



Katsushika Hokusai (Japanese, 1760–1849), *Under the Wave Off Kanagawa*, from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, about 1831, Woodblock print (oban, yoko-e, nishiki-e), ink and color on paper, 14 1/4 x 9 1/4 inches. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 32-143/199.



View of the exhibition galleries

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

*Hokusai: Waves of Inspiration* celebrates the art of Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), one Japan’s most famous and influential artists. As innovative as he was prolific, Hokusai was known for his paintings, illustrated books, and woodblock prints, including *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* (commonly known as the *Great Wave*), which has become one of the most recognizable works of art in the world. This exhibition brings together art by Hokusai, his teachers, his students, and artists from around the globe who have been influenced by his work, tracing Hokusai’s impact on the history of art.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Through the activities outlined in this guide:

- Students will look closely at the art of Katsushika Hokusai and will make connections between it and the works of others who were part of his artistic lineage.
- Students will explore the techniques, styles, and subject matter of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints and will consider their impact on art history.
- Students will take inspiration from Hokusai’s work to exercise personal expression through visual art and poetry.

## USING THIS GUIDE

This guide can help educators incorporate *Hokusai: Waves of Inspiration* into their students’ learning. Look inside for background information on the exhibition and its contents, questions and activities to engage your students with the exhibition, and suggestions for where to learn more.

Docent-led and teacher-led tours of the exhibition are available for school groups. For groups planning a teacher-led tour, the “In the Exhibition” section of this guide offers questions and looking strategies to guide students’ exploration. To schedule a docent-led or teacher-led school tour, visit [nelson-atkins.org/tours](https://nelson-atkins.org/tours).

## ABOUT THE ARTIST



Born in Edo (the capital of Japan, now called Tokyo), Katsushika Hokusai began painting at an early age. At 19, he joined an art studio that specialized in the *ukiyo-e* school, which focused on scenes from urban popular culture. Eventually establishing himself as an independent artist, Hokusai branched out from traditional *ukiyo-e* subjects; his creations included actor portraits, landscapes, still lifes, illustrations to accompany poems, images of wildlife, and supernatural legends and adventure tales.

Hokusai oversaw the training of numerous emerging artists, who incorporated aspects of his style into their own work. In the mid-1800s, prints by Hokusai and his circle began arriving in Europe and the United States, where they influenced subsequent generations of artists.

*Portrait of Katsushika Hokusai by Keisai Eisen, before 1848. Waseda University Libraries, accessed via Wikimedia Commons, user Y.haruo.*

## WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE EXHIBITION

There are nearly 300 objects included in this exhibition, and roughly 100 of those are by Hokusai himself. Exhibition artworks include prints of various sizes, paintings, illustrated books, photographs, and three-dimensional objects ranging from vases to jewelry to sculptures. The exhibition is organized into seven sections:

- **Hokusai's Artistic Lineage** View Hokusai's art alongside that of his teachers and early influences.
- **Hokusai and His Students: Drawings and Paintings** Explore the transmission of Hokusai's style to his students and followers.
- **Surimono: Visualizing Poetry** Consider the relationship between word and image in privately-commissioned prints.
- **Storytelling: Heroes, Ghosts, and Monsters** Meet a diverse cast of characters from Japanese legends and tales in these artworks.
- **The Beauty of Nature** View nature through the eyes of Hokusai and the artists he inspired.
- **Hokusai's Influence: Landscapes** See how Hokusai's depictions of natural and urban environments influenced other artists.
- **Making Waves: 1790s–2020s** Encounter Hokusai's *Great Wave* and other works that reference it.

## BEFORE YOUR VISIT

### What is Inspiration?

The title for this exhibition includes the phrase “waves of inspiration.” Discuss with students: *What does inspiration mean to you? What might it mean for artists? Where do you look to find ideas or inspiration for your own artwork?* Students can continue to think about the role of inspiration in art when they view the exhibition.

### Get to Know the *Great Wave*

As a class, observe and discuss Hokusai’s *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*. What do students notice about the work? What overall impression or mood does it create? What questions do they have?

Next, have students search the internet for images that are derived from, inspired by, or meant to parody this work of art. (A Google image search for “the Great Wave” should yield many results!) Discuss: *What are some ways people have modified Hokusai’s famous print to create new images? Why do you think so many people have used this artwork as a jumping off point for their own creations?*

### Woodblock Printing

Learn about techniques for creating a Japanese woodblock print like those designed by Hokusai and his contemporaries. In this video, British artist Rebecca Salter explains the steps and tools involved in woodblock printing as artists from Kyoto’s Sato Woodblock Workshop demonstrate the process:

Royal Academy of Arts, “Japanese woodblock printing with Rebecca Salter RA,” [youtube.com/watch?v=CeMAuIErLgs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeMAuIErLgs)

## IN THE EXHIBITION

### Observe an Artwork

Encourage students to choose one work in the exhibition that interests them and observe it carefully. Students can discuss or write about what they see, including the artist’s use of:

- Color
- Shape
- Line
- Texture
- Form
- Space
- Value
- Balance
- Movement
- Pattern
- Emphasis

Katsushika Hokusai (Japanese, 1760–1849), *The Falling Mist Waterfall at Mount Kurokami in Shimotsuke Province* from the series *A Tour of Waterfalls in Various Provinces*, about 1833. Woodblock print; ink and color on paper, Image: 14 5/8 x 9 5/8 inches. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 32-143/183.



Have students sketch their chosen artworks. Does the act of drawing lead them to notice anything they hadn’t seen before?

## Compare a Pair

As students explore the exhibition, they will encounter Hokusai's artworks shown alongside works by other artists who were inspired or influenced by him. Ask students to choose one such pairing and describe the similarities and differences between the two works. Suggested pairings:

- Katsushika Hokusai, *Tametomo's Shipwreck* from *The Strange Tale of the Crescent Moon Bow (Chinsetsu yumiharizuki)*, Vol. 13, 1808
- Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *On the Sea at Mizumata in Higo Province, Tametomo Encounters a Storm*, about 1836
- Katsushika Hokusai, *Hokusai Sketchbooks, Vol. 10 (Hokusai manga jūhen)*, 1819
- Yoshihiro Togashi, *Yu Yu Hakusho, Vol. 1, Ch. 1*, 1990
- Katsushika Hokusai, *Hokusai Sketchbooks, Vol. 2 (Hokusai manga jūhen)*, 1815
- Félix Bracquemond, *Fish, Preparatory Etching for the Rousseau Service*, 1866
- Katsushika Hokusai, *The Amida Falls in the Far Reaches of the Kisokaidō Road* from the series *A Tour of Waterfalls in Various Provinces*, about 1832
- Merion Estes, *Chemical Falls*, 2016
- Katsushika Hokusai, *Poem by Minamoto no Muneyuki Ason* from the series *One Hundred Poems Explained by the Nurse*, 1835–1836
- Paul Gauguin, *Mahna No Varua Ino (The Devil Speaks)*, from the series *Noa Noa (Fragrance)*, 1893–1894

## Explore Image and Text

Many *ukiyo-e* prints contain lines of poetry that relate to the subject of the artwork in some way. Invite students to read one of the poem excerpts below. What ideas, feelings, or images come to mind when they read it? Next, have students look at the print containing that poem excerpt. How does the artist's depiction relate to the poem and the imagery it evokes?

*Seize the time, climb even to the sky, oh carp / moving beneath the kingly flowers on the Edo River.*

—Katsushika Taito II, *Carp in Water*, about 1832; poem by Bunkaro Kiyomaru

*Turning, a brilliant azure hue; / in motion, a delicate blue.*

—Katsushika Hokusai, *Kingfisher with Iris and Wild Pinks*, about 1834; poem by Cai Yong (Chinese, 131-192 C.E.)

*At Hayatomo Shrine, / to mark spring's arrival / they gather seaweed / along a concealed path, / thinly veiled with mist.*

—Totoya Hokkei, *The Seaweed Gathering Ritual of the Mekari Shrine*, early 1830s; poem by Miwasha Suginari of Nagato province



## AFTER YOUR VISIT

### Take Inspiration from Hokusai

Hokusai's art incorporated a broad range of subject matter. Challenge students to choose one of these subjects and create an original print showing the contemporary equivalent of Hokusai's depiction:

- An imaginary scene showing an actor, who is the child of another actor, starring in a role made famous by the parent.
- A still life composed of foods and decorations that are used to celebrate a popular holiday.
- A well-known natural formation that tourists like to visit.
- An action scene from a widely-read novel.

### Visualize a Poem

Have students create original artworks that include poetic inscriptions. The poem excerpts can be original or taken from existing poems, such as haiku. (You can find examples of Japanese haiku translated into English at [haiku-poetry.org](http://haiku-poetry.org).) Encourage students to think about the connection between their image and the text – will they make a straightforward illustration of the poem? Or will the reference be more subtle?

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<b>Edo</b>	A former name for Tokyo; it is the name Tokyo was known by during Hokusai's lifetime. Also refers to a time period in Japanese history from 1615 to 1868.
<b>Japonisme</b>	The fashion for Japanese art and design that swept Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
<b>Kabuki</b>	A form of Japanese theater that involves stylized movements, exaggerated gestures and expressions, and elaborate costumes and makeup.
<b>Manga</b>	In contemporary usage, refers to serial stories told in panels of images similar to comic books; in Hokusai's time, manga could mean any kind of informal drawing.
<b>Mount Fuji</b>	A volcano located on the Japanese island of Honshu; it is a cultural icon of Japan and has been a pilgrimage site for centuries.
<b>Nishiki-e</b>	A type of multicolored woodblock print, made by carving a separate block for each color, that is closely associated with the <i>ukiyo-e</i> style.
<b>Surimono</b>	Japanese prints that were privately commissioned by individual customers. They were often made into programs for musical or dance performances or illustrations for amateur poetry collections.
<b>Ukiyo-e</b>	Literally "pictures of the floating world"; a genre of Japanese art that flourished in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and focused on scenes of urban popular culture.
<b>Woodblock</b>	A relief printing process that involves carving an image onto a wooden block, covering the surface with pigment, then pressing something onto the block to transfer the image.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

### Books

*Hokusai: Inspiration and Influence* by Sarah E. Thompson

The catalog that accompanies *Hokusai: Waves of Inspiration* offers essays on the artist and images of many works featured in the exhibition. Available in the ERC.

*Hokusai: The Man Who Painted a Mountain* by Deborah Kogan Ray

This is a detailed, richly illustrated retelling of Hokusai's life and career. Available in the ERC.

*Hokusai: He Saw the World in a Wave* by Susie Hodge

This picture book offers biographical details about Hokusai alongside questions and art prompts for students to tackle themselves.

*Japanese Woodblock Print Workshop: A Modern Guide to the Ancient Art of Mokuhanga* by April Vollmer

Learn about the history, tools, techniques, and steps involved in traditional Japanese woodblock printing. Available in the ERC.

### Web

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston / [collections.mfa.org](https://collections.mfa.org)

Most of the works shown in *Hokusai: Waves of Inspiration* can be viewed by searching this online collection.

Padlet on Hokusai from the Seattle Art Museum / [bit.ly/3Xyk0CH](https://bit.ly/3Xyk0CH)

This collection of Hokusai-focused resources was compiled by the Seattle Art Museum.

## EXTEND YOUR STUDY OF JAPANESE PRINTS

If you can't get enough of Hokusai and his circle, visit the Nelson-Atkins' gallery of Japanese art (Gallery 205) to view *Hokusai:*

*Masterpieces from the Spencer Museum of Art, the Richardson-North Collection, and The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.*

This free exhibition features works from local collections and is on view Sept. 21, 2024 —Feb. 1, 2025.



Totoya Hokkei (Japanese, 1780–1850), *Monkey performing Sanbasō*, 1824. Woodblock print; ink, color, and metallic colorant on paper. 8 1/4 x 7 1/4 inches. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 32-143/204.



## EDUCATOR RESOURCE CENTER

This guide was produced by the Educator Resource Center at the Nelson-Atkins. The ERC is available to support educators in linking museum objects with classroom learning. Connect with the ERC to access:

- Curriculum consultations
- Circulating resources
- Professional development workshops

Visit [nelson-atkins.org/educators/resources](https://nelson-atkins.org/educators/resources) for more information.