Hokusai
The Great Picture Book of Everything

30 September 2021–30 January 2022
Guide for teachers

Sponsored by
The Asahi Shim bun
JAPAN’S LEADING NATIONAL NEWSPAPER

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), Daoist master Zhuo Sheng ascends a cloud-ladder to the moon, from Banze no zu (Illustrations for The Great Picture Book of Everything). Block-printed drawing, ink on paper, Japan, 1830s–40s. Purchase funded by the Theresa Griswold Bush Bequest, in memory of her parents, Rudolph and Julie Bush, with support from Art Fund.
Planning your visit
We recommend the following planning guidelines:
• Provide a focus for students to keep in mind as they explore the exhibition which you can follow up afterwards
• Do some preparatory work in school to develop the focus of the visit and familiarise students with the content of the exhibition
• Allow students some scope to explore and find images that interest them

Curriculum Links
The exhibition can be used to support the following curriculum areas:

Art and design/The arts/Expressive arts:
painting, brush drawing, landscape, illustration, wood block printing methodology, symbolism, nature, imagined worlds, artistic techniques.

History & Geography/The world around us/Social studies: Hokusai’s Japan, classical heritage of East Asia (India and China), the natural world, travel.

Religious Education/Religious and moral Education
Representation of Buddhism, religious and mythological figures, deities.

Introduction to the exhibition
Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) is one of Japan’s greatest and best known artists. Known simply as Hokusai, many will recognize his world-famous wood-block print popularly called ‘The Great Wave’.

This exhibition celebrates the recent re-discovery of 103 of his brush-drawings produced during the 1820s-40s for a picture-encyclopaedia called The Great Picture Book of Everything. The book was never made, thus preserving these drawings which would otherwise have been sacrificed to the block-cutter’s knife as part of the process to create a wood-block print. As such, these drawings are exceptionally rare and provide a unique opportunity to see Hokusai’s lively mind and hand at work together.

Using the exhibition
In advance
Decide on a focus for the visit and the follow-up activities. Go through this with the students.
Use the image bank to familiarise students with some of the exhibition content. Go through any exhibition activities with the students and accompanying adults beforehand. Additional illustrations from The Great Picture Book of Everything are available via the Museum’s online collection.

On the day
Encourage adults to allow students to linger at images which interest them and to discuss what they see and share ideas as they go round.
Remind students to behave calmly and politely.
Photography is allowed in the exhibition and students may also take photographs of relevant objects in the Museum’s permanent galleries. A visit to the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries (Rooms 92-94) is recommended.

Afterwards
Use the information (written, drawn, photographed and/or discussed) gathered by the students in the exhibition/Museum galleries as a starting point for follow-up activities back at school.

Using this resource
This resource is designed to support your visit to Hokusai: The Great Picture Book of Everything.

It aims to be cross-curricular and offer opportunities to work the exhibition into different curriculum subjects. The resource is accompanied by a downloadable image bank of a selection of images displayed in the exhibition.

Two cats by hibiscus. Preparatory drawing, ink on paper (hanshita-e), about 1820’s-40’s.
The ‘Big’ questions
It is a good idea to have a big question for students to keep in mind during their visit to the exhibition. Here are some possible examples:

- Which did I think, and why, was the most interesting image in the exhibition?
- What did I learn about Hokusai and his art that I didn’t know before?
- What sources of evidence and research does the exhibition include and how useful did I find this for learning about Hokusai?
- How has Hokusai represented Japanese culture as well as other cultures and the world around him? Which elements would you like to explore further?
- What else would I put in the exhibition to make it interesting/informative?

Exhibition themes
The exhibition is divided into nine sections.

1. Introduction
This exhibition showcases Hokusai through his newly rediscovered final drawings for a book titled, The Great Picture Book of Everything. The drawings remained unknown until a collaborative international research project based at the British Museum revealed their significance. These drawings help us focus on an important but sometimes overlooked aspect of Hokusai’s long career when he was breaking new ground in terms of design and subject.

They also underscore how Japanese people of the late Edo period craved knowledge about ancient history, foreign lands and the natural world. Prohibitions on travel abroad sparked a desire to learn about unfamiliar peoples and their cultures whilst good literacy rates fuelled the production of a variety of encyclopaedias and general reference books. Hokusai very much made this genre his own.

2. Rediscovering Hokusai’s lost drawings
The drawings are housed in a purpose-made Japanese box. They include a title sheet, and frontispiece introducing the first two sections of the book. The frontispiece shows an Indian Buddhist monk holding a fly whisk and a Chinese boy holding a Chinese-style fan (see Slide 8 in accompanying Image Bank). Between them is a cartouche inscribed with the words India and China. A letter from Hokusai to his publisher indicates that Hokusai was still working on the project into his last years.

3. Ancient China
Trade flourished between China and Japan during the Edo period with the import of silk, ceramics, artwork, books and daily goods. Beyond China’s material culture, however, it represented a storehouse of ancient lore and tradition. Fundamental aspects of society and culture had originated in China. Historical Chinese warriors offered models of bravery and discipline. Legendary Chinese poets and Daoist experts inspired their early-modern Japanese counterparts, including scholars and ascetics. By Hokusai’s day, many of these stories would have been widely familiar, but Hokusai conceived each one afresh and with characteristic spirit and individuality.

4. How Hokusai’s prints were made
This section explores the process of making a wood-block print. Once Hokusai was satisfied with a design, he produced a final version of it called a ‘block-ready drawing’ (hanshita-e). This drawing went to the block-cutter (hori-shi) who pasted it to a polished woodblock, and cut through it with a chisel to remove empty areas and produce a woodblock with raised lines that perfectly matched the original design. This line block (omohan) then went to the printer (suri-shi) for inking and printing. Prints taken from the line block were pasted down and, in turn, used to cut the colour blocks required for a design. During the Edo period, every type of commercial publication—from books and prints, to leaflets and advertisements—emerged from this process. Hokusai was closely involved in the production of his books, keeping a watchful eye on the block-cutters to ensure they properly represented his style.

5. Buddhist India
India represented the land of the Buddha, an almost mythical place where his disciples perfected their understanding of his teachings. Stories of deities and ancient kings became familiar through the sacred Buddhist texts (sutras) that were translated in China, transmitted to Japan, translated into Japanese, and then studied and shared by priests and travelling storytellers. Over the centuries, certain narratives made their way into popular culture including stage dramatizations. Hokusai presented these ancient narratives with excitement, as if he were discovering them for the first time.
6. Hokusai’s published books
While Hokusai is best known for his landscape prints, his career longevity was founded on his designs and illustrations for upwards of 260 books. From his first years as an independent artist in the mid-1790s through his last years, publishers called on him for scenes of daily life, illustrations to warrior tales, and his inventive drawing manuals. This exhibition shows Hokusai’s range, humour and skill in every genre.

7. The natural world
Japan’s mountains, lakes, seas and coastlines are home to an abundance of plant and animal life, and Hokusai was a keen observer of the natural world. His imagination also encompassed mythical creatures such as phoenixes, two-headed birds, sea monsters and a ‘hakutaku – a creature with 9 eyes that ate bad dreams. Hokusai’s drawings of both fauna and flora, and the details of a hair, leaf, or feather, possess a unique energy and sense of individual characterization.

8. Working together across the globe
In 2020, Tim Clark, (former Head of the Japanese Section and now Honourary Fellow at the British Museum) recommended the Museum acquire Hokusai’s drawings for The Great Picture Book of Everything. These 103 drawings have inspired new lines of research, with the basis of the exhibition highlighting the important role of international collaborations. Through Tim’s research with scholars in Japan, Europe and the USA, we have deepened our understanding of the drawings as well as Japanese culture past and present.

9. The evolving wave
The Museum’s Conservation team have undertaken a recent research project to investigate Hokusai’s world-famous print, Under the Wave off Kanagawa (Kanagawa oki nami ura, 1831), better known as ‘The Great Wave’. Many impressions of the design are known but none is definitively the first as they are unnumbered. As woodblock prints were inexpensive, it’s debatable how many impressions of the Great Wave were printed and how many survive today.

British Museum Scientist, Capucine Korenberg, has been studying examples of the Great Wave held by different collections around the world. Her research aims to construct a chronology of these impressions which helps bring us closer to Hokusai’s original conception.

Curricular opportunities
Art and design/The arts/Expressive arts

Hokusai worked as an artist throughout his life. He was inspired by the world around him and experimented with different art techniques to create his images. Look out for his use of line, angles and mark-making to create different textures and a sense of motion or energy to the characters depicted in his work. His ability to create compelling and complex action images may shows his influence on modern manga artists specialising in dramatic manga (gekiga).

Consider his use of imagination – you will see mythical beasts and exaggerated or wholly unhuman features in his depictions of mythical people. Why do you think these themes were the subject of his art?

Spotlight objects:
See slides 1, 2, 3, 4, in the powerpoint that accompanies this resource.

Follow up activities:
- Explore the many animals, including mythical creatures, represented by Hokusai and try copying his different textures so that you discover new ways to represent feathers, fur, skin, hair, horn, scales etc. through mark making, line and blending. Create your own mythical creature and incorporate your new texture-making techniques to bring it to life.
- Hokusai was a master of line and used it to create energy, movement and drama. Undertake a line exercise where 6 different pieces of music are selected (useful to use classical music, heavy metal, techno, folk etc, so different tempo, dynamic and pitch is represented). Have students close their eyes, putting pencil to paper and not lifting the pencil as they create a continuous and moving line all around their page that responds to the music. Discuss findings as a class afterwards – are some lines heavier and more aggressive-looking than others? Are some sharper, darker, lighter, rounder? Employ this learning to a piece of work where line is used to create expression and emotion.
- Explore Hokusai’s exaggerated human figures (distorted or extra long necks, legs, arms) and what impact this has on figurative representation. Where else have exaggerated bodies or body parts been used in fine art or in...
popular culture? Create a self-portrait selecting a key feature to exaggerate. Discuss why you chose to exaggerate that particular feature and use this to explore how this represents self-image and identity.

History & Geography/The world around us/Social studies

Hokusai’s work demonstrates how Japanese people of the late Edo period were curious and hungry for knowledge about history, foreign lands and the natural world, including animals, plants, geology and weather patterns. Prohibitions on travel abroad led to people being curious about other cultures – this feels particularly relevant today as we can relate this to our curtailed desires to travel due to pandemic restrictions. Depictions of India and China are particularly prominent in this exhibition which highlights the interconnectedness of place and the cultural influences that countries and people have on each other.

Spotlight objects:
See slides 5, 6, 7, 8 in the powerpoint that accompanies this resource.

Follow up activities:
- Hokusai was fascinated with nature – weather, geology, plants and animals. His animal illustrations are particularly enticing, from house cats and squirrels that you might see in your garden, through to tigers, exotic birds, bears and elephants. Compare and contrast Hokusai’s animal illustrations to those of contemporary naturalists like Charles Darwin or John James Audubon to explore how illustrating nature not only helped to illustrate ideas but also to investigate them. What do these depictions teach us about other countries and their climate, biodiversity? What might our flora and fauna tell other nations about life in the UK?
- Hokusai drew people from other countries including India, China, Vietnam and the Phillipines. Discover how these countries were interacting with Japan during Hokusai’s time. What influence do these countries have on trade and industry today? Explore the positives and negatives of globalisation and trade by using this as a debate topic.
- The image of Tao Kan (Slide 8) dreaming he has wings so he can travel the world is a relevant one to the world’s current situation – possibly to travel and explore new lands or as a means to escape the challenges of the past year. Where would you like to travel and why? Create an information poster on your country, city or place of choice with interesting information, history, maps, images and drawings and share it with your class.

Religious studies/Religious and moral studies

Hokusai was a Nichiren Buddhist and shows his connection to Buddhism through the many references he makes to this religion in his work. For Hokusai, India represented the land of the Buddha and stories of deities and kings were translated in China, travelled to Japan, translated into Japanese and then shared through study and storytelling. Hokusai also represents Hinduism and Daoism as well as spirits, demons, nature deities and immortals in his work.

Spotlight objects:
See slides 9, 10, 11, 12 in the powerpoint that accompanies this resource.

Follow up activities:
- This exhibition provides a good opportunity to explore Buddhism, its origins and how different countries and cultures have adapted it over time. Find out three interesting facts or facets about Buddhism and compare these to how other large world religions (such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism) view these topics.
- Hokusai illustrates several representations of otherworldly spirits, demons and natural deities. Go out in your community, neighbourhood or city and use your phone to photograph different representations of spirits, demons, deities – looking at art and architecture are good starting points. Develop some thoughts and discuss what these beings might believe or represent and why Hokusai was interested in capturing them?
- Inspired by the image in Slide 11 that illustrates the four Buddhist sights, create a poster or write a reflective journal that illustrates what might be four sights for the modern day. Draw parallels between the experience of Buddha and the 21st century.