

Deep Dive into Virtual Meiji Era Ginza

The second edition of the Hyper Edohaku virtual Tokyo app allows users to step back in time to the turn of the century, when Edo became Tokyo as we know it today.

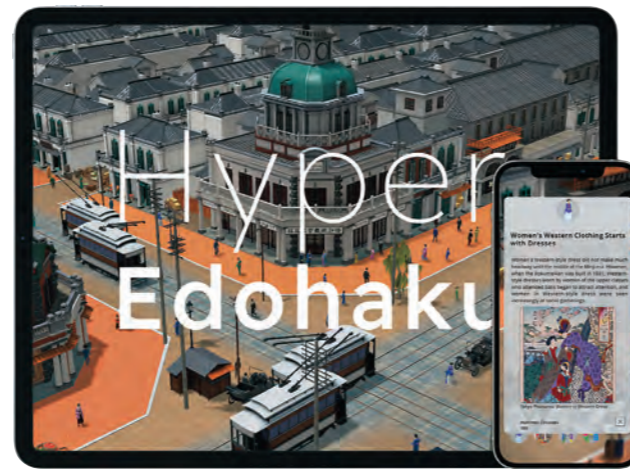


Within the app, users can speak to people in the streets, interact with objects in the area, and become involved in events of the time. Photo: courtesy of Edo-Tokyo Museum

The Hyper Edohaku app is part of the TOKYO Smart Culture Project by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture, whose purpose is to provide unlimited access to culture and the arts via technology. The Edo-Tokyo Museum released the Hyper Edohaku Edo Ryogoku Edition in 2022, giving users an entirely new way to interact with museum artifacts and explore Tokyo's heritage in a virtual setting. Covering the Edo period (1603–1868), that version of the app was set in the Ryogoku area, known for its sumo wrestler stables, and where the museum is located.

Curator of the Edo-Tokyo Museum, Kutsusawa Hiroyuki, says that the team chose the Meiji era (1868–1912) for its second version, released in 2023 because of the incredibly rapid social and technological changes that occurred during that time.

Marking the end of the Edo period, the Meiji era is considered the beginning of Japan's modern history, with Ginza especially at the forefront of Tokyo's swift modernization. This movement was thrust forward by a devastating fire that ravaged the area in 1872—a pivotal event included in the app. Following the disaster, the Meiji



The English version of the Hyper Edohaku app opened up the virtual world of Tokyo to a global audience. Photo: courtesy of Edo-Tokyo Museum

government undertook the revitalization of the area by, for example, erecting brick buildings that could withstand fire. This action had a profound influence on Ginza's development, helping to create the unique, chic area loved by international visitors and residents alike.

From the Meiji Era to the Present

The app's center of action is the iconic Ginza 4-chome, considered by many to be the heart of modern-day Ginza.



From left, Akira in a suit and Haru in kimono. Photo: courtesy of Edo-Tokyo Museum

Kutsusawa says that one of the biggest challenges the team faced when developing this version was to faithfully re-create the Ginza of the Meiji era. Photos of Ginza from that time still exist, giving developers more references to work with than they had when creating the original Edo-period Ryogoku version.

One notable cultural development that the app captures, which Kutsusawa thinks users will find fascinating, is the rapid change in food culture. Several of the nation's culinary classics, such as Japanese-style curry, *anpan* (buns containing sweet red bean paste), and *ramune* (a carbonated soft drink), came into existence during the era.

A New Chapter for Museum Curation

Perhaps the most notable feature of the app is its immersive approach to history education. The purpose of a museum is no longer to just display collections of artifacts in glass boxes or works of art on walls. Rather, museums are taking steps to allow and even encourage people to experience art and history more directly so that they can develop an understanding of what it was like to have lived during a certain time in history.

The Edo-Tokyo Museum has always striven to give its visitors a three-dimensional view of Tokyo's history, using scale models, dioramas, and even life-size replicas of real streets. And while other museums have created digital collections and online museum tours, the Edo-Tokyo Museum has taken a novel and entertaining approach to digitizing a collection, thereby bringing people into history itself. Tokyo has been at the forefront of this movement toward experiential and immersive museums in recent years.