

Hokusai: Genius of the Japanese Ukiyo-e

By Seiji Nagata

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Hokusai is perhaps the Asian artist best known in the West. His influence has extended from the Impressionists to later modern art and even to commercial design. A few of his works are so frequently reproduced that they are almost as familiar as the face of the Mona Lisa. Yet the "Great Wave" and the "Red Fuji" from the *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji* represent only a tiny action of Hokusai's output. The pages of the Sketches, with their teeming humanity and their boundless interest in the details of everyday life, give only a small idea of his true scope. Hokusai's life was characterized by a prodigious energy and productivity that continued to the end of his ninth decade; his output comprises a correspondingly broad variety of genres and styles. Despite this, it is still not sufficiently realized just how great is the range, and how many masterpieces it includes.


The bold compositions and the grasp of essentials seen in the *Thirty-six Views* find their counterpart in the masterly monochromes of the *One Hundred views of Mt. Fuji*. Against the daring simplifications of these works may be set the elaborate refinement and delicacy seen in many of the surimono prints and books of illustrated verse. The brilliant coloring and decorative qualities of Hokusai's brush paintings of beautiful women and legendary subjects are rivalled by the unsurpassed skill in ink drawing found in the best of his book illustrations, some of which are masterpieces in their own right.

Even the flower-and-bird series and the albums of sketches from life, which might seem to represent essentially minor genres, provide at their best a sense of color and inventiveness of composition that rival those of Hokusai's landscapes. On the oilier hand, the interest in human beings and in genre subjects is not confined to the Sketches and some of the *Thirty-six Views*, but is apparent again and again in the art manuals, the book illustrations, and even in a late print series such as the *Nurse's Illustrated Hyakunin Isshu*.

There are religious pictures and pictures of children and sumo wrestlers; experiments with Western perspective and with various combinations of style, whether Japanese, Chinese, or Western; moods ranging from the elegant to the earthy, from the lightly fanciful to the heavily grotesque. Even in his very last years, Hokusai's unflagging energy was taking him into new realms reaching beyond the ukiyo-e proper.

The aim of this work is to present a more balanced picture of Hokusai's achievement, a selection ranging over the whole oeuvre that will give some idea of the strength, the delicacy, and the fabulous inventive powers of this truly universal genius of the ukiyo-e.

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