

KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI

The Great Wave off Kanagawa, 1829-1832
Color woodblock print, 10.1 x 14.9 in



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EMANUELE TREVI

The Education of Beginners and the Spirit of Things

Hokusai's Wave Obsession

I entered the large portal of the Palazzo Reale, just a few steps from the Duomo, more for shelter from the icy cold Milanese drizzle that had started at dusk than from a real desire to see the Hokusai exhibit. I was early for an appointment, and the only alternative was an nth-time reconnaissance of the underground rooms of the nearby Virgin Megastore, an overused resource in those days of foul weather. The Palazzo Reale's rooms were presumably heated and comfortable. Besides, the exhibit's title, *The Paint-Crazy Old Man*, had a certain attraction. Blessed is he who is crazy for something, and even grows old while at it.

In other words, I wasn't prepared for the shock. I was expecting little branches of blossoming almond trees, geishas wearing their hair in buns, ponds with herons and bamboo tufts. Instead I immediately realized that I had stumbled in those galleries upon the work of a genius, one of the greatest, most inimitable, and astonishing artists ever. All things considered, this kind of sudden revelation is rare. Artistic education and taste aren't known to be conducive to sudden revelations and that is supposed to be a good thing. And that's because "education" necessarily and essentially is *prejudice* the sum of things that we know about an event before the event takes place. "Culture," in other words, is a sort of preventative measure. And then there are some people who don't have enough patience or determination to follow any measures at all. They look for fortuitous clues, keys found by chance that fit the right keyhole, the melody of coincidences.

My amazement over the beauty and intensity of those paintings and drawings by Hokusai was such that I emptied my pockets to buy the exhibit catalogue, a heavy thing that I had to drag around Milan all evening and which then, as always happens with objects of sudden and irresistible desire, I placed somewhere when I arrived back in Rome and ended up forgetting about completely.

Days before I departed for India, as I was watching the images of the 2004 tsunami for hours on TV, the catalogue for the *Paint-Crazy Old Man* came to mind, its subject the artist of the most famous and reproduced wave in the world, now often described as "Hokusai's tsunami." But that wave, painted in Hokusai's old age, was neither the first nor the last of a nearly infinite series of waves that he painted between his adolescent apprenticeship and the

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end of his long life. I had noticed this *wave obsession* while visiting the exhibit in Milan, and now I felt the need to investigate it further, as a continual succession of all the possible images of the disaster showed on the TV screen.

I had a vague idea where that big catalogue could be, but in the end it popped out from the top layer of a pile of old magazines. When I opened the book, my memory of Hokusai's waves and stormy seas was even more exact than I had expected.

In one of Hokusai's first prints, a portrait of a young Kabuki actor specializing in female roles, there exists a wave already resembling his great masterpieces of maturity and old age, with the "claws" at the crest of the swell. The wave is painted on a panel of the screen behind the actor; the dramatic moment represented by the print carries strong psychological tension. Oren, the female character played by the actor, is eavesdropping on her father, who is talking about something important to do with her future and the future of her family. As a woman, she must listen secretly and can't interfere. The image of the wave behind her is an exact projection of her state of mind. Hokusai drew it vertically to give the impression that she is bending under its weight. Even if the meaning is "ambiguous," as the catalogue says, the image erected menacingly behind this character captures a moment of anguish with exactness and plausibility.

The print *Springtime at Enoshima* comes from 1797, Year of the Snake. A few miles south of Tokyo, the little rocky island of Enoshima was once a common destination for visits and pilgrimages to the temple of Benten, goddess of love, well-being, and beauty. The print shows the island quite close to the mainland. It also depicts Shichirigahama ("Seven League") Beach, a beloved subject for other masters of the period, particularly Shiba Kokan, who between 1789 and 1801 produced many versions of it.

Hokusai's choice of a point of view that included a long beach section, inspired by his predecessors, allowed him to foreground a splendidly outlined wave. Recognizable in the background is Mount Fuji, regarded as the epistyle or cornerstone of the whole figurative world in Hokusai's work. At this point, the elements of the volcano and the wave aren't interacting in dramatic union as will happen in Hokusai's famous later works. But it's possible to identify the process—of the volcano and wave growing closer—and say that it may have started with this print.

What is certain, however, is that three years later, in 1800, Hokusai was back on the Seven League Beach to work on another print, called *Enoshima and Mount Fuji*. The near complete absence of pounding waves is interesting in this one because instead the unusual and sinister shapes of the rocks of Enoshima take on, within the composition, the role of "petrified waves." The magic and the supreme liberty of the artist's gaze follow an alchemic path by which the qualities of one element (water) are absorbed into another (the rocks of the island).

If the "obsession for copying things" that Hokusai wrote about toward the end of his life had started when he was seven, then overall he believed he had produced in his seventy years of life "nothing . . . worth considering." We shouldn't dismiss these words by interpreting them as the coquetry of an old master now certain of his glory or, even worse, by appreciating the modesty that they express. Prints were considered an ephemeral art form, aimed at the masses. Painting was held in higher esteem. These psychological elements might have been involved, but Hokusai, at a deeper level, seemed to understand that the only image of himself that really counted was the one delivered through his work. But his body of work on the other hand, is not, or at least is not only, a countable catalogue of "results." Exactly like a life, an artwork is a field of psychic tensions, a crucible of unresolved intentions, stretching out toward a distant target. In 1805, among the *Landscape Prints in Western Style*, the polychrome xylography called *Cargo Boat Passing through Waves*, where the waves are rendered as solid elements, stands out particularly. In 1817, Hokusai's seventh collection of scattered sketches genially entitled *Education of Beginners through the Spirit of Things* describes the kinds of compositional patterns he was turning toward as the basis of his new research.

Beneath the Wave off Kanagawa belongs to the series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (1830–32). Its triumphal arrival in the West coincided with the beginning of the mechanical reproduction of art, including the stylized image that appears on the original score of *La Mer* by Claude Debussy. Hokusai's complete compositions are where, together with the wave, Fuji and the endangered boat come into play, but most reproductions that circulate world over focus solely on the huge wave, contoured and removed from the other elements in the print. In the original those elements appear to be in close and dramatic relationship with one another as if to summarize, in one image, relationships and conflicts among the main cosmic principles—human, divine, and earthly; the image, however rough and threatening, catches this moment of rare and difficult balance, on the verge of rupturing but still intact. In 1896, Edmond de Goncourt, the French writer who was among the first Westerners to understand Hokusai's greatness, after having explored the treasures of many private collections of the time, devoted a book to an in-depth look at this image. In it de Goncourt lingers on how the image captures the "religious terror" generated by the fearsome sea that surrounds Japan on each side—how it is an image that expresses "the rage of the wave that rises to the sky, the dark blue of the transparent inside of its curve, the shattering of its crest that breaks up in a rain of drops shaped like beastly claws." In the days after the tsunami, looking for news on the internet, I found a site that specialized in the history of tsunamis showing on its home page a terrified Bugs Bunny about to be crushed by Hokusai's wave.

In any case, from Hokusai's point of view, his research was only beginning. We mustn't forget that, in his opinion, before turning seventy, one could not do anything "worth considering." In the *One Thousand Pictures of the Sea* collection (1833–34), the polychrome print devoted to *Chōshi in Shimosa Province* was thought to convey danger to maximum degree, the fishermen's boat in the foreground struggling to avoid the womb of the wave and a collision with the nearby cliff. Water and stone this time are absolutely integral in representing the deadly threat to the men who are fighting for their lives. And this new way of representing the crest of the wave is notable because Hokusai this time does without the famous "claws," experimenting with

shapes that look vaguely like trees or, better perhaps, like ocean coral. But possibly his most audacious attempt when it comes to rendering waves is represented by the panels of *The Illustrated Canon of Loyalty*, based on the Chinese classic *Xiaojing*. Here a storm surge, composed of a series of winding abstract lines resembling a fabric decoration, submerges an entire army of warriors of which only some scattered fragments are visible in the small spaces among the crests.

At this point it's time to talk about *Fuji on the Sea*, a monochrome masterpiece from *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji* completed in 1835. A revival and intentional variation on the *Great Wave* of the *Thirty-Six Views*, the new image takes the "claws" in an unexpected direction, causing an authentic visual astonishment that in the West could be tied to the concept of the baroque, with the addition of birds that brings to perfection the alchemic balance of Hokusai's vision by including air among the elements (Fuji is both fire and earth). As in the work from a few years earlier, however, the main relationship is the one between the liquid curve of the wave, with all its swirling and unstoppable dynamism, and the serene, unflappable pyramidlike stasis of Fuji. Movement, immobility. To enrich the gaze, to refine it day after day, granting it new possibilities, to translate all of these possibilities into visual signs: Hokusai's work, or, if you prefer, his methodical craziness, consisted of this extenuating and endless exercise. To arrive at the *spirit of things* that is the goal of the *education of beginners* in reality keeps all people, no matter what their talent, in the condition of eternal beginner. Maybe what we call "talent" in its purest meaning, freed from all contingencies, is nothing but the extreme awareness of the divinely arduous nature of the *spirit of things*. One of the most extraordinary and dazzling drawings by Hokusai is the one of a group of blind men trying to measure a big and patient elephant. Some mount it, others thrash in the space between its legs, others climb on its back—and none of them has the faintest idea what it is, in reality, what that immense mass of warm and wrinkly flesh on which they roam, deceived by touch, is really like. Like blind men who lack a sense compared to us who contemplate the beautiful drawing by Hokusai, we too may lack a fundamental sense, unable to imagine *what* that sense could unveil to us and *how*. And so in our existence in the world, attentive or

not to the *spirit of things*, we behave exactly like the blind men of Hokusai's illustration, ourselves naïve illustrations, laughable in the same manner as we touch our own inexplicable, labyrinthine, false elephant.

In the *Illustrated Book of Glories of China and Japan* (1850), a classically “clawed” wave carries the god-dragon of the sea, evoked by the hero who intends to beg it to hold back the ocean's waters and allow him to besiege an opposing city.

Hokusai, old man and eternal beginner, was eighty-four when he painted two large waves to sit atop floats. The people of Obuse were awed by those images moving with the rocking of the carriages, creating the illusion of moving water, as if real waves were crashing against the sky. It looks as if Hokusai, right near the end of his life and research on the *spirit of things*—someone whose longest and most important chapters could be defined as the ones on the spirit of the waves—was caught by one last intuition. He put the liquidity and mobility of the wave into relationship with the impassible, mineral stasis of Fuji, he transformed its waves with feline claws and with a flock of birds that dip the oars of their wings in the wind. The *spirit of things* can't be drawn or taught, but when we are able to grasp something close to it, we discover an alchemy of metamorphosis and the secret sympathy of contraries. One can't even be sure that the wave, this tremendous tool of meditation, is simply a separate element in the eternal wheel of symmetries, juxtapositions, and conquests. No, if you look carefully, hit your head and mind against it for a while, another truth comes out, a further couple of contraries to overcome: now the site of the struggle is the wave itself and its dichotomous nature of male and female, phallus and vulva, gush and squirt . . . but there is never, truly, time to get to the bottom of things, to the sunken deposit of the spirit of them.

—from *Londa del porto. Un sogno fatto in Asia*, Laterza, 2005,
translated from the Italian
by Michela Martini and Elizabeth McKenzie

Emanuele Trevi (b. Rome, 1964) is a literary critic and a writer. His book *Istruzioni per l'uso del lupo* (Castelvecchi, 1994) advocating a change in the artificial, technical language of Italian literary criticism was groundbreaking. Trevi contributes regularly to newspapers such as *il manifesto*, *La Stampa*, *la Repubblica*, is one of the editors of the literary magazine *Nuovi Argomenti*, and has hosted the cultural radio program *Lucifero* for RAI Radio 3. His debut novel appeared in 2003 (*I cani del nulla*, Einaudi) and was followed by *Senza verso* (Laterza, 2005), *L'onda del porto* (Laterza, 2005), *Il libro della gioia perpetua* (Rizzoli, 2010), and *Qualcosa di scritto* (Ponte alle Grazie, 2012). This essay is an excerpt from *L'onda del porto*.

Michela Martini, a native of Genoa, Italy, received her MA in Italian literature from the University of Genoa, where she studied with Edoardo Sanguineti. Her translations of Italian poetry, in collaboration with poet Robert Hahn, have appeared in the *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, the *Literary Review*, *Poetry International*, *Gradiva*, *Journal of Italian Translation*, *Italian Poetry Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *International Poetry Review*, *Unsplendid*, etc., and were anthologized by Geoff Brock in *The FSG Book of Twentieth-Century Italian Poetry* in 2014.

Elizabeth McKenzie is the author of the novel *The Portable Veblen* (Penguin, 2016). She is the managing editor of *Catamaran Literary Reader*.

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Fine Wind, Clear Morning, 1830
Ukiyo-e woodblock print, 10.13 x 15 in



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