Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)
Japan
Fudō Waterfall at Ōji
From the series: *Meisho Edo hyakkei (One-hundred Famous Views of Edo)*
1857, 9th month, Edo period (1600-1868)
color woodcut
34.4 x 23.2 cm
1999.0151

Essay by Takaaki Kumagai

Utagawa Hiroshige's *Fudō Waterfall at Ōji* is a print from his last series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (1856-1858). Having established his fame through his travel prints during the 1830s, Hiroshige again turned his eye to his hometown and its immediate cultural environs. Some twenty years prior to this series, Hiroshige published his first ten landscape prints called *Famous Places of the Eastern Capital* (1831), which illustrated ten well-known vistas around the central district of Edo. Farther from the famous landmarks such as Ryōgoku Bridge and the vista of Asakusa, many of the places included in *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* are rather minor places known only to the local inhabitants. By Hiroshige's time, Ōji, some ten kilometers north of central Tokyo, had become a popular destination for cherry blossom viewing for the people in Edo. His print of Ōji, while illustrating a scene of everyday life also reveals the popular practice of the veneration of a waterfall as a syncretic manifestation of Shinto and Buddhist deities.

Hiroshige was born to a low-ranking samurai family in Edo, who supervised the firefighting brigade in the central Marunouchi district. Hiroshige lost his parents at the age of thirteen and later filled his father's position. The most important mission of his brigade was to protect the Edo Castle from fire. It is imagined that Hiroshige would constantly look over the city from *hinomiyagura*, or fire lookout towers, the only high vantage points in the city of Edo at the time. Some scholars discuss that Hiroshige's experience of viewing the

city from these towers must have been fundamental to his artistic imagination and is mirrored in his mastery of birds-eye perspective and dynamic three-dimensional expression.

Hiroshige appears to have become interested in art from an early age. Like many of his contemporaries, Hiroshige initially studied the styles of Kanō School masters and literati painting before turning to *ukiyoe* at the age of fifteen. In nineteenth-century Japan, the economic circumstances of low-ranking samurai retainers in Edo were generally harsh. The long-lasting social stability under the Tokugawa shogun's rule had largely demoralized the presumably prestigious military class, who became viewed merely as today's counterpart to a public security guard. Furthermore, the relative depreciation of rice, in which their salaries were paid, and the rising cost of living, triggered by the expanding consumer economy, diminished their economic status. By Hiroshige's time, it was quite common for these samurai retainers to pursue additional jobs, such as teachers and doctors.

Hiroshige also started his artistic career as a part timer. At first, he unsuccessfully attempted to study under Utagawa Toyokuni (1769-1825), the famous master of *yakushae* (prints of kabuki actors), and eventually became a student of Toyokuni's disciple Toyohiro (1773-1828) because a position was available. Many scholars deem this accident to be rather fortuitous for Hiroshige, since, while Utagawa Toyokuni had already gained his fame as a *yakushae* master and was intensely focused on his expertise, Toyohiro was interested in the relatively newer print subject of landscape rather than the more conventional types of *ukiyoe.* The early 1830s, a few years after the death of Toyohiro in 1828, proved to be a turning point in Hiroshige's career, as he seriously started to work on landscape prints. The exact motives for this change remain unclear. By the time of Hiroshige's debut as landscape artist, *ukiyoe* traditions, such as *yakushae* and *bijinga* (pictures of beauties) had

long since fell into stylistic stagnation. Hiroshige was certainly prompted to seek a distinctive identity in the highly competitive *ukiyoe* market of the day.

In 1831, Hiroshige started his career as landscapist by publishing landscape prints. *Famous Places of the Eastern Capital*, which, as already mentioned, illustrated ten well-known vistas around the central district of Edo. It is useful to note that Hiroshige was born about forty years later than the equally famed printmaker Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Nevertheless, in Hiroshige's early years as a printmaker, old Hokusai was still an active and prolific artist. Hokusai's landscape prints in the series *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*, published in the early 1830s, for the first time set the stage for highly refined Japanese *ukiyoe* prints that later captured the attention of the European Impressionists, such as Van Gogh (1853-1890) and Edouard Manet (1832-1883). Since the early 1830s, Hiroshige's and Hokusai's prints competed in the same market.

It is common among scholars to say that, compared to Hokusai who was interested in experimental composition and objective observation of natural phenomena, Hiroshige's approach was characterized by his distinctive lyricism. Hiroshige often depicted the subtle details of specific places and illuminated the ephemeral human existence through his poetic rendering of travelers and local people. In 1832, Hiroshige joined an official delegation traveling along the Tōkaidō road, Japan's main highway connecting Edo and the ancient capital of Kyoto. Using this opportunity to sketch the landscapes along the highway, he later compiled these in his most celebrated wood-block series, *Fifty-three Stations of Tōkaidō* (1833-1834). This *Tōkaidō* series eloquently visualizes the increasing popularity of the traveling experience during the mid Edo period. As narrated in the best-selling travelogue *Tōkaidōchū hizakurige (Shank's Mare)* (1802-1822), these trips were mostly motivated by religious pilgrimage, particularly to Ise Shrine in present-day Mie prefecture.

One of the most important issues in contextualizing *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, the series to which the present print *Fudō Waterfall at Ōji* belongs, is the shifting notion of *meisho*, or "famous places" in Japanese history. Amy Poster points out the crucial transition in the concept of *meisho*, or famous places, which took place after the mid Edo period.[1] In Japan, traditionally, *meisho* referred to noble places associated with court poetry in the environs of Kyoto and Nara. Tightly linked to the poetic ideal, these places were more imaginary in character than places actually visited by common people. On the other hand, in Edo, hundreds miles away from the imperial court, *meisho* took on a new meaning, which was closely attached to people's everyday lives. These were often well-known sites for relaxation and refreshment within Edo's urban area. Many of these places were Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines, in which people congregated not only for religious events, but also for chatting at adjacent teahouses, or to stop to enjoy the improvisational street theater. However, one important continuity between the previous *meisho* concept and Hiroshige's, was his close attention to specific seasonal settings or moments linked to the yearly cerebrations around the city.

Another interesting fact about *One Hundred Famous Places in Edo* is Hiroshige's frequent choice of rather unknown, or at best mediocre sites rather than famous symbolic places for his images. This is explained primarily by the aforementioned fact that *One Hundred Famous Places* takes a step further beyond Edo's famous landmarks that he already depicted in his *Famous Views of the Eastern Capital*. Apart from this, however, the earthquake of magnitude 6.9 that killed more than 12000 of Edo population in 1855 made many areas of the city inaccessible. As many scholars have pointed out, one of Hiroshige's

[1] Amy G. Poster, Henry D. Smith and Robert Buck, eds., *Utagawa Hiroshige, One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (New York: G. Braziller, 2001), 10-12.

objectives was to reinvigorate the public mood after the devastation. In *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo,* Hiroshige's effort to transform somewhat mediocre scenery into interesting images worthy of the name of *meisho* is clear throughout the series. One example is his use of experimental techniques, including exaggerated contrasts between near and far grounds and birds-eye views. One of the most interesting examples is a dynamic aerial view entitled *Fukagawa, Suzaki 10-man Tsubo (Fukagawa*, *Ten-million Tsubo Plain at Suzaki)*. It is astonishing that Hiroshige was able to conjure up the view from such an extreme angle, which should have been largely unimaginable to mid nineteenth century common Japanese people. However, despite his frequent manipulations, and the pictures' abstract appearance due to the lack of three-dimensionality, Hiroshige's images never wholly deviate from actual topographical settings. Overall, the Ansei era (1854-1859) was a difficult time to the majority of people in Edo. In addition to the aforementioned earthquake, the cholera epidemic hit Edo in 1859 and killed about 12,000 people, including Hiroshige himself. *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* was his last series, on which the artist continued to work until the last moments of his life.

The present print shows the Fudō waterfall of Otonashi River at Ōji, the area that forms the present-day north ward of metropolitan Tokyo. During medieval times, Ōji was only a small village known for the Ōji Inari Shrine and its cherry blossom viewing. As already discussed, by the eighteenth century, it was connected to Edo's central districts by a main highway, and became a popular site of holiday excursions. Although this waterfall does not exist today, the surrounding area was transformed into a city park where people of the neighborhood often stop to the catch breeze at the waterfront.

The print interestingly brings together both secular and religious elements. A man in a loincloth is about to enter the water, while another man sits on the bench relaxing after a

bath. In Japan, the practice of entering a waterfall is often associated with a Shinto purification ritual called *misogi*, which occasionally serves as a rite of passage in some of Japan's rural communities. The picture clearly shows Hiroshige's close observation of the subtle details of people's everyday life: an old lady who runs an improvisational tea stand by the waterfall is about to serve a cup of tea on a tray to the man relaxing on the bench. On the right, two young women in kimono look curiously at the dynamic view of the waterfall. These points confirm the aforementioned change in the meaning of *meisho,* as the site of divinities became a familiar part of people's lives.

Against the minimized depiction of these human figures, the gigantic waterfall, rendered as vertical stripes of blue, is particularly impressive. A Shinto *shimenawa* rope, which marks off the waterfall as a divine realm of Shinto kami, crosses the stream of water in the upper area. Moreover, scholars deem that this smooth, and almost metallic rendering of water with a shining surface might be a reference to the Buddhist guardian deity Fudō Myōō's sword. Fudō Myōō, recognized for his grimacing facial expression, is often associated with waterfalls in the context of *shugendō*, ascetic training that often took place in remote mountains. The above coexistence of Shinto and Buddhist elements attests to the inherently syncretic religiosity that informed the site and everyday life. In contrast to the amount of falling water and the dynamic rugged rocks surrounding it, the water only makes a small splash. This gives the picture a fascinating contrast of movement and stillness. In addition, Hiroshige's depiction of lush cedar trees and moss and their transition of color from lush green into yellow in the foreground reveal the artist's keen attention to seasonal details.

During the nineteenth century, landscape became one of the major subjects among *ukiyoe* printmakers. This not only led to drastic innovations in style but also to the

exploration of Edo's immediate cultural environment and anonymous people's daily lives, who had never drawn the attention of *ukiyoe* artists before. As I suggested, Hiroshige frequently used deliberately dynamic perspectives and, in the case of *Fudō Waterfall at Ōji*, information on the geographical setting proves that the height of the waterfall should have been much lower and its downward movement less dynamic. In this sense, *Fudō Waterfall at Ōji* is a fascinating example that reveals the way talented *ukiyoe* printmakers reacted to Edo's thriving urban environment with their renewed interest and infinite capacity for imagination.

Bibliography

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