



MIRACLE IN BLUE

Hokusai's woodcuts had an indelible effect on world art

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Translated from German by Judith Thomas

HE WAS 36 YEARS OLD WHEN HE DECIDED TO rechristen himself. This wasn't the first time he had changed his name - by this time, he was an old hand at it, being as he was a restless and idiosyncratic spirit. As a child he was adopted by a mirror grinder and had answered to different names - first Tokitaro, then Tetsuzo. He signed his first prints using various noms-de-plumes - Shunro, Zewaisai, Gumbatei and Sori. But it wasn't until 1796 that he signed one of his works Hokusai Katsushika Hokusai - the name by which his fame spread.

Twenty more names were to follow in the ensuing decades, but the choice of this one particular name at that time coincided with the period in his life when he started to experiment with a theme that fascinated him deeply, a theme that would make him the most famous Japanese artist of all time in Europe - the theme was "the great wave".

By this time Hokusai had already experienced much - but more was to follow. He was a master at the art of woodcutting but, as we can read in his autobiography, his sense of time was peculiar. One reads: "I was obsessed with sketching the shapes and forms of everything around me when I was six. After turning fifty, I made a series of print designs but everything I produced before I was 70 isn't really worth talking about. It wasn't until I was 73 that I started to understand the true nature of animals, insects, fish as well as the nature of plants and trees. So, at 86 I

will have made even more progress. When I turn 90 I will have cut my way deeply into the meaning of art. At the age of 100, I will have become truly marvellous and when I'm 110, every dot and every line I produce will jump to life like never before. I only beg that gentleman of sufficiently long life take care to note the truth of my words."

His plan didn't work out. Hokusai died at the age of 89, by which time he had produced 30,000 colour wood engravings called Ukiyo in Japanese, or "pictures of a floating world". Looking back on his life we see the tumultuous details: he moved a dozen times; he married twice and survived each wife, bringing up three children in all; he paid his grandson's gambling debts; he supported his two daughters after they returned home on failure of their marriages; and he finally achieved fame and recognition for his works after experiencing long periods of extreme poverty. The biggest factor contributing to his lack of funds was the fact that he lived through the Tempe crisis, an economic disaster triggered by the machinations of a corrupt government. This crisis forced many people to move away from the cities. Cultural life in Edo, present day Tokyo, grinded to an abrupt halt. "This month I have no money, no clothes, no food. If things don't change next month, I won't live to see the spring.": these were the words that Hokusai used in a letter to his publisher. He was impelled, old as he was at that time, to become an itinerant vendor, selling his own sketches. Even when the crisis finally passed by, he was

reluctant to give up drawing.

Hokusai was prolific, so it wasn't just one particular piece that made him famous: over the course of his life, he illustrated hundreds of tales and poems; in 1814 he collated his sketches of Japanese daily life into 13 volumes entitled *Manga* – a concept which he himself popularised; a series of erotic works was also prominent in his portfolio. In addition to all of this, he spent ten years working to contract to produce a series of block prints known as 36 views of Mount Fuji – a project that brought him wide-spread fame in artistic circles.

Mount Fuji, a volcano 3776 meters high, can be found deep within Japan's interior. But, on clear day, it can be glimpsed from the former fishing village of Edo. The colour woodcut "The Great Wave Off Kanagawa" is the major work in 36 views of Mount Fuji. Strange to say, Hokusai himself probably never saw Mount Fuji from this particular perspective, and possibly also was at sea himself. Nevertheless, the view depicts tiny fishing boats tossed about within a foaming sea – a motif that Hokusai frequently returned to as, for example, in his series entitled *A Thousand Pictures of the Ocean*. This motif was unusual in many ways: in Hokusai's time fishermen were not suitable subjects for Japanese artists as they were right at the bottom of the social scale. Urban scenes, portraits of actors and courtesans were common, but not illustrations of landscapes or depictions of poverty. It wasn't just his choice of subject that made Hokusai different from his contemporaries but also the fact that western art influenced his work.

Japan had been cut off from the rest of the world for centuries; this self-imposed isolation meant that it was strictly forbidden to import European books or paintings. Dutch painting had only just started to become familiar in Japan due to the fact that the Shogun Yoshimune was devoted to astronomy and was dependant on books printed in Europe. Hokusai studied the Dutch masters religiously: elements such as perspective and chiaroscuro are represented in his works; he painted decorative borders, a reference to the European custom of framing oil paintings, something unheard of in Japan; and lastly, he sometimes even signed his paintings in a horizontal script just like painters in the west.

Hokusai was fascinated by one other major western element, a particular pigment, Prussian Blue, an import from distant Europe that was extremely rare and costly. In his prints, he experimented successfully with all shades of this pigment – people loved it by virtue of its very novelty.

Hokusai's works became famous in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. The western elements made the works easily accessible to the European public, although they remained

quintessentially Japanese. Paris was particularly taken with the Japanese artist: Degas studied Hokusai; Vallotton and Gauguin drew inspiration from his works; and Toulouse-Lautrec was deeply influenced by him when he produced his graphic works. Hokusai was by no means as popular in his home country as he was in Europe. In fact, it was an American who organized the first big exhibition of his works on Japanese soil. The Japanese preferred his drawings. – woodcuts were deemed vulgar. Most of his works have disappeared either destroyed in the great fire of Tokyo or lost in the Second World War.

Hokusai was a man driven by passion. He himself was all too aware of this fact: *Gakyo-rojin* was an epithet he chose himself. It translates roughly as "the old man mad about painting". ☺

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