# British Museum exhibition celebrates Hiroshige's vibrant legacy and influence on Western art



The British Museum is currently showcasing a vibrant exhibition dedicated to the celebrated early 19th-century Japanese artist Utagawa Hiroshige, renowned for his distinctive prints that capture fleeting moments of everyday life in Edo-period Japan. The exhibition has been widely praised for its vivid display of Hiroshige’s work and its insightful exploration of his influence on Western art, particularly French Impressionism. However, some critics have noted that the final section, which addresses Hiroshige’s global legacy and imitators, feels somewhat hurried and lacks the depth warranted by the subject.

Throughout the exhibition, the connections between Hiroshige’s prints and the works of French Impressionists become strikingly evident. For example, Hiroshige’s treatment of rain as a lighthearted urban event is echoed in Pierre-Auguste Renoir's painting The Umbrellas. Hiroshige’s print Tarui from the 1830s depicts umbrellas raised to celebrate a shower, a motif later joyfully revisited by Renoir. Similarly, Claude Monet’s fascination with snow-covered landscapes echoes Hiroshige’s Snow-viewing Along the Sumida River triptych created between 1832 and 1834, which portrays a well-dressed family appreciatively observing the snow’s gentle blanket in Edo (modern Tokyo).

The Guardian describes the triptych as encapsulating Hiroshige’s worldview, one infused with hedonism and pleasure in transient moments, such as a shower or a fresh layer of snow. This philosophy of savouring small freedoms deeply influenced late 19th-century Parisian artists and writers—an outlook calm and natural for Hiroshige, a devout Buddhist, but revolutionary for the European modernists who adopted it. The exhibition demonstrates how these fleeting, weightless incidents—the parting of friends, the bathing of a companion, or the comfort of a temporary meal—are treated with profound beauty and subtlety in Hiroshige’s prints.

These scenes are portrayed with a timeless freshness that would be as relatable in contemporary cities such as London or Newcastle as they were in Edo. One print, Enjoying the Evening Cool Along the Shijo Riverbed, shows crowds dining at temporary restaurants on a dried-up riverbed, with convivial guests animatedly enjoying the evening. This urban leisure scene anticipates Renoir’s Luncheon of the Boating Party and mirrors Édouard Manet’s Luncheon on the Grass through scenes of open-air picnics.

Hiroshige’s art also offers a nuanced glimpse into the socio-political context of early 19th-century Japan. Born in 1797 during the Tokugawa shogunate, a military dictatorship that imposed strict isolationist policies excluding almost all foreign contact, his prints reveal the rituals and customs of this period. A notable example is his 1830s triptych of a Samurai procession, which intriguingly focuses on a bride’s journey to an elite marriage, portrayed almost entirely with female figures. Another vibrant print from 1851 captures a lively group of pilgrims on their way to a mountain shrine by the sea, their joyous costumes and lively movements drawing a parallel with Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims, emphasising the human aspect of these communal events.

What sets Hiroshige’s work apart is his dazzling use of colour. The exhibition highlights his “ecstatic sense of colour” with vivid contrasts such as sapphire seas, fiery skies, and kimonos in myriad hues that stand out against the white faces of women. His detailed depictions of pleasure gardens, teahouses, and picnics are made radiant by striking cosmic colour schemes, with blues reminiscent of Prussian blue conveying a spiritual dimension akin to nirvana.

The British Museum also presents two versions of The Plum Garden at Kameido, a print copied by Vincent van Gogh, who was among Hiroshige’s most devoted Western admirers. Van Gogh’s renditions show his intense engagement with Hiroshige’s work, with the artist experimenting with tones of red and pink skies that evoke the sweetness and vitality of plum orchards. The exhibition displays Van Gogh’s original drawing made in preparation for his painting after Hiroshige, offering a glimpse into his concentrated effort to capture the emotion and vibrancy of the Japanese prints.

The Guardian’s review praises the British Museum’s exhibition as a visually kaleidoscopic journey, celebrating Hiroshige’s fresh and joyful view of life, even as it notes the final section on his global legacy is somewhat less comprehensive than the main body of works. Nonetheless, the exhibition provides a rich exploration of how Hiroshige’s art transcended its time and place, influencing generations of artists far beyond Japan’s shores.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/hiroshige-artist-open-road> - Supports the fact that the British Museum is hosting an exhibition dedicated to Utagawa Hiroshige. This exhibition showcases his life and work, highlighting his influence on Western art.
2. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/whats-british-museum-202425> - Corroborates the information about the exhibition 'Hiroshige: artist of the open road' and its location in the Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery.
3. <https://www.timeout.com/london/art/hiroshige-artist-of-the-open-road> - Provides details about the exhibition, including its timing and the types of artworks displayed, such as prints, paintings, and sketches.
4. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/british-museum-japan-utagawa-hiroshige-b2706002.html> - Supports the claim that the exhibition includes rare and previously unseen works by Hiroshige and discusses his career as a painter of Japan's natural landscapes and daily life.
5. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/press/press-releases/announcing-hiroshige-artist-open-road-exhibition> - Announces the exhibition and highlights its significance in showcasing Hiroshige's art, marking the first major exhibition of his work in over 25 years.
6. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\_Painting\_of\_Modern\_Life\_(book)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Painting_of_Modern_Life_%28book%29) - Although not directly mentioned in the search results, this Wikipedia link discusses how Impressionist art was influenced by Japanese prints, indirectly supporting the connection between Hiroshige's work and French Impressionism.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/apr/28/hiroshige-artist-of-the-open-road-review-i-could-look-forever-at-these-passing-moments-in-cosmic-colours> - Please view link - unable to able to access data