

‘He Frames a Shot!’: Cinematic Vision in Hiroshige’s *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*

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What exactly is the lure of the landscape prints of Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)? Although his views of the city of Edo (Tokyo) and the stations of the Tōkaidō (the highway which ran west to Kyoto) are among the most familiar works of Japanese art in the world, it is not a simple matter to encapsulate their appeal, since different elements have attracted different audiences in each era. In the artist’s own time, these prints were prized primarily for their informational value, as visual descriptions of the ‘famous places’ of Japan and the customs for which they were known. For modern collectors, Japanese and non-Japanese alike, Hiroshige has been praised above all as a lyrical master of atmospheric and crepuscular effects – an artist of mist, snow, rain and moonlight. And in all generations, the genial good humour that infuses many of his landscape scenes has been a source of pleasure.

Beyond such informational and sentimental appeal, however, lies the more intellectual attraction of Hiroshige’s compo-

sitional technique, which remains the least explored dimension of his landscape art. The current exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art of the complete set of Hiroshige’s last and largest landscape series, *Meisho Edo Hyakkei (One Hundred Famous Views of Edo)*; 118 sheets, 1856-59), is an appropriate occasion to look more closely at his manipulation of composition for dramatic and interpretative effect. This series in particular commends itself to such an approach, since it makes up for a lack of lyrical appeal with striking innovations of composition, particularly those in which a dramatically enlarged and often truncated foreground element has been set against a distant view. The author proposes understanding this as a form of ‘cinematic vision’, not to suggest that Hiroshige’s images were in any direct way a forerunner of film, but rather to provide a metaphor for understanding the experimental manipulations of time and space that he explored in this final work of his career.



(Fig. 1) *Shinobazu Pond*
By Odano Naotake (1749-80), c. 1778/79
Colour on silk
Height 98.5 cm, width 132.5 cm
(Photograph courtesy of the Akita Prefectural Museum of Modern Art)

The technique of Renaissance linear perspective was not used in Japan as a coherent system of picture-making, but as a dramatic effect that could be manipulated at will. Some European-style painting was introduced to the country in the later sixteenth century by Jesuit missionaries, but the tradition was lost with their exclusion in the 1640s. It was only a century later, from the late 1730s, that the Western approach to pictorial space re-entered Japan, this time by way of Chinese popular prints that used converging lines to create the effect of pictorial depth, often in an exaggerated way. Paintings and prints that replicated this effect, typically for views down streets and into the interiors of theatres and brothels, were known as *uki-e*, or 'relief pictures', to describe the way in which the foreground seemed to project from the picture's surface. The illusion of great depth was central to the appeal of linear perspective in Japan (see Figs 5 and 6).

A more sophisticated understanding of Western painting emerged a few decades later, in the 1770s, when a small group of samurai artists from the northern Japanese domain of Akita began to combine their training in the traditional Kano School style with the lessons of Dutch landscape painting, which they had absorbed largely from etchings in printed books imported through Nagasaki. Unconstrained by any commitment to either the geometry or the conceptual coherence of Western pictorial space, they would place a conventional bird-and-flower composition in the foreground, enlarged and carefully detailed, against a distant landscape in the Dutch manner, receding to a far horizon below a tinted and cloud-lined sky of a sort wholly novel to East Asian painting.

The acknowledged masterpiece of this 'Akita School' (whose members actually worked in the domain mansion in Edo), is *Shinobazu Pond*, probably painted in 1778/79, by the precocious Odano Naotake (1749-80) (Fig. 1). Whereas almost all early works of the school were in the vertical format, typically framed by a tree trunk along one side, Naotake has moved here to a horizontal format and a more integrated Western-style landscape, with a finely detailed distant view of Shinobazu pond at Ueno. This was a favourite theme of Edo landscape artists for the pleasing composition offered by the tiny man-made island-shrine in the middle, connected to the shore by a low causeway. Abruptly inserted into the composition, however, and larger than life in a painting that is over a metre wide, are two potted plants, rendered in sharp and minute detail, down to tiny ants on the peony buds. The contrast of near and far is striking and provocative, lending a certain air of mystery to the view: why are these pots, we wonder, sitting there beside the pond?

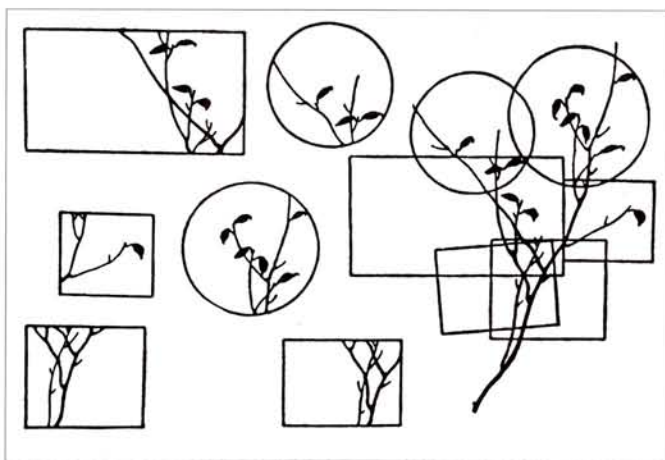
The Akita School vanished with scarcely a trace following the premature death of Naotake in 1780 and his lord and patron Satake Shozan (1748-85) five years later, and it remains a matter of speculation how its distinctive near-far mode of composition might have been passed directly on to other artists outside the domain. Art historian Naruse Fujio has argued that the technique was carried on by Shiba Kōkan (1747-1818) and other Western-style painters active in the late eighteenth century, and then passed on to Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), and in turn to Hiroshige (Naruse, 1977). The author believes, however, that Hiroshige arrived at the dramatic near-far compositions of *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* largely on his own, in a way that was comparable to Naotake, but with wholly different results. The basic similarity lies in the initial experiment of overlaying a distant landscape view with a close-up bird-and-flower depiction. The Akita artists first did this in a vertical hanging-scroll format, whereas Hiroshige himself devised it independently in a critical series of four Edo landscape



(Fig. 2) *Sumida River*, from the series *Famous Places of the Eastern Capital* By Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), c. 1839
Wood-block print
Height 37.3 cm, width 12.6 cm
Japan Ukiyoe Museum

prints in the vertical *tanzaku* format published by Murataya Ichibei in the late Tenpō period (c. 1839-42). (For reproductions, see Sakai, ed., pp. 214-16, figs 1048-51.) The example shown here offers a view across the Sumida river to Matsuyama shrine, over which is imposed an extreme close-up of two wooden pilings, with a wagtail perched on one and the other cropped by the frame (Fig. 2). Lacking in any great lyrical appeal and hence neglected by aficionados, this type of composition nevertheless offers a key to the logic that led to the *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*.

The abrupt and striking annihilation of the middle ground in these near-far compositions affected only the third dimension of the pictorial space. Equally critical to Hiroshige's experiments, and to the eventual cinematic effect, was the manipulation of the two-dimensional frame. The potential here was recognized many years later by the great Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) in a 1929 essay, 'The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram', in which he reproduced a diagram from a Japanese elementary school art manual of 1910 demonstrating ways of composing a painting



He frames a shot!

(Fig. 3) Illustration from a Japanese elementary school art manual of 1910 (After Eisenstein, p. 41)

of a branch (Fig. 3) (Eisenstein, p. 41). Exclaiming 'He frames a shot!', Eisenstein saw this type of composition as 'hewing out a piece of actuality with the ax of the lens', as opposed to staging an event for the sake of a fixed observer (ibid.). The technique illustrated here is properly a method appropriate only to the framing of branches in an ink painting or a bird-and-flower composition, but as we have seen, this was precisely the origin of the near-far method evolved first by the Akita School and later by Hiroshige.

Hiroshige was in fact an artist who seemed particularly intrigued by frames in the later stages of his career, as revealed, for example, in a genre of print known as *harimaze-e*, literally 'paste and mix pictures'. These consisted of an assortment of three or more separately framed views on a vertical sheet, as though different paintings had been cut out and pasted onto a single surface, traditionally a screen (Fig. 4). Hiroshige was possibly the inventor of this genre in the 1840s, and certainly its most prolific practitioner in the years that followed. Such sub-framing had in fact been developing within Japanese prints for many years, in the form of title cartouches and the pictures-within-pictures known as *koma-e* ('koma pictures', using the term that is today used to refer to a single frame of film – precisely the 'shot' that Eisenstein had in mind). In the process, a complex vocabulary of frame patterns was developed, using varied rectangular forms with the corners rounded, bevelled or scalloped (as in the outer frames of *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*), as well as the shapes of circles, fans, flowers and gourds.

Hiroshige's preoccupation with framing, however, eventually came to challenge the conventions illustrated in the drawing manual that so intrigued Eisenstein, and moved in directions that were more truly cinematic. As a film-maker who worked with moving images, Eisenstein took for granted the element of time, whereas the challenge for Hiroshige was precisely the incorporation of a sense of the moment into one single sheet. He did this by a type of framing that excluded most of an object, leaving only the minimal slice needed for recognition, thus paradoxically heightening the sense of its presence and suggesting an urge to move further into the pictorial space. This seems to have been the kind of provocative 'collision' of which Eisenstein spoke in focusing on 'the conflict between the frame of the shot and the object' (ibid.).

From the early stages of his landscape designs, Hiroshige had shown foreground objects protruding beyond the pictorial

space. The use of branches and tree trunks in this manner was wholly conventional; more distinctive was his frequent use of man-made vertical elements both to frame and to invade the picture space. Almost all of these shared a curious common feature as objects that projected from the surface of Edo bay and the Sumida river which runs through the city: most frequent were bridge pillars and boat masts (with or without sails), while pilings and channel markers also appeared occasionally. In the series that established his landscape reputation, for example, the so-called 'Ichiyūsai signature' series *Edo Meisho* (*Famous Views of Edo*; 10 sheets, c. 1831-32), we find foreground elements such as masts, sails and bridge pillars (see Sakai, ed., pp. 110-12, pls 440-50).

In all such cases, however, these elements were large and conspicuous, extending across much of the picture space. They were also familiar and stable objects in the watery landscape of Hiroshige's Edo, and caused minimal visual surprise. The earliest sign of a radically new type of cropped foreground object appeared in a remarkable print from a little-known series of the mid-1830s, entitled *Kōto Shōkei* (*Fine Views of the Eastern*



(Fig. 4) *Souvenir of Asakusa Kinryūzan Temple* (centre); *Gotenyama Cherry Blossoms* (top left); *Ryōgoku Summer* (top right); *Mimeguri Embankment* (bottom right) and *Ueno Tōeizan Temple* (bottom left), from the series *Assorted Pictures of the Famous Places of Edo* By Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), 1852

Wood-block print
Height 33 cm, width 22.5 cm
Japan Ukiyoe Museum

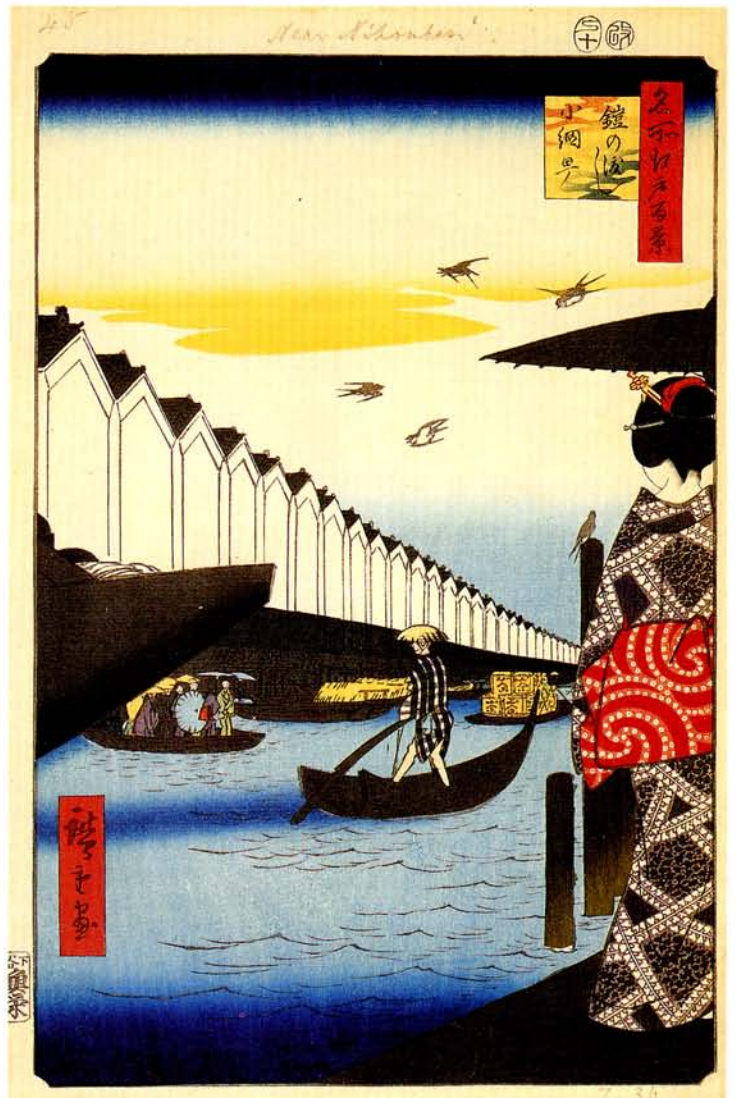
(Fig. 5) *View of Shiba Shinsenza*,
from the series *Fine Views
of the Eastern Capital*
By Utagawa Hiroshige
(1797-1858) c. 1835-38
Wood-block print
Height 23.5 cm, width 34.5 cm
Japan Ukiyoe Museum



Capital, 10 sheets c. 1835-38). This set of prints is highly unusual among Edo prints in focusing exclusively on views of the daimyo mansions of the city. Given his own samurai origins, it is not entirely surprising that Hiroshige should depict the residences of the great provincial lords that were such a conspicuous part of the urban landscape, but in fact he showed them only rarely. In this series, however, every view showed an expansive mansion, the size of many of them emphasized by exaggerated perspectival recession into the distance, as with the *View of Shiba Shinsenza* illustrated in Figure 5.

This print shows on the left the great black gate of the 'middle mansion' (*naka-yashiki*, the permanent residence of a daimyo's wife and heir) belonging to the lord of the domain of Aizu in northern Japan, looking south along a road running between the Tōkaidō and Hama Palace, a shogunal villa on Edo Bay. In the street we see, from the left, a group of street entertainers, three dogs and a distinguished-looking old samurai followed by four retainers. But intruding into this placid scene from beyond the frame to the right is a strange assemblage of lanterns above and umbrellas below, injecting a bright yellow accent against the black of the gate. We presume that these are the wares of one of the shops lining the opposite side of the street, and further inspection reveals that they bear the marks of the artist himself, his school name 'Utagawa' on the umbrellas and his personal cipher 'Hiro' on the third lantern above, consisting of two symbols written in *katakana* (syllabic Japanese script): *hi* enclosed by the box-like *ro*. In this visual collision of frame and object, Hiroshige has managed to convey the bifurcated character that was associated with Shiba Shinsenza, as an area that mingled both samurai and commoner land. The artist has distilled the essence of the city of Edo by juxtaposing the heavy solem-

(Fig. 6) *Yoroi Ferry, Koami-chō*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*
By Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), 1857
Wood-block print
Height 36.9 cm, width 24.1 cm
Brooklyn Museum of Art



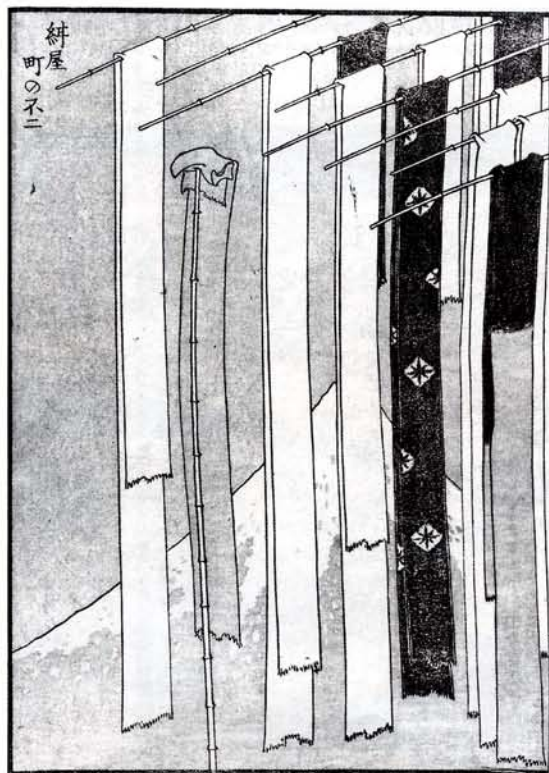
nity of the daimyo mansion and the jostling merchandise of the shops out of sight to the right.

In *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, published roughly two decades later, Hiroshige took up this type of composition once again and pursued it to new levels of complexity and refinement, as we see, for example, in *Yoroi Ferry, Koami-chō* (Fig. 6). The format is now vertical, in contrast to the horizontal orientation of most of his previous landscape prints, a shift that may well have been inspired by earlier experiments with the narrow vertical *tanzaku* size of the type that we saw in Figure 2. At any rate, Hiroshige began vertical compositions in the standard *ōban* size (approximately 38 by 26 cm, a 3:2 ratio) in substantial numbers only at the very end of his career, first in *Rokujū Yoshū Meisho Zu-e (Famous Views of the Sixty-odd Provinces)* of 1853-56. This series had few surprises, however, and it was only with his last great Edo series that he dedicated himself to compositional innovation, drawing on past experiments and pushing to new limits. In this particular view, we can see a certain parallel to the earlier view of Shiba Shinsenza in the counterpoise of sturdy architectural forms on one side (in this case, the great warehouses lining the the Nihonbashi river) with the lively pattern of colourful movement on the other (here,

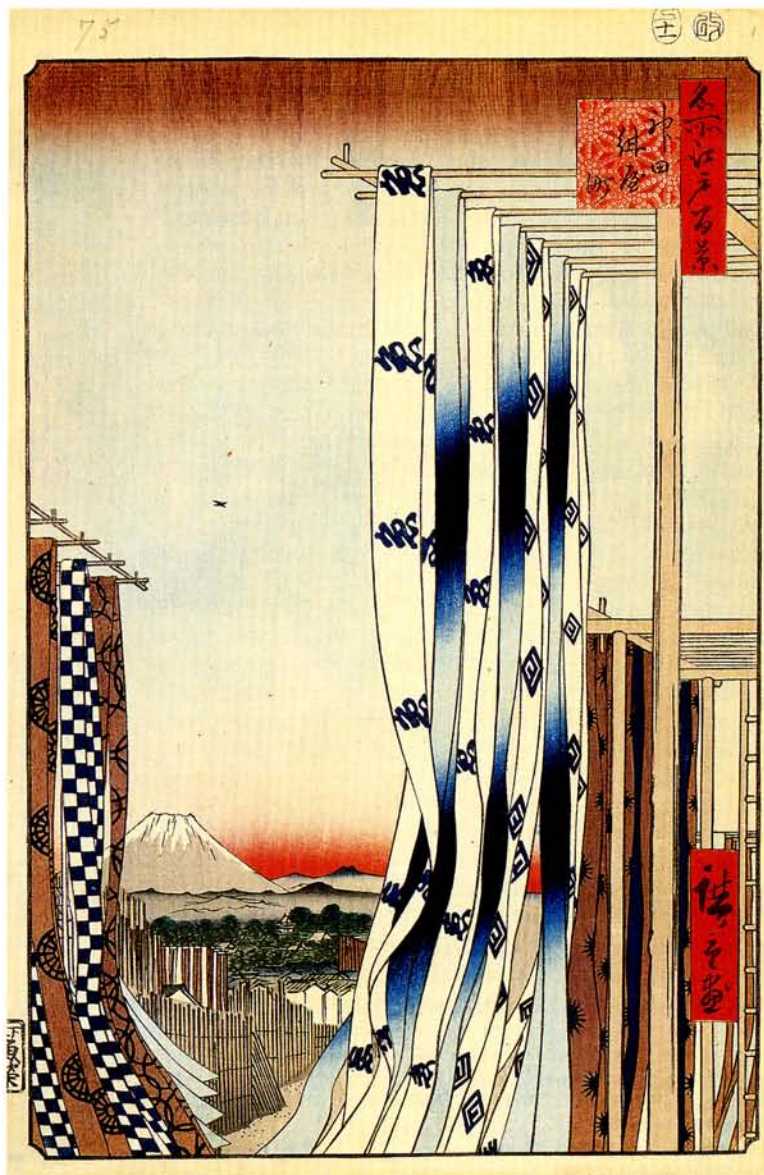
a stylish young townswoman with her back to us). The surprise element is the black prow of the ferry boat intruding from the left as it makes its way to the landing on the right. It is a striking composition that captures in a single cinematic slice the sense of style, stability and movement of the city of Edo.

Hiroshige's compositional genius was preceded and in many ways conditioned by that of his great senior Hokusai. In the current context, it is of particular interest to study the way in which he consciously borrowed some of Hokusai's designs in his near-far compositions in *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, but reworked them in his own way. At least two of Hiroshige's compositions are clearly modelled after designs from Hokusai's illustrated book, *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, a three-volume work that was begun in 1834.

Figure 7 shows Hokusai's *Fuji of the Dyers' Quarter*, while Hiroshige's *Kanda Dyers' Quarter* is illustrated in Figure 8. Hokusai's view is highly graphic, extracting from the urban context of the dyer's district of Kanda Kon'ya-chō a single bamboo drying rack for strips of cotton cloth, through which we see the distant form of Mount Fuji, the theme of every print in the book. The most striking element in Hokusai's view, not



(Fig. 7) *Fuji of the Dyers' Quarter*, from the series *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, vol. 2
By Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), 1834
Height 23 cm, width 14 cm
New York Public Library
(After Smith, 1988, p. 121)



(Fig. 8) *Kanda Dyers' Quarter*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*
By Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), 1857
Wood-block print
Height 37.1 cm, width 24 cm
Brooklyn Museum of Art

(Fig. 9) *Kanasugi Bridge and Shibaura*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* By Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), 1857
Wood-block print
Height 36.7 cm, width 24 cm
Brooklyn Museum of Art

obvious at first glance, is the vertical bamboo pole held by a hidden hand outside the frame below, which is seen lifting a freshly dyed piece of cloth to the rack above. Hiroshige has rejected this contrivance, and in the process has also eliminated all direct reference to human labour, shifting attention to the forms and colour of the cloth, and to the details of the neighbourhood beyond, extending on to Edo Castle and Mount Fuji. The fruits of labour have been transformed into festive drapery, inscribed (exactly as in the view of Shiba Shinsenza) with the personal mark of the artist, to which here is added the character for 'fish' (*uo*) to advertise the publisher of the series, Uoya Eikichi ('Eikichi the fishmonger'). While Hokusai's aim was to worship the mountain, Hiroshige's was to celebrate the city.

But it was perhaps also from Hokusai that Hiroshige borrowed precisely the idea of using festive and ritual ornaments as the enlarged foreground feature for some of the most distinctive near-far compositions in *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*. The Hokusai model used Tanabata festival decorations of bamboo branches festooned with poem cards, which Hiroshige followed in *The City Flourishing, Tanabata Festival* (see Smith, 1988, p. 169, pl. I/12 and Smith, 1986, pl. 73). The remaining six occasions in Hiroshige's series that also use festive decorations are all his own invention, including the particularly ingenious view of *Kanasugi Bridge and Shibaura* (Fig. 9). The enlarged foreground items are all religious paraphernalia of pilgrims of the Nichiren sect, and suggest an expedition heading south (moving to the right) to commemorate the death of its founder at the temple Honmon-ji on the thirteenth day of the tenth month. The group of believers crossing the bridge in the picture space beyond, however, appears to be returning to Edo, judging from the positions of the drums and drumsticks. In short, Hiroshige has shown not just one moment of the pilgrimage, but in effect the entire pilgrimage from start to finish. It is cinematic in the broadest sense, serving both as a single 'shot' and as a longer narrative within one sheet.

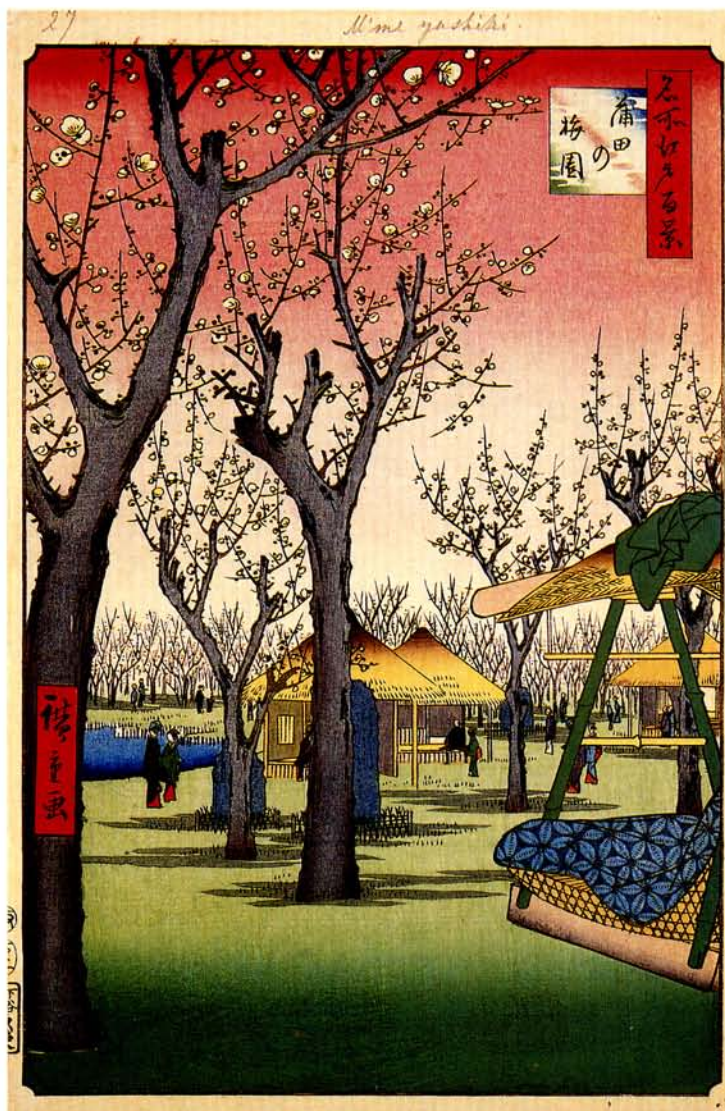
Yet of all the compositions in *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, the one that seems most uniquely cinematic is *Plum Garden, Kamata* (Fig. 10). This is one of about one third of the 118 sheets in the series which feature a dramatically enlarged and cropped foreground element, although it is also one of the most difficult to integrate perceptually with the background scene. It shows a simple A-frame palanquin projecting from the right, with one end of the long pole for the two porters visible above and the indigo-cushioned passenger's seat empty. Presumably the customer is among the figures appreciating the plum blossoms in the park beyond, as the porters themselves rest out of sight. The palanquin must be placed directly on the ground, but seems almost suspended in mid-air, which the author takes to be not a sign of the artist's clumsiness but a deliberate attempt at enhancing the cinematic sense of 'collision' between foreground and backdrop.

The most striking aspect of the print, however, must be gauged by a comparison with the same view in Hiroshige's illustrated four-volume gazetteer of 1850, *Ehon Edo Miyage* (*Picture Souvenirs of Edo*), a set of small volumes printed in light colours which provided many of the models for the *One*



Hundred Famous Views of Edo later in the decade (Fig. 11). Most of these models were, as in this case, conventional topographical views from a high angle, the majority of which Hiroshige followed with only minor adaptations to the vertical format (for which the separately framed pages of a two-page spread often provided a compositional basis). In this view of the Kamata plum garden, however, Hiroshige has done more than simply adopt the composition of the right-hand page at a lower viewpoint, as would seem to be the case at first glance. In bringing the composition quite literally down to earth, he has also moved our line of sight so that each one of the three stone monuments, which were all in open view in the picture-book version, is now obscured by a plum tree. In effect, the trees have collided with the monuments, obstructing their inscriptions and urging us to move our line of sight in one direction or the other so that they might be brought into view. The artist has begun to 'pan' across the scene, an effect much enhanced by the weightless palanquin to the right.

In the end, the kind of cinematic visual play in which Hiroshige engaged in *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* did not particularly lead in any clear direction, and his successors in this were only of minor importance (for an analysis, see Solomon, 1999). Scholars in the past have suggested that he was actually inspired by the idea of photography, but this seems highly unlikely as the cameras used in the nineteenth century



(Fig. 10) *Plum Garden, Kamata*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* By Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), 1857
Wood-block print
Height 36.8 cm, width 24 cm
Brooklyn Museum of Art

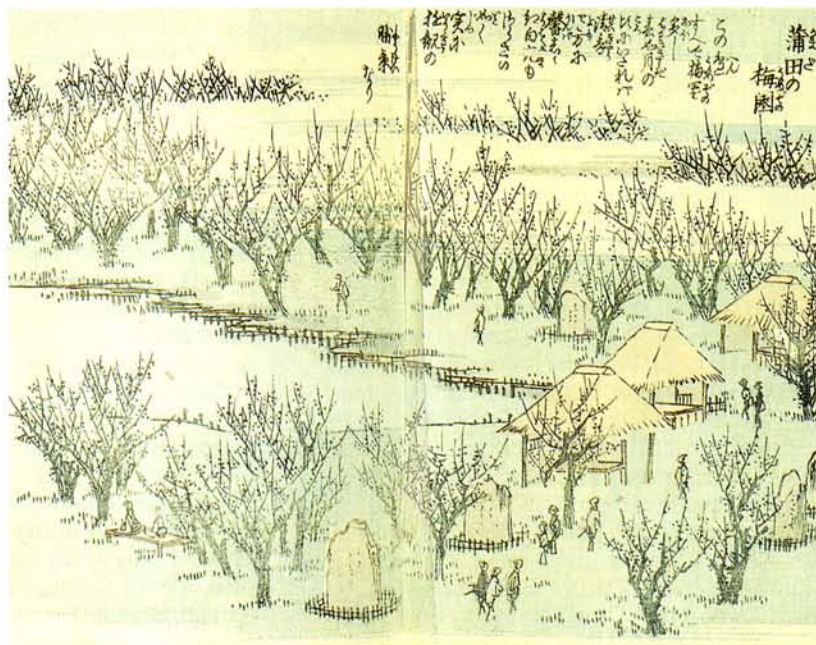
would never have permitted the kinds of compositions that Hiroshige imagined; only the high-speed hand-held models of the twentieth century, whether still or moving, would have corresponded to Hiroshige's vision. The significance of these experiments lies less in any way that they may have anticipated the invention of moving pictures than in the ways in which they *were* moving pictures, put to expressive uses that even now continue to perplex and entice our visual sense.

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The prints illustrated in Figures 6, 8, 9 and 10 are included in the exhibition 'One Hundred Famous Views of Edo', which opened on 18 February and runs until 23 April at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York.

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(Fig. 11) *Plum Garden, Kamata*, from the book *Ehon Edo Miyage*, vol. 2 By Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), 1850
Wood-block print
Height 18 cm, width 21 cm
C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University
(After *Ehon Edo Miyage*, Tokyo, 1850, vol. 2)