

PICTURES THAT COME TO LIFE: THE *HOKUSAI MANGA*

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Katsushika Hokusai first gained recognition in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States with his *Manga*: woodblock-printed and generally monochrome picture books that showcase varied aspects of everyday life, from natural surroundings to man-made structures, the mundane to the supernatural, the domestic material world to the realm of classic Japanese poetry and Chinese literature.¹ Featuring nearly 4000 images on more than 800 pages in total, the *Hokusai Manga*, produced intermittently between 1814 and 1878, impress by their sheer quantity and diversity. In them, nothing is too trivial, and nobody too unimportant to escape pictorial representation. While deities, saints and heroes make appearances, the biggest attraction of the *Manga* is, without doubt, their focus on everyday life; common people fishing, cooking, dancing, bathing, sleeping or trying out new optical devices, such as the magnifying glass. As opposed to distinguished poses, these figures often assume postures considered unsuitable in European paintings of the time. In the *Hokusai Manga* even Bodhidharma, the famous propagator of Zen Buddhism, grimaces in front of a mirror (opposite).

Japanologists have analysed motifs within the *Hokusai Manga* at length, determined which volumes were created by the master himself (as distinct from his disciples-cum-editors), and examined to what extent certain images augur Hokusai's famous works, such as the single-sheet prints of the *Thirty-six Views of Mt Fuji* series, 1830–34 (pp. 50–101). But even people without Japanological expertise are immediately attracted to the *Hokusai Manga*. Browsing through their pages is both inspiring and enjoyable, not only because of the subject matter but also because of the way in which Hokusai presents this subject matter. Individual motifs are arranged to form decorative patterns, and occasionally it remains vague whether they are to be perceived in sequence or as a simultaneous event. Furthermore, everything seems to be in motion – not only humans, animals and insects but also plants, rocks and the sea. Hokusai's brush makes everything come to life.

Random sketches?

The word *manga* is composed of two Sino-Japanese characters: *man*, meaning diverse, random, rambling or capricious; and *ga*, meaning line drawing, or a picture rendered with brush and ink. Because the *Hokusai Manga* seem to lack a unifying principle, the most popular translation of their Japanese title has been *Random Sketches*. While the 'sketches' part could be replaced by the word 'drawings', the meaning of 'random' is more complex.

First of all, it harks back to how the *Hokusai Manga* came into existence. During his half-year stay in Nagoya at the home of his disciple Gekkōtei Bokusen, between the autumn of 1811 and the spring of 1812, Hokusai is understood to have produced as many as 300 sketches. Bokusen, together with other pupils, collated these drawings and arranged them for print; Nagoya-based publisher Eirakuya Tōshirō released the first volume of the *Hokusai Manga* in 1814. Hanshū Sanjin, one of the Nagoya artists, describes this process in his two-page preface to volume I, dated 'Autumn 1812'. Apart from the preface there is no text in the first volume; rather, the images are left to speak for themselves, without any captions that would describe their motifs or link them to well-known narratives. Initially projected to comprise only ten volumes, which appeared as an annual series between 1814 and 1819, the *Hokusai Manga* continued due to popular demand and advantageous circumstances, namely, the success of

Hokusai's landscape colour prints of the 1830s. Volume XI is thought to have been released in c. 1833, volume XII was de facto published in 1834 and volume XIII in 1849. After Hokusai's death, two final volumes appeared – number XIV evidently in 1850, and number XV effectively in 1878.

Some nineteenth-century Western critics ascribed the apparent randomness of the *Hokusai Manga*'s imagery to an allegedly 'oriental' spontaneity.² In contrast, art historian Richard Lane traced it back to Hokusai's exceptional power of observation and imagination.³ Others have brought Japan's literary tradition to play in their interpretation of the *Hokusai Manga*'s unity. Noting the way in which medieval poetic anthologies grouped their subject matter, and considering also the Japanese custom of *renga* (collaborative poetry, or linked verse), art historian Evgeny Steiner claims that every volume of the *Hokusai Manga* is deliberately composed as a whole. Indeed, on closer inspection consecutive pages within individual volumes appear to pair men and animals, mountains and water, poets and visual allusions to their poems. Against this backdrop, Steiner understands *manga* as meaning 'pictures of all sorts'.⁴



Recent Hokusai exhibitions have preferred to use 'diverse' instead of 'random' in their translation of *manga*, and in so doing return to the word's meaning in nineteenth-century Japan, when it was first coined.⁵ At that time, *manga* signified a large and wide assortment of drawings, or an extensive catalogue of sample motifs; that is, a selection that was not necessarily 'random', but indiscriminate. According to the preface of volume I, Hokusai defined his approach to drawing as a 'brush gone wild', and this all-embracing attitude applied not only to the *Manga's* subject matter but also style, which ranges from *ukiyo-e* (the art of the commoners) to older Japanese schools and even Chinese and European painting traditions. Finally, it is noteworthy that Hokusai's sketches were produced with the assistance of woodblock cutters and printers. This technical aspect was vital to their production and required a degree of planning that curtails the Western impression of randomness.⁶

When modern newspapers began publishing drawings around 1900, the quantitative term *manga* assumed the qualitative meaning of 'satirical picture' or 'cartoon'.⁷ During the twentieth century, the term came to encompass various formats, including not only caricature, short comic strips (*koma manga*) and magazine-based graphic narratives, which integrate image and text with the help of a vast variety of balloons, pictograms and modifying lines, fonts and graphically rendered sounds. Since 2000, these so called *story-manga* have spread around the world; however, outside of Japan, the word *manga* is often used in a narrower sense, referring to a specific illustration style and character design that is no longer bound to the specific comics media.

Funny pictures?

Although primarily characterised by its diversity in subject matter and drawing styles, the popular focus on exaggerated facial and bodily expressions in the *Hokusai Manga* has led to the assumption that *manga* is synonymous with 'cartoons', or 'pictures intended to make people laugh'. On closer inspection, it turns out that the *Manga's* humour is often low-key and subtle. The frontispiece to volume XI of the *Hokusai Manga* is a good example in this regard (opposite left). It features a Chinese boy adding the Chinese character for 'new' to the characters for '*manga*'. The boy stands atop of Fukurokuju, the god of longevity, who is leaning forward as if bowing to the *Manga's* audience, who had to wait more than a decade for this continuation of the popular work. The utensils placed in the lower left corner of the page – an inkstick (*sumi*) on top, a scroll (*makimono*) in the middle, and a fan (*sensu*) at the bottom – combine to form the word *sumi-ma-sen*, meaning 'sorry!' to those who are able to decode the pun.

Another typical example of humour in the *Manga* is Hokusai's take on the well-known legend of the *Dream of Kantan*, also known as *The World Inside a Pillow*, which is part of the Noh theatre repertoire. When resting in the Chinese village Handan (Kantan), an ordinary man dreamed that he was ruling the country for fifty prosperous years while taking a short nap on a magic pillow (opposite right). The *Hokusai Manga* features the motif of the dreamer on a page of volume XII, which assembles several disconnected figures. A dream balloon attached to the left side of the sleeper's head evokes the narrative pictorially: we see a wooden latrine on the upper left and eight small men carrying two buckets of excrement each. Here Hokusai reduces the legend's original dream of social advancement – becoming the emperor – to having unlimited disposal of excrement, which was highly valuable as dung and thus a means of income at this time.

(opposite left)
Katsushika Hokusai
Hokusai Manga Vol. XI c. 1833 (detail)
The British Museum, London

(opposite right)
Katsushika Hokusai
Hokusai Manga Vol. XII 1834 (detail)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Both examples imply a kind of humour dependent on language and not on the visual content alone. In Hokusai's day, *manga* did not have to be pictorially humorous because there were other image forms with a comical orientation; namely *giga* and *toba-e*. Alluding in name to the Buddhist abbot Toba Sōjō, the purported creator of the well-known, late Heian-period scroll *Frolicking Animals and Humans* (*Chōjū jinbutsu giga*), *toba-e* pictures similar to the 'long-legged people' in the *Hokusai Manga* featured figures with round faces and unnaturally long limbs (below left).

Although *manga* was a new term, contrary to popular belief it was not coined by Hokusai. Examples of its use are found in a publication by Santō Kyōden from 1798 as well as in Aikawa Minwa's *Manga Hyakujo*, a guide to the different kinds of women in Kyoto and its vicinity, which was published almost concurrently with volume I of the *Hokusai Manga* in 1814. During Hokusai's lifetime, approximately fifteen books with the word *manga* in their title appeared on the Japanese market.⁸



While humour does not characterise the *Hokusai Manga*, and when it does feature it is subtle, the volumes' publication history suggests that they were enjoyed in part as a collection of humorous pictures, that is, as *giga*. According to *manga* collector Shimizu Isao, seven out of the fifteen volumes of the *Hokusai Manga* exhibit a comical inclination – volumes I, III, VIII, IX, X, XI and XIII – and one volume, number XII, especially employs satire.⁹ Here we find an exceptional case of a member of the ruling class becoming an explicit figure of fun: a full-page image shows a samurai answering nature's call while guarded by his nose-holding but still meek retainers (opposite right). Maintaining that satire was not common at the time, John Rosenfield points out that, 'Hokusai's imagery contains little direct reflection of the turbulent social atmosphere and no apparent challenge to the political establishment'.¹⁰ Precisely because Hokusai focused on human nature in general, his *Manga* could achieve a transcultural impact.

Painting manual?

In comparison to other works by Hokusai, in particular his illustrations for storybooks, Shimizu Isao sees the *Hokusai Manga* as featuring socially satirical content. Compared to collections of *giga* or *toba-e*, and works by other artists of the same time the *Hokusai Manga* appear 'semi-humorous' at best.¹¹ They are, however, less serious in tone than contemporaneous reference books featuring samples of established schools of painting (*gaifu*), technique-oriented manuals (*edehon*), and thematic compilations, such as Toriyama Sekien's encyclopedic *Night Parade of One Hundred Demons* (1776). Similarly, the *Hokusai Manga* are less serious than the highly philosophical painting treatises of the Chinese tradition published at the time or, at the other end of the spectrum, the mainly technical manuals for aspiring artists and craftsmen to which Hokusai contributed as well; for example, *Quick Lessons in Simplified Drawing* (p. 8; 1812, 1814, 1815); *Drawings in Three Styles* (1816); and *Drawings at One Brushstroke* (1823).

Nonetheless, the *Hokusai Manga* still served an educational purpose. Many of their pages allude to well-known narratives and/or humour to allow commoners access to the previously elitist realm of painting; however, just as many pages assemble various things of the same category without any humorous or narrative orientation. For example, two prosaic images in volume III introduce Western central perspective: one focusing on tripartition (the inscription reads 'use two parts of the painting's surface for the sky, and the third for the ground'); the other one on diminishing point perspective lines (that do not converge at the same point though) (p. 26).

Hokusai had a few live-in disciples over the course of his career, but he never ran a studio, and before the publication of his *Manga* any instruction on painting he provided was through correspondence if not oral communication. The *Manga*'s instructional intent is clearly indicated by the complete title, which reads *Denshin Kaishu: Hokusai Manga*. The prefix has been translated as *A Primer for Transmitting the True Spirit*¹² and *Education for Beginners through the Spirit of Things*.¹³ While *denshin* draws on the Chinese aesthetic concept of *chuanshen* (conveying the spirit), *kaishu* is an address to all students of pictorial art, including amateurs. Dilettante engagement in drawing and painting had been on the rise since the 1790s, partly due to an unprecedented desire to acquire knowledge about the world through images, and partly facilitated by new forms of mechanical reproduction that drummed up interest in drawing and replicating images.

(opposite left)

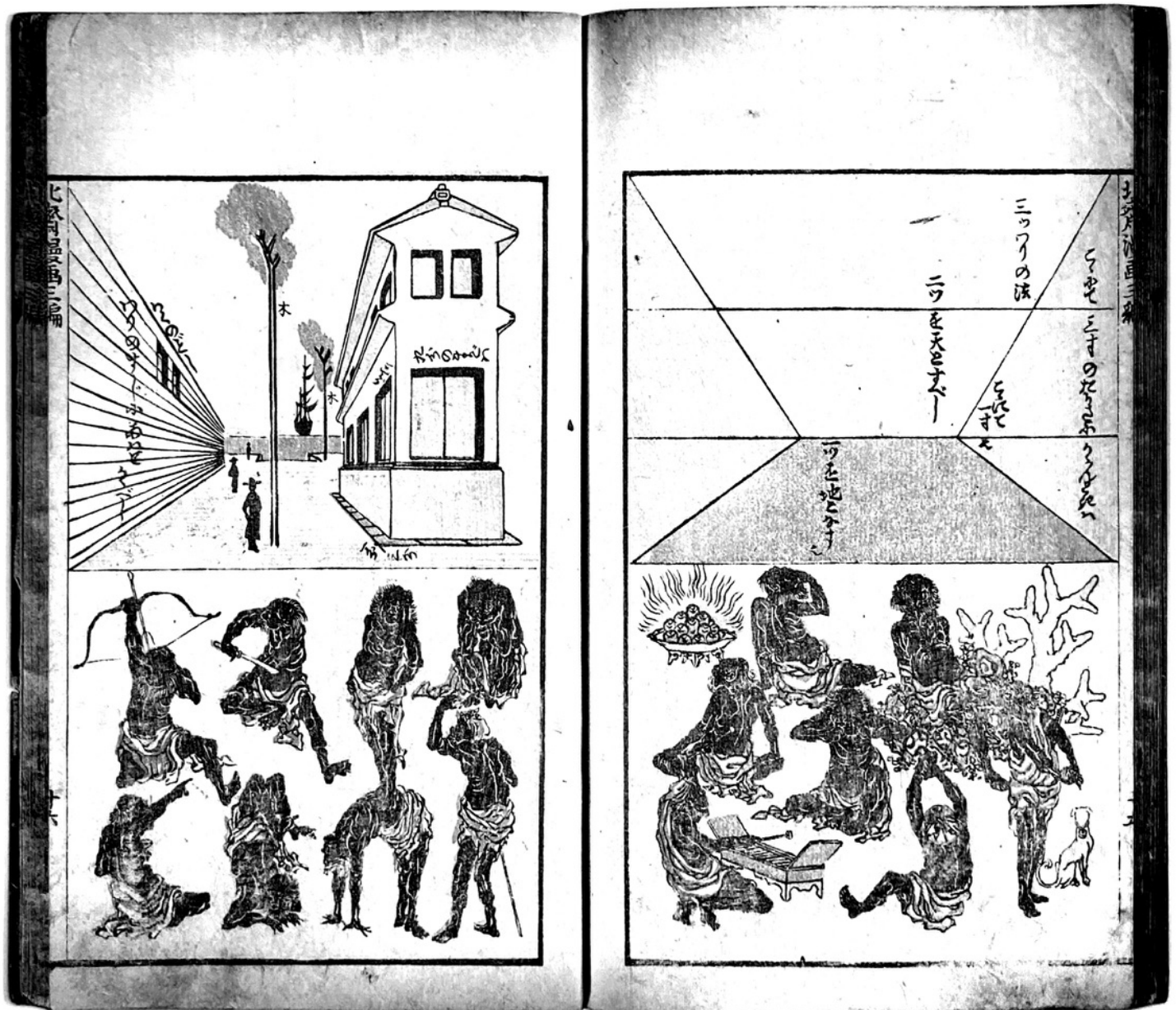
Katsushika Hokusai

*Long-legged men, two men from the
'land of the long-legged people' 1796 (detail)*
from a book of Japanese comic verse
illustrated by Hokusai
British Library Board

(opposite right)

Katsushika Hokusai

Hokusai Manga Vol. XII 1834 (detail)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



Prototype of contemporary *manga*?

The word *manga* suggests a direct link between Hokusai's compendium and *manga* in the present-day sense of serialised fiction, which has been shaped by the Japanese gender-specific *manga* magazine format since the late 1950s. While both types of *manga* are characterised by still and monochrome line drawings, they differ in many important respects.

Occasionally, although not often, comic-like elements such as balloons or impact lines appear in the *Hokusai Manga*, but they never assume the narrative function they serve in

Katsushika Hokusai
Hokusai Manga Vol. III 1815
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



contemporary *manga*. The same applies to panelling: in the *Hokusai Manga* approximately fourteen per cent of all pages are subdivided into at least two frames. One extraordinarily long pictorial sequence in volume VI stretches over ten successive pages.¹⁵ But whereas panels in comics usually conjoin to suggest the passage of time, the *Hokusai Manga* employ panels mainly to feature separate locations, such as the Edo sights in volume VIII. The different treatment of space and time becomes obvious when the *Hokusai Manga* are compared to a contemporary manga such as the short story created by Okadaya Tetuzoh (Okadaya Yūichi) for the Japan Foundation's world-travelling exhibition *Manga Hokusai Manga: Approaching the Master's Compendium from the Perspective of Contemporary Comics* (2016–20).¹⁶ Over eight pages, this *manga* imagines the last moments of Hokusai's life. Proceeding from right to left, the first three panels show a hand and brush which the fourth panel, by means of a zoom-out, reveals to belong to Hokusai. Through a dialogue between the master and his daughter, rendered mainly in shot/reverse-shot panels on its following pages, we learn that Hokusai, who is losing his eyesight, wants to go on drawing until his pictures come to life. In the end he passes away, but the brushstrokes, which appeared in the very first panels, turn into an actual butterfly that takes off from the sheet of paper.

According to Okadaya, it is Hokusai's ability to animate pictures that makes him a model for contemporary *manga* artists. But *manga's* appeal is not only due to the quality of professional artistic execution. As distinct from self-contained works of fine art, *manga* depends fundamentally on viewer/reader participation. This, however, is often overlooked. Although the *Hokusai Manga*, which are usually claimed as one of the origins of Japanese comics, bear all-too-obvious stylistic, narrative and media-related differences to current *manga*, they have one thing in common with the Japanese comics culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and that is the way they turn their recipients into creators. Highly reminiscent of the *Hokusai Manga's* instructional role, manuals, or how-to-draw *manga* books, have facilitated a culture of actively sharing specific illustration styles, character designs and stories in contemporary Japan and recently also on a global scale. By copying, redrawing, and circulating parts of *manga*, their audience partakes in bringing the pictures to life.

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(jacket)

Katsushika Hokusai

The great wave off Kanagawa 1830-34 (detail)

from the *Thirty-six views of Mt Fuji* series

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

(pp. I-II)

Viewing the sunset over Ryōgoku Bridge from the *Onmayagashi
embankment* 1830-34 (detail)

from the *Thirty-six Views of Mt Fuji* series

The Japan Ukiyo-e Museum, Matsumoto

(pp. VI-VII)

Fuji from the tea plantation of Katakura in Suruga Province
1830-34 (detail)

from the *Thirty-six Views of Mt Fuji* series

The Japan Ukiyo-e Museum, Matsumoto

(pp. X-XI)

The Drum Bridge at Kameido Tenjin Shrine c. 1834 (detail)

from the *Remarkable Views of Bridges in Various*

Provinces series

The Japan Ukiyo-e Museum, Matsumoto

(pp. XIV-XV)

Bunya no Asayasu (Fumiya no Asayasu) 1835-36 (detail)

from the *One Hundred Poems Explained by the Nurse* series

The Japan Ukiyo-e Museum, Matsumoto

(opposite)

The Rōben Falls at Ōyama in Sagami Province 1834-35 (detail)

from *A Tour to the Waterfalls in Various Provinces* series

The Japan Ukiyo-e Museum, Matsumoto

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