

Gus Foster, *Artist's Statement*

From Tokaido Road exhibition catalogue, 1993

My introduction to Japan began many years ago when I first saw the *ukiyo-e* wood block prints of Utamaro, Harunobu, Hokusai, and Hiroshige. It was landscape prints by Hiroshige, particularly the "Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido Road" which were of compelling interest; more than anything else, it was those exotic and colorful views which sowed the seed of desire to visit the country one day.

My work has been involved with American landscape, and in recent years, extensively with wilderness areas of the United States, particularly the summits in the Rocky Mountain range extending from New Mexico to Canada. I started climbing to photograph the extraordinary 360 degree panoramic views from these peaks. One year I was training for that season's climbs when the idea occurred to me to combine training and pleasure by walking the Tokaido Road, a distance of 300 miles between Tokyo and Kyoto.

I spent some months researching the trip trying to find modern references to the route; I read *Shanksmare*, the classic tale of the journey contemporary to Hiroshige's time; I obtained topographic maps of sufficient scale to begin to identify the road. I asked an acquaintance who read Japanese to mark on the maps the individual 53 stations as they were listed by Hiroshige. With these maps, a compass, panoramic camera, 100 rolls of film, sleeping bag, clothing, books, and a backpack I flew to Tokyo in May 1991.

My walk began the next morning after being driven to the "Nihonbashi" which is the beginning of the Tokaido Road. What I saw the next 27 days is what few tourists see, in fact what I imagine few Japanese experience themselves: a 300 mile wide cross-section of country from the perspective of detail of 1 mile per hour on foot.

The Tokaido Road is the oldest road in Japan dating to the 8th century; in more recent times it has been the spine of the industrial corridor: the first rail lines were laid parallel to it, as was the first automotive highway, and the first of the high speed bullet train lines. Of the historic Tokaido Road – centuries old hand-set stone footpaths – less than 30 miles still exist, and a conscious effort seems to have been made to preserve these old sections. The many, rivers, great and small, which cross the Tokaido Road are now bridged and spanned and are crossed effortlessly on foot, but each was an impediment and an ordeal to cross even a century ago.

The photographs record the cities and villages, rivers and bridge, factories and gardens, shrines and car dealerships, pachinko parlors and tea plantations. Because the photographs are 360 degree panoramic views nothing is left out: a pastoral landscape that could have been drawn in the 14th or 18th century, the shinkansen (bullet train) is juxtaposed making the image unique to our time. The black lava beach, site of the famous Miho pines, is covered with detritus jettisoned from the ships using the modern harbor. The Tokaido Road that Hiroshige drew, of course, no longer exists. I had no illusions that it did, but there are still many parallels: people are as fascinated by kite flying today as they were then, the rain that fell on paper parasols then, falls on today's umbrellas, people that gathered at the shrines for festivals then, attend the same rites today. Now the memento is a group photograph at the temple gates. The monumental work made by an artist 160 years ago still speaks today; it was his effort and the panoramic account of life in his time that led to my own journey and an account by a traveler in the late 20th century.