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An Artist of the floating world

Hokusai: beyond the Great Wave

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The British Museum



In an essay on Hamlet in 1919, T.S. Eliot wrote famously about the "objective correlative." He used this phrase to describe "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion". In simpler terms, his concept articulates the way a symbolic external objective reality is a useful tool in reflecting the creative, subjective inner vision.

In the visual arts this can take the form of obsession with certain imagery. Cézanne was compelled to paint his psychic twin, the Provençal mountain Mont Saint Victoire for much of his life. Rembrandt painted his own face from adolescence to senility. Monet painted his water garden compulsively for over 50 years. Picasso identified priapically with the mythical Minotaur. And Katsushika Hokusai, or "old man crazy to paint", the greatest artist of the floating world, the *ukiyo-e*, of 18th century Edo, the city now known as Tokyo, painted his beloved and stately Mount Fuji. Again and again and again. It was his objective correlative, and a representation of his deepest and innermost thoughts and feelings.

Mount Fuji stands magisterially in the background of his archetypal fridge magnet painting the Great Wave, and his conviction in the connectiveness of things (he was a devout Nichiren Buddhist) is manifest in the famous *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, many of which are in this show. Thirty-six is a canonical number in Japanese art, hence the title of the set, but the prints actually number 46 and it is thought that there were as many as 8000 impressions of this famous print, as Hokusai had no compunction about being a commercial artist. Indeed his often precarious livelihood depended on being published in books, on fans, on screens, on scrolls and even on ceilings. He, ever the pragmatic realist, would be thrilled at the silk ties of the Great Wave being sold in the museum shop.

Hokusai changed his symbolically charged name many times in his life. He was Taito (star-blessed) Iitsu (one with creation) and finally Manji (everything) as he felt that with every passing decade he changed as a person and also became a better artist - a life lesson for us all. "Let me live to a 100 and I will be without equal" he wrote in his 90th year.

He died doing what he had been doing all his life - painting. Perhaps it was his art or perhaps it was his Buddhism that kept him so strong and resolute and forward looking.

As the Buddhist said to the pizza maker; "make me one with everything."

He is.

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)