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Katsushika Hokusai

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About this Person

Born: October 01, 1760 in Edo, Japan
Died: May 10, 1849 in Edo, Japan
Nationality: Japanese
Occupation: Painter (Artist)
Other Names: Hokusai Katsushika
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Full Text:

The Japanese painter and printmaker Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) is considered one of the six great Ukiyo-e masters and the founder of the school of landscape artists that dominated this form during its last phase.

While the Japanese wood block of the 18th century was dominated by the figure print, notably pictures of actors and courtesans, the prints of the early 19th century were largely devoted to landscapes and to scenes from the daily life of the common people. This development was due to the work of Hokusai, whose introduction of the landscape print was responsible for infusing Ukiyo-e, which had become decadent and stagnant at the end of the 18th century, with a new vitality.

Born of peasant stock in the Katsushika district on the outskirts of Edo (modern Tokyo), Hokusai never lost touch with the ordinary people of his native city. In his youth he was first adopted by a mirror maker and then apprenticed to a wood-block engraver and, later, to the proprietor of a lending library. His first teacher was Katsukawa Shunsho, an Ukiyo-e artist who was celebrated for his portrayals of Kabuki actors. Starting in 1778 Hokusai worked under Shunsho for 15 years, using the name Shunro for this period. At his teacher's death in 1792, he left his studio and studied the styles of the main schools of Japanese painting, such as Kano, Tosa, and Sotatsu-Korin, as well as Dutch engravings and Chinese painting. Hokusai's mature artistic style was not formed until middle age--in fact, the artist was fond of saying that he was born at the age of 50. However, once he had absorbed these various influences, he developed his own style and produced a huge body of work, much of it highly original and of fine quality. Hokusai, who called himself the "old man mad with painting," died in his ninetieth year, in 1849.

Mature Work

Hokusai's mature work shows a marked inventiveness which is uniquely his own and reveals him as a true master. Speaking of his artistic development when he was 75, Hokusai said, "Since the age of 6 I had the habit of drawing forms of objects. Although from about 50 I have often published my pictorial works, before the seventieth year none is of much value. At the age of 73 I was able to fathom slightly the structure of birds, animals, insects, and fish, the growth of grass and trees. Thus perhaps at 80 my art may improve greatly; at 90 it may reach real depth, and at a 100 it may become divinely inspired. At 110 every dot and every stroke may be as if living. I hope all good men of great age will feel that what I have said is not absurd."

Hokusai varied his artistic personality frequently and used no less than 31 different names. His subjects included every genre from Kabuki actors and courtesans to landscapes and scenes from daily life. In addition, he illustrated novels, published his sketchbooks under the title of *Manga*, and produced guidebooks to famous places, books on how to paint, and erotica known as pillow books, one of which is called *The God of Intercourse with a Full Stomach*.

Artistic Style

Hokusai's style varied greatly from period to period and even from work to work. Not only did his painting differ from his sketches and wood blocks in being on the whole less inspired and more meticulous, but his prints also show a tremendous change in style. The

most extreme contrast is that between his early, very conventional work produced while he was working in Shunsho's studio and his bold experiments with Western shading and perspective in a set of prints of 1798 which show the influence of Dutch engravings and the work of Shiba Kokan. Other works, notably his bird and flower paintings, reflect the influence of the Chinese bird and flower paintings of the Ming and Ch'ing periods.

Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji and Manga

The climax of Hokusai's career was no doubt achieved with his celebrated set of the *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*, which he produced some time between 1823 and 1831. This series, which actually has 46 prints since he added 10 when the set proved immensely popular, represents the genius of Hokusai at its very best. The most famous among the compositions are *Fuji on a Clear Day* and the *Great Wave at Kanagawa*, the former showing the red cone of Mt. Fuji, the sacred mountain of Japan, silhouetted against the white clouds and blue sky, and the latter, with Fuji in the distance, depicting a huge wave threatening to engulf fishermen in their open boats. Exhibiting a beautiful sense of pattern, first-rate drawing, and sensitive use of colors, these prints combine artistic excellence with interesting and typically Japanese subject matter. It is not surprising that Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh admired Hokusai and were influenced by him.

Hokusai's other masterpiece is his *Manga*, a series of sketchbooks published in 15 volumes from 1814 to 1878. Painted in a loose and spontaneous manner, these drawings show Hokusai's amazing versatility with the brush and his keen observation of the world around him. No episode is too trivial, be it the comic appearance of old men, umbrellas in the rain, fat wrestlers in combat, the goddess Kannon riding on a carp, or the grotesque shape of the octopus. Among his other notable works are bird and flower prints, series of celebrated bridges and waterfalls, portrayals of spirits and ghosts, and a set of a hundred views of Mt. Fuji which he produced in his old age. All in all, it is estimated that Hokusai produced some 35,000 paintings, wash drawings, wood-block prints, and illustrated books during his long and immensely productive lifetime.

FURTHER READINGS:

- The best book on Hokusai in English is J. R. Hillier, *Hokusai* (1955). For the *Manga* see James A. Michener, ed., *The Hokusai Sketchbooks* (1958), and Theodore T. Bowie, *The Drawings of Hokusai* (1964). See also Muneshige Narazaki, *Hokusai: The Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji* (trans. 1968).

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