

Getting Better All the Time
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Hokusai: Beyond the Great Wave. British Museum, until August 13

Timothy Clark, editor. *Kokusai: Beyond the Great Wave*. 352pp. Thames & Hudson/ The British Museum. £35. 978 0 500 09406 8

'Under the Wave off Kanagawa', or 'The Great Wave' as it became known, was always Katsushika Hokusai's most famous work, after its publication in 1831. Some eight thousand impressions of the woodblock were printed and sold in Edo. After the Meiji Restoration, and the opening of Japan's borders, the image became a touchstone of Japonism, influencing European painters, sculptors, writers and composers. Now, in the intimate, winding spaces of the British Museum's exhibition, perfectly adapted to the scale and shifting perspectives of Hokusai's work, the Wave has a wall of its own; and its familiar tentacles stretch enticingly across the covers of the beautifully produced accompanying catalogue.

True to its promise, *Beyond the Great Wave* casts its net far wider than the stormy sea off Kanagawa, and the full extent of Hokusai's output is revealed through a packed sequence of roughly chronological but thematically unified galleries. Its vast haul, made possible by loans from across the world, includes hanging scrolls, brush drawings, figure paintings, book illustrations, painting manuals, and every element in the woodblock process, from sketches through to printing tools. Nonetheless, one of the most compelling aspects of the exhibition is its sustained argument about the significance of 'Under the Wave' in the context of Hokusai's wider work.

Hokusai was seventy-one when 'Under the Wave' was published, as one of the *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*. The series is a study not just in perspective, but also in light, and like all the initial images 'Under the Wave' makes full use of the intensity of newly-available Prussian blue pigment from China, employing it here to unify waves, Fuji, and the fishermen returning home with their catch. As the series developed, Hokusai introduced more colours to represent the changing lights of the unfolding day: blue therefore stands for the early light of morning. Several earlier woodblocks exhibited prefigure this composition: 'Fast Skiffs Navigating Large Waves' from the 1800s is formally similar in its curves and opposing forces, but its giant wave fails to leap into action. Nonetheless, it punctures the myth of flatness in the Japanese woodblock with its receding perspective, low horizon, and signature written horizontally, demonstrating how Hokusai was already assimilating European traditions.

Later works show Hokusai developing his fascination with the movements of water: in 'Whirlpools', the concentric circles extend over an entire sheet, rendering the image horizonless; while the cresting wave forms are reconfigured to form ceiling panels for a festival cart in 1845. Water in all its forms, a defining feature of East Asian landscape painting across the ages, is imbued by Hokusai with new senses of animation. The mountain, itself a source of water, returns in the *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, Hokusai's greatest illustrated book: Fuji increasingly becomes for Hokusai a 'powerful spiritual talisman', as the exhibition curator Timothy Clark puts it: a sustaining force, and a key component of his Nichiren Buddhism, with its animist belief in the interconnectedness of all phenomena.

Contrast and balance are everywhere in the mature Hokusai, epitomised in 'Under the Wave' by the yin and yang of its rise and fall, spray and snow, its movement and its stasis. These effects are felt not least in the control and flexibility of his line drawing, exquisitely in evidence in the two sets of the *Large Flowers* series of woodblocks. The first group, representative of the 'cursive', informal style, includes the jagged 'Poppy', with its rapid, abrasive strokes jolting the plant into life; while the second group demonstrates the 'formal' style, as in the delicate reticulation of 'Peony and Butterfly'.

Like Utamaro before him Hokusai was a master of texture, achieving subtle effects of gradation in his prints by getting his cutters to sand away at the cherry wood blocks. He experimented too with embossing, and with metallic pigments, as in the *Horses* series, which unfolds as a series of puns: 'Mayoke', which can mean a stockade in Japanese, features equipment for washing, and certainly horses are excluded from the image; 'Bamboo Horse' transforms the animal into a frame for transportation. Wit was a Hokusai hallmark that had brought him recognition as an illustrator of 'crazy verses' in the late eighteenth century. At the pivotal painting demonstration before the shogun in 1807 that was to secure his future, Hokusai produced a live chicken, dipped its feet in red paint, and walked it across a band of blue to represent 'Autumn Leaves on the Tatsuta River'.

It is illuminating to see many prints from the same series – flowers, Fuji, bridges, waterfalls, ghosts – hung alongside each other, but there are tantalising absences that the catalogue might work harder to fill. Despite dating much of his work, Hokusai leaves the cataloguer with a headache: his prints went through numerous impressions of variable colour and quality, and his projects were prone to change, the *Thirty-Six Views* becoming forty-six. Even the most nebulous of projects, such as the extraordinary 'Daily Exorcism' drawings that Hokusai for several years threw out of his window each morning to ward off evil, are represented here; yet for all the meticulous referencing and overviews it is still at times unclear, to both viewer and reader, precisely what is known and unknown about the ordering of his series.

The catalogue essays at first glance seem eccentric in giving such prominence to Hokusai's later years, but the several accounts combine to form an intensely moving reflection on the relations between his late art and his life, in support of Hokusai's own view that his work got better with age. In his fifties he was struck by lightning; in his sixties he had a stroke, had to teach himself to draw again, and was from then on helped by his daughter Ōi, herself an artist; then, in his seventies, a fire destroyed his reference drawings and supplies, prompting him to concentrate exclusively on painting. The exhibition ends with a series of numinous hanging scrolls Hokusai painted in his final years, up until his death in 1849 at the age of ninety. 'Dragon Rising Above Mount Fuji', from that final year, fuses his knowledge of Chinese tonalities and European perspective to sublime effect: negative space is used not just to carve out a snow-covered Fuji, but also to suggest the three-dimensionality of the rising dragon. In its airy ascent on wavering silk it is a portal into the afterlife.