

Western perspective—Japanese vision

Utagawa Hiroshige's adaptation of Western linear perspective

Japanese culture is characterized by syncretism (*shūgō* 習合), an admixing of the indigenous with influences drawn from other cultures that through a harmonious blending enrich tradition. In the field of landscape painting this syncretism resulted in a complex expression that was an amalgam of influences. What allowed for this to grow into a purely Japanese landscape style was that in adopting new ideas artists sought out an infusion of the old with the new that, because tradition was given precedence in this admix, resulted in a uniquely Japanese expression. In the area of painting this cultural interaction resulted in two styles that were to dominate Japanese artistic expression for centuries. The first reflected the direct influence of Chinese composition, subject matter and approach (*kara-e* 唐絵) and the second reflected the tastes and sensibilities of the Japanese (*yamato-e* 大和絵). During the Edo period, the West provided another source of enrichment seen in the early nineteenth century landscape prints of artists of the ukiyo-e school such as Utagawa Hiroshige (歌川広重, 1797–1858). Hiroshige's classical training and traditional sensibilities led him to produce prints and paintings that reflected the spatial composition of traditional *kara-e*-style vertical hanging scroll paintings (*kakemono-e*) or horizontal *yamato-e*-style narrative scrolls (*emakimono*). In doing so he adopted the perspectival conventions and compositional techniques of *sansui-ga*, or 'pictures of mountains and water' associated with *kakemono* as well as those associated with *renzoku-shiki emaki*, or 'continuously illustrated scrolls'. In this essay I will discuss how Hiroshige merged these divergent styles through his use of a compositional arrangement he found common to all three.

Depth in 'mountains and water'

Unlike Western convergent perspective where a fixed viewpoint is conveyed by lines converging on a single vanishing point on the horizon in East Asian perspective there is no horizon line, no true vanishing point, no rules of foreshortening and no shadows. Reflecting the philosophical view that humanity and nature coexist, in East Asian landscape painting there is a more encompassing view conveyed through a mobile viewpoint that is determined by the viewer's proximity to the object viewed. For this reason a scene may take on the appearance of a montage of images, most commonly seen in the vertical format of *kakemono* and in the subject of 'mountains and water' (*sansui* 山水). In these works soaring mountains and the amorphous form of water falling from the same into misty valleys was conducive to exploring humans' relationship to nature through height. Indicating distance in these works objects are shown behind one another but not necessarily in receding dimension. This spatial rendering known as *jōen kakin* ('lower-near; upper-distant') gave the landscape the sense of a bird's-eye viewpoint. *Jōen kakin*, often used together with the zigzagging planar recession and



Fig. 1 Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) *Snowy gorge* c. 1843–4. Colour woodblock print, *ōban* ditpych. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio.

a winding road that stretches beyond the picture plane, was particularly suited to the *kakemono* format.

Hiroshige produced *sansui* paintings in the *kakemono* format and to evoke this painterly expression in prints such as *Snowy gorge* c. 1843–4 (Fig. 1) he chose a vertical *ōban* print ditpych format referred to as *kakemono-e*. It has the traditional elements of ‘mountains and water’ with recession into distance suggested by dividing the landmass into three distinct areas (front, middle and back) in a *jōen kakin* arrangement. Against a background of snow-covered mountains, their forms overlapped to suggest distance, a river is flowing carrying boats laden with cargo—the huddled figures of boatmen and a similarly burdened man struggling across a bridge enhance the mood of a stark winter scene. Notice how the figures are placed down the composition in order to enhance the imposing size of the background mountains and the sense of harshness we associate with winter in mountainous regions.

Enhancement of a *yamato-e*-style narrative

In seeking to enhance the narrative that was such an integral part of ukiyo-e Hiroshige utilized the compositional elements of Japan’s native tradition of painting, or *yamato-e*, as epitomized in the *emakimono* format. Landscape in the context of travel was a continuing theme of Hiroshige’s prints and the narrative style referred to as *renzoku-shiki emaki* best suited this for in these horizontal scrolls space and time are treated as a continuum with scenes often being linked together by compositional devices as the scroll unrolls from right to



Fig. 2 *Heiji monogatari emaki*, third quarter 13th century. Ink and colour on paper. Tokyo National Museum.

left. One of these devices was a wedge-shaped grouping of figures which naturally directs our attention towards the apex of that wedge. In a scene from the thirteenth century *Heiji monogatari emaki* (Fig. 2) depicting Emperor Nijō being challenged by rebels as he escapes from his palace we can see how this grouping enforces the overall dramatic thrust of the action.

In *Miya* from Hiroshige’s c. 1831–

34 Hoeidō edition of *Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō Road*, he has adopted this *emaki* compositional arrangement (Fig. 3). Utilising a high viewpoint so that all distracting background detail can be eliminated we can see two teams of opposing villagers, arranged into wedge-shaped groupings competing against each other in a horsedriving race held at the Atsuta Shrine. Ingeniously Hiroshige has combined the two groups visually into one overall wedge-shape by having the line that describes one of the figures in the foreground touch the line of the raised stick of a figure in the background.



Fig. 3 Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) *Miya* from the series *Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō Road* (*Tōkaidō gojūsan tsugi*) c. 1831–34. Colour woodblock print, *ōban*. The Tōkai Bank Foundation.

Hiroshige's realistically enhanced wedge-shapes

The European Renaissance architect Leon Battisti Alberti had noted that the triangular shape that is the outline of the ground plane formed by lines drawn to the vanishing point in perspective views in which the vertex is the eye resembles the 'cross-section of the visual pyramid' (Alberti). When, during the 1730s and 40s, *uki-e* artists adopted vanishing point perspective in the sub-genre known as *uki-e* (literally 'floating pictures') they found it particularly suited depictions of interiors such as the kabuki theatre. However, not correctly applying this technique they combined it with a high viewpoint and more than one vanishing point which resulted in a combination of numerous eccentrically shaped 'pyramids' or wedges as can be seen in Okumura Masanobu's (奥村政信, 1686–1764) c. 1740 *Large perspective picture of kabuki drama on stage during a November performance* (*Shibai kyōgen butai kaomise ōuki-e*) (Fig. 4). In this process what occurred was a destruction of fixed-point realism and its replacement by a dynamic field in which realism and the nonrepresentational field of Eastern perspective intermingled. The single fixed viewpoint of Western perspective on which a realistic scene could be built created a stability that we associate with a pyramid, the use of multiple vanishing points in *uki-e* however gave the triangular shapes in these print designs an independent dynamic that is better analogous to a number of wedges.

Hiroshige produced *uki-e* but the small number of such images indicates that he found them lacking in expressive potential although a modified perspective became an integral part of his greatest designs. Such modifications occurred because the 'pyramids' created in *uki-e* views have no subtlety. For example, the unobstructed movement of lines towards a vanishing point leaves no room for the

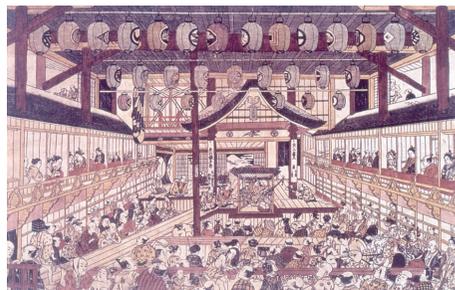


Fig. 4 Okumura Masanobu (1686–1764) *Large perspective picture of kabuki drama on stage during a November performance* (*Shibai kyōgen butai kaomise ōuki-e*) c. 1740. Colour woodblock print. Private Collection.



Fig. 5 Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858)
Sudden rain at Shōno (*Shōno hakuu*) from the series Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō Road (*Tōkaidō gojūsan tsugi*) 1857.
Colour woodblock print, *ōban* 24.6 x 36.2 cm.
Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio.

‘travelling eye’ that is part of *sansui* landscape painting representation. Nor does it allow for the narrative nuances and movement from scene to scene that *yamato-e* figurative groupings provided. The discomfort felt by Japanese artists when they first began to use Western perspective in *uki-e* was avoided by placing an object in front of where the vanishing point should have been (Lee). This eventually led to turning the diminishing lines that defined this wedge, so that they moved out of the picture plane at an acute angle—the beginnings of Hiroshige’s series of wedges that approximates the zigzagging movement in hanging scroll landscape painting and directs the viewer’s gaze into and out of the picture. Realistically enhanced, such wedges were

ideally suited to the theme of travel that underlies Hiroshige’s landscape series. Importantly this realism allowed him to evoke the monumental dimensions of a *kakemono*, even in the horizontal print format. It can be clearly seen in one of his most lauded works, *Sudden rain at Shōno (Shōno hakuu)* from his *Fifty-three stations of the Tōkaidō Road (Tōkaidō gojūsan tsugi)* published between 1848 and 1854 (Fig. 5). Further, the *yamato-e* use of wedge shaped groupings of figures used to direct the viewer’s attention, as discussed earlier was also incorporated into this adaptation for it suggested figures moving along these wedges. In *Sudden rain at Shōno* a summer’s rain falls on groups of travelers moving to and fro along a path. In this work Hiroshige has clearly defined a single ‘wedge’ formed by the line along the edge of the path and the silhouette of the background bamboo forest. There is thus a strong movement from right to left that follows this ‘wedge’ towards its apex near the center of the left edge of the picture. Colour works to emphasise this visual movement with dark tones to the right and lighter tones to the left. Within this ‘wedge’ are enclosed a number of smaller wedge-shapes formed by the differing colour tonality that defines different bamboo groves. The bamboo bends to the left, as does the group of four travellers, two of who are bearing a palanquin (*kago*) with a passenger whose hand is revealed as the wind blows up the *kago*’s protective cover. What compositional means has Hiroshige utilised in order to counter such a lopsided right-left movement? He balances the composition by imposing a counter movement described by the foreground path that slopes from left to right creating a foreground ‘wedge.’ Complementing this shape the two figures to the lower right, one of whom is carrying an umbrella emblazoned with the name of the publisher and part of the title of the series, form a smaller wedge whose apex faces right. The traditional source of such ‘wedges’ has been identified in the traditions of *yamato-e* and *kara-e*, Western realism has however enhanced their expression.

Hiroshige’s use of alternating wedge shapes in the horizontal *yoko ōban* format developed as a realistic enhanced adaptation of *yamato-e* and *kara-e*, and this adaptation was suggested by the similarity between the wedge shapes seen in *uki-e* and traditional representations. When this adaptation of traditional spatial arrangement was reintroduced back to the conventional vertical landscape format, as occurred in the vertical *tate ōban* prints of

Hiroshige's *One hundred famous views of Edo* (*Meisho Edo hyakkei*) tradition was reinvigorated. These wedge shapes can be seen described by the converging lines describing the foreground bridge, the mid-ground river and the background riverbank and sky in *Sudden Shower over Ōhashi and Atake* (*Ōhashi Atake no yūdachi*) from this series (Fig. 6). Because Hiroshige has needed to accommodate his 'wedges' to a narrower format the apex of these wedge shapes needs to be located outside the plane. Despite this the directed vision suggested by the wedge remains and is enhanced by Hiroshige's use of converging lines. Hiroshige was well aware that this convergence of lines suggested realistic depth for the lines describing the bridges also move as if to a vanishing point outside the picture plane. He was also aware of how the vertical layering of wedge shapes suggested the vertical visual movement seen in the zigzagging planar recession of *kara-e* for like traditional landscapes, where a winding path moves into and out of the picture plane behind vertical layered overlapping forms, in this work our mind's eye follows each wedge into and out of the picture. Further, by placing figures and boats within these 'wedges' he enhances a sense of *yamato-e* narrative.

In Hiroshige's landscape print series the use of dynamic wedge shapes along with the heightened viewpoint that allows for a more all-encompassing view and the use of framing devices and partial views, all enhanced through realism, work to suggest action beyond the picture frame as if there is a continuing narrative. By using these compositional devices in his landscape series, Hiroshige creates an impression of continuity between images, a narrative flow that Smith has likened to a cinematic-like progression (Smith). In the *yamato-e* handscroll such a narrative could be revealed by unwinding the scroll, or in *kara-e* vertical hanging scroll painting by following the vertical progression of *jōen kakin*. In the diminutive size of the single sheet print neither of these options was available. As well, in the commercially driven world of ukiyo-e publishers were more interested in suggesting a narrative rather than actually realising one as the latter would have limited their ability to sell individual prints from a series as well as expand or reduce the size of a series according to demand. By enhancing traditional narrative devices Western realism fulfilled both the commercial and artistic goals of ukiyo-e.

Conclusion

Hiroshige became aware of wedge-shapes through his early experiments with Western perspective. In later experiments he explored the synchrony between this wedge-shape and similar shapes in *kara-e* and *yamato-e*. His adoption of a schematic utilizing these wedge-

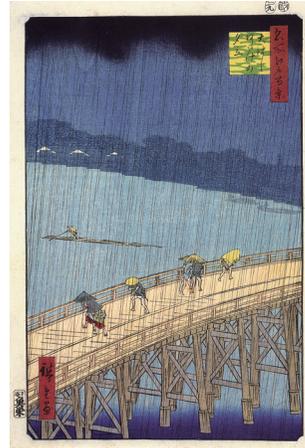


Fig. 6 Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) Sudden Shower over Ōhashi and Atake (*Ōhashi Atake no yūdachi*) from the series *One hundred Famous Views of Edo* (*Meisho Edo hyakkei*) 1856–8. Colour woodblock print, *ōban* 36.3 x 24.9 cm.

Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio.

shapes resulted in his greatest designs and thus demonstrates that his artistic achievement was accomplished by the sublimation of Western realism epitomized in Alberti's 'visual pyramid' to the Eastern pictorial means of wedge-shaped compositional units seen in the overlapping forms of *sansui-ga* and the figurative groupings of *renzoku-shiki emaki*. By utilising this realism and subjugating it to the aims of composition Hiroshige was able to instill these works with a traditional sense of evocative space, in effect realising a 3-D enhancement of tradition !

Bibliography

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