CHAPTER SEVEN

Landscapes
Traditional landscape painting in Japan has its roots in China. Likewise, the Chinese produced color prints about three-quarters of a century before the Japanese. There are basic differences between Chinese and Japanese landscape painting and their European counterpart, the most important being the European use of the sun to define form and create shadows. Very seldom are there any shadows in Chinese and Japanese landscape painting. The second basic difference is the position of the viewer. In traditional Chinese painting, the viewer moves into the landscape, his viewpoint changing as he proceeds. It is virtually impossible to see the tops of mountains or trees from the foreground. Instead, one has to view the scene in sections from the foreground to the middle ground and eventually the background. This explains why houses and people in the distance are not smaller as they recede into the background. Moreover, the position of the eye level changes so that one can have a worm’s-eye view in one area and a bird’s-eye view in another. In the last half of the eighteenth century, the landscape served mainly as a background for a figural composition. It was not until the nineteenth century that the landscape itself became a worthy subject of woodblock prints.

Traditional Japanese landscape painting was not meant to describe a particular location. If names of mountains or vistas were indicated on a picture, it was purely the imagination of the artist at work. Many Japanese scenes were placed in China and painted by artists who had never set foot there. The traditional artist used the sun and moon only as a decorative device. The same applied to changes in the weather, which usually offered the four seasons as a traditional change of cosmic time. These basic principles were understood by ukiyo-e artists and, in some cases, incorporated in their works, but by and large they chose to ignore them. The townspeople—shopkeepers, workers, entertainers and others—did not have the artistic training to appreciate such an esoteric art form. They were practical people who liked to travel and to purchase pictures of the local shrines and temples and beauty spots they visited, perhaps afterwards mounting them in albums, much as the modern-day traveler takes photographs or buys postcards. Sometimes they would purchase fans bearing the same scenes. It was not important that the scenes shown were not a photographic likeness. To the buyers, the imaginative concept of a place was more important than a realistic image.

While many woodblock print artists attempted landscapes, it was the creative and innovative genius of two artists in particular—Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige—that conclusively shifted the emphasis in ukiyo-e from a style of personal portraiture focused on courtesans and actors into a broader style of art focused on landscapes, plants and animals. The landscape prints they produced are in a category of their own in the world of art. They are not abstractions of imaginary places but are easily acceptable to our pictorial vocabulary. They are of specific places. They are also colorful and composed in such a way that the viewer is made to feel that he is part of the scene.

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) was the greater designer of the two, an eccentric genius whose imagination knew no bounds (Figs. 114–120). He was drawn to diverse artistic influences, among them Chinese and Western art, which helped to make him a universal artist. Some of his famous series, such as Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji (1826–31) and One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji (1834), have become icons of Japanese art. His waterfall series shows his imagination reaching heights never before attained by any other artist. Hokusai lived to be eighty-nine years old. His life went through many stages, and with each stage he adopted a new name, but as the 1830s drew...
near, his vision and single-minded passion saw the creation of his majestic Fuji series and the series of waterfalls. Hokusai started the Fuji series when he was seventy years old.

At this time also, he attempted to revolutionize the palette of ukiyo-e by creating a masterful monochromatic use of Prussian blue, also known in Japan as Berlin blue (bero). A synthetic color imported from Europe to Japan in 1829, and the first of the synthetic colors to be used, the dark opaque blue revolutionized landscape prints because it allowed for many tones and also could be mixed with other colors. In Japan, prints in Prussian blue are known as aizome-e. About ten of the original printings of the Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji were done entirely in tones of Prussian blue, making them monochrome prints in Berlin blue. Many of these prints were in the format of uchiwa-e (fan prints). Unfortunately, because of persistent usage many fans eventually became torn and were discarded. A fine example is the Hiroshige fan print of fishing boats reproduced from my own collection (see Fig. 126).

The set of eight prints of Hokusai’s waterfalls, although not recognized as Japanese print icons in the same way as the “Great Wave off Kanagawa” or the “Red Fuji,” are to me his masterpieces. They are the most contemporary of all his compositions, embracing abstract qualities that do not appear in world art until the twentieth century. The variations constructed around a simple theme of descending water, either in a gushing column or undulating over the sides of a mountain, are remarkable. The compositions also contain figures that initially go unnoticed against the power of the falling water, but on closer examination reveal all sorts of human activity.

Hokusai had a prodigious energy. It is estimated that he drew over 70,000 different designs in his long life. His working period spanned over seventy years, which meant he had to produce three or more designs daily. It is hard to imagine a man working so tirelessly every day to accomplish this body of work—and, moreover, to create his best work during his golden years. Hokusai stands apart from all the other ukiyo-e artists. His imagination, power of conception and mastery of design were not equaled by any who came after him.

Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) took the landscape to new heights, consolidating it as an independent subject and adapting it to the tastes of the public (Figs. 121–126). Although in the early years he confined himself to common ukiyo-e themes such as beautiful women, kabuki actors and warriors, he was inspired by the success of the landscape prints of his near-contemporary Hokusai to make a dramatic turnabout around 1830 and focus on landscapes. He did not have the imagination nor did he create the revolutionary composition of Hokusai, but he did have an attribute that Hokusai lacked—he was able to imbue his landscapes with a sense of poetry. Particular moods of the seasons, weather and time of day lend his landscapes a convincing closeness to nature. One can smell the grass, feel
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guides, portraying the starting and finishing points and the overnight stops along the way by means of fifty-five painterly single-sheet woodblock prints. Each of the stops was a way station or inn where the traveler could spend the night or rest for a few days before continuing his journey. Some of the inns were very elaborate as feudal lords or other important dignitaries would also stop to change or care for their horses, and expect accommodation for the attendants who accompanied them.

This large series was a resounding commercial success—the popular equivalent to Hokusai’s Fuji series—and encouraged Hiroshige to become a full-time artist working extensively within the realm of meisho-e (pictures of famous places). For the next twenty years he concentrated his efforts on landscape prints, although he excelled at kacho-e (bird and flower prints) at the same time. He created numerous other large series, as opposed to the small sets of eight or ten prints that he and other artists previously made,

the mud, be warmed by the sun, blown by the wind, drenched by the rain or frozen by the snow simply by absorbing the atmosphere in his pictures. He also managed to achieve a sense of realistic depth by adapting Western principles of perspective and receding space to his own works. As much as I admire Hokusai and wish to emulate him, I love Hiroshige and know his art is intuitive and far beyond my capabilities.

Hiroshige was born into a family of minor officials who were responsible for fire control in the city. Even though his position was relatively unimportant, it did allow him to freely travel the roads he loved to sketch and absorb the scenery that became famous from his journeys. Sent on a shogunal delegation to the imperial court in Kyoto in 1832, Hiroshige traveled along the 500-kilometer (300 mile)-long Tokaido Road, a coastal highway linking the metropolis of Edo with the capital of Kyoto. In his Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido that resulted (1833–4), he revived the familiar territory of travel guides, portraying the starting and finishing points and the overnight stops along the way by means of fifty-five painterly single-sheet woodblock prints. Each of the stops was a way station or inn where the traveler could spend the night or rest for a few days before continuing his journey. Some of the inns were very elaborate as feudal lords or other important dignitaries would also stop to change or care for their horses, and expect accommodation for the attendants who accompanied them.

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sizes. Three other series were published in collaboration with other artists. He never repeated himself and continuously found excitement and inspiration from this one source of material. He kept diaries of his travels, some of which have been translated. They allow us to experience his daily activities as he wanders his trails. Hiroshige's popularity and the reprinting of his works gave birth to a whole corpus of writing on the subject. But it also led to a lowering of printing standards. When the blocks were overused, the outlines became blurred, or the registration of the color blocks lost their alignment. Sometimes new blocks were cut, especially by other publishers, or old blocks were bought and new pieces plugged into them. Variations on the blocks or colors caused series of prints to be erroneously labeled second edition, third edition, etc. Prints from the original blocks sometimes contained variations in the colors or the bokashi where the sky or ground faded in different directions. Collecting Hiroshige is thus a test in connoisseurship of Japanese prints. A unique element in his prints is the border around the edges, which has indented rounded corners. But there are thousands of Hiroshige prints on the market without borders as these were cut off when prints were removed.

FIG. 118 (left)
Katsushika HOKUSAI
北斎 (1760–1849)
Kirifuri Waterfall at Mount Kurokami in Shimotsuke Province
下野黒髪山きりふりの滝 (ca. 1832)
38.5 x 26.5 cm
Courtesy of Adachi Institute of Woodcut Prints

This print of a waterfall near Nikko was published to encourage city dwellers to venture on trips to the countryside. The modernity of the composition is remarkable. Also noteworthy is the scale of the falls compared to the figures in the foreground and the climbers on the slope to the right of the falls. The use of dots in this print as well as in other Hokusai pictures may have had an influence on the painting techniques of his European contemporaries, especially the French Impressionists.

FIG. 119
Katsushika HOKUSAI
北斎 (1760–1849)
Drum Bridge at the Kameido Tenjin Shrine, from Rare Views of Famous Bridges in All Provinces
亀戸天神たいこ橋 (ca. 1834)
38.5 x 23.5 cm
Courtesy of Mita Arts Gallery

Hokusai's bridges are not as exciting as his Fuji and waterfall series but do offer some marvelous compositions. To quote the late Hokusai expert, J. Hillier: "The greater topographical accuracy, the less the chance of evaluating a design completely satisfying in itself. In this set Hokusai was obviously bent on portraying the particular bridge, instead of the typical bridge. There is a greater attention to the identifying detail, to the picturesque effect." The Drum Bridge startles us with so arduous an ascent. As in other Hokusai prints, the middle ground is obliterated by Tosa school-style bands of mist.
from albums to be sold individually. Japanese collectors often pasted the prints into albums as a collection of memories of a trip taken.

Despite the problem of overproduction and the toll it took on artistic quality, Hiroshige's landscapes series were enormously popular both at home and abroad. They greatly influenced European artists, especially French Impressionists, from the 1870s onwards. Elements of his style were copied in oils by Van Gogh and were included in the compositions of Whistler and Degas. His prints were collected enthusiastically by Monet.

Hiroshige died of cholera in 1858 at the age of sixty-two. He had lived his entire life in Edo. A daughter born from his second marriage married a print artist who Hiroshige adopted and on whom he bestowed the name Hiroshige II; her second husband, another pupil of Hiroshige, is today known as Hiroshige III. Hiroshige II tried to carry the torch of his father-in-law, but never achieved the same level of success and recognition.

With the death of Hiroshige, landscape in the form of single-sheet prints came to an end. Although he had followers, the poetry was gone even though the scenery remained. Woodblock landscape continued in the form of illustrated books (see page 36) until the advent of a single individual who resurrected that pictorial reality in the early twentieth century. This individual was Watanabe Shozaburo (1885–1957), art dealer, publisher and businessman extraordinaire, who started his working life in an export company that also dealt in prints. After learning the export business and gathering connections to foreign importers, he set up his own company in 1906. Sensing a market for Japanese prints in North America and Europe, Watanabe began to export reproductions of famous and popular prints by ukiyo-e masters that he commissioned from trained artisans.

Not content with dealing in reproductions alone, Watanabe soon turned his sights on developing and selling new woodblock prints targeted at art lovers rather than the mass consumer market. Thus the shin hanga, literally “new woodblock prints,” movement was born. In Watanabe’s view, the European and American market wanted woodblock prints that featured an idealized, exotic Japan that had ceased to exist at the end of the Edo period in 1868. Instead of following the ukiyo-e tradition of black outline and flat patterns of color, the prints would re-create through the print medium an aesthetic expression based on Western concepts of landscape painting. They would be prints without outlines and in appearance resemble Western watercolors.

Watanabe’s exposure to the Western market coincided with his patronage of many painters and print artists who were approaching the landscape medium in the Western mode. After 1868, all kinds of cultural imports came to Japan from the West, including photography and printing techniques, which were greeted with great enthusiasm. The art of ukiyo-e could not compete and went into decline in Japan. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many artists and artisans trained in traditional ukiyo-e printmaking were forced to make a living as illustrators for newspapers and by designing kuchi-e (frontispiece illustrations) distributed with novels and magazines. A parallel change in artistic taste and direction also relegated images of the “floating world” to the annals of history. The time was ripe for a new print genre. The themes would comprise somewhat romantic and idyllic renditions of famous temples, landscapes and other images thought to appeal primarily to Westerners but also to many Japanese. They would be finely crafted.

Among the collaborating shin hanga artists in Watanabe’s circle were Kawase Hasui (1883–1957), who worked exclusively on exquisite landscape prints, including seasonal themes such as spring blossoms, summer rains,
autumn foliage and gentle snowfalls as well as night-time scenes (Figs. 127–129); Hiroshi Yoshida (1876–1950), noted for his day and night scenes or images at different times of the day or in different weather conditions; and Ito Shinsui (1898–1972), a painter best known for his images of beautiful women who produced a set of eight scenes of Lake Biwa. Shin hanga covered the entire spectrum of Japanese subject matter, but it was in the areas of landscape and beautiful women where they excelled in creating prints of exceptional beauty, reaching a level of craftsmanship in print production never before imagined.

FIG. 120 (above)
Katsushika HOKUSAI
北斎 (1760–1849)
Viewing Sunset Over the Ryogoku Bridge from the Ommaya Embankment, from Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji 富嶽三十六景 御厩川岸より両国橋夕日見 (1826–31)
38.5 x 25 cm
Courtesy of Mita Arts Gallery

Even though the title of this fascinating print is about viewing sunset, only about half of the travelers are actually looking at Mount Fuji in the distance. The man on the right is asleep. Others are washing their laundry or engaging in conversation. What is also amazing is the length of the bridge. The perspective view suggests an unbelievable engineering feat. This print is included as an example of Hokusai utilizing the middle ground. There are no bands of mist separating the foreground from the background.

FIG. 121 (opposite above)
Utagawa HIROSHIGE
広重 (1797–1858)
Full Moon at Takanawa, from Famous Places in the Eastern Capital 高輪の明月 (ca. 1831)
38.5 x 23.8 cm
Courtesy of Adachi Institute of Woodcut Prints

This print is pure poetry and shows Hiroshige at his best. The perspective is almost Western in concept. The formation of the flying geese against the circular white moon in front of a Berlin blue sky raises questions as to where the viewer would be standing. In the distance are boats in the harbor. Takanawa was a way station where travelers presented their documents before leaving or entering the city of Edo.
FIG. 124 (right)
Utagawa HIROSHIGE
広重 (1797–1858)
Sudden Shower over Shin-Ohashi Bridge and Atake, from One Hundred Famous Views of Edo
おお橋あたけの夕立ち (1856–8)
39 x 27 cm
Courtesy of Mita Arts Gallery

When we look at the Shin-Ohashi Bridge and the Shono we can understand why the Japanese say Hiroshige is “wet” compared to Hokusai being “dry.” As in other compositions, the figures are running out of the picture plane. The red underskirts of the two women on the left provide a pleasant color accent next to Hiroshige’s signature block. Compositionally, Hiroshige creates a fantastic element of visual movement back into the exact center of the picture with the boatman’s lumber barge.

FIG. 122
Utagawa HIROSHIGE
広重 (1797–1858)
Night Snow at Kambara, from Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido
蒲原夜の雪 (1833–4)
27 x 39 cm
Courtesy of Mita Arts Gallery

This masterpiece went through two major versions, one showing the sky becoming almost black at the horizon, the other showing the sky darkening from top down in a bokashi technique. The version here, with the darkened horizon, has more drama and emphasizes the cold white snow, especially on the roofs and tree-tops. This is basically a monochrome print with the addition of yellow, red and blue on the people out in the fierce snowfall. In this very effective composition, the figure on the left leans to the left, the figures on the right lean to the right, while the center is left open with a great deal of graded black detail under the central house. One’s eye is led through the snow-covered rocks in the exact center of the composition.

FIG. 123
Utagawa HIROSHIGE
広重 (1797–1858)
White Rain at Shono, from Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido
庄野 白雨 (1833–4)
38 x 25.5 cm
Courtesy of Adachi Institute of Woodcut Prints

Along with the Kambara print (Fig. 122), the Shono print rates as among the finest, if not the finest, design in the series. It is a remarkable example of the skill of the printers in controlling the multitude of grays that depict the pouring rain as it drenches the travelers who move in both directions to escape it. The popularity of this picture also caused many revisions. There is a whole body of literature devoted to the Shono print, including a long article by the great scholar D. Richard Lane on the variations in the details of the Shono, especially on the umbrella at lower right, which bears the characters Take-nouchi, the name of the owner of the publishing house. The two kago bearers have covered their vehicle with a yellow oilcloth and we can just see the occupant’s hand just peeking out from underneath.
There is a wonderful tour de force in this composition. The title of the print comprises only a minor element in the middle foreground and our eye wanders back to Mount Fuji. But it is the use of bokashi by the printer in the scales of the carp streamers, which are flown annually on Boy’s Day, that imparts a sense of drama and mystery to what is a common subject. Other streamers and banners take us into the distance. The central streamer is especially dynamic when we see the small figures at lower right and realize the difference in scale. What adds to the mystery is where the viewer is standing to be able to see such a view.

This uchiwa-e (fan print) is a wonderful example of aizome-e. The luxuriousness of the Berlin blue in all its multitude of tones is completely captivating. Fan prints were a very popular art form but, of course, were subject to wear and tear when they were waved back and forth in the heat of summer. Thousands were printed but only a fraction survived.
Hasui, one of the most prominent of the early twentieth-century woodblock print artists and the first to be named a Living National Treasure in Japan, continued the poetic aesthetic of Hiroshige, with numerous delicate gradations of color. There is a clear separation of space between the foreground, middle ground and background. The human element is there in the boat in the center, giving us a sense of scale. The lights in the windows indicate human occupation. We shiver as we feel the heavy falling snow.

Like no other artist, Hasui was capable of creating moods with his designs. Unlike in the prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige, here the rain is real, wet and lonely, a night when we would rather stay at home. The landscape is pure reality.

This print truly recalls Hiroshige in showing how humanity resists the forces of nature. The woman can barely cope with the snow and the wind that is blowing her kimono as she struggles toward the temple. Hasui spent a large part of his life traveling in order to catch views like this "live."