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The Life and Legacy of Katsushika Hokusai Through 10 Fascinating Facts



Katsushika Hokusai - Lilies. Sold (Est: \$70,000 USD - \$90,000 USD) via Christie's (March 2022).

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[Katsushika Hokusai](#) an influential Japanese artist renowned for his ukiyo-e paintings and prints during the Edo period (1603-1867). His masterpieces, such as the iconic “The Great



Wave of Kanagawa,” are celebrated worldwide. Delving into the intriguing life and work of Hokusai reveals a multifaceted artist with lasting impact.

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It's perhaps no surprise that such a prolific artist would have an interesting life. Here are 10 facts to know about Katsuhika Hokusai's life and work.

[Katsushika Hokusai](#)
[- 3 Volumes of an](#)
[Erotic Publication.](#)

Sold (Est: €17,000 –
 €20,000) via
[Sotheby's](#) (Nov
 2003).

1. A Lifelong Artistic Journey

Hokusai's artistic journey was a lifelong pursuit, characterized by continuous growth and creative exploration. Although he gained recognition for his woodblock prints and illustrations in “kyōka ehon” (books of humorous poetry), it wasn't until his 60s that he achieved widespread acclaim. Notable among his later works is the magnificent series “Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji,” which solidified his position as a revered figure in Japanese art.

2. Aspirations and Artistic Evolution



[Katsushika Hokusai – Gaifu kaisei \(Fine wind, clear weather\) \[“Red Fuji”\]](#). Sold (Est: \$90,000 USD – \$120,000 USD) via [Christie’s](#) (March 2019).

Hokusai held high aspirations for his craft, and believed that, by 100, his artistry would be “marvellous and divine.” He hoped that, by age 110, each line he drew would have “a life of its own.” Sadly he never knowingly achieved this divinity as he died at age 88 but his relentless pursuit of artistic improvement and deeper meaning in his subjects underscored his dedication and creative spirit.

3. Nurturing Talent Despite Uncertain Beginnings

While details about Hokusai’s early years remain unclear, it’s believed that he had familial ties to Nakajima Isen, a prominent mirror-maker. This familial connection might have initially steered Hokusai toward a different career path. However, his inherent artistic talent and passion led him to pursue creative endeavors that would shape his remarkable legacy.

4. Many Names, Many Expressions



[Katsushika Hokusai – Two Heads with Reed](#). Sold for €135,000 via [Van Ham Kunstauktionen](#) (December 2014).

Like many artists of the 19th century in Japan, Hokusai adopted various names throughout his career. These name changes often corresponded with shifts in artistic style, materials, or social

status. Hokusai held over 30 names during his lifetime. Noteworthy among his many names were Shunrō, bestowed by his master, and Tawaraya Sōri, which reflected his association with the Tawaraya school. His most recognized name, Hokusai, originated from his birthplace in Edo, present-day Tokyo, while Hokusai means “north studio.”

5. Turning Adversity into Inspiration



Katsushika Hokusai – Poppies. Sold (Est: \$90,000 USD – \$120,000 USD) via Christie's (March 2022).

Hokusai had been accepted into the studio of the artist Katsukawa Shunshō aged 18, where he honed his skills in the ukiyo-e style. He would spend 14 years studying under Shunshō but in 1793, Shunshō died, and Hokusai began studying under Shunshō's chief disciple, Shunkō. Hokusai's eventual expulsion from the studio proved to be a turning point in his artistic development. Rather than succumbing to shame, Hokusai embraced the experience as a catalyst for his own creative growth, forging his unique artistic identity that transcended traditional boundaries. Such exploration included incorporating tropes from other art styles, such as the European art forms that he encountered in Dutch and French copper engravings.

6. The Art of Self-Promotion



Katsushika Hokusai - Chuban tate-e from the series "Hyaku monogatari" (One Hundred Ghost Stories). Sold for €27,048 via [Piasa](#) (September 2015).

Hokusai's rise to fame was not merely a result of his artistic prowess but also his shrewd self-promotion. Notably, controversial public displays showcased his talent in unconventional ways, capturing the attention and curiosity of audiences. Whether it was using a chicken's foot to demonstrate a brushstroke (to the Shōgun, the then military ruler of Japan, no less) or a mesmerizing performance at the palace, where he painted the master stroke on a painting of a dragon using a brush held in his mouth, Hokusai's strategic self-marketing techniques propelled his artistic career.

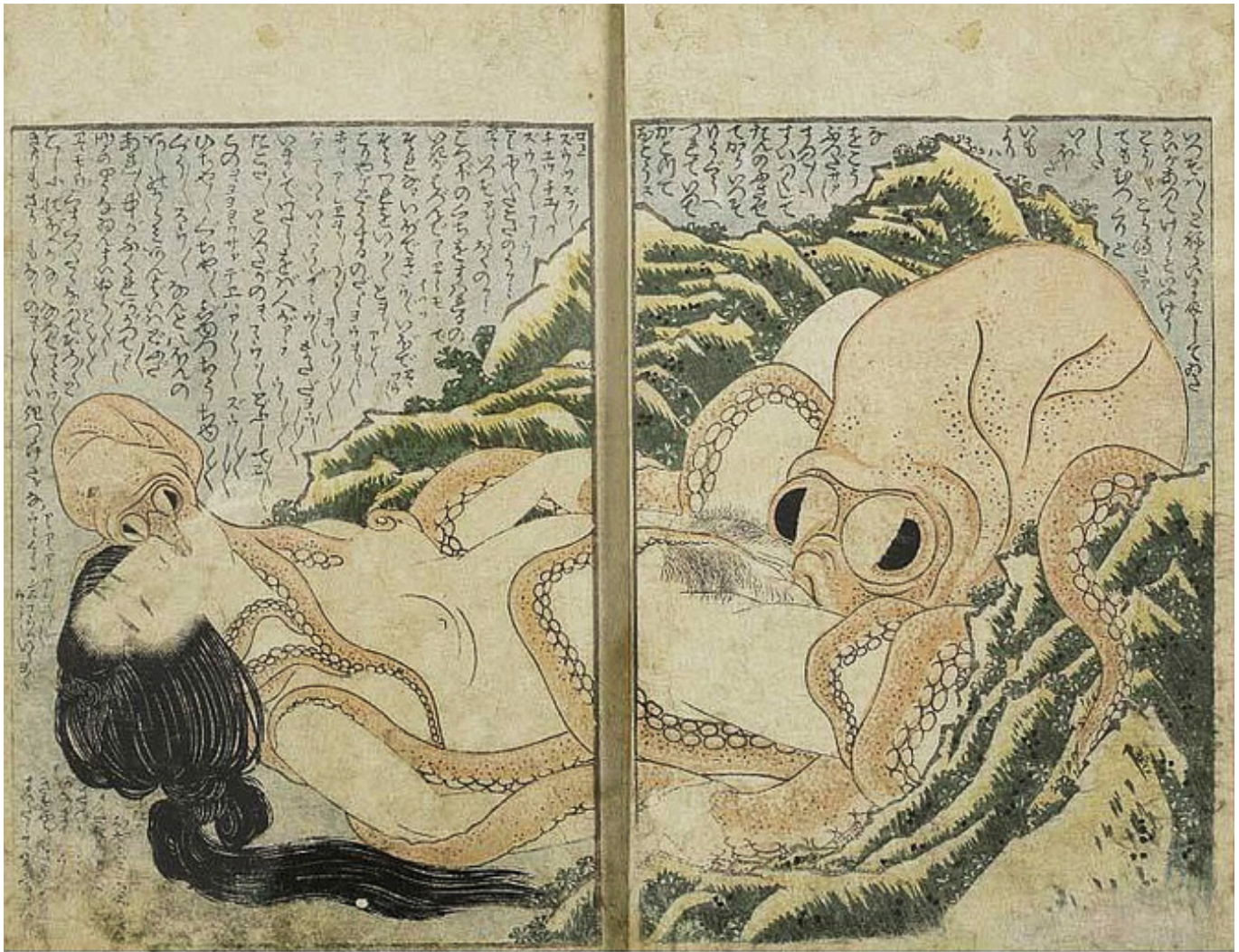
7. Beyond Woodblock



*Katsushika Hokusai – Preparatory drawing in sumi ink the print series *Hyakunin isshu uba qu etoki* (100 Poems Explained by the Nurse).* Sold (Est: €4,400 – €5,200) via *Sotheby's* (November 2003).

While Hokusai's woodblock prints hold significant recognition, his artistic versatility extended far beyond this medium and his talent graced various artistic realms. He was one of the foremost designers of toy prints of his time, illustrating board games and crafting paper lanterns. He worked on landscape designs, books of poetry, works of fiction, and produced his own instructional series called "Hokusai Manga." Such a diverse body of work attests to his creative ingenuity and broad artistic contributions.

8. Exploring the Boundaries of Expression (and Eroticism)



Katsushika Hokusai – Kinoenokomatsu (set of 2). Sold (Est: ¥200,000 – ¥250,000) via [Mallet Auction](#) (April 2009).

Hokusai's involvement in the “shunga” style of erotic art, while noteworthy, should be approached with sensitivity. “Shunga” prints were popular during the Edo period, and accessible to women and people from all social classes. But they were also subject to censorship and societal restrictions. Hokusai's playful and humorous take on this genre, exemplified in his notable work “The Dream of a Fisherman's Wife,” drew inspiration from ancient tales, and depicts a sexual encounter between a woman and an octopus. Its influence extended beyond Japan, capturing the attention of Western artists such as Pablo Picasso.

9. Prolific Output Met with Tragic Loss

Hokusai's artistic output was remarkable, owing to his industriousness, his willingness to work in various media, and his relatively lengthy career. While the exact number of his works remains unknown, it is estimated that he produced around 30,000 paintings, sketches, woodblocks, and

more throughout his seven-decade-long career. Sadly, many of these treasures were lost when his studio succumbed to a devastating fire in 1839.

10. “The First Ever Viral Image”



[Katsushika Hokusai – Kanagawa oki nami ura \(Under the well of the Great Wave of Kanagawa\)](#). Sold (Est: \$200,000 USD – \$300,000 USD) via [Christie's](#) (March 2019).

The Great Wave of Kanagawa stands as one of Hokusai's most renowned works. Although the international recognition of Hokusai's art was limited during the Edo period by Japan's policy of isolationism, his legacy experienced a resurgence during the transition to the Meiji period (1868 onwards). In time, this iconic masterpiece inspired and influenced Western artists like [Claude Monet](#), [Camille Claudel](#), and [Vincent Van Gogh](#). Its enduring popularity and wide-reaching influence have solidified its status as a cultural phenomenon, with BBC journalists describing it as the first ever viral image. It remains popular among people around the globe today, and was honoured by an [exhibition at The British Museum in 2022](#).

The lasting impact of Katsushika Hokusai

One can argue that, without Katsushika Hokusai's work going global, the art world would look much different today. After the Edo period and its isolation ended, Western artists saw, admired, and emulated his work. Artistic themes from his paintings began to guide the Impressionist and Art Nouveau styles. Additionally, notable artists such as [Edgar Degas](#), [Van Gogh](#), and [Edouard Manet](#)

took inspiration from his work. While he didn't reach 110 to become the artist he thought he could, the art he created has truly earned him a place in history.

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