

Hokusai's Waves

By Nobuo Tsuji



The *Male Wave* on the inner ceiling of the Kanmachi festival float, Katsushika Hokusai, Hokusai's Ukiyoe Gallery, Obuse, Nagano Pref.



The Higashimachi festival float with Hokusai's phoenix and dragon paintings, Hokusai's Ukiyoe Gallery, Obuse, Nagano Pref.

The country being surrounded by the sea, Japanese artists have traditionally taken up rough waves as a favorite motif.

There are famous wave pictures by, for example, Tawaraya Sotatsu (who died in about 1640), founder of the Rimpa school of Japanese painting, and Ogata Korin (1658-1716), one of Sotatsu's better-known successors in the Rimpa style. Many paintings of waves by Rimpa artists are to be found in the United States. Sotatsu's *Waves of Matsushima* screens, painted around 1630, are in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington. A similar set of screens painted by the artists of Korin's atelier are now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. *Rough Waves*, on screens in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, is one of Korin's best depictions of waves.

It was that great print artist Hokusai (1760-1849), however, who was probably

the most obsessed with the wave motif. He was especially fascinated by the way waves were constantly changing shape, and imbued his depictions of the natural phenomenon with an uncanny human-like quality. Few would fail to recognize the *Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, one of Hokusai's *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji* wood prints. The foreground of this famous print is nearly completely taken over by a massive wave that looks for all the world like a gigantic hand threatening to close upon the tiny boat that bobs on the surface.

In 1842, when Hokusai was 83 years old, he was invited to Obuse, a small town in Nagano Prefecture, by Takai Kozan, one of Obuse's leading salt merchants. Kozan was an artist in his own right and a great admirer of Hokusai's work. After that Hokusai revisited Obuse several times to stay around six months for painting. It is assumed that he painted the

inner ceilings of two festival floats, now exhibited in the Hokusai's Ukiyoe Gallery in the town, during those stays—namely, in 1844 and in 1845.

The two wave motifs on one float and the phoenix and dragon on the other are painted in bright—almost garish—colors.

The waves are known as the male and female waves. Shown here is the male wave. The painting and its surrounding border, with gold-foil background, measure roughly 125 square centimeters. The wave swirls in a powerful eddy of dark blue and light greenish-blue that draws the eye far inward. Like the *Great Wave*, the male wave seems almost alive, a cruel, claw-like hand that is more disquieting than cooling.

The frame design enclosing the wave is decorated in the four corners with Western-style motifs probably copied from a Western book binding. There is even an angel. Hokusai was strongly attracted by everything Western and incorporated numerous exotic elements in his work. The female wave is softer, less threatening. It, too, is framed by a gold-foiled square of strange, Japanized Western motifs.

The ceiling of the second float is decorated with two great rings enclosing a dragon (a male motif) in one and a phoenix (a female motif) in the other. The dragon twists and turns on a blood-red ground surrounded by waves. The brightly colored phoenix rests on a black ground.

Hokusai's choice of motifs originates in ancient Chinese symbolism in which water, hence waves, represents the source of all life. These examples of Hokusai's later work have a magnetic attraction transcending that of mere decoration. I do not think it too farfetched to say that Hokusai was attempting to convey his own personal cosmic view of the universe in these ceiling paintings. Ironically, it has been primarily American and European scholars and art critics rather than Japanese who have recognized the considerable extent of Hokusai's great talent and vision. ■

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