

Clare Pollard - Utagawa Hiroshige I, Evening shower at Ōhashi Bridge, Atake

CLARE POLLARD: I'm Clare Pollard. I'm the Curator of Japanese Art at the Ashmolean Museum. I look after the Japanese collections, which are quite wide-ranging. They vary from prehistoric ceramics up until contemporary teawares, via lacquerware, and metalwork, and all sorts of other things, including Japanese prints, of which we have an example here.

This is a print by the 19th-century artist Utagawa Hiroshige, who was one of the most famous woodblock print designers of the 19th century. And this is one of his most famous prints. It shows a summer rainstorm at Ohashi Bridge in Edo, which is the city we now know as Tokyo. It was one of a series of a hundred prints that he designed showing different scenes in and around Edo.

This is a woodblock print. It's printed onto strong Japanese paper, which is made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree, which has very long fibres. It makes good strong paper. And the pigments are water-based pigments made from vegetables and minerals. For example, red comes from safflower, white is made from the ground clam shells. And the blue that you see at the bottom of this print here, at this stage is made from Prussian blue, which is a synthetic pigment that was being imported from the West by this time.

Although we say that this is made by Hiroshige, in fact Hiroshige was just the designer of this print. The whole woodblock printmaking process in Japan was a collaborative process. It was a collaboration between the print's designer, in this case Hiroshige, a block carver, a block cutter, all working underneath the guidance of a publisher.

So to make this print, the publisher would have commissioned Hiroshige to make a design. He would have done the sketch, which was sent back to the publisher, who approved it. The sketch was then worked up either Hiroshige or perhaps by one of his students into a much more detailed design with all the different elements of the print included.

The worked up design was done on very thin translucent paper, that was handed to the block carver, who pasted it face down onto a block of seasoned hardwood, very often mountain cherry, and then carved through the design on the block to create what was known as the key block, the outline block. And at this stage in the process, the block cutter also carved two little rectangular marks on the upside of the block, which were called kentō. And these were registration marks. They were carved just on the outside of the design. These kentō marks allowed for proper alignment later on.

So once the key block had been carved, it was sent to the printer, who printed it by placing a piece of dampened paper onto the block and then rubbing on the back of it with a flat pad called a baren in spiral movements. And the printer made several prints of this outline block, one outline print and then one for each of the different colours that was used in the print. So this print uses nine or 10 different colours. Each of those colours would have a separate block printed for them. And because the kentō registration marks were on the key block, they were printed on each

of the subsequent blocks. So when the piece of paper was added onto the block, it always lined up in exactly the same place.

So the print shows a summer rainstorm. A group of travellers, or pedestrians, are trudging across the bridge in the rain, clutching their umbrellas. There's a man here who's got his straw rain cape over his back. In the river beyond them is a man poling his log raft along the river. The scene is Ohashi, which means large bridge. It was a bridge in Tokyo at a place called Atake, which was where the government had a set of boathouses, which are very faintly visible in the distance.

You can tell it's a summer rainstorm because of the way that the people are dressed. The men here are wearing just loincloths and shorts. It's very, very atmospheric. Hiroshige was particularly known for his ability to capture atmospheric effects, the time of day or night, season, different types of weather. And this is a really lovely example. So you really get the feeling of being caught in this heavy, heavy downpour.

He's achieved that in quite simple ways. So this driving rain is just made by two sets of overlapping lines. So it's two different blocks have straight lines of rain carved on them, and they're printed on with just very slightly different shades of grey. The effect of the rainy day is also intensified by the foreboding blue-grey colour of the sky in the background and the way that the details of the far bank all disappear into this misty, cloudy, indistinct mass.

The print also has a rather wonderful band of dark cloud at the top, which is called bokashi. This is a special technique in which the printers wiped the blocks, the wet pigment on the blocks to create a sort of a blurry effect. And it really adds to the sense of this sort of brooding, heavy skies. The same effect has been achieved in the water under the bridge here.

The composition of the print is simple but it's quite striking. It has very distinct elements in it. So you have the bridge in the foreground. You have the figure of the man poling his log raft in the middle ground. And then you have the band of trees and boathouses that you can barely make out in the background.

Hiroshige very often used strong diagonals in his compositions. Here, you have the bridge, and the tilting horizon, and the log raft all leading to one point on the edge of the print, which adds to the intensity of the mood. As well as the pictorial elements of the design, there are also bits of text throughout the image.

A Japanese print is read from right to left, in the same way that Japanese script is read in vertical lines from right to left. So looking at this print, once you've taken in the overall impression, you would start by looking at the title of the series, which is in the red rectangle on the top right corner of the print. This is the series title. It's A Hundred Views of Edo. Next to the series title, you have the print title, which is *Ōhashi Atake no yudachi*, which means 'an evening shower at Ohashi in Atake'.

The artist signature is what you see down in the bottom left corner of the print. It reads 'Hiroshige ga', which is 'designed by Hiroshige'. And if you look really closely, you can see that

the red area of the cartouche doesn't quite align with the outline. There are little gaps of white. You can see the paper through.

And this doesn't mean that the woodblocks that were used to add the colour were not aligned in the first place. It means that this is quite a late impression of the print and that the different colour blocks warped in slightly different ways over time. So when the print was printed, they didn't quite match up.

There are a few other hints in this print that this is a later impression. The colours still look quite bright, but in fact, in some of the very early impressions, you have more sophisticated colours. So, for example, the title cartouche here, which it has just two colours in this print, had three in the original printing. You have much more detail in the background of early impressions. Also, the bokashi line across the top of the print was much more carefully applied in earlier impressions. It actually have it in wavy lines, really, like black clouds.

You also see fine lines on the original woodblocks wearing out over time. And you can see, for example, on the edge of the title cartouche that there are actually gaps in that fine line. So there are various reasons that we know that this wasn't a fine early impression.

One of the striking aspects of the composition is the way that Hiroshige uses cropping in his design. This is a really typical device that he uses in his later years. Here you have the bridge cropped at the edges of the print. It's almost like being in a photograph and it's a way that Hiroshige draws his viewers into the print and creates a sense of depth without actually needing to use Western-style perspective.

This was an aspect that Western artists in the late 19th century found really impressive and novel in Hiroshige's work. Although, in actual fact, Hiroshige probably borrowed it from Western art in the first place. We know that Hiroshige studied Western art and was aware of Western linear perspective and of other devices, such as chiaroscuro shading. And he used some of them in his prints, but he very often incorporated Asian artistic conventions with Western artistic conventions.

So, for example, he very often uses Asian perspective, which isn't fixed point perspective. The higher up a picture something is, the further away it is. In this print, there is a combination. You can see that in the background of the picture. The log raft boatman is much smaller than the figures on the bridge. But he's also got this aerial Asian perspective as well.

The other bits of text on the print include these two little marks at the top. These are censor seals. In Japan at this time, all printed material had to be run by censors to make sure there was no politically subversive content in them. There are two seals. The one on the right reads aratame, which literally means examined. And the one on the left is a date seal. It's snake nine, so it was the ninth month of the year of the snake, which is 1857. So they're are very useful dating tool, actually.

And the final piece of information is the publisher's seal on the bottom left of the corner. This is the mark of the publisher who actually published the print. So the print was produced in Edo,

which was the headquarter of the ruling Tokugawa shoguns. Edo was the centre of the publishing industry, and this would have been made to sell to people in Edo quite cheaply. You could buy a woodblock print like this for about the same amount as you spent on a large bowl of noodles.

In Hiroshige's time, Japan was enjoying a long period of peace and prosperity. The cities were booming. Edo had a population of over one and a half million people by this stage. And the residents of Edo were enjoying more leisure activities, and they often liked to buy prints, such as this one, which acted as souvenirs for their trips, or even prints of places that they weren't able to get to but they hoped that they would be able to get to.

So the people who bought prints like this would have enjoyed them at home. They might have pinned them up on their walls or perhaps pasted them into albums. They certainly weren't regarded as fine art. They were just a little bit like posters or postcards nowadays. In his prints, Hiroshige depicted all different classes of society, from samurai, to farmers, to artisans, to merchants. But his main customers were the ordinary townspeople.

In fact, landscape prints as a genre hadn't actually become a thing until the 1830s. There's a very, very long tradition of landscape painting in Japan and in wider Asia. But in woodblock prints, you only really get landscape elements as a framing motif around depictions of kabuki actors or beautiful courtesans. It wasn't until the 1830s that Hokusai, the famous print designer, had a smash hit with his series, *The Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, which inspired a whole new genre of print design.

Print designers had been inspired in the 18th century by imported Western copper plate prints. So the first real landscape prints were produced in the 1740s. But it really wasn't until the 1820s that you got Prussian blue pigment being imported into Japan in sufficient quantities to become really commercially viable that you actually were able to do landscape printing properly.

So it's technical factors, really, that really boosted the landscape print. Because it meant, for the first time, you were able to depict sky, and sea, and rivers, and water properly. Until this time, blue was a very difficult pigment to manage. The blue that were used in Japanese prints were very fugitive. They faded very quickly to a kind of a rather dull beige colour, or they were quite coarse. Whereas Prussian blue was much easier to use. It was much more stable. And it really made possible dramatic effects of the sky and landscape.

There are several reasons why this is a really important work of art to study. First of all, it's one of the best known prints by one of the most famous Japanese print designers of all time from his most ambitious series, *A Hundred Views of Fuji*, that was done just before he died.

So Hiroshige prints were among the first prints to reach Europe, and his prints were in the collections of many leading painters. Manet, Monet, Degas, van Gogh collected Hiroshige prints, and many of the compositional elements and stylistic devices that he used made a huge impact on their own work. In fact, Camille Pissarro once described Hiroshige as a marvellous Impressionist.