

A FAMOUS JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINT

Katsushika Hokusai

The Great Wave Off Kanagawa

Artist Background: Hokusai was born in 1760 near present day Tokyo. His family was poor and he was apprenticed to a woodblock engraver. The **woodblocks** he created were called **ukiyo-e**, pictures of the amusements of everyday life in Japan. Over his lifetime, Hokusai made more than 10,000 woodblock prints and 40,000 drawings.

Drawing was Hokusai's passion. He traveled constantly always carrying his sketchbook and brushes. Although he could draw very realistically, many of his works are almost cartoon like or stylized like a stage setting. When the yet-to-be French **impressionists** first saw Hokusai's work they were astounded by his beautiful use of color and flowing lines. The work of Hokusai had a dramatic effect on the progression of these artists. Look at Van Gogh's *Iris* for a clear example!

Hokusai was a character. He was always out of money, changed his name over 30 times, had three wives and many children, and didn't start his most famous works until he was 68! What he is best known for today is his Mt Fuji series, *The Thirty-six Views of Mt Fuji*, which he worked on until his death in 1849 at the age of 89. *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa* is part of the Mount Fuji series and has been used on book covers, on television, and in magazines. Unlike many famous art works, *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa* is not an oil painting but a woodblock print. It is a symbol of the strength and power of nature and the sea. Look closely; the focal point is not the wave, nor the men in the boats, but Mt. Fuji standing calmly and solidly in the middle background!

Lesson Ideas

Share the book by Deborah Kogan Ray, mentioned above with your class. It will give them lots of information, insight, and a familiarity with Hokusai's style.

Locate prints of the *Great Wave Off Kanagawa* for students to examine. Have them look for the focal point; discuss how Hokusai

uses perspective, color, line, and form to create tension and beauty in his woodblock.

Allow children to sketch nature. Make little sketchbooks and send them out on the playground to observe closely and draw what they see. If you have blossoming trees in bloom in the spring, a view of Mt. Rainier, or flowers opening up, alert your young artists to these subjects, very similar to Hokusai's!

Of course, making potato prints or any other print making materials would tie in with a lesson on Hokusai.

Resources

Hokusai, The Man Who Painted a Mountain by Deborah Kogan Ray is a great biography of the artist. It is in the Highline School District system and the King Library System County Library System.

Prints of the *Great Wave Off Kanagawa* can be found in art books, poster shops, card shops (*Papyrus*), and art museum gift shops.

Websites

<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/hokusai/>

This site has a biographical overview of Hokusai, the woodblock image *The Great Wave* and links to impressionist artists

<http://spectacle.berkeley.edu/~fiorillo/welcome.html>

An extensive collection of Japanese prints with an explanation of Ukiyo-e prints