

Tōkaidō Texts and Tales: Tōkaidō gojūsan tsui by Kuniyoshi, Hiroshige, and Kunisada. Andreas Marks, ed., with contributions by Laura Allen and Ann Wehmeyer. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015. 216 pp.*

Reviewed by Michael Dylan Foster

During Japan's long Edo period (c. 1600-1868), a road known as the Tōkaidō served as the major thoroughfare between the political capital, Edo (current-day Tokyo), and the imperial capital of Kyoto. The Tōkaidō also became an important subject in the literary, folkloric, and artistic imagination of the time, featured on painted screens, in guidebooks, and in lighthearted novels. Perhaps most famously, it also became the subject of numerous woodblock prints illustrating the fifty-three stations (*eki*) along the approximately three-hundred-mile journey.

With translations and significant annotations, *Tōkaidō Texts and Tales* reproduces one collection of prints, *Tōkaidō gojūsan tsui* or *Fifty-Three Pairings along the Tōkaidō Road*. This handsome coffee-table book is the fourth publication in the David A. Cofrin Asian Art Manuscript Series produced by the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida. It is an excellent selection for the series not only for showcasing the evocative images themselves but also for providing a deeper understanding of the historic, literary, and folkloric resonances of the Tōkaidō.

Tōkaidō Pairs, as the editors and contributors call the print series, was published in 1845 and represents a significant collaboration between several publishers and three of Japan's most important woodblock artists: Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861), Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), and Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865). In her introductory essay, Laura W. Allen points out that we do not know exactly why these three major print designers came together on this project but "as they were well established in the print publishing world, their collaboration was probably expected to generate sales" (3). Allen also explains one of the more innovative aspects of *Tōkaidō Pairs*: in order to circumvent newly imposed government restrictions on portraying kabuki actors and other images "deemed harmful to public morals" (6), the artists creatively embedded references to celebrities and famous beauties within pictures ostensibly depicting acceptable historical and literary subjects. The result was a series of prints exhibiting complex intertextualities and allusions that eloquently interweave images of contemporary actors and other personalities with historical events, literary scenes, legends and folkloric motifs. The artists created, as Allen puts it, "an image of the Tōkaidō as a route alive with popular heroes and beauties, inhabited by the spirits of legendary warriors and lovers, and dotted with the imagined presence of living Edo celebrities" (10).

The book opens with two essays. Allen's contribution offers the artistic and historic context of the *Tōkaidō Pairs* project. She provides background on the three artists, the publishers they worked with, as well as the restrictive political milieu out of which the creative collaboration was born. She goes on to situate *Tōkaidō Pairs* within the long history of artistic and literary

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representations of the Tōkaidō—from the 1659 guides by Asai Ryōi (1612-1691) to the exquisite twentieth-century prints of Sekino Jun'ichirō (1914-1988).

Building on this broad historical context, the second introductory essay, by Ann Wehmeyer, provides tools for reading the prints themselves. Wehmeyer explains a number of the folkloric references found in the images, noting in particular the powerful role played by the supernatural: “many of the scenes in the *Tōkaidō Pairs* allow the viewer to experience the vicarious thrill of an encounter with the miraculous and ghostly” (24). She traces several broad themes, such as the function of water and water deities, as well as specific legends associated with the locations portrayed. Although such explanations can only scratch the surface, by revealing the complex web of references that the images draw upon, Wehmeyer’s essay gestures not only to their aesthetic qualities but also to the semiotic richness of this material for gaining insight into the cultural-historical landscape of their production.

But the real heart of the book, of course, is the section of plates containing the images themselves. Each of the fifty-nine woodblock prints of *Tōkaidō Pairs* is beautifully reproduced here at almost full size. For each one, the editors provide a brief but helpful annotation. They also include the original Japanese and a romaji transliteration of the artist’s signature and print title, as well as a careful transliteration and English translation of the explanatory texts on the print itself. Leafing through these plates, the reader sees some of the folkloric and literary references mentioned in the preceding essays and also gets a sense of the inner workings of the Edo-period publishing industry. Each of the six publishers involved in the project used a cartouche in a different style and shape, and the editors also provide a helpful diagram showing where to find the censor’s marks, the publisher’s marks, the artist’s signature and other design elements of the print. They include edition notes for each print, indicating where different versions of the same print may be found in public collections. Finally the book concludes with a concordance of Japanese words and toponyms and a map tracing the route of the Tōkaidō with each station identified.

In sum, *Tōkaidō Texts and Tales* is a fine publication that serves a number of purposes. By showcasing an important series of late Edo-period woodblock prints, it provides readers with a deep appreciation of the artistry of three major woodblock print designers at the height of their aesthetic powers. It also locates this series within the history of publishing and publishing laws, highlighting the tremendous creativity necessary on all levels to produce a popular product of this sort. At the same time, the prints are also invaluable resources themselves, providing insight into the historical and cultural richness of the Tōkaidō specifically, and of Edo-period popular culture more generally. In making this material accessible and giving guidance on how to read it, *Tōkaidō Texts and Tales* performs a vital service to scholars of Japanese culture and history, media studies, art historians, and anybody interested in the cultural history of travel, roads, and transportation. It reminds us that travel is never just about getting from one place to another.

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