**The battle of ukiyo-e: Hokusai vs. his pupils**

He was a passionate seeker — a curious artist who refused to be confined by the tight boundaries of a particular aesthetic tradition. He did not care much for convention either: In pre-modern Japan, allegiance to a single authority was the norm, but he constantly sought the guidance of a broad range of masters. It was done discreetly, of course, lest anyone take offence, but even when they did, it didn’t seem to bother him that much.

This man was Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), an artist whose career spanned eight decades, during which time he produced 3,000 woodblock designs, more than 1,000 paintings, hundreds of drawings and 200 illustrated books — all in a wide range of styles. Hokusai was trained as an ukiyo-e artist. And yet, he never hesitated to borrow from elsewhere, whether Western perspective techniques, Chinese flower-and-bird designs or Japan’s rich indigenous traditions. Anything that offered insights into the true nature of the world and facilitated its representation on paper was worth investigating.

But is was not always smooth sailing: In 1793, he was forced to cut his ties with the prestigious Katsukawa school, where he had begun his apprenticeship 15 years earlier, for secretly studying with a painter of the Kano school. Undaunted, he moved on. Over time, Hokusai developed a reputation for eccentricity. He was notoriously untidy and could also be self-absorbed, but his energy and talent were boundless. As his confidence and fame grew, so did the number of prospective pupils and enthusiastic followers. Neither the exact tally or precise identity of all these individuals is known, but most scholars would say the number was approximately 200.

It is tempting to pin Hokusai’s allure as a teacher on his iconoclastic personality. This, however, would be a speculative step too far. The reality, says Maho Yamagiwa, a curator at The Sumida Hokusai Museum in Tokyo, is that we don’t know. “There are few records documenting Hokusai’s relationship with his pupils,” she says, “and none that shed light on their motives or on how they felt about their teacher.”

This dearth of information partly explains why, until recently, few paid much attention to his pupils’ work. Hokusai’s large and varied output, consistently of a high quality, also contributed to keeping his pupils in the shadow. In fact, as late as 1978, Richard Lane (1926-2002), an influential American ukiyo-e scholar, could still write that few of Hokusai disciples “had original talents of any great consequence.”

This judgement was rash. It is also largely unfair. Now, almost half a century later, a more balanced assessment is possible and a new exhibition at the Sumida Hokusai Museum, “Hokusai: The Teacher- Student Showdown,” which opens Feb. 4 and runs through April 5, aims to provide just that. It will present 100 woodblock prints, over two periods, with some works rotated halfway through, on March 9.

Yamagiwa is the brain behind the show. To facilitate comparisons, she divided the prints in four categories — human figures, landscapes, animals, miscellany — and within these, she paired works in which master and pupils depicted the same theme. One that deserves particular attention is Manjiro Hokuga’s “Strange Tales of the Bow Moon, Simplified Image.” On the surface, the influence of Hokusai is clear, but look closer, Yamagiwa says, and you see that “the eyes are bloodshot and the teeth clenched with an intensity that is pure Hokuga.” Compared to Hokusai’s style, the result is much more “powerful and bloodcurdling.” Elsewhere, visitors can examine the works of Katsushika Oi, Hokusai’s daughter and a talented artist in her own right, and the only known print by Sessai, who Yamagiwa calls one of Hokusai’s most “mysterious” students.

For all his fame and talent, Hokusai does not appear to have been a very attentive teacher — when he was present at all, that is. Documentation is once again scant, but we know he led a peripatetic life — he changed residence 93 times — and this must have complicated his teaching activities. This might also explain why in 1814 he embarked on the publication of his “Manga,” a massive project that lasted decades. It grew to 15 volumes — the last two published posthumously — and contains thousands of individual sketches. It became an invaluable resource to his followers all over Japan.

Hokusai’s desire to sharpen his skills never dimmed. A drawing by a former student, Tsuyuki Iitsu, that is now conserved at the National Diet Library, shows Hokusai in his early 80s, in a cramped home, half hidden under a quilt. He is hunched, his brush firm in hand. His bald head is only a few inches away from a drawing he seeks to complete. He looks frail, but his concentration is intact. Until the end, he remained *gakyō rōjin*, the “old man mad about painting.”