

Rediscovered Hokusai drawings to go on display for the first time

30 September 2021 – 30 January 2022
Room 90

Sponsored by The Asahi Shimbun

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- This Autumn, over 100 newly rediscovered drawings by Japanese artist, Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) will go on public display for the very first time at the British Museum.
 - The exhibition, *Hokusai: The Great Picture Book of Everything*, will open on 30 September 2021, sponsored by The Asahi Shimbun.
 - Created as illustrations for an unpublished book, *The Great Picture Book of Everything*, the drawings came to light in 2019 and were purchased by the British Museum last year, thanks to the Theresia Gerda Buch Bequest with support from Art Fund.
 - The beautiful drawings will be in print for the first time since their creation, for the accompanying book, *Hokusai: The Great Picture Book of Everything*, by Timothy Clark, published by the British Museum.

The existence of these exquisite small drawings – 103 in total – had been forgotten for the past 70 years. Formerly owned by the collector and Art Nouveau jeweller Henri Vever (1854–1942), they resurfaced in Paris in 2019, the same city where they were last publicly recorded, at an auction in 1948. The drawings are thought to have been in a private collection in France in the intervening years and unknown to the wider world.

The drawings illustrate a broad range of subjects related to China, India and the natural world: from religious, mythological, historical, and literary figures, to animals, birds and flowers and other natural phenomena, as well as landscapes. Many subjects here are not found in any other Hokusai works.

At the time Hokusai conceived *The Great Picture Book of Everything*, Japan was in a form of lockdown. From 1639 to 1859, under the government of the Tokugawa shoguns, people were forbidden to travel abroad. Despite these restrictions and never leaving Japan, Hokusai allowed his imagination to roam over continents and dynasties back to the very roots of human civilisation. In this unique group of

drawings, the artist's animated figures dramatise the origins of Buddhism in India and the development of habitation, fire, agriculture, weights and measures and even rice-wine brewing in ancient China.

The British Museum has one of the most comprehensive collections of Hokusai works outside of Japan. Visitors to the exhibition will have a chance to see two Edo-period (1615-1868) examples of Hokusai's most celebrated print *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* (1831), popularly called *The Great Wave*.

These wonderful, lively drawings, each the size of a picture postcard, shouldn't have survived. They are neat, line-perfect, so-called 'block-ready' drawings (*hanshita-e*). If the book they were intended for had been published, a professional block-cutter would have pasted each one face down onto a plank of cherry wood and cut through the back of the paper with chisels and knives to create a finely detailed printing block. This process would have destroyed the drawings. Instead, once they were no longer required for the abandoned publishing project, they were carefully mounted on cards and kept in a purpose-made wooden storage box. In that way, they were converted from working drawings into a set of works of art for individual contemplation.

The beautiful drawings will be reproduced in print for the first time since their creation, as originally intended, for the accompanying book, *Hokusai: The Great Picture Book of Everything*, by Timothy Clark, published by the British Museum.

As a major discovery, the drawings provide valuable new insights into Hokusai's life and work. They link closely with other important groups of drawings by Hokusai in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The set has been analysed using the British Museum's knowledge representation system, [ResearchSpace](#), supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Experts at the Museum, in collaboration with scholars and collections worldwide, are working to establish meaningful connections between the drawn features in the 103 drawings and other works by Hokusai, and to wider social interconnections – people, places, time, events, ideas, and technology. This will help place Hokusai, a genius observer of human behaviour, within a larger historical context. Since the acquisition, two Hokusai letters have been discovered which mention *The Great Picture Book* and suggest the drawings might have been made in the 1840s, when the artist was in his eighties. The position of the drawings within a long lineage in East Asian 'picture encyclopaedias' has also become more clearly apparent.

[All 103 drawings are now available to see via the British Museum's Collection online](#), including the ability to see the drawings up close, using zoom technology from the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF). This allows the fast, rich zoom and panning of images so viewers can see them in detail. This work was carried out at pace by a dedicated team of staff during lockdown, ensuring the public had access to these new works while the Museum was closed due to the pandemic.

Hokusai is considered by many to be Japan's greatest artist and has been recognised internationally since the Japonisme era of the 1870s, two decades after his death. During his 70-year career, he produced a considerable oeuvre of some 3,000 colour prints, illustrations for over 200 books, hundreds of drawings and over 1,000

paintings. Hokusai quickly abandoned the narrow subject matter traditionally associated with the 'floating world' (ukiyo-e) school he originally trained in, such as images of popular actors and courtesans. His ambition was to create images of universal appeal, imbued with powerful life force, encompassing the whole range of subjects in worlds real and imagined.

Hartwig Fischer, Director of the British Museum, said: "Hokusai's art combines boundless invention, subtle humour and deep humanity. In recent years the British Museum has explored his vast oeuvre through research and exhibitions. These important works were shared with the world during lockdown through our Collections online as high-quality digital images. We are delighted to continue this work with this display and the accompanying publication. I would like to thank The Asahi Shimbun for sponsoring this exhibition as part of their longstanding support of our display programme."

Alfred Haft, JTI Project Curator for Japanese Collections, British Museum, said, "Katsushika Hokusai's brush-drawings for *The Great Picture Book of Everything* burst with energy. As the artist himself hoped, each dot and each line almost seems to have a life of its own. This remarkable rediscovery will speak to anyone who loves Japanese art or simply the art of drawing."

Notes to editors

Hokusai: The Great Picture Book of Everything runs from 30 September 2021 to 30 January 2022 in Room 90 at the British Museum.

Open Saturday – Thursday 10.00–17.00, Friday 10.00–20.30. Last entry 90 mins before closing. Adult tickets £9 weekdays and £11 weekends, under 16s free, 2-for-1 tickets for students on Fridays, and concessions and group rates available. Prices may vary.

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A full public programme of events will accompany the exhibition. More information on this programme is available here: britishmuseum.org/hokusai

The beautifully illustrated book *Hokusai: The Great Picture Book of Everything* by Timothy Clark will be published by the British Museum in September 2021. £25 hardback.

ISBN 9780714124896

For more information on the book please contact:
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About The Asahi Shimbun

The Asahi Shimbun Company is a longstanding corporate sponsor of the British Museum. The Asahi Shimbun is a Japanese leading newspaper and the company also provides a substantial information service via the internet. The company has a century-long tradition of philanthropic support, notably staging key exhibitions in Japan on art, culture and history from around the world. In addition to supporting *Hokusai: The Great Picture Book of Everything*, The Asahi Shimbun Company also supports The Asahi Shimbun Displays in Room 3 and is a committed supporter of the British Museum touring exhibition programme in Japan. They are the funder of The Asahi Shimbun Gallery of Amaravati sculpture in Room 33a of the British Museum, and a supporter of the iconic Great Court.

About Art Fund

Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art. It provides millions of pounds every year to help museums to acquire and share works of art across the UK, further the professional development of their curators, and inspire more people to visit and enjoy their public programmes. In response to Covid-19 Art Fund has made £2 million in adapted funding available to support museums through reopening and beyond, including Respond and Reimagine grants to help meet immediate need and reimagine future ways of working. Art Fund is independently funded, supported by the 159,000 members who buy the National Art Pass, who enjoy free entry to over 240 museums, galleries and historic places, 50% off major exhibitions, and receive Art Quarterly magazine. Art Fund also supports museums through its annual prize, Art Fund Museum of the Year. In a unique edition of the prize for 2020, Art Fund responded to the unprecedented challenges that all museums are facing by selecting five winners and increasing the prize money to £200,000. The winners are Aberdeen Art Gallery; Gairloch Museum; Science Museum; South London Gallery; and Towner Eastbourne www.artfund.org

About the Theresia Gerda Buch Bequest

Theresia Gerda Buch established at the British Museum a bequest for the acquisition of Japanese art, in memory of her parents, Rudolph and Julie Buch, who were killed in the Holocaust. Since 2013 the bequest has made possible around 60 significant acquisitions, including a major painting by Kitagawa Utamaro, an album of original brush drawings by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, an album containing 167 *surimono* prints by artists of the Maruyama-Shijō School, and two superb prints from Hokusai's series *One Hundred Ghost Tales*. The rediscovered Hokusai drawings are the bequest's concluding acquisition.



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Further information

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