

Gus Foster: *The Language of the Tokaido Road*

By Dr. Richard S. Field, Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs,
Yale University Art Gallery, 1993

In America there are those who make pilgrimages to old Civil War battlegrounds, or who visit the homes of the famous – from Jefferson’s Monticello to Elvis’ Graceland. Most of us have experienced that yearning to see again a deeply cherished place of childhood or to take a physical journey that would reestablish some essential contact our earth and ourselves, as do the great walks along the Appalachian or Muir trails. For the Japanese, such longing was for centuries associated with the Tokaido Road, which since the eighth century, extended from Tokyo to Kyoto. The most important artery of cultural and material exchange in Japan, it was the location of innumerable shrines, pilgrimage stops, inns, teahouses, political checkpoints, horse and runner relay stations, and merchants. Yet, over the centuries, it had accumulated the traces of untold events and legends. By the mid-seventeenth century, the number and location of the fifty-three stations had been fixed; each, replete with mythic, historic, and artistic associations, was famous for local customs and cuisine, and offered the traveler an ever-changing succession of landscapes, flora, and fauna. The first printed guidebook appeared in 1709. A journey on the Tokaido road was increasingly the subject of both art and literature, as much a fantasy of spiritual renewal as it was of worldly desire.

In 1991, when Gus Foster set out to walk the three-hundred-and six miles between the Nihon Bridge (Tokyo) and the Sanjo Bridge (Kyoto), the old Tokaido Road had been transformed from a footpath to a super highway (and a high-speed railway). With the exception of a few disconnected miles (see nos. 11, 36/37, and 49), the old road had vanished as much from memory as from the earth. A few of the old shrines, restaurants, curiosities, and markers recorded in Hiroshige’s woodcuts of 1833 still existed (see nos. 12, 21, 37, 45,47, 55), but most did not survive the eradicating expansion of the Tokaido Industrial Zone. Nowadays, pilgrimages are made elsewhere in Japan. And though he carried Hiroshige’s memories in a miniature set of the Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido, Foster harbored neither romantic illusions nor spiritual expectations. With a map marked with the fifty-three stations, a compass, three-days’ clothing, and his 35mm Globuscope panoramic camera, he made a record of what interested him at each “station.” There are few parallels with Hiroshige’s woodcuts-contrived or otherwise (see nos. 26, 28, 41, and

42) – but rarely did Foster seek to follow in the presumed footsteps of the master. And while the contrast with the old woodcut cycle is devastating, Foster's images, like Hiroshige's, are an incredibly rich portrayal of the contemporary Tokaido.

Still, the gulf that separates Foster's record from Hiroshige's is immense. It invokes that which separates pre-industrial from post-capitalist culture, pre-photographic original from post-modern replica, or even artistic exploitation of natural mist from the literal veiling of chemical smog. On the other hand, today we must allow that both Foster and Hiroshige represented the world, even the natural world, as a construction of man. Close readings of their images (which space refuses) reveal that each society despite the illusory freedoms of temporal pleasures – is ordered by complex systems of control, manifested in each by the ever-present signs and the patterns of social behavior. No society could have been more strictly regulated than that of Japan under the shoguns (1615 – 1868); no society could be more subtly manipulated than that of the modern West through the creation of desire by mass media culture. In both sets of images, the metaphor of travel invokes freedom and constraint. The variety of human behavior and natural description is very much subsumed by conventions in Hiroshige, just as the variety of consumer choice and social mobility is overlain by the codes of the camera. What at first might appear to be text about the machine in the garden - the despoiling of the pastoral tradition by modern technology (see especially the litter in nos. 8 and 19) – has given way to a more deconstructive urge, one that permits us to ponder how all symbol systems – visual and otherwise – act to construct and control.

But we have yet to ask whether there are cultural meanings encoded in Foster's use of the camera? Most striking is the fact that these photographs are more than instantaneous. The 360-degree circuit of the camera takes about eight-tenths of a second. Time elapses, things change and narratives emerge. Persons, bicycles, cars, trucks, and trains appear, alter and disappear. And they do so in an ordained occidental sequence, since the camera pans, without exception, from left to right.. And just as the circuit camera imposes readings of continuous change, it imparts unexpected movement to the other phenomena, or, correctly stated, it destabilizes our normal habits of decoding images. Objects arranged in a circle equidistant from the camera, such as the group of highschoolers in Seki (no.48) or the horizon itself appear straight, that is undistorted, and without movement. But other structures, especially those made or

imposed by man are distorted, disturbing the picture plane with rapidly plunging corridors into space.

Because Foster's camera was always oriented so that the film plane was perpendicular to the ground plane, the viewer looked out – neither up, down, nor sideways – so that the patterns of steep and curving perspectives repeat from one photograph to the next, constantly undermining the viewer's attention. Just as Hiroshige's spaces of 1833 are without resolution, without vanishing points, so Foster's photographs suggest endless cycles rather than focused, goal oriented trajectories. It is only with intense effort that one can "read" these rhythms as coherent portraits of a 360-degree circuit; there is a tendency to see photographs as super-wide-angle panoramas, hardly giving credence to the fact – except for the passage of time – one has returned to where one had started. Yet the more one learns this language, the more the Tokaido becomes a pilgrimage that marks time, that awaits the inevitable penetration of the signs of technology from the fringes even when it has still been shut out from the center (nos. 2, 7, 12, 34, 38, 52, 54).

Despite this, Foster's Tokaido is not so much an ironic depiction of the present against the implied background of Hiroshige's past, nor does it masquerade as a voyage of inner discovery. It is, rather, a journey into the endless surfaces of modern means of communications: roads, signs, habits, desires, i.e., the ordering of our lives through language and symbol systems, those of both the merchant and the artist. In our times, the interpretation of language is the Tokaido Road to the conscious self.