

## Artist Spotlight: Hokusai



Katsushika Hokusai. "The Great Wave off Kanagawa." Part of the series Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji.

First publication between 1826-1833.

Image from Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Great\\_Wave\\_off\\_Kanagawa2.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Great_Wave_off_Kanagawa2.jpg).

Hokusai (1760-1849) is perhaps the best-known artist of woodblock prints from the period during which this art form was at its height in Edo (present-day Tokyo, Japan). Born a peasant, Hokusai apprenticed as a woodblock engraver, then with the artist Shunsho. In his lifetime he produced 30,000 works of art, not just prints but drawings, sketches, engravings, book illustrations, and more. In 1814 he began publishing his sketchbooks as *Hokusai Manga*; eventually 15 volumes were released.

His most recognizable works, including "The Great Wave off Kanagawa," above, were created when he was in his 70s. Late in his life, he wrote, "From the age of five, I have needed to sketch the form of things. Yet of all I drew prior to the age of seventy, there is truly nothing of great note."

Today, when an artist makes a woodblock print, he or she both creates the drawing and carves the block. But in Hokusai's time, several artisans were part of the process. The artist was the most important person; he drew the picture in pen and ink on thin rice paper. The engraver pasted this paper to the wood block and carved away all of the white space, leaving the wooden block raised only where the lines were drawn. The printer then applied the ink to the block and made the print. In this way, many copies of the drawing could be made and sold.

As an artist, Hokusai designed *ukiyo-e* prints, which means "pictures of the floating world." They depicted theater actors, sumo wrestlers, women and children, landscapes and flowers. They were not considered fine art, which was for the highest classes. They were for the merchant class. Buying a *ukiyo-e* print was like buying a poster or a postcard today. But today, Hokusai's woodblock prints hang in museums.

For much of Hokusai's life, Japan was a closed country. This means that citizens of Japan were not allowed to travel to other countries, and foreigners were not allowed into Japan. This had been decided by the shogun, the military leader of the country. Dutch traders were allowed to come to a distant island to exchange goods, but not to Japan itself. Eventually the shogun allowed the Dutch traders to bring books and art from Europe. The styles were quite different, and Hokusai began experimenting with "Landscapes in the Western Way."

In turn, Japanese prints influenced Western artists, including Claude Monet, Mary Cassatt, and Vincent van Gogh. This influence was termed *Japonisme*, and it's an exciting example of how artists expand their styles and subject matter based on exposure to new ideas.

Sources:

Finley, Carol. *Art of Japan: Wood-Block Color Prints*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1998.

Forrer, Matthi. *Hokusai: Mountains and Water, Flowers and Birds*. New York: Prestel, 2004.

Ray, Deborah Kogan. *Hokusai: The Man Who Painted a Mountain*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

# Hokusai: Resources

## Books

*Hokusai: The Man who Painted a Mountain*, by Deborah Kogan Ray: Picture book story of the artist's life, beginning in childhood and including an explanation of the process of printmaking and information about life in Japan. The writing and watercolor illustrations are inviting, and a chronology and short biography are included at the end.

*The Old Man Mad About Drawing: A Tale of Hokusai*, by Francois Place, Translated by William Rodarmor: An introduction to Hokusai through the eyes of a nine-year-old boy who becomes his apprentice. The chapter book, appropriate as a read-aloud for pre-readers, includes lush color illustrations, stories of Hokusai's life, and information about the printmaking process and Japan at the time of his life. It includes illustrations of his prints.

*Art of Japan: Wood-block Color Prints*, by Carol Finley: Informative about technique, subject matter, and life in Japan at that time, with photos and illustrations. A good reference, though perhaps a bit dry in some spots.

*Hokusai: Mountains and Water, Flowers and Birds*, by Matthi Forrer (adult book): A short beginning section discussing his life and art, followed by 50 plates of his artwork.

*Japanese Prints*, by Gabriele Fahr-Becker (adult, oversized): Useful not only for the large colored plates of prints, but also for the discussions of the history of ukiyo-e prints and their influence on Western artists, found at the beginning. Biographies of Japanese artists are included at the back.

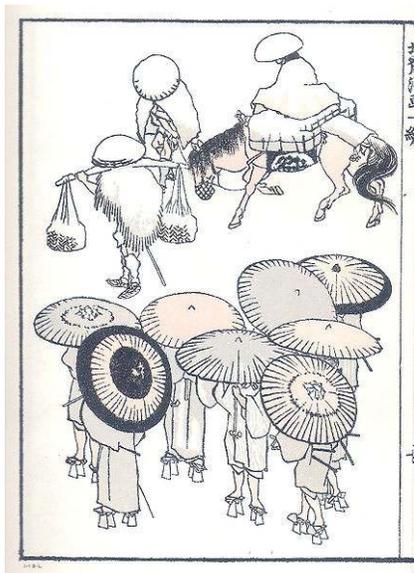
*Japanese Woodblock Prints: Artists, Publishers and Masterworks, 1680-1900*, by Andreas Marks (adult, oversized): Another choice for large colored plates of prints, arranged by artist.

## Websites

Japonisme, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art: [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jpon/hd\\_jpon.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jpon/hd_jpon.htm)

Japan and the West: Artistic Cross-Fertilization. The Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/ukiyo-e/japan.html>

Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji, Artelino: <http://www.artelino.com/articles/hokusai-36-views-fuji.asp>



A page from *Hokusai Manga*, early 19th century.

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hokusai\\_Manga](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hokusai_Manga)