

Eagle in a Snowstorm

Katsushika Hokusai, Japanese, 1760-1849

1848, Hanging scroll of ink on paper, 48" x 22"

Pacific Asia Museum Collection, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. George A. Brumder

About the Artist

Katsushika Hokusai, born in Edo (Tokyo), Japan in 1760, was adopted into a prestigious artisan family named Nakajima. At about the age of five Hokusai began to draw. He continued his many artistic pursuits during his long life, customarily awakening early and painting until after sunset. It is little wonder that when the artist died at the age of 89 he had produced about 35,000 drawings and prints in addition to writing and illustrating poems and books.

Hokusai began professional training at the age of 15 when he was apprenticed for three years to a woodblock engraver. This early preparation no doubt contributed to the artist's later success in printmaking. In 1778, Hokusai became a pupil of [Katsukawa Shunsho](#), a master of the [Ukiyo-e school](#) of art. Under Shunsho's tutelage, Hokusai's images of kabuki actors were first published in 1779.

In his early to mid-20s Hokusai first married. His family grew to include one son and two daughters. During this time the content of Hokusai's images changed from Japanese genre scenes to historical figures and landscapes. Additionally, he produced prints of children. The landscape scenes often utilized Western techniques of perspective. Two events brought about changes in Hokusai's private and artistic lives: the death of the master Shunsho, followed in 1793 by the death of Hokusai's young wife. Hokusai began to turn away from Ukiyo-e and to depict images of samurai and Chinese subjects. He also adopted the name "Hokusai" (one of many pseudonyms used by the artist in relation to whatever style he was portraying).

Hokusai remarried and the remainder of his life was spent in a variety of artistic endeavors. He influenced both Western and Japanese art forms with his woodblock prints and his direct observation of nature and human subjects. His work varied in size from small, highly detailed book illustrations to a very large public painting of approximately 2,000 square feet in dimension. Notable among Hokusai's many works are [Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji](#) and [Eagle in a Snowstorm](#). While Western societies tended to recognize Hokusai as an important visual artist of his time, in his homeland he was revered more as a poet and considered only a "good" artist. Perhaps somewhat reflective of this lack of elevation to master artist status in Japan, Hokusai apparently was never quite satisfied with the quality of his art. Late in his life, Hokusai wrote that:

". . . from the age of 50 I produced a number of designs, yet of all I drew prior to the age of 70, there is nothing of any great note. At the age of 73, I finally apprehended something of the true quality of birds, animals, insects, fishes, and of the vital nature of grasses and trees. Therefore, at 80, I shall have made some progress, at 90, I shall have

penetrated even further the deeper meaning of things, at 100, I shall have become truly marvelous, and at 110, each dot, each line, shall surely possess a life of its own."

About the Art

Eagle in a Snowstorm, painted when Hokusai was 88 years old, characterizes an eagle in its struggle against violent nature. One interpretation suggests that the eagle symbolizes strength and power by its defiant pose against a great storm. Perched firmly upon an outcropping, the majestic bird seems to glare into the biting wind, defying the elements of nature that threaten its life. Another interpretation suggests the theme is somewhat autobiographical, that the bird represents Hokusai's own battle with the ravages of old age.

The image is a hanging scroll (*kakemono*) made from paper and painted with ink. Hokusai created drama in the image by emphasizing the stance of the eagle in opposition to the force of the storm. The delicate tips of the eagle's feathers are ruffled by a driving wind represented by curving, bold strokes sweeping across the picture plane. Dots of white emphasize falling snow carried by the wind to the eagle's rocky perch. To create an even more dynamic storm, Hokusai splattered the painting with a powdered egg white and oyster shell mixture (*gofun*) that mimics the snow and wind's force.

Hokusai signed *Eagle in a Snowstorm* with his red seal in the lower left hand corner. Characteristic of the artist's own restless nature (he changed residences during his life no fewer than 90 times), the imprint does not read "Hokusai," but rather "Manji, old man mad about painting, age 88 years." This is one of about 20 such names that the artist used to sign his works throughout his career.

Vocabulary

Ukiyo-e: "pictures of the floating world." Genre scenes such as everyday life in the city or leisure time activities, rather than historical figures or classical landscapes, were portrayed by the Japanese artists of the Ukiyo-e school.

Uki-e: Japanese historical landscape scenes that utilize perspective techniques typically used by Western artists

Kakemono: Hanging scroll

Gofun: Powdered oyster shells mixed with egg white

References

Britannica Online. (1995). *Encyclopedia Britannica*

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compiled by Pam Stephens