

# The World of *Hokusai Manga*



Depictions of daily life in *Hokusai Manga*

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*Hokusai Katsushika's sketches of woodblock prints depicting people, animals, spirits, insects, landscapes and other subjects—collected in his Hokusai Manga series—created shock waves in the European art world. The world's top collector of Hokusai Manga, art dealer Mitsuru Uragami, speaks about the profound influence Hokusai's work had on the French Impressionists.*

**H**OKUSAI Katsushika (1760-1849) was an ukiyo-e artist during the late Edo period (1603-1867) who first gained global recognition through his masterpiece woodblock print series “Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji.” *Hokusai Manga* is a collection of his drawings depicting models of everyday life, animals, plants, monsters and landscapes, originally done for his two hundred disciples around the nation. The series of fifteen volumes, which featured a limited color palette and were bound in traditional Japanese style, was later sold to the general public for sixty-five years, from 1814, when Hokusai was fifty-five, until 1879. The series was read by everyone, from the highest ranks of society to common people, and all fifteen volumes became huge bestsellers.

It is often said that *Hokusai Manga* was used as

cushioning for shipments of Japanese porcelain, which is how it found its way to Europe and produced shock waves in the late nineteenth-century Paris art scene, becoming the trigger for Japonism. You can see the influence of *Hokusai Manga* on the works of Impressionists such as Manet, Monet and Degas, artisans such as Émile Gallé, as well as Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin.

“It was not its exoticism but the prominent rendering, dynamic compositions and abundant creativity that shocked European artists,” says Mitsuru Uragami, president of Uragami Sokyudo, an antique shop in Tokyo’s Nihombashi district. Hokusai was a self-proclaimed “old man, crazy about painting” who dedicated his life of ninety years to art, and was on an endless search for

new methods of expression. He even incorporated Western art techniques such as tenebrism and perspective on his own. As Uragami notes, “There are no boundaries for art.”

Uragami showed a genuine Edo period copy of *Hokusai Manga*. “The more woodblock prints you make, the poorer the condition of the printing block becomes due to wear and tear, so the first print is the best,” he states. “After searching for earlier prints in better condition, I realized I had accumulated one thousand five hundred copies.”

Uragami has lent out his collection to leading museums and galleries, including the British Museum, Tokyo National Museum and the National Museum of Western Art.

The popularity and perceived value of *Hokusai Manga* were significantly higher outside of Japan, and many copies flowed out of the country in the late nineteenth century. A third of Uragami’s collection, in fact, are copies purchased from overseas. Uragami also pointed out the clear differences in the way the volumes were treated in Japan and overseas.

“Outside of Japan, copies of *Hokusai Manga* were treated as precious objects, carefully handled and stored, so the condition is excellent,” he explains. “In Japan, due to its commonness, copies were shared among many, and the condition is not as good.”

Hokusai’s many rambling sketches, use of paneling and double-page spreads made a huge impression on modern Japanese manga. His



Illustrations of insects and reptiles

dynamic narrative drawings of people, the way he drew a Japanese long-handled sword sticking out of the panel to show perspective, and how he expressed strong winds and rain using lines to convey the sounds of water splashing off the ground are all traits used in manga. The way Hokusai captured the force of the wind in his sketches with expressive lines mimicking its movement all show why he was truly an artist for the world and a pioneering guide for Japanese manga artists like Osamu Tezuka (1928-89) as well as creative people in other fields such as art, fashion and movies. Many people in the art world that love Japanese art are fans of Hokusai.

Starting in 2019, Japanese passports will have a new design incorporating twenty-four of his “Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji.” Hokusai will become the face of Japan everywhere its people travel in both name and reality. *Hokusai Manga*, which had a great impact on the art world, will continue to impress fans worldwide. 📖



Art dealer Mitsuru Uragami



A small part of Uragami’s extensive collection