

# Degas and Hiroshige

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Edgar Degas's series of 50 landscape monotypes reworked with pastel are simultaneously prints, paintings and drawings. In the autumn of 1890 the artist travelled through Burgundy to the village of Diénay, where he set to work on the prints in the studio of his friend Georges Jeanninot. These were his first serious forays into landscape since his Impressionist pastels of 1869. In some cases the prints take on a dream-like quality, reaching a degree of abstraction unequalled

in Claude Monet's paintings for another decade or more. One could say that he now worked as an anti-Impressionist, for rather than sitting before his subject, he looked to his memory and imagination. In at least one instance, as he worked in the studio, Degas had in mind a specific colour woodcut by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), *Asuma Shrine and the Entwined Camphor*, made in 1857 as part of *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, one of his most popular series.<sup>1</sup> Degas's

1. Inv. 30.1478.31.



259. Edgar Degas, *Winding River*, 1890, colour monotype reworked with pastel, sheet 295 x 389 mm (Minneapolis Institute of Arts).

interest in Hiroshige is well known. He owned some 40 landscape prints by the master<sup>2</sup> and Richard Kendall commented on similarities in Degas's and Hiroshige's compositional devices as well as their mutual interest in series and variants.<sup>3</sup> The present discussion adds to Kendall's observations an example of a direct link between specific landscapes by Degas and Hiroshige.

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts recently acquired Degas's *Winding River*, which depicts a river or a path winding through a valley lush with blossoming trees (fig. 259).<sup>4</sup> The soft-focus image may have been so novel to contemporary viewers that they needed assistance in deciphering it, for an inscription on the lower edge of the mount reads *bas* to provide some orientation. The monotype is somewhat of a rediscovery, in that for decades the only published images of it were based on the small black-and-white illustration that appeared in the catalogue of the fourth sale from Degas's studio.<sup>5</sup> It first appeared in colour in a catalogue produced by the Galerie Terrades in 2008.<sup>6</sup> Only after seeing the image in colour would one make the connection to Hiroshige.

At first glance, it may seem far-fetched to link *Winding River* with *Asuma Shrine and the Entwined Camphor* (fig. 260), since the former is horizontal and the latter vertical. Additionally, the most pronounced curves of the rivers or paths point in opposite directions. Yet, close inspection and thinking through Degas's process reveals several correspondences that could not be happenstance alone.

Degas seems to have painted dilute oil colours onto the plate with a rag: pinks and roses in the sky, with rich greens and blue-greens in the middle ground and olive greens in the foreground. Once the colours were

applied he wiped and scratched the prominent s-curve through the center, probably using both ends of a brush. After printing the plate he reworked the image with pastel, adding the lavender, ochre, yellow and pink blossoms. He indicated the tree trunks in black. In the foreground, he accented – or attempted to cover – the irregular tide-line of his runny paints with pink pastel and used the same pink to colour broader areas. He activated the horizon line with a tangle of chevron-shaped or zigzag strokes and dots of black chalk. He seems to have found the contrast too sharp, for he retraced many of these marks with brown. In the sky, he added yellow, pink and white that enhances the half-lit effect of dawn or dusk. Also visible in the sky are numerous, nearly vertical, closely spaced strokes of gray.



260. Utagawa Hiroshige, *Asuma Shrine and the Entwined Camphor*, 1857, colour woodcut, image 340 x 222 mm, sheet 364 x 237 mm (New York, Brooklyn Museum of Art).

2. R. Kendall, *Degas Landscapes*, New Haven and London, 1993, p. 120. The sale catalogue for Degas's print collection lists eight lots of Japanese prints and drawings, many of which were slated to be subdivided for sale; see Drouot, Paris, 6–7 November 1918, lots 324–31. Lot 328 contained 42 landscapes, noted as being mostly by Hiroshige, but the contents are not itemized. Although Degas clearly had an interest in Hiroshige, no proof that he owned an impression of *Asuma Shrine and the Entwined Camphor* has come to my attention.
3. Kendall, *op. cit.*, pp. 120, 205–07. Kendall also noted similarities between prints by Hokusai and Degas; *ibid.*, pp. 201 and 205.
4. The John R. Van Derlip Fund, inv. 2009.19.1. E. Parry Janis, *Degas Monotypes: Essay, Catalogue & Checklist*, Cambridge, MA, 1968, no. 287.
5. Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 2–4 July 1919, lot 42.
6. A. Cahen, *Galerie Terrades: Tableaux, sculptures et dessins Français, 1500–1900*, Paris, 2008, p. 58, no. 25.

There are many affinities in the overall colour schemes of the prints, both in terms of the colours selected – green, pink, black, yellow and brown and in the gradation of the colours (*bokashi*). The sunset effects of the skies are very similar. Both deal with the blossoms of springtime contrasted with black tree trunks. Whereas Hiroshige used groves of trees to activate his horizon line, Degas seems to have struggled a bit with his efforts.

If one considers that the orientation of the s-curve that Degas wiped through the center of his image was made on the plate rather than on the paper, then it becomes apparent that he followed the orientation of Hiroshige's curve. Their similarity is readily seen when the image of *Winding River* is flipped (fig. 261). Additionally, the serrated edges of Hiroshige's path and river have their echoes in Degas's work. A further telling fea-

ture in *Winding River* is the presence of the closely spaced, nearly vertical lines of grey that Degas drew in the sky. In fine impressions of many Hiroshige prints, including *Asuma Shrine and the Entwined Camphor*, the grain of the woodblock shows especially in the sky.

Certainly Degas's reimagining of Hiroshige's image led to anything but a slavish copy. Indeed, it is difficult to know if or where Degas drew the line between Hiroshige's ideas and his own. In a sense this borderline of exploration may be seen in the pink highlights added along the foreground tide-lines of thinned-out paint. The curving forms recall the curving outlines of the pink blossom-filled treetops that appear in the foreground of *Asuma Shrine and the Entwined Camphor*, but they do not at all appear to be treetops. Perhaps Degas's step toward abstraction began on the firm footing of his artistic forebear's composition.



261. Reversed image of fig. 259.