

Exhibition Guide

Utagawa Hiroshige *The Moon Reflected*

Later woodblock prints from the British Museum, curated by Julian Opie
with the assistance of Timothy Clark

28 November 2007 – 20 January 2008

First Floor Galleries

This exhibition, curated by British artist Julian Opie, consists of woodblock prints by 19th century Japanese artist Utagawa Hiroshige. An intervention in Ikon's normal sequence of contemporary exhibitions, it demonstrates the relevance of historical work to current artistic practice and provides visitors with another look at printmaking, an important part of our gallery programme.

Hiroshige was born in Edo (modern Tokyo) in 1797. The son of a fire-warden, he briefly took up this profession himself whilst also developing his career as an artist, studying printmaking and painting to become an illustrator of comic poetry and story books. By 1830, he was concentrating on making landscape prints of famous places in Japan. Increasingly inventive, to some extent against the strong influence of Hokusai, another Japanese master, his reputation as a key figure in Japanese art was established by the publication of his series *The Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido Road*, around 1833–4.

The three series featured in this exhibition were made more than twenty years later: *Famous Views of the Sixty-odd Provinces* (1856), *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (1856–58) and *Thirty-six Views of Fuji* (1858). Stylistically quite distinctive, nevertheless they were made using the same traditional woodcutting techniques. During this process, first a rough sketch is translated into a neat line drawing, which is then overlaid onto the wood block, acting as a guide for a hand-held cutting tool. Ink is then spread over the wood block, the gouged sections remaining untouched, before the paper is pressed down on the surface. Using a technique called 'bokashi', the printer can also carefully wipe off some of the ink before the print is made, thereby creating gradated areas of colour.

Famous Views of the Sixty-odd Provinces was Hiroshige's first sustained attempt to produce landscape prints in the unusual and very 'un-western' vertical format seen here. It pushed further his tendency to arrive at surprising and seemingly odd design solutions, often involving the radical cropping of subject matter, and the imposition of looming motifs in the foreground. It resulted in a flattening of pictorial space, making the imagery more stylised overall.

In the later series, *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, these characteristics become more extreme, as seen in *Distant View of Kinryuzan Temple and Azumabashi Bridge*, where a geisha sitting in a boat almost completely disappears off the edge of the picture. The effect is disconcerting; we are not entirely sure what we are looking at. In *Plum Estate, Kameido*, famously copied by Van Gogh, the image is pulled so much into the foreground that it's almost impossible for our eyes to 'enter' the scene depicted. And it is not only the tree that has been so radically cropped, the wooden signpost to the left of the tree has been reduced to a minimal framing device so that its message is illegible.

Julian Opie's preference for the prints in this exhibition is telling. Their aesthetic economy corresponds very much with the formal characteristics of his own practice. Opie and Hiroshige convey a wealth of meaning through the slightest variation in their lines or shifts in their shapes. It is perhaps important to note that the prints exhibited here are less concerned with narrative than previously was the case in Hiroshige's work. They are what Opie refers to as 'functional' works, having been produced, in part, for tourists to collect as souvenirs on visits to large cities, thereby suggesting the Japanese artist's pragmatism.

The Moon Reflected concludes with three triptychs of vertical prints. These works, made in 1857, are known as the *Snow, Moon and Flowers* triptychs and are extraordinary for their ambition. The 'flowers' are actually whirlpools in the Naruto Straits, spirals of breaking waves, whereas the other titles refer literally to the depiction of a moonlit bay and a landscape blanketed in snow. Beautiful and unpretentious, they epitomise not only Hiroshige's vision at the height of his powers, but also what it is about this Japanese artist that appeals particularly to Julian Opie.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with an interview between Julian Opie (www.julianopie.com) and Timothy Clark (Japanese Section, The British Museum) and an essay by Henry Smith (Columbia University) available for £17.95, special exhibition price £14.95. Visit the gallery's new online shop at www.ikon-gallery.co.uk/shop for the full range of Ikon catalogues.