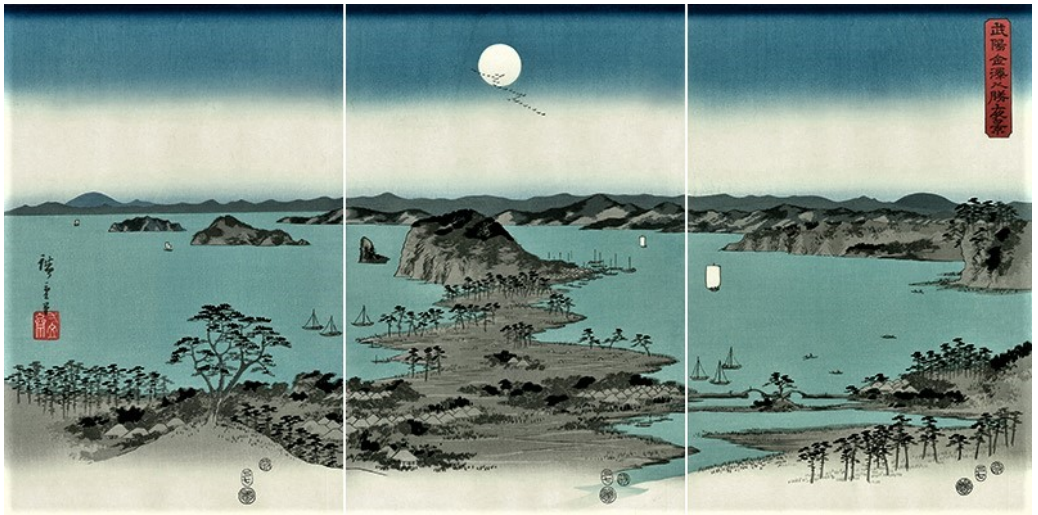


Images of the Sea in Japanese Art

Background notes

Dr Meri Arichi — 28 September 2022



Utagawa Hiroshige (1797 – 1858), *Kanazawa Hakkei Yakeizu (Eight Views of Kanazawa in the evening)*, 1857, triptych, colour woodblock print

Images of the Sea in *Emaki* (Picture scrolls)

Japan is an island country situated in the northwest Pacific Ocean and is separated from the Asian Continent by the Sea of Japan. There are four main islands, Hokkaido in the north, Honshu the largest in the centre, Shikoku, and Kyushu in the south, as well as over 6000 smaller islands.

Sea was always closely connected to people's lives, providing food and transport, but also presented danger and fear since the ancient times. The relationship with the sea is celebrated in poetry and literature and the awe-inspiring beauty of nature also provided inspiration to artists over the centuries.

Early images of the sea can be found in many Illustrated picture scrolls (*Emaki*) dating from the 12th century onwards. Illustrations were often done by anonymous craftsmen, and the combination of text in beautiful calligraphy and accompanying images enhanced the enjoyment of readers. These *Emaki* scrolls provide us with valuable information on the development of painting over the centuries as well as the view of nature connected to Shinto and Buddhism.



Anonymous artist, "Voyage to China" from Emaki Kobo Daishi Gyojoki (Biography of Priest Kobo Daishi), 14th century, ink and colour on paper

Images of the Sea on Screens

A pair of six-fold screens came into wide use in residential architecture for the nobility, the warrior class, and affluent merchant class from around the 16th century. Screens were useful portable furniture to divide rooms, to prevent draughts, and to provide decoration. Artists were inspired to depict the beauty of nature, and particularly popular themes were well-known locations celebrated in classical poetry.

Matsushima (Pine Islands) in the northern region of Tohoku (present day Miyagi prefecture) was a well-known beauty spot from early times. There are some 260 tiny islands covered in pine trees in the Bay of Matsushima, and it is considered as one of the Three Famous Views of Japan.

In the early 17th century, the merchant class artist, Tawaraya Sotatsu (c.1600 – 1640), painted a pair of six-fold screens with images of islands amongst waves on gold background. The high viewpoint and the ambiguous perspective give an impression of a dreamy scene. The image was copied by Ogata Korin (1658 – 1716) in the early 18th century. Both Sotatsu and Korin were inspired by classical literature of the Heian period (794 – 1185) when the art of *waka* poetry flourished. Their distinctive style of painting with stylized motifs came to be known as the “Rimpa style”



Ogata Korin (1658 – 1716), *Waves at Matsushima*, 18th century, six-fold screen, ink and colour on paper, Museum of Fine Art Boston

Western Influence

Japan's relation with the outside world was limited to Korea and China for a long time, but a group of shipwrecked Portuguese sailors reached the southern island off the coast of Kyushu in 1543. These first Western visitors to Japan were quickly followed by traders and Jesuits missionaries based in South-east Asia. The introduction of Western weapons and Christianity brought profound changes to Japan, and the visual art was no exception.

Oil paintings and engravings brought by Jesuits teachers revealed the visual culture of Europe to Japanese for the first time. Some examples of paintings by Japanese artists from the 16th century display the artist's interest in the Western vanishing point perspective and light and shade (*chiaroscuro*). Although Christianity was prohibited and all missionaries were expelled from Japan in the early 17th century, European books and engravings continued to be imported by the Dutch East India Company, and the knowledge of Western science and technology were eagerly sought after by Japanese intellectuals.

Shiba Kokan (1747 – 1818) started his artistic training in the orthodox Kano school, but his keen interest in novelty led him to study the *Ukiyo-e* style as well as the Western style. He experimented by copying the Western images first and then painted his own Japanese scenes using oil pigment on silk.



Shiba Kokan (1747 – 1818), *Shichiri ga Hama (Seven-miles Beach)*, c.1800, hanging scroll, oil pigment on silk

Hokusai's Sea

The image of “The Great Wave” from the series *The Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* by Katsushika Hokusai (1760 – 1849) is probably the most well-known Japanese image in the West. Landscape was not a major subject matter for *Ukiyo-e* prints in the 18th century, but with Hokusai's Fuji series it was established as an exciting new genre in the 19th century. In the striking image of “The Great Wave”, tiny figures of men in boats are about to be engulfed by the huge wave, symbolizing the frailty of human existence against the terrifying power of nature.

Another attraction of “The Great Wave” was the use of bright Prussian Blue which was newly imported from the West in the early 19th century. This synthetic colour did not fade easily, and it provided new possibilities to print makers. There are several other images of the sea from Fuji series which utilize this colour fully.

Hokusai started to create the series *Chie no umi* (*One Thousand Pictures of the Sea*) after the success of *The Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, but only ten prints were published around 1833, and then the project was abandoned, possibly for commercial reasons. Hokusai was a prolific artist who lived to the age of nearly 90 years, and left approximately 30,000 designs including illustrations for 250 books, 3500 single sheet prints, and many paintings.

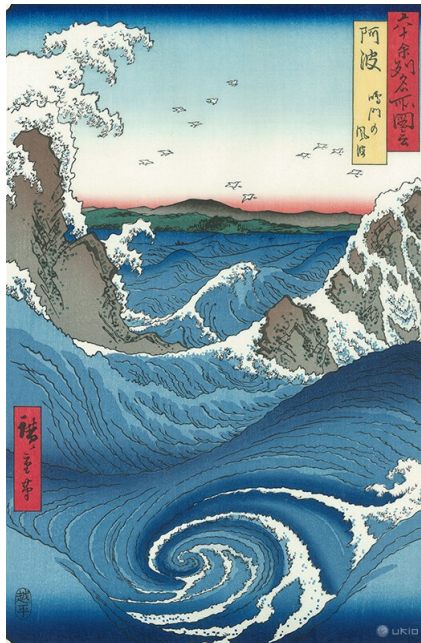


Katsushika Hokusai (1760 – 1849), “Soshu Choshi” from the series *Chie no Umi* (*Thousand pictures of the Sea*), c.1833, colour woodblock print

Hiroshige's Sea

Hokusai's younger contemporary Utagawa (Ando) Hiroshige (1797 – 1858) was inspired by the success of landscape series by Hokusai and he began to design the series *The Fifty-three Stations of Tokaido Highway* from 1834. In sharp contrast to Hokusai's turbulent Great Wave, images of the sea along this highway were depicted by Hiroshige in calm and peaceful weather. Hiroshige's prints encouraged public's interest in travel, and he continued to design landscape series such as *The Famous Places in Sixty-odd Provinces*, and *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*.

Hiroshige also designed smaller sets of prints based on the Chinese traditional theme *The Eight Views of Xiao and Xiang* which was a well-known landscape theme for paintings in Japan since the 15th century. Instead of depicting the original Chinese landscape, Hiroshige adopted the idea on to the Japanese locations, and designed the series *Kanazawa Hakkei* (*Eight Views of Kanazawa*) and *Omi Hakkei* (*Eight Views of Omi Province*). He also produced lyrical and serene triptych prints of *Kanazawa Hakkei* and *Naruto Whirlpool* in his later years.



Utagawa Hiroshige (1797 – 1858), “Naruto Whirlpool in Awa Province” from the series *Famous Places in Sixty-odd Provinces*, 1853, colour woodblock print

Ukiyo-e to Manga

Elements of humour and satirical twists are clearly visible in Japanese art from the early period as seen in *Emaki* scrolls such as the *Frolicking Animals* dating from the 12th century. Many of the illustrated printed books from the Edo period focused on comical stories akin to today's *Manga*. Some *Ukiyo-e* designers deliberately exaggerated figures and movements in bold composition to create feeling of surprise and maximum impact to viewers.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798 – 1861) was a contemporary of Hiroshige, equally prolific and popular designer, but he specialized in exciting warrior figures and historical events instead of landscape. His images of the sea are backdrop for the most thrilling moment of the story, and they suggest that the beauty of nature was of little interest to Kuniyoshi.

Kuniyoshi's treatment of water displays similarity to Hokusai's waves, but he took the stylization and simplification even further and paved the way to inspire *Manga* artists of today.



Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798 – 1861), “Nichiren suppressing the storm” from the series *Life of Priest Nichiren*, 1831, colour woodblock print

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