

Katsushika Hokusai



The Great Wave off Kanagawa, 1832

Polychrome woodblock print; ink and color on paper; 10 1/8 x 14 15/16 in. (oban size)

Copies located at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), and the Hakone Museum in Japan, among other places.

The Artist

Katsushika Hokusai

Born in Edo, Japan - Fall 1760, died in Edo - May 10, 1849

Hokusai was born in Edo, now present day Tokyo. The man historians believe was his father, Nakajima Ise, was a mirror-maker and artist. Hokusai quickly followed his father into the arts—at age 12 he began working in a library, and at age 14 he began apprenticing in a woodcarving studio. At 18, Hokusai was accepted into the studio of Katsukawa Shunshō. Shunshō's main medium was ukiyo-e, a wood printing method with which Hokusai would later make many of his most famous paintings.



1839 Self-Portrait

Throughout his life, Hokusai adopted many different styles of painting. With each style, he changed his name, a practice that was common among other Japanese painters. However the number of times Hokusai changed his name—at least 30—was far greater than other artists. After his training in ukiyo-e, he began learning about European styles like copper engraving that was popular in France and Holland. He also experimented with brush painting, portraits, and illustrating books and manga (Japanese comic books). From here, Hokusai once again began using ukiyo-e, though more often using landscapes as subjects, for which he is now most famous.

After the creation of Hokusai's famous *36 Views of Mount Fuji*, which includes *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, he began to lose favor to younger artists. He was also subject to a fire in his studio, which destroyed a good deal of his work. Hokusai continued to paint into old age, until his death on May 10, 1849.

Art Movement

Ukiyo-e

A Japanese art movement and style that developed between the 1600s and 1900s. This method of using woodcut blocks to make paintings represented the “floating world,” or the urban, unregulated Japanese culture that was emerging from beyond a previously oppressive culture. These paintings were wildly popular because they could easily be mass-produced.

The Artwork

The Great Wave Off Kanagawa

This was the first of 46 prints in the Hokusai's series *36 Views of Mount Fuji*. [There were 10 prints added to the original 36 when the series was found to be so popular.] The print depicts a giant wave threatening boats, with Mount Fuji in the background. See the next page for information from the Metropolitan Museum of Art on this work of art.

Discussion Suggestions

Talk about Hokusai's print:

- *What is the major event going on in the foreground (front) of the picture?*
- *What do you notice about the sky? Are the waves because of a storm?*
- *How is this print different from one in which the mountain is in the foreground?*
- *Do you think Hokusai experienced this in real life or was using his imagination?*
- *Hokusai's print is not painted directly with a paint brush, it was made with a wooden block that was pressed against the paper. What other steps do you think there were before the print was on the paper?*
- *Why do you think Hokusai's prints were so easy to mass-produce (copy)?*



South Wind, Clear Sky, 1830 – 1833,
color woodblock

Activity Idea

Hokusai Landscapes:

Pre-Activity (Things to consider **before** beginning the portrait):

- Explain that Hokusai's works often focused on one or two simplified images (like waves and Mount Fuji) with large areas of pure color.

Activity:

- Have students think of a subject they would like to draw. Hokusai used Mount Fuji because he lived in Japan. Think of a Peoria, Illinois, or United States landmark to draw!
- Have students decide where they want subject to be: in the foreground or in the background (like Hokusai's *The Great Wave*). Also, do they want their subject in the center, right or left of their painting?
- What colors do you want to use in your painting? And related, what feeling do you want your picture to portray?
- Using a pencil, sketch your drawing on the paper.
- When you're happy with the layout of your sketch, add the colors.
- Give your work a title and sign it.

Materials Needed:

- White paper
- Pencils
- Colored pencils, crayons, watercolors, or pastels