Hokusai, c. 1831-34)



Middle: *Fukagawa Mannenbashi Shita* ("Under the Mannen Bridge at Fukagawa"), from the series *Fugaku Sanjurokkei* ("Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji") (Katsushika Hokusai, c. 1831-34)



Below: *Kameido Tenjin Taikobashi* ("Drum Bridge at Tenjin Shrine, Kameido"), from the series *Shokoku Meikyo Kiran* ("Famous Bridges in Various Provinces") (Katsushika Hokusai, c. 1833)



Above: *Ohashi Atake no Yudachi* ("Evening Shower at Ohashi Bridge") (Utagawa Hiroshige, 1857)

Left: *Ryogoku Hanabi* ("Fireworks at Ryogoku"), from the series *Meisho Edo Hyakkei* ("One Hundred Famous Views of Edo") (Utagawa Hiroshige, 1858)



# 広重