The Tokaido Road was an important and well-trodden route in pre-modern Japan connecting the ancient political capital of Kyoto with the imperial city of Edo (modern-day Tokyo). The road was punctuated by 53 stations where travelers could rest and refresh themselves and where the government could monitor trade and collect taxes. In the 19th-century, artists began creating woodblock prints illustrating scenes of life, society, culture and landscape found along this popular route. These were issued in sets of 55 prints, one for every post station, plus the beginning and end points of the road.

These spectacular prints address classical literary and theatrical subjects, dangerous liaisons, tales of the supernatural, samurai legends, religious pilgrimage, and memorable characters from all walks of life, along with universal themes to which all travelers can relate. *Life is a Highway* includes examples from four complete sets of the series, including, the “Parallel Tokaido” which is was noteworthy for its approach to the stations along the route. These prints were designed by three of the best known 19th-century Japanese woodcut artists: Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861) and Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865). Rather than focusing on the passing landscape, these artists represented the road through historical and legendary stories associated with its numerous stations. The “Parallel Tokaido” changed the conventions in which the landscape along the Tokaido Road was depicted. Stations along the road were no longer presented merely as places — but as places in time, layered in history.

In 19th-century Japan, travel provided an opportunity to temporarily escape the pressures of everyday life in the strict, ordered society of the Edo period. We hope that you will enjoy your stay in Japan and, if you so desire, use the exhibition to escape your everyday life – if even for a few moments.

Labels for each of the print series included in this exhibition can be found immediately to the right. Please select a tour card to your left to explore particular themes within the exhibition. Also, make sure to visit the Tourist Information Center in the center of the gallery for a variety of educational materials, including Guide Books with extended text for all of the stations. Visit the Bishop Study Center for an interactive children’s travel pack and additional research materials related to Japanese printmaking.

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Most of the prints in the exhibition were made in the mid-19th century, toward the end of the Edo period (1615-1867). The traditional printmaking method of this period involved collaboration between artist, carver, printer and publisher. In the print diagram to the left, both the artist’s and the publisher’s signatures appear. The publisher can also be identified by the shape of the cartouche in the upper left of each print. In this particular series (*Parallel Images from the Tokaido Road*), three master print designers worked in collaboration with no less than six publishers. Publishers employed specialist carvers and printers to transform the design into a finished print.

Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) produced multiple editions of prints depicting the Tokaido Road. In 1832 he was invited to join an official procession to Kyoto, which gave him the opportunity to travel the Tokaido and make sketches along the way.

Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865) was best known for his kabuki and actor prints, and was a trendsetter among the artists of his time. Kunisada was an extremely prolific artist, producing somewhere between 20,000 and 25,000 print designs in his lifetime. Utagawa Sadahide (1807-1873), a notable student of Kunisada, created triptychs that can also be seen throughout the gallery.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861) was a master of many genres. He created prints depicting beautiful women, mythical animals, kabuki actors, and landscapes. However, he is best known for his battle scenes with legendary samurai heroes.

Notice that all of the artists discussed here seem to have the same last name (last name before first name in Japanese convention) of Utagawa. These artists were not related by blood, but were adopted by the Utagawa school of printmaking. It was a Japanese custom for successful apprentices to take the names of their masters. The Utagawa school was so successful during the Edo period that more than half of all surviving prints are by its artists.
Sekino Jun’ichiro (1914-1988) is an important figure in 20th-century printmaking. From an early age, he studied printmaking and oil painting, while concentrating on both Japanese and Western techniques. When he was in his mid-twenties, he moved to Tokyo and began studying with master printmaker Koshiro Onchi. Both artists were members of a postwar Japan Print Association in which artists were directly involved in all stages of printmaking. Although they made prints inspired by traditional themes and subjects, they diverged from the traditional model of a collaborative system where the artist, carver, printer, and publisher engaged in a division of labor. Known as the sosaku hangu, this movement stressed the importance of the artist as sole creator.

Between 1959 and 1974, Sekino began working on a modern print series of the Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido. Sekino researched the history of the series and tried to revitalize the famous 19th-century scenes from a modern perspective. This series has been considered one of the most important works of his oeuvre. Ironically, he departed from two of his conventional working methods when making these prints. While he made the watercolor designs (at left) and did the carving himself, he entrusted the printing to three skilled artisans - Kobayashi Sokichi, Yoneda Minoru and Iwase Koichi.

Sekino was also very skilled at portraiture, having an eye for psychological subtlety and the technical skill to achieve precision and depth. However, you would be hard pressed to find many figures in his Tokaido series. The absence and/or anonymity of people in his compositions are striking. By coupling scenes of industrialism with vignettes of empty natural spaces, the artist points out the impersonality and resulting loneliness in modern society.
Daimyo were the powerful feudal lords, hereditary property owners, who held economic and military power over their region. Daimyo hired samurai warriors to guard their territory, and many samurai were loyal to their daimyo clan for several generations. Before the unification of Japan, in-fighting was common between the clans.

Between 1603 and 1615, the Tokugawa Shogunate established itself as the leader of the government and the military. Appointed by the emperor, the shogun was considered the de facto ruler of Japan, controlling foreign policy, the military and feudal patronage. During the Edo period (1615-1867), the role of the emperor was ceremonial. During this time, the first Tokugawa shogun established his capital in Edo (modern-day Tokyo), rather than in the ancient capital of Kyoto. The Tokaido Road was established as the shortest distance between these two capitals.

When the Tokugawa Shogunate came into power, the daimyo swore their allegiance to the shogun and promised military service on demand. Several tactics were employed over time by the shogun in order to keep the daimyo subservient. The lords were organized into different ranks according to the history of their loyalty to the Tokugawa family, and the rules for each ranking differed slightly. With the new capital in Edo, all daimyo were forced to live there for several months each year. Their families were also kept hostage in Edo, in houses that the daimyo were required to maintain at their own cost. To comply with another of the shogun's edicts, the daimyo traveled to Edo in elaborate and costly processions – sometimes with up to 20,000 foot soldiers and servants in their retinue. These expensive processions would have placed an enormous burden on the daimyo's finances, as did their lavish Edo residences. The shogun’s policy cleverly kept the daimyo occupied and reduced the potential for rebellion.