Urban Metamorphosis: One Hundred Views of New Tokyo

J. Thomas Rimer

The printmakers who produced the New Tokyo series were all part of the Sōsaku hanga or "creative print" movement. Their style and approach differed from the traditional Japanese practice of woodblock printmaking in which a publisher, artist, block carver, and printer worked jointly to create a print. Artists of the creative print movement worked directly with the materials, carving and printing their own designs. They looked on the medium as an authentic means of personal artistic expression. As a group, they had collaborated informally on various projects, calling themselves the Takujōsha, or "On the Table Group." They gave exhibitions and published a small magazine. "One Hundred Views of New Tokyo" was their greatest and most enduring success.

Urban Metamorphosis is a lesson on the New Print Movement that allows the user to enter the material through three distinct pathways. You may explore the material in this lesson by viewing all the material by a particular artist or by entering via a map of Tokyo circa 1936 or by reading the full text about the movement which explains the artists' work.

Urban Metamorphosis is based on an exhibit of the entire New Tokyo series that was shown at the Carnegie Museum of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania from January to March of 2001. All prints and photos in this lesson are used with permission from the Carnegie Museum of Pittsburgh, all rights reserved.

It was noon on September 1, 1923, and the Tokyo streets were hot. Suddenly and without warning, the earth began to tremble, and within moments, the cooking fires, lit for making lunch in so many thousands of homes, set the many wooden homes ablaze, and the whole city seemed to go up in smoke. The famous Tokyo earthquake, long considered one of the major disasters of its kind in the twentieth century, virtually destroyed the capital of Japan. Mile after mile of only ashes from the flattened buildings remained, with only the shells of those relatively few structures made of concrete still standing. Tokyo, formerly known as Edo during the preceding Tokugawa period (1603-1868), had continued to grow into one of the largest urban areas in the world. Now it was laid waste. Throughout the Meiji period (1868-1912), many of the older monuments of architecture were still standing, a great number of them constructed of wood in the traditional manner. During those years, the capital was, visually speaking, a mixture of the old and the new. Now, in less than a day, Tokyo's visual past had virtually disappeared.

The city, however, was soon to spring back like a phoenix. Because of the prevalence of empty spaces, city planners now were able to find open areas which allowed them to move closer to contemporary European and American city planning models. Office buildings were constructed from concrete, roads developed for auto traffic, and the kinds of elements familiar from similar urban environments around the world began to appear. Parks, dance halls, baseball parks, theatres, fashionable restaurants, art galleries, movie houses, and department stores all had a contemporary look that was by the late 1920s to turn Tokyo into one of the most contemporary of all East Asian cities.

Yet this new and glittering façade was again to vanish some twenty-odd years later, when the bombings of Tokyo at the end of the Pacific War reduced the city to rubble again once more. Photographs of Tokyo after the earthquake and after the bombings bear an eerie resemblance: both reveal similar vast stretches of flattened, empty space. Tokyo would of course again come to life, but in its postwar incarnation, traces of both the Edo past and the interwar elegance would disappear.

There exists, however, an extremely appealing record of those interwar years, captured in a set of one hundred woodblock prints of the "new" city by a group of eight young artists. These prints chronicle the buoyant urban atmosphere of the period, the sense of the happiness which the inhabitants of Tokyo felt in being up-to-date and modern, in a way that no photographic record can accomplish. These prints really capture the spirit of the time when Tokyo-before the rising of militarism in the 1930s-revealed a carefree spirit that showed in turn a fresh energy, a belief in progress, and a sense of the possibilities for personal excitement and fulfillment.

Edo, later Tokyo, was always a prime spot for visitors from around the country, and woodblock prints by such famous nineteenth-century Edo artists as Hokusai (1760-1849) and Hiroshige (1797-1858) provided striking views of the shogun's capital. With the coming of the West, despite all the changes this contact brought to Japanese culture, traditional printmaking did manage to continue, and many of the subjects chosen by these artists continued to show a nostalgic regard for the beauties of the capital. Such prints continued to be executed in the traditional manner. The original drawing was created by a particular artist, who then gave his design to be cut on blocks, to be printed by professionals and marketed through a publishing company.

This type of print, based on traditional methods of production, are referred to as shin-hanga (literally "new prints"). Prints such as those of Kawase Hasui's "Iwasaki Garden" and Kasamatsu Shirō's "Spring Night: Ginza" indicate the way in which these artists viewed the changing urban environment of Tokyo.

Along with this traditional approach, a new and altogether fresh method of printmaking emerged. These prints were made directly by the artists themselves. Many of these

printmakers had been trained in Western-style oil painting. They saw themselves not as craftsmen but as creative painters and designers, and indeed some of them were among the most gifted artistic personalities of their generation. In their minds, they were artists who happened to make prints. These men made their own designs, then carved and usually printed their own blocks. Their work is classified as belonging to the sōsaku hanga or "creative print" movement. For them, prints served as an authentic means to reflect their direct and personal artistic expression.

A group of these "creative print" artists, who had collaborated informally on several occasions, now began in the 1920s to hold join exhibitions and publish a small magazine devoted to the emerging art of the creative print. These various activities eventually resulted in the creation and publication of a joint project, "One Hundred Views of New Tokyo" (Shin Tōkyō Hyakkei), published on a subscription basis between 1929 and 1932. Fifty sets were made. The Carnegie Museum of Art of Pittsburgh owns a full set, numbered No. 31, one of the few complete runs of the prints available in the United States or elsewhere. Thanks to the generosity of the museum, these striking and evocative prints are shown here.

This was a young men's project, filled with the artistic vitality of those who enjoyed the new energy of the city in its latest transformation. Many, such as the famous novelist Nagai Kafū (1879-1959), mourned the passing of the old, as did such "new print" artists as Itō Shinsui (1898-1972), whose nostalgic works are full of a more traditional atmosphere. Among the prints in the New Tokyo series, however, there is little in the way of any visual nostalgia for the loss of Edo. Rather, as was the case in so many cities around the world, it was the new, the modern, and the progressive that were to be showcased.

Many of the prints illustrate specific places, but there are also a number that illustrate symbols of a new and Westernized contemporary life, such as "Gas Station" of Fukazawa Sakuichi, a movie theater by Onchi Kōshirō, and, of particular interest, Henmi Takashi's print of the famous Imperial Hotel by the great American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the few buildings to survive the 1923 earthquake. Another unusual print is Kawakami Sumio's rendering of a parade in which the young Emperor Hirohito (1901-1989) participated. At this point, Hirohito had only been Emperor for a half-dozen years or so following his return from England, where he had studied in 1921. At this time, he was still very much a public figure and had yet to assume the elevated, godlike stature of the later war years. The print thus serves as an unwitting record of a simpler time for the Imperial family in the course of modern Japanese history.

Among these artists, all of whom were quite gifted, there are several whose names are highly known and respected among the best artists of the period. Maekawa Senpan

(1889-1960), the oldest of the group, was in his early forties when the project was completed. Originally trained as a Western-style oil painter, he had established a considerable reputation as a cartoonist and book illustrator.

His contributions to the set show his abilities to use flat spaces and elongated forms, giving his works a striking poster-like effect. Most important among his younger colleagues was Onchi Kōshirō (1891-1955). Also trained as an oil painter, Onchi began making prints, some of them abstract, that eventually earned him the reputation as Japan's most brilliant and innovating maker of prints in the twentieth century. In the New Tokyo series, Onchi's unusual juxtaposition of colors, striking sense of design, and brilliant texturing can be seen in such famous prints as his Tokyo Station and Inokashira Pond. Hiratsuka Un'ichi (1895-1997) studied with several important Western-style painters before becoming a printmaker himself. Now particularly admired for his postwar black-and-white prints, many of scenes in the United States, his prewar work shows a particularly elegant sense of color and design in works such as his Nihonbashi and Ueno Park. Others included, as mentioned above, were Henmi Takashi (1895-1944), Kawakami Sumio (1895-1972), Fukazawa Sakuichi (1896-1947), and Suwa Kanenori (1887-1932), all of whom earned popular and critical distinction during their careers.

Each of the eight artists represented in the New Tokyo series has a distinctive and easily-recognized style. Nevertheless, all worked together on the basis of their common ideals and belief in the value of sōsaku hanga. They managed to achieve a remarkable visual unity despite the fact that it took them four years to complete the series.

Perhaps the best way to grasp the range and significance of the series is to follow these artists around the city as they visited the main spots of interest to them in this huge and varied urban space.

With the coming of railroads in late nineteenth century, local trains became the chief means of moving the population around within the confines of the city. In particular the Yamanote line, which formed a circle that ranged around the core of the city, served as a means to encourage urban development around the stations constructed at various points along the line.

Our journey might appropriately begin with the Nihonbashi (Japan Bridge) area (print by Hiratsuka), traditionally considered the center of the city, which, during the earlier Edo period, provided the spot from which all distances in the country were measured. That site was long famous because of a celebrated print of Hiroshige. Close by are two other celebrated bridges, Kyōbashi (Capital Bridge) print by Fukazawa Sakuichi and Shinbashi (New Bridge) (print by Hiratsuka).

Slightly to the south is the central Ginza area, located somewhat to the east of the Imperial Palace, itself the subject of a famous Onchi print, Nijūbashi (Double Bridge). This area is well known for such landmarks as the old Tokyo Station, still in use today, and, as mentioned above, the subject of one of Onchi's most celebrated prints. The Kabukiza (Kabuki Theater) is nicely rendered in a print by Fujimori Shizuo. Nearby are the office buildings of Marunouchi and Hibiya, also represented in the set.

Travelling south, the series includes a view by Maekawa Senpan of the area near Shinagawa Station, one of the major transportation hubs of southeast Tokyo, and the not too distant Yanagi Bridge (Willow Bridge) in Ryōgoku, seen in a print by Fukazawa Sakuichi. Some distance north of Shinagawa are the hereditary temples of the Tokugawa family, the hereditary shogun (civil rulers of Japan) from 1600 to 1868, at Zōjoji, a well-known Buddhist temple (print by Fukazawa Sakuichi).

Continuing around the circle and up towards the western part of the city, we next come to Shibuya. In recent years, the area has become extremely fashionable as a shopping and entertainment area, but during the interwar period it still retained its character as a quiet, aristocratic part of the city. The prewar shopping area is depicted in a print by Maekawa Senpan.

Moving still to the northwest, one comes to the area of the famous Meiji Shrine, a huge and beautifully maintained public park dedicated to the Emperor Meiji (1851-1912), the grandfather of Emperor Hirohito, mentioned above. Henmi Takashi added a view of the park's Memorial Picture Gallery to the series.

To the north of this area is Shinjuku, of the busiest and most colorful areas of Tokyo, filled with theaters, restaurants, hotels, and department stores. Two of the printmakers, Maekawa and Fukazawa, chose to depict the central area, while others chose sites nearby.

Going still north and around to the top of the city, we travel to Yotsuya, then to Ueno, an area near the top of the city that at one time housed a number of shrines and other sites related to the Tokugawa family. Ueno is popular now for its pleasant park, seen a print by Hiratsuka Un'ichi, as well as for the Zoo, the museums, and the botanical gardens, also shown in prints from the series.

To the south and east of Ueno on the Yamanote line comes the entertainment quarter of Asakusa, the great popular area of the city. Asakusa is jammed full of temples, popular theatres, and shopping areas, as seen in the print by Hiratsuka. Across the Sumida river, Tokyo's most important waterway, there are such pleasant places to stroll as Mukōjima (print by Suwa Kanenori).

Still farther to the south is the campus of Tokyo University, the most prestigious institution of higher learning in the country, built on the grounds of a former great lord's estate. Fujimori Shizuo depicts the so-called Red Gate of the university. Our visit to the university completes the circle.

These beautiful and stylish works demonstrate the homage paid to the new city by eight masters of the modern print. When these prints were first made, they served as a record of what, for these artists, was best, most beautiful, and most exciting of the urban space in which they lived and worked. Looking back on these prints now, seven or eight decades after they were created, their artistic record possesses a real poignancy. Many of these sites were destroyed in the fire bombings of Tokyo in World War II or have been so changed during the reconstruction of the city in the 1960s and after that they cannot be easily recognized today. Tokyo has been a volatile and exciting city since it became the administrative capital of the county in the early seventeenth century. These prints document one vibrant chapter in that history, but this huge urban area continues to change, renewing itself year and year, decade after decade.

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Suggested Reading

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