

WEBINAR SUMMARY:

Hokusai: What makes him so popular?

With Alfred Haft and Tane Tsuyoshi

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Alfred Haft's talk:

Thank you for giving the British Museum this opportunity to contribute to this program at the Daiwa Foundation. Thanks to all of you for joining today to help us celebrate the British Museum's acquisition of a group of more than 100 previously unknown block-ready brush drawings that Katsushika Hokusai produced for a book titled 'The Great Picture Book of Everything'. The complete group is on display in a special exhibition for which regular tickets are actually sold out. Although entrance is still open to museum members, including new members, if you are interested. The exhibition is based on the published research of British Museum honorary research fellow Tim Clark, and here you can see the book. We are grateful to the Daiwa Foundation for generously supporting the publication. Tim's book summarizes his extensive research into Hokusai's drawings, and after more than 150 years, at last presents the group at original size in published form. You might like to know that a Japanese language edition is in preparation.

My presentation has two parts. The first will simply introduce the drawings and the exhibition. In keeping with the title of today's event, the second part will introduce the exhibition design, as a way to consider how the museum went about presenting previously unknown work by such a popular artist under complex and challenging circumstances.

The title of today's event, 'Hokusai: What Makes Him So Popular', offers an interesting challenge. How can one explain the range of Hokusai's appeal? One answer may be his insatiable curiosity. His appetite for learning about, imagining, and reimagining the world. Perhaps he appeals to such a wide range of people because such a wide range of people appealed to him. His work is encyclopedic: encompassing an astonishing variety of subjects that all seem to share a zest for being. Not only his people, but also his animals, plants, and even his rocks and hills. Everything he drew seems somehow alive. Furthermore, while he set and achieved high standards, he kept pushing himself forward with a ceaseless drive for invention that seems universally inspiring. He was also a complex and interesting

person: cantankerous and humorous, mercurial and dedicated, ambitious and never resting. That, at any rate, is my hypothesis. So let's see how well the British Museum's drawings support it.

The British Museum's exhibition begins at the beginning. It is with remarkable survival. The 100 drawings were found in this small wooden storage box from the late 1800s, probably produced after the drawings were completed. The drawings themselves, as you see on the right as an example, are very thin pieces of paper, mounted on heavier card, possibly at a later date. This particular drawing on the right shows a Buddhist priest, an Indian Buddhist priest, and a Chinese boy on the left, and the cartouche between them reads 'India' and 'China', which introduces the first two of the main sections of these drawings, which include drawings related to Buddhist India, ancient China, and the natural world.

But also important here is this little red seal, which is the red seal of Henri Vever, who was a French collector of Japanese art in the late 19th and early 20th century. He was a very successful designer of Art Nouveau jewelry, but he was also very interested in Japanese art and collected illustrated books, prints, and paintings. Perhaps the major collector of Japanese art in Europe in the early 20th century. So the seal there indicates that these set of drawings were formerly in his collection. The museum acquired them in 2020 from an established dealer of Japanese Art, Israel Goldman, who noticed them at a small auction in Paris in 2019, where they were misattributed to one of Hokusai's students. But Izzy Goldman thought that they were more significant than that, and shared them with Tim Clark. In 2020, after consultation around the world, the British Museum hired them.

So they are brush drawings. Not prints. They're brush drawings for a picture book called 'The Great Picture Book of Everything' that was never published. Just to give you a sense of the publishing process at this time, we're at a time in what is known as the Edo period, which ran from 1615 to 1868, when everything was published by woodblock. Every book. Every print. Every announcement. Every privately commissioned print. Everything that was published was by woodblock. That involved this process: you have a block of wood, the drawing is pasted ordinarily, facedown on the block of wood. The block cutter then takes a chisel and cuts right through the drawing to remove all of the unmarked areas, to leave a network of raised lines, that the printer then inks, and places a piece of paper down onto it. Using this tool that you see on the right, what is called the baren, burnishes the back of the paper to transfer the ink to the paper and you have a print. So every single print went through this process.

For some unknown reason, Hokusai's drawings were never published. We don't know exactly why. But it is not unusual in Hokusai's career. Other examples are known where drawings survived in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and in what is now called the National Museum of

Asian Art in Washington, part of the Smithsonian institution. A group of museums formerly known as the Freer and Sackler galleries also have examples of unpublished Hokusai drawings.

Hokusai is, of course, well known for his woodblock print, 'The Great Wave'. Perhaps he is less well known for his work on the many, many paintings that he produced, and also the vast number of illustrated books. Over 270 titles. When I say titles, each title consists of several volumes and each volume then comprises 10 to 15 illustrations. Just his work in the medium of illustrated books is rather astonishing. It ranges throughout his career. He started out as a trainee in the workshop of a designer of actor prints, Katsukawa Shunshō. But after leaving Shunshō's studio, he found work producing books and illustrated prints for a group of amateur poets in Edo. That sustained his career throughout the 1800s, first decade of the 1800s. Then onto the famous Hokusai manga, the series that was produced through the 1810s and continued throughout his life. Over almost 270 titles, a vast output.

But the British Museum's exhibition is about a group of unpublished drawings that had gone completely unknown, which is rather astonishing because scholars in Japan have visited Europe on many occasions to study Hokusai's work. But these drawings were in a private collection and remained unknown until they emerged at auction. So they are in three main topics, as I mentioned, Buddhist India, ancient China, and the natural world. Here are just two examples of the subjects from Buddhist India. On the right, some of you will recognise the goddess 'Kannon', the Buddhist goddess of mercy who has 33 manifestations. In this case, she is seated on the head of a dragon. Hokusai had depicted this subject perhaps 30 years earlier in an illustrated book. The conception has developed considerably. Here, where we have these almost luminous clouds, not defined by lines, but defined by this ink wash, illuminated by the deity's halo. Then the dragon, who seems to have a wistful, sad appearance, which is kind of hearing the sorrows of the people of the world and sharing the deity's understanding of the world. It's a wonderful conception. Also, the fantastic way that the drawing fills the page with the dragon's tail continuing somewhere off where we cannot see.

On the left is one of the highlights of the exhibition, a fantastic composition where an ancient king who had annihilated the Buddha's family receives his divine retribution. The Buddha had predicted he would be killed at a banquet by a bolt of lightning, and that is the moment we see here. Where the bolt of lightning strikes him square in the chest, and the rays burst in all directions, and if you look closely, you can see that the rays are bursting forward and out the side, and out through his back, and he is thrown off his feet with the momentum of the lightning bolt, his legs flying in the air, and his robes all scattered around him. This fantastic conception has a precedent in a set of drawings, which are found in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. This you see here on the right is the preliminary drawing that Hokusai prepared for it. It is very similar to the finished version, but Hokusai has developed all of the details, and it's an astonishing array of details, all of the elements in the shoes here, and all of the rays,

which you can see aren't evenly spaced, but have a kind of variety in their length and length. There's an intensity, which really suggests that lightning is bursting in all directions.

So that's just two examples of the India subjects, which also include a couple of genre scenes. The section on China and beyond, China, as you may know, was not a place that anyone could visit during the Edo period. Hokusai never left Japan. Under the Shogun, the Japanese were prohibited to travel, but of course Hokusai was free to use his imagination, and his imagination ranged widely. On the left, you see an unusual representation of the goddess, who in Chinese is known as Xiwangmu, in Japanese as Seiobo, and in English as the Queen Mother of the West. Usually this figure is shown in her peach garden, and she is being presented with a crop of peaches from her garden, and these peaches grow once every 3,000 years, and they are a sign of a virtuous ruler. They are also associated with longevity and good fortune. Hokusai instead has presented her as a royal personage in the mountains of Kunlun, where she resides, with this magical sparkling mist rising all around her, and the trees in the distance, each mark showing a sense of the trees rising out of the mist, with eight attendants. People sometimes miss the little one in the back. But this is Hokusai playing with the expectations of the viewer, and also creating a sense of movement in space. These figures at the front, the carriage in the middle, and these figures surrounding it in the background, and then in the distance, the trees, a layering of space. Although there's no shading as such, Hokusai is constructing a three-dimensional world in each of these mountains.

You'll notice that this inscription here, which is how we know about many of the subjects, is very short. It names the deity and the location. Here on the right, however, is a much longer inscription, which suggests that this subject would have been less familiar to people of Hokusai's time. In fact, I'm not aware of any other representation of this wonderful scene of the Daoist master Zhou Sheng, who is ascending a ladder out of clouds to reach the moon. He had been attending a moon viewing party, and his co-celebrants there complained that they would never get to see the palace on the moon, and Zhou Sheng used his powers to benefit the poor and reach up to the moon, put it in his pocket, and bring it back down to earth. A wonderful vision of achieving the impossible. It is the kind of thing that we think of also as Hokusai, with his vast output and his remarkable technical skill. You'll see how he has placed this figure above the highest peaks. This is how he creates a sense of the altitude of this fantastic figure.

So I mentioned that Hokusai's interests ranged widely. Here, in keeping with encyclopedias of the time, he presents three barbarians, which were what they called the people of northeast Japan, and in the middle, a Portuguese person, and on the left, a Taiwanese person. Now, some of you may wonder, a Portuguese person? There were no Portuguese in Japan at this time. It is very interesting that Hokusai is not presenting the contemporary world in these drawings. He is presenting a world far away, a world

that he can only see in his imagination. He, of course, would never have seen a Portuguese person. The Portuguese had never been into Japan until the early 16th century. They are kind of mythical people, as are these other lands and these other Chinese subjects, these Buddhist subjects, the world of the imagination, which Hokusai brings to life. Look at how he does so by the overlapping of this figure with what would be a boundary, and the way the figures echo each other in their forms, as though there's a kind of dialogue, a kind of correspondence between them, although they are intended to be separate figures.

Here are just a couple of examples of the animal kingdom, the natural world, which in the British Museum's drawings cover mainly birds and land animals, although there are a couple of plants. This is an extraordinary composition. The detail is just extraordinary, when you really take a close look. Every one of these feathers seems to have a movement, as though it's slightly ruffling in the breeze. This is not Hokusai's construction here. Phoenixes and peacocks were closely associated in books of the time. But Hokusai has arranged them in this wonderful, compatible composition, one taking up the upper right, the other one taking up the lower left. It is also nice, in any case, to think of these as the companions of Seobo, who we saw earlier. Her carriage is drawn by peacocks and accompanied by phoenixes. But this is a wonderful association of a creature of the air and a creature of the land working together in a very harmonious way. On the right is a rather unusual subject in Japanese art, it is a bear under a waterfall. But perhaps some of you will say I've seen those waves somewhere before. Those are very similar to the waves in 'The Great Wave'. So, you can see Hokusai reusing motifs and developing motifs in different contexts.

I've mentioned that 'The Great Picture Book of Everything' was intended as an encyclopedia. Encyclopedias at this time covered every subject from the universe: the sun, the weather, the land, to occupations, people in the world, the tools that they used, and then everything related to the animal kingdom and the plant kingdom from mythological creatures such as dragons and bears and so on, to birds, fish, insects and plants. All kinds of plants, from useful plants such as grains, rice, wheat, to coniferous plants to flowering plants. Really the whole world. In Japan, these encyclopedias reach back to the middle 16th century, when Nakamura Tekisai was a Confucian scholar who developed an encyclopedia to inform his children about the words that they might encounter in the Confucian classics. He based his encyclopedia, of course, on Chinese examples. But this in Japan is the source for all Japanese encyclopedias later.

You can see how closely this tiger and the leopard here are repeated in Hokusai's drawing. So Hokusai is working from earlier precedents, but how he has transformed these subjects. These are really now interacting. This indicative bamboo, because tigers, of course, were always conventionally associated with bamboo, is now not just an indicative but a habitat. The tiger is moving through the bamboo

forest. These two are looking at each other. Also, we don't just have a vocabulary, a word. We have an indication of behavior. Because this inscription in this case says, 'tigers fear bears' and 'leopards fear tigers.' There's something about the world of nature, "nature red in tooth and claw", we really get a sense of the life in the world at large.

Importantly, though, as I mentioned, these encyclopedias covered birds and insects and fish. But where in the British Museum's drawings are the fish and the insects and most of the plants? Those turn out to be in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. The idea is that the drawings in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and the drawings in the British Museum form a complementary set that somehow these two groups at some point were separated, but they actually form part of the same much larger project of presenting a comprehensive book of "everything".

These are the people involved in this research. You'll see Tim Clark on the left, and he consulted widely around the world. One of the important figures in identifying and authenticating the drawings as Hokusai's are, is Asano Shūgō, who you see on the top left, a specialist in Hokusai and a co-curator of the British Museum's exhibition in 2017. On the right, Roger Keyes, who was a guiding spirit and one of the leading specialists in Hokusai studies in the West. At the bottom left is Yasuhara Akio, who was actually a Professor of Economics at Brown University, but who worked with Tim during lockdown to identify many of the subjects in the drawings and to help Tim understand what these drawings were about. On the right, Sarah Thompson, the curator of the Museum of Japanese Art at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, who has worked with Tim on understanding the Hokusai drawings at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, where there are several examples.

The British Museum's exhibition ends with a discussion of the Great Wave. There is research here at the British Museum on how to understand the history of the different examples of 'The Great Wave', how the blocks eroded over time. This subject is featured, my colleague Capucine Korenberg is leading that research. I'll move on to a brief walk through the exhibition space. Here are, just to give you a sense of exhibition design, these are two of the recurring motifs in the exhibition. This circular window, which echoes the idea of a tea house, but also the idea of looking through into new worlds. It recurs in this way of highlighting some of the drawings here in the exhibition. This is the drawing of Zhou Shun, which features on the cover of Tim's book and the poster. So these are the two motifs that recur. You'll also notice the color blue. Now that of course derives from 'The Great Wave'. Colours are very important in design, and specific colours are very important in design. This colour blue is known as Capri blue, which has a kind of greenish tone, which has appealed to a Western designer, but is perhaps slightly different than what we might consider as a Japanese blue. So this is perhaps a difference of a Western presentation of these drawings.

The exhibition opens here with what is an imagined portrait of Hokusai, and you get a sense of the idea of these banners, suggestive of hanging scrolls, though not specifically. This is the first corridor of the exhibition, and you can see how the drawings are displayed with lots of room between them, so that people can look closely, and spend time. This is the prints and drawings gallery of the British Museum, where we have this railing, which allows people to literally rest and to look closely. The exhibition then opens up and around into this first space, where we have the section on China continuing onto the other side, and also the section on how Hokusai's prints were made. This is how that is set up, with the woodblock, examples of Hokusai's prints, 'The Great Wave'. Over here is a tabletop projection, showing the process of carving, cutting and printing the blocks. Then behind this area is a section about Hokusai's published books, which gives you a sense of the way the text is presented. We had to limit the number of books, so as not to overwhelm visitors, but we thought that visitors may not have had an idea what an illustrated book in Japan may have looked like. So this is a complete set of the Hokusai manga, the book with Hokusai's Kyōka illustrations, and a later book from the 1830s. This is the final section where we have 'The Great Wave' and the video, Capucine Korenberg here, and an Edo period example, and a modern reproduction. Capucine explains the differences between them. We included this as an opportunity for selfies, if people want. That brings me to the end of my presentation.