

Ukiyo-e in Edo Japan

● see DVD for additional material

うき よ え
浮 世 絵

Ukiyoe

Ukiyo-e (literally meaning floating world pictures)

かつ しか ぼく さい
葛 飾 北 斎

Katsushika Hokusai

え ど
江 戸

Edo

Tokyo (current day name)

か ぶ き
歌 舞 伎

kabuki

kabuki theatre

す もう
相 撲

sumō

sumo wrestling

まん が
漫 画

manga

comics

Ukiyo-e, literally meaning 'pictures of the floating world', is the name given to the multi-coloured woodblock prints that were exceptionally popular and affordable to the general population of Japan during the Edo period (1600–1868).

After centuries of military upheaval and hardship for the middle classes, the Edo period ushered a new era of peace and stability. Society's attention turned to making money and having lots of fun. The general public was inspired by a vibrant consumer culture, new fashions and recreational pursuits. A new style of theatre called Kabuki gained great popularity, and people's interests in travel, sport and literature flourished. To service these new passions, entrepreneurial publishers worked with leading artists and employed carvers and printers to develop an intricate multi-block/multi-colour printing process, producing some of the most exquisite prints and illustrated books in all history.

Ukiyo-e prints and *e-hon* printed books focused on popular subjects and were mass-produced for sale to the public. They give us a detailed window into the tastes and life styles of Edo period Japan just as magazines, posters and the Internet represent our current-day society. For example, images of Hollywood stars can be compared to Kabuki actors, movie action scenes to dramatic Japanese historical dramas, sports stars to sumo wrestlers, fashion models to *bijin* (beautiful woman), comic books to *e-hon* picture books and historical manga. Almost all the subjects of popular twenty-first century culture can find similar themes produced in *Ukiyo-e* prints of the Edo period.

Hokusai

Of all the artists producing *Ukiyo-e* prints, perhaps the imagery of Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) captured the public's imagination the most with his unique social observations, innovative approach to design and mastery of the brush.

Hokusai was truly an eccentric artist. Known by at least thirty names during his life-time, he was renowned for his unconventional behaviour and impoverished lifestyle, displaying an indifference to money and dedicating all his days to drawing. Although receiving notoriety for his prints and paintings throughout the bustling metropolis of Edo (now Tokyo), he was never able to attain financial reward from this success. His years of greatest artistic production were conducted in poverty, living in a squalid hut by the banks of the Sumida River or on the road travelling, drawing, painting and avoiding debt collectors.

Hokusai and the other great landscape artist of the Edo period, Hiroshige, combined the pictorial traditions of eastern art with western techniques of perspective to create a new and visually stunning

style of landscape print. Hokusai's *Thirty-six views of Mt Fuji* series depict Mt Fuji in different seasons and weather conditions from different places and distances. More than being simple landscapes, we can see Hokusai's incredible originality of design and acute social observation with his juxtaposition of human activity in the foreground and the dramatic all-encompassing symbol of nature, Mt Fuji, in the distance. Mt Fuji (a 3776 meter volcano) on a clear day was visible from many vantage points in Edo. Its dramatic shape and changing seasonal beauty played an important role in the imagination of painters, poets and ordinary citizens throughout the country.

The great wave off Kanagawa is one of Hokusai's finest works and possibly the single most famous image in all of oriental art. In addition to the sheer graphic beauty of the Great Wave there is a compelling force in the contrast between the wave and the mountain. The monstrous wave, towering above with its impending crash of water creates great tension, whereas a diminutive Mt Fuji with its graceful lines sits in the distance. We see tiny fisherman huddled in their sleek crafts ride down one wave, dive straight into the next and endeavour to come out the other side. These swift boats, called *Oshiokuribune*, transported fresh fish and dried sardines to fish markets around Edo Bay.



Katsushika Hokusai Self-portrait 1839

Hokusai, in his own words, the self professed 'Drawing Maniac':

From the age of six I had a mania for drawing the forms of things. By the time I was fifty I had published an infinity of designs; but all I produced before the age of seventy is not worth taking into account. At seventy-three I learned a little about the real structure of nature, of animals, plants, trees, birds, fish and insects. In consequence, when I am eighty I shall have made still more progress; at ninety I shall penetrate the mystery of things; at a hundred I shall certainly have reached a marvellous stage; and when I am a hundred and ten everything I do, be it a dot or a line, will be alive. I beg those who live as long as I to see I do not keep my word.

Hokusai died at the age of 89.

Katsushika HOKUSAI 葛飾北斎
Japanese 1760–1849
The great wave off Kanagawa
(*Kanagawa oki namiura* 神奈川沖波裏)
from the *Thirty-six views of Mt Fuji* series
(*Fugoku sanjyūrokkei* 富嶽三十六景)
Edo period 江戸時代 c. 1830 Japan
colour woodcut
25.7 x 37.7 cm (image and sheet)
Felton Bequest, 1909 (426-2)

富嶽三十六景 神奈川沖
浪裏

大船江崎一舟

