

Excerpted from Kathleen Krull, *Lives of the Artists*, 1995, 32 – 35.

OLD MAN MAD ABOUT DRAWING
KATSUSHIKA
HOKUSAI
BORN IN 1760 AND DIED IN 1849
IN EDO, JAPAN

***Japanese painter and printmaker,
 known for his enormous influence on both
 Eastern and Western art***

THE MAN HISTORY knows as Katsushika Hokusai was born in the Year of the Dragon in the bustling city now known as Tokyo.

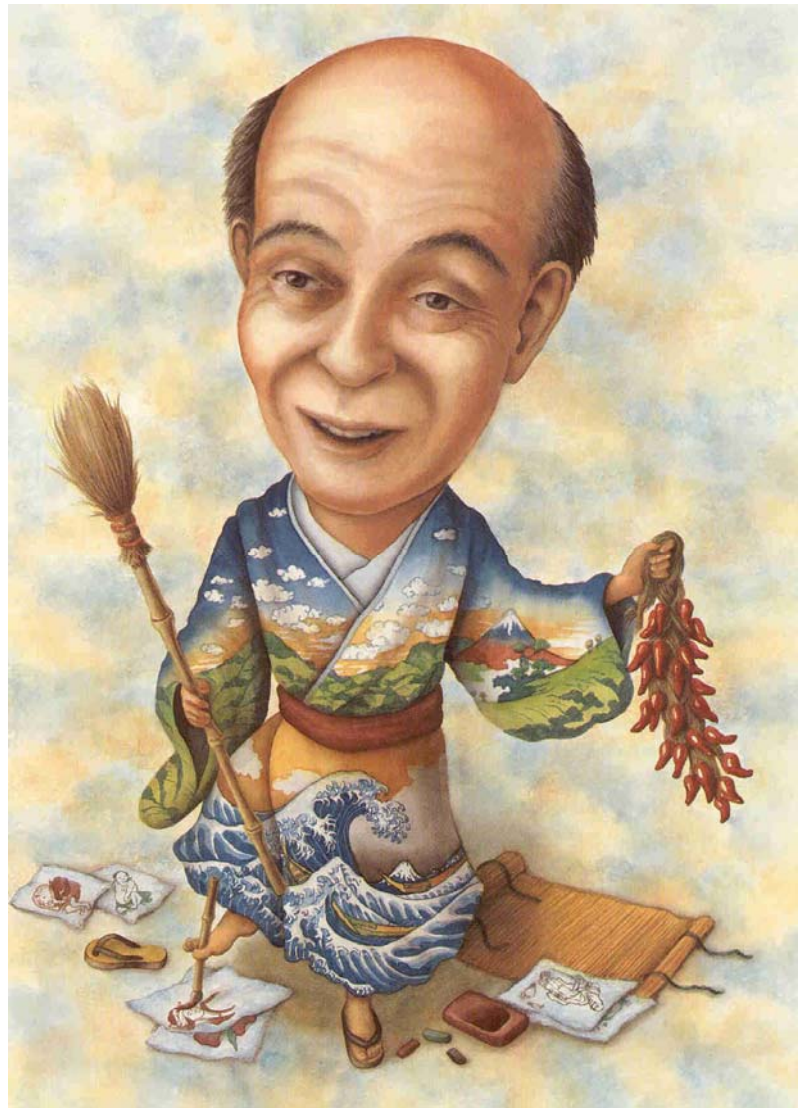
After working for eight stormy years in the studio of a popular artist who resented the boy's greater skill, Hokusai was finally thrown out. At first he earned his daily bowl of rice as a street peddler, selling red peppers and ducking if he saw his old teacher coming. Soon he was illustrating comic books, then turning out banners, made-to-order greeting cards for the rich, artwork for novels full of murders and ghosts, and drawings of scenes throughout his beloved Edo.

Changing one's name was a Japanese custom, but Hokusai carried it to an extreme—he changed his more than thirty times. No one knows why. Perhaps he craved variety, or was self-centered (thinking that every change in his art style required a new identity), or merely liked being eccentric. One name he kept longer than most was Hokusai, meaning "Star of the Northern Constellation," in honor of a Buddhist god he especially revered.

He did like variety in dwellings. Notorious for never cleaning his studio, he took the easy way out whenever the place became too disgustingly dirty: he moved. Hokusai moved a total of ninety-three times—putting a burden on his family and creating a new set of neighbors for himself at least once a year. He married twice and had seven children, most of whom died in their twenties.

A born showman, Hokusai attracted attention by staging public performances of his art. Spectators marveled when he drew birds in flight—on a grain of rice; crowds cheered when he sprawled on a huge sheet of paper to paint with a brush the size of a broom. Sometimes he painted while hanging upside down, or with the brush held in his mouth or between his toes.

Wealth didn't impress him. He was known to keep important clients waiting while he meticulously picked all the fleas off his kimono. He lived simply, usually in poor neighborhoods. Hokusai drank tea and ate little, mostly rice cakes; he enjoyed a bowl of noodle soup before he went to bed. In the style of the times, he slept on a straw mat brought out from the closet every night. Money held no interest for him. When he had to pay bills, he would hand over one of the unopened envelopes of payments he had received for his art—sometimes the money in the envelope matched the amount of the bill, sometimes it didn't.



Hokusai once went bankrupt and, to escape arrest by creditors, changed his name yet again and went into hiding outside of town for a year. Though he nearly died of starvation, running out of paper and paints was his worst nightmare. After dark he would walk fifteen miles into Edo for supplies, trying to return before anyone he owed money to recognized him.

The older Hokusai got, the harder he worked. Sitting on his heels, hour after hour, he completed over thirty thousand pieces of art- an average of one a day during the course of his life. He hoped for immortality but made it to age eighty-nine. The inscription on his gravestone shows his final name, Gwakio Rojin, meaning "Old Man Mad about Drawing."

WORKS

- Hokusai's most famous images come from a series of prints called *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, which reveal this sacred symbol of Japan from various angles. *The Great Wave*, the "view" most often reproduced, shows Fuji framed in the curve of a wave about to engulf three fishing boats.



- *Manga* (or *Random Sketches*) was a fifteen-volume encyclopedia of Hokusai's drawings of Japanese life—dragons, pagodas, wrestlers and acrobats, whole pages of "Thin People" or "Fat Men." In 1856 a friend of French artist Edgar Degas found Hokusai prints such as these being used as packing material in a crate of porcelain from Japan. The prints became all the rage among most artists of the time, and Hokusai became the most important figure in introducing Eastern art to the Western world. Today each of those prints would be worth as much as fifty thousand dollars.