

THE ASIAN BOOKSHELF

Hokusai: From East to West and back again

By DONALD RICHIE

HOKUSAI AND HIS AGE: Ukiyo-e Painting, Printmaking and Book Illustration in Late Edo Japan, edited by John T. Carpenter. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers/Hotei Publishing, 2005, 357 pp., 227 color & 126 b/w photos, \$125 (cloth).

The West first discovered the art of the Japanese woodblock print. Though popular enough in Japan, the prints had been denied any kind of artistic standing until it became understood that their reputation abroad was much higher than at home.

In the same manner, one of the most representative of these artists, Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), was first given aesthetic recognition in Europe and America. In 1880, "Notes on Hokusai" by Edward Morse had appeared, and between 1896 and 1914 there were three biographies in French -- those of Edmond de Goncourt, Henri Facillon and Marcel Revon.

In Japan there was no such interest. There had been an 1817 pamphlet about how Hokusai had managed to paint the famous giant picture of Dharma, but no comprehensive monograph appeared after Iijima Kyoshin's 1893 compilation, itself consisting mainly of biographical anecdotes. It was not until 1944 that a serious work on the artist appeared, a monograph by Narazaki Muneshige.

The first Hokusai exhibition was also in the West. It was held by the Fine Arts Society of London in 1890, and was succeeded by one in Boston in 1893. The first in Japan, arranged by Ernest Fenollosa and Kobayashi Bunshichin, did not occur until 1900.

People had, of course, been collecting Hokusai earlier than that. Some members of Commodore Perry's expedition, which occurred only five years after Hokusai's death, brought back examples, and even earlier, in 1832, Philipp F.B. Siebold had apparently seen and coveted a few.

Fenollosa and his friends were the most industrious of later buyers, however, with the result that the world's largest collection of Hokusai prints is in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It was only later that the paintings were appreciated, and consequently the best collection of these is in the Freer Gallery.

There is thus a certain logic in that the most scholarly of new publications on Hokusai, now well over 150 years after the artist's death, should be European. The latest of these is "Hokusai and His Age."

This beautifully produced volume collects essays by 15 specialists in Japanese art and may be seen as a kind of sequel to "Hokusai Paintings: Selected Essays," published some 10 years ago, also under the aegis of the International Hokusai Research Centre, University of Venice, the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, and the Art Research Center of Ritsumeikan University.

Divided into two parts, the present volume begins with issues raised in earlier volumes and

focuses on the paintings of the artist, continuing, in part two, with a presentation of Hokusai's accomplishments in print design and book illustration.

Roger Keyes opens the volume with an essay on the early paintings of Hokusai, followed by John Carpenter's paper on the early *bijinga*, usually translated as "pictures of beautiful women." Naito Masato writes on the manipulation of form in such pictures and is followed by more on the subject by Timothy Clark, "Frisly Undergarments: Some Paintings by Hokusai's Pupils."

Kobayashi Tadashi turns to the paintings of Hokusai's daughter, Oi, and Asano Shugo contributes a chapter on the seals in Hokusai's paintings.

Gian Carlo Calza (author of the 2003 "Hokusai") gives us a very interesting paper on "Imitations, Copies and Fakes." This is followed by Kobayashi Fumiko's writing on anthology illustrations, and Kubota Kazuhiro, on Hokusai's smaller prints.

Doris Croissant compares the still-life painting techniques of Hokusai and Takahashi Yuichi, and Henry Smith II writes engagingly of Hokusai's use of the color blue. Of particular interest is David Pollack's offering that presents an entire Hokusai-illustrated *shunga* booklet with all of the ribald writing translated.

John Rosenfeld writes of humor in the Hokusai sketchbooks, and Timon Screech offers a paper on Hokusai's participation in *rangaku*, Western-oriented discourse. Finally Tsuji Nobuo's essay (written in the late 1980s and previously published only in French) indicates how the West, particularly the copper-plate illustrations of its publications, influenced Japanese artists, including Hokusai.

There is thus a kind of symmetry to the structure of this volume, in that Hokusai was first appreciated in the West and it was the West that in some small way influenced his own vision. All of the essays are splendidly illustrated, and the general luxuriousness of the format and the production make this among the most beautiful of recent books on Japanese art.

This book may be ordered via e-mail from: publisher@kit.nl. More information is at: www.kit.nl/publishers

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