



COVER: Utagawa Kunitoku (1808-76). *Famous Places in Edo*. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Printmaker Utagawa Kunitoku made this print for the actress Oshichi. Above her the artist has included a secondary image, or *koma-e*, of a famous lake in Tokyo.

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Visions From the East



▲ Japan is in the part of the world known as the Far East.

Map by Jim McMahon

How were Japanese artists able to stun the rest of the world?

During the middle of the 19th century, European artists began running across examples of a kind of art they had never seen before. These strange new images were filled with fierce swordsmen, actors wearing frightening masks, and fantastic, poetic landscapes. These pictures had all been created using flowing lines and brilliant, unusual color schemes. If skilled Japanese artists had been making prints like these for hundreds of years, why had no Western artist ever seen anything like them before?

The answer lies in Japan's history and location in relation to other countries. Japan, on the eastern side of the

create images that

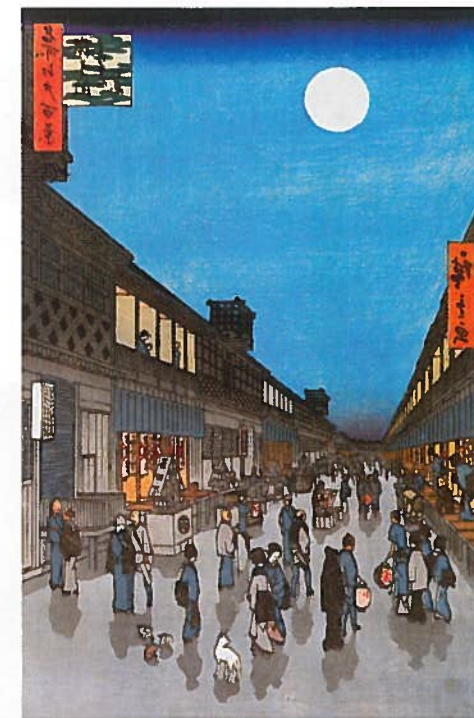
globe, is made up of a series of islands that had been isolated from the rest of the world for centuries. Warrior rulers had kept Japan closed to foreigners in order to retain their power and traditions. In 1855, at the end of the *Edo Period* (1615-1868), Japan opened its ports to Western ships. Arriving outsiders found prints being sold on the street that were totally different from anything they had ever seen. When they returned home, they brought this art with them. European artists loved the stylized shapes, unusual points-of-view,



◀ This scene by master printmaker Katsushika Hokusai captures the essence of Japan, a land made up of islands surrounded by the sea and connected by bridges.

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). *An Ancient Picture of the Eight Part Bridge in Mikawa Province* from the series *Curious Views of Famous Bridges in the Provinces*. The Cleveland Museum of Art/Historical Picture Archive/Corbis.

Text by Harriet Rzetelny



◀ Japanese prints were originally created as posters for the Edo (now called Tokyo) restaurants, theaters, and teahouses shown in this image made by famous printmaker Hiroshige.

Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858). *Night View of Saruwaka Street* from the series *One Hundred Views of Famous Places in Edo*, 1856. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Carlotta Mabury Collection.

dynamic compositions, bright, flat colors, and expressive outlines of Japanese prints. Soon they began incorporating these new elements into their own paintings.

The Japanese art of printmaking, called *ukiyo-e*

(literally "pictures of a floating world"), involves carving shapes into woodblocks, which are then printed to produce stylized images of everyday life. In *Night View of Saruwaka Street* (above) master printmaker Ando Hiroshige (heer-oh-SHEE-ge) captured an urban scene in a poetic way that ordinary people could understand. Edo printmakers were inspired by dramatic images of the theater, actors' makeup and costumes, and the beautiful women of the city's entertainment district. Many of these prints were in fact posters advertising theater performances. As city people began to travel, the beauties of the natural environment and interesting landmarks also became popular subjects.

Another important printmaker, Katsushika Hokusai (cat-sue-SHE-ka HO-ku-sigh), created the landscape on the left. In this print, the natural, organic shapes of the islands contrast with the linear, geometric bridges. Hokusai also produced *View of Mt. Fuji* (pages 8-9). Considered eternal and unchangeable, Mount Fuji has long been a symbol representing Japan to people all over the world. To symbolize the majesty and importance of Fuji, Hokusai portrays the mountain as one large, flat, simple shape, dominating his asymmetrical (different on each side but visually balanced) composition. He contrasts its giant orange geometric triangle with repeated organic, horizontal cloud shapes. The artist uses two complementary (opposite) colors—orange and blue—to capture both the beauty and violence of this once active volcano.