



春朗画

*Katsushika*

HOKUSAI

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Edmond de Goncourt

# Hokusai

茶坊為家

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# Foreword

Hokusai's talent travelled across land and sea to Europe long ago. But his work, so original, so diverse, and so prolific, still remains misunderstood. It is true that, even in the artist's homeland, though he has always been immensely popular, his work has not been received with the same fervour by the academy and by the elite as by the Japanese people. Was he not reproached, in his own time, for only doing 'vulgar paintings'? Then, however, few artists knew how to delve into the potential of drawing techniques and methods as he did. What artist can vaunt his ability to draw with his fingernails, his feet, or even his left hand (if right-handed) or inverted, with such virtuosity that it seems to have been drawn in the most conventional way?

Hokusai illustrated more than 120 works, one of which, the *Suiko-Gaden*, consisted of ninety volumes. He collaborated on about thirty volumes: yellow books and popular books at first, eastern and western promenades, glimpses of famous places, practical manuals for decorators and artisans, a life of Sakyamuni, a conquest of Korea, tales, legends, novels, biographies of heroes and heroines and the thirty-six women poets and one hundred male poets, with songbooks and multiple albums of birds, plants, patrons of new fashion, books on education, morals, anecdotes, and fantastic and natural sketches.

Hokusai tried everything, and succeeded. He was tireless, multitalented, and brilliant. He accumulated drawings upon drawings, stamps upon stamps, informing himself very specifically about his compatriots, their work, and their interests, and about the people in the streets, those in the fields, and those on the sea. He opened the gates to the walls that hid brilliant courtesans, their silks and embroidery, and the large belt knots spread across their chests and stomachs. He frightened observers with apparitions from his most awful and stirring, fantastic imagination.

To understand the art of a very particular, distant people, it is not sufficient to learn, more or less well, their language; it is necessary to penetrate their soul, their tastes – one must be the obedient student of this soul and these tastes. It is, after all, founded on love, the profound ecstasy that artists feel in expressing their country. They love it passionately, they cherish its beauty, its clarity, and they try to reproduce its life from the heart. A happy affliction, Hokusai was an eminent representative of those who work incessantly.

- Léon Hennique

*Hotei*, c. 1830-1849.  
*Sumizuri-e* (monochrome  
woodblock print), 20.7 x 12.9 cm.  
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



春朗画



# Hokusai

## *Old Man, Crazy about Drawing*

Hokusai was born in 1760, sometime in October or November. He was born in Edo in the Honjo neighbourhood, close to the Sumida River and to the countryside, a neighbourhood to which the painter was much attached. He even signed his drawings, for a time, “the peasant from Katsushika”, Katsushika being the provincial district where the Honjo neighbourhood is located.

According to the will left by his granddaughter, Shirai Tati, he was the third son of Kawamura Iriyemon, who, under the name Bunsei, would have been an artist of the new profession. Near the age of four, Hokusai, whose first name was Tokitarō, was adopted by Nakajima Ise, mirror designer for the Tokugawa royal family.

Hokusai, whilst still a child, became the assistant to a great bookseller in Edo where, whilst contemplating illustrated books, he carried out his duties as assistant so lazily and disdainfully that he was fired. Paging through the bookseller’s illustrated books and life in images for long months developed the young man’s taste and passion for drawing.

In 1774, he began an apprenticeship with a woodcutter and in 1775, under the name Tetsuzō, he engraved the last six pages of a novel by Santchō. Thus, he became a woodcutter, which he continued until the age of eighteen.

In 1778, Hokusai, then named Tetsuzō, abandoned his profession as a woodcutter. He was no longer willing to be the interpreter, the translator of another’s talent. He was taken by the desire to invent, to compose, and to give a personal form to his creations. He had the ambition to become a painter.

He entered, at the age of eighteen, the studio of Katsukawa Shunshō, where his budding talent earned him the name of Katsukawa Shunrō. There, he painted actors and theatre sets in the style of Tsumuzumi Torin and produced many loose-leaf drawings, called *kyōka surimono*. The master allowed him to sign, under this name, his compositions representing a series of actors, in the upright format of the drawings of actors by Shunshō, his master.

At this time, the young Shunrō began to show a bit of the great sketch artist who would become the great Hokusai. With perseverance and relentless work, he continued to draw and to produce, until 1786, compositions bearing the signature of Katsukawa Shunrō,

*Kintoki the Herculean Child with a Bear and an Eagle*, c. 1790-1795.  
*Ōban, nishiki-e* (polychrome woodblock print), 37.2 x 24.8 cm.  
Ostasiatische Kunstsammlung,  
Museum für Asiatische Kunst,  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin.

*Ushigafuchi at Kudan*  
(*Kudan Ushigafuchi*), from an  
untitled series of landscapes in  
Western style, c. 1800-1805.  
*Chūban, nishiki-e* (polychrome  
woodblock print), 18.3 x 24.4 cm.  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.  
(pp. 10-11)





or simply, Shunrō. In 1789, the young painter, at twenty-nine years old, was forced to leave Katsukawa's studio under peculiar circumstances. As a matter of fact, Hokusai would keep the odd habit of perpetually moving and of never living more than one or two months in the same place.

This departure took place under the following circumstances: Hokusai had painted a poster of a stamp merchant and the merchant was so happy with the poster that he had it richly framed and placed in front of his shop. One day, one of his fellow students at the studio, who had studied there longer than he, passed the shop. He thought the poster was bad and tore it down to save the honour of the Shunshō studio. A dispute ensued between the elder and the younger student, following which Hokusai left the studio, resolving to work only from his own inspiration and to become a painter independent of the schools that preceded him.

In this country where artists seem to change names almost as often as clothes, he abandoned Katsukawa to take that of Mugura, which means shrub, telling the public that the painter bearing this new name did not belong to any studio. Completely shaking off the yoke of the Katsukawa style, the drawings signed 'Mugura' are freer and adopt a personal perspective.

Hokusai married twice, but the names of his two wives are unknown. It is also not known whether or not his separation from them was due to death or divorce. It is certain that the painter lived alone after the age of fifty-two or fifty-three. By his first wife, Hokusai had a son and two daughters. His first son, Tominosuke, took over the house of the mirror designer Nakajima Ise and led a disorderly life, causing his father many problems. His daughter Omiyo became the wife of the painter Yanagawa Shighenobu. She died shortly after her divorce and after having given birth to a grandson who was a source of tribulation for his grandfather. His second daughter, Otetsu, was a truly gifted painter who died very young.

By his second wife, Hokusai also had a son and two daughters. His second son, Akitiro, was a civil servant of the Tokugawa rule and a poet, and became the adopted son of Kase Sakijūro. He erected Hokusai's tomb and took on his name. The grandson of Akitiro, named Kase Tchojiro, was the schoolyard friend of Hayashi, a great collector of Japanese art. Hokusai's other daughters were Onao, who died in her childhood, and Oyei, who married a painter named Tomei but divorced him and lived with her father until the end of his life. She was an artist, who illustrated *Onna Chohoki*, an educational book for women covering etiquette. Hokusai had two older brothers and a younger sister, all of whom died in their childhood.

His life was filled with pitfalls. Thus, near the end of 1834, serious problems arose in the old painter's life. Hokusai's daughter, Omiyo, married the painter, Yanagawa Shighenobu. The child from this marriage was a veritable good-for-nothing, whose swindles, always paid for by Hokusai, were the cause of his misery during his last years.

*The Seven Gods of Fortune*, 1810.  
Ink, colour, and gold on silk,  
67.5 x 82.5 cm.  
Museo d'Arte Orientale – Edoardo  
Chiossone, Genoa.





It is plausible that, following commitments made by the grandfather to keep his grandson from going to prison, commitments that he could not keep, he was forced to leave Edo in secret. He took refuge more than thirty leagues away in the Sagami province, in the city of Uraga, hiding his artistic name under the common name of Miuraya Hatiyemon. Even upon returning to Edo, he did not dare, at first, give out his address and called himself the 'priest-painter', moving into the courtyard of the Mei-o-in temple, in the middle of a small forest.

Some interesting letters from the painter to his editors remain from this exile, which lasted from 1834 until 1839. These letters attest to the old man's trials caused by his grandson's mischief, and to the destitution of the great artist, who complained, one harsh winter, of having only one robe to keep his septuagenarian body warm.

These letters unveil his attempts to soften his editors, through the melancholy exposition of his misery, illustrated with nice sketches. They also unveil some of his ideas on translating his drawings into woodcuts, initiated in the language marked by crude images with which he was able to make the workers charged with printing his works understand the way to obtain artistic prints.

The year 1839, which followed three years of poor rice harvests, was a year of scarcity during which Japanese restrained their spending and no longer bought images. Editors refused to cover the publication costs of a book or a single plate. During this editors' strike, Hokusai, counting on the popularity of his name, had the idea of composing albums from "the tip of his brush", and he earned about what he needed to live during this year from the sale of these original drawings, undoubtedly sold very cheaply.

It was in 1839 that Hokusai returned to Edo, after four years of exile in Uraga. But this was another miserable year for the artist. He had only just moved in, again settling in Honjo, the country neighbourhood that the painter loved, when a fire burnt his house; it destroyed many of his drawings, outlines, and sketches, and the painter was only able to save his brush.

At the age of sixty-eight or sixty-nine, Hokusai had an attack of apoplexy, from which he emerged by treating it with 'lemon paste', a remedy in Japanese medicine, whose composition was given by the painter to his friend Tosaki, with sketches in the margin of the prescription representing the lemon, the knife for cutting the lemon, and the pot.

Here is the composition of this 'lemon paste': "Within twenty-four Japanese hours [forty-eight hours] of the attack, take a lemon and cut it into small pieces with a bamboo knife, not an iron or copper one. Put the lemon, thus cut, into a clay pot. Add a go [one quarter of a litre] of very good sake and let it cook over low heat until the mixture thickens. Then, you must swallow, in two doses, the lemon paste, after removing the seeds in hot water; the medicinal effect will take place after twenty-four or thirty hours."

*Summer Bathing*, c. 1808-1809.  
Black ink, colour, *gofun*, and *nori*  
on silk, 86.2 x 32.5 cm.  
Sumisho Collection, Tokyo.

This remedy completely cured Hokusai and seems to have kept him healthy until 1849, when he fell ill at ninety years old, in a house in Asakusa, the ninety-third home in his vagabond life of moving from one house to another.

This is, undoubtedly, when he wrote to his old friend Takaghi this ironically allusive letter: "King Yemma is very old and is preparing to retire from business. He has built, to this end, a pretty country house and he has asked me to go and paint him a *kakemono*. I am thus obliged to leave, and when I do leave, I will take my drawings with me. I will rent an apartment at the corner of Hell Street, where I will be happy to have you visit if you have the occasion to stop by. Hokusai."

At the time of his last illness, Hokusai was surrounded by the filial love of his students, and was cared for by his daughter Oyei, who had divorced her husband and was living with her father. The thoughts of the dying, 'crazy artist', always trying to defer his death to perfect his talent, made him repeat in a voice that was no longer more than a whisper, "If heaven would only give me ten more years..." There, Hokusai broke off, and after a pause, "if heaven would only give me five more years of life... I could become a truly great painter."

Hokusai died at the age of ninety, on the eighteenth day of the fourth month of the second year of Kayei (10 May 1849, or according to some on 18 April). The poetry of his last moment, as he left in death, is almost untranslatable: "Oh! Freedom, beautiful freedom, when one goes into the summer fields to leave his perishable body there!"

The style called *Hokusai-riu* is the style of true *ukiyo-e* painting, naturalist painting, and Hokusai is the one and only founder of a painting style, based on Chinese painting, which is the style of the modern Japanese school. Hokusai victoriously lifted up paintings of his country with Persian and Chinese influences, and by a study one might call religious in nature, rejuvenated it, renewed it, and made it uniquely Japanese.

He is also a universal painter who, with very lively drawings, reproduced men, women, birds, fish, trees, flowers, and sprigs of herbs. He completed 30,000 drawings or paintings. He is also the true creator of the *ukiyo-e*, the founder of the '*école vulgaire*', which is to say that he was not content to imitate the academic painters of the Tosa school, by representing, in a precious style, the splendour of the court, the official life of high dignitaries, the artificial pomp of aristocratic existence; he brought into his work the entire humanity of his country in a reality that escapes from the noble requirements of traditional Japanese painting.

He was passionate about his art, to the point of madness, and sometimes signed his productions, "the drawing madman".

However, this painter – outside of the cult status given to him by his students – was considered by his contemporaries to be an entertainer for the masses, a low artist of

*The Semi-Legendary Hero, Asahina Saburō*, c. 1797.

*Koban, nishiki-e* (polychrome woodblock print), 10.4 x 18.5 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

*Long Night Surimono: Nine Characters at Night*, date unknown. Long *surimono*, *nishiki-e* (polychrome woodblock print). Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. (pp. 18-19)



宗理臣



由縁者人

咲梅の花は是のし袖は香はるる人魚と妻の朝は奈

一丁羽狩

ふらふらてんあまの初るはけしけはまの朝

浅草菴

若指の糸は舞て朝は奈がさう通る妻や

午をらつ妻





其母の理髪

五七五  
 浅草 永世



裁んかゝるめよけり世の中れうまきよきまてのよる月親  
 山の煙と物も時かはいこれたつのがやこのにちる月親の若  
 とや身とる糸丸の坂小月のねもよ海利の口もこむ  
 ゆやなを櫛の産もてえゆるんをのけくみのきれ物も月  
 けら枝とつくくまきを月親八つのみ乃かむきもせん

浅茅菴守全  
 浅花菴皮人  
 浅波菴河鳥  
 浅枝菴連人  
 浅倉菴三笑

葉のチハもあふまて何のいふもせん秋の葉乃月  
 一牧ハ物も深子よ月親のまを流ふつを産のちの行  
 けくまや燈や思月親小姑の男も月小親お産とつき物いり

浅葉菴音芳  
 浅子亭市成  
 浅緑菴春告

友のかき山がよまめく月ふめでとがもせん一つと枝の夜  
 姑の女う嚙よ流一せんくふかけつうれてまこやも月  
 この月小浦山一といひいとめん頂ナま一ねと思ひつをて  
 こそまある産もろもと小君かてえくくくぬ月小指入

浅呂菴牧廣  
 浅流菴清志  
 浅月堂春人  
 浅律菴永世

月とめてくんのあくるありのう乃徳一をてあやをひと  
 さる月小袖いぬくまてま親吹の虎もほめるもたこのき  
 花のゆき花ふきくをばけていんを月一静と探もぬ

浅草菴市人  
 浅瀬菴永喜