



# Journey to Hokusai

a film by Chikara Motomura

USA, 80 minutes

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# Who is Hokusai?

**Katsushika Hokusai** (c. October 31, 1760 – May 10, 1849) was a Japanese artist, ukiyo-e painter and printmaker of the Edo period. Born in Edo (now Tokyo), Hokusai is best known as author of the woodblock print series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (c. 1831), which includes the internationally iconic print, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. Hokusai created the *Thirty-Six Views* both as a response to a domestic travel boom and as part of a personal obsession with Mount Fuji. It was this series, specifically *The Great Wave* print and *Fine Wind, Clear Morning*, that secured Hokusai's fame both in Japan and overseas. (Retrieved from [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)).

Around 1856, the French impressionist painter and etcher Felix Bracquemond discovered a set of Hokusai's manga sketches in Paris and was soon extolling their virtues to his circle of friends and acquaintances. Through his efforts, artists such as Manet, Pierre Bonnard, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Mary Cassatt, Degas, Renoir, James McNeill Whistler, Monet, van Gogh, Camille Pissarro, Paul Gauguin, Aubrey Beardsley and Klimt were all influenced by Japanese art.

Ukiyo-e with its lack of perspective, clean lines and flat areas of color influenced many Western artists. Impressionism, Art Nouveau and Modernism all drew inspiration from traditional Japanese art. The work of artists such as Hokusai and [Utamaro](#) were to have a profound and lasting affect upon Western art.

(2008) *Japonism and the Ukiyo-e*. Retrieved from [www.hokusaionline.co.uk](http://www.hokusaionline.co.uk)

In the postscript to the *Thirty-Six Views*, Hokusai writes:

*From the age of six, I had a passion for copying the form of things and since the age of fifty I have published many drawings, yet of all, I drew by my seventieth year there is nothing worth taking into account. At seventy-three years I partly understood the structure of animals, birds, insects and fishes, and the life of grasses and plants. And so, at eighty-six I shall progress further; at ninety I shall even further penetrate their secret meaning, and by one hundred I shall perhaps truly have reached the level of the marvelous and divine. When I am one hundred and ten, each dot, each line will possess a life of its own.* Calza, Gian Carlo. "Hokusai: a Universe" in *Hokusai*, p. 7. Phaidon

## Logline

Tom Killion has long held a dream – to go to Japan and learn a traditional method of printing by hand. Deeply touched by the artist Hokusai's prints when he was a child, Tom has for almost 50 years successfully created iconic California landscape prints. This film follows Tom's journey to Japan to finally learn the traditional technique from Kenji Takenaka -- a 5th generation printer in Kyoto.

## Synopsis

*Journey to Hokusai* is a feature-length documentary that intimately follows an artist's creative process and discovery of the origins of his art. Tom Killion, a woodblock print artist, identifies the 19th century Japanese artist Hokusai as his inspirational master and "the most talented artist ever." When Tom makes his California landscape prints, his most important artistic references are Hokusai's landscape prints. Tom sketches a real landscape just like Hokusai did 200 years ago. He carves woodblocks using Japanese hand tools. But when it comes to printing, Tom uses a German printing press and oil-based ink unlike the traditional Japanese method of printing by hand with watercolor ink.

The film follows every step of Tom's journey: choosing a sketch illustrating the California landscape; carving it on woodblocks in his studio; learning the traditional printing technique with Kenji Takenaka, a 5th generation master printer in Kyoto; and successfully producing the print.

Throughout the film, Tom's homage to Hokusai is interwoven as poignant side stories. Some of the notable places pertaining to Hokusai that Tom visits are Hokusai's grave in Tokyo; a 9<sup>th</sup> generation "living national treasure" paper maker in the Echizen region whose ancestors must have produced paper for Hokusai's prints; the town of Obuse in central Japan where Hokusai spent his last few years and produced some of his important works; and sites where some of Hokusai's Mt. Fuji prints were created.

At the end of the film, Tom sums up his experience this way – "My 'Journey to Hokusai' taught me how Hokusai achieved this extraordinary immortality as his art spread out across the whole world, influencing how we see both man and nature, and how we understand the mystical power of beauty in our world."

## Director's Statement

I've known Tom Killion for over 10 years as our kids went to school together. A few years back when Tom shared with me that he had always wanted to take a workshop in Japan to learn a traditional hand-printing technique, I told him that it was a wonderful idea. A couple of years later, when I was searching for project ideas, I remembered what Tom had told me. When I approached Tom with my idea to turn his dream into a documentary project, he loved it.

What interested me most about the "Journey to Hokusai" project was that I could explore a traditional Japanese art form that I knew little about. Hokusai is considered by many Japanese to be Japan's preeminent artist. His iconic prints of Mt. Fuji are still seen everywhere in Japan. But I didn't know anything about his background or the process of woodblock printmaking. In essence, "Journey to Hokusai" was a journey of discovery for both myself and Tom.

I learned much about Hokusai through reading his biography, seeing many of his original prints, drawings, and paintings, and talking to the experts. But what left me most intrigued was the tradition of woodblock printmaking that is still being carried on today by many artists and craftsmen. Tom's teacher was Kenji Takenaka, a 5<sup>th</sup> generation master printer in Kyoto. We also visited Ichibei Iwano, a 9<sup>th</sup> generation papermaker who holds a "living national treasure" status and whose ancestors produced paper for Hokusai's prints. Both Mr. Takenaka and Mr. Iwano told me that the number of printers and papermakers in Japan is dwindling and that they are anxious about the future of their traditions.

I must say both Tom and Kenji were perfect subjects for me. They were totally open and their chemistry was special. For Tom, the workshop was a grueling five days. There are many, many minute steps and nuances that go into printing by hand. It takes years of experience to properly print, but we tried to do it in five days! No wonder Tom felt frustration and despair at various points during this process. Of course, both Tom and Kenji knew that you could only learn those small skills by practicing them again and again. As a novice to woodblock printmaking, I was in awe at the complexity and depth of this art form.

Woodblock printmaking is one form of art with its own tradition and process. Nevertheless, after learning about Hokusai and seeing how Tom, Kenji, and Mr. Iwano work, I feel that they all share one thing – a passion for perfecting their own craft. This passion is the driving force of years and years of practice and dedication. I hope "Journey to Hokusai" can give viewers the sense of dedication and passion that these artists bring to their craft.



## "Journey to Hokusai": Tom Killion's Japan Trip, October 2018

In October 2018 I visited Japan late in my 64th year, 32 years after my first visit, to search for the roots of my life-long artistic devotion to creating *ukiyo-e* style landscape prints of my native land of California. Though I looked forward very much to this trip when my friend, filmmaker Chikara Motomura, proposed and organized it, I had no idea what a profound journey it would be of both discovery and understanding. In three whirlwind weeks of travel, work and filmmaking, I discovered so much about both the art of *moku hanga* printmaking and the spirit of my lifelong 'mentor and master', Katsushika Hokusai, that I reached a new depth of understanding my chosen art form.

In Kyoto I had the good fortune to work with Kenji Takenaka at his 'Takezasado' *moku hanga* workshop, where I learned the nuances of traditional hand-printing including the mixing of inks, dampening and sizing papers, and printing effects like the *bokashi* shading that I had always tried to replicate in California, but never fully understood. This week of intense printmaking helped me discover new techniques and approaches to my own work in California, and also opened my eyes to really seeing how Hokusai and Hiroshige's landscape prints were created (so that when I later visited their museums in Tokyo I spent hours in front of their prints, reexamining with new eyes the pictures I had known since childhood).

But even more profound for my understanding of the roots of my art was my "Journey to Hokusai", to visit the places Hokusai lived and worked, and to go deeper into understanding Hokusai's artistic vision. By visiting the sites he inhabited in the 19th century, Chikara and I tried to touch the life of this figure from another time who, through his art, still has such an impact on our way of seeing the world (not just in Japan, but everywhere on earth). We visited his grave in Tokyo, the places where he composed his views of Mt. Fuji (like Misaka Pass above Lake Kawaguchi-ko), the house of his patron in Obuse, where he stayed near the end of his life and painted the ceiling of the Buddha Hall at Gansho-in Temple. Gazing up at the huge Phoenix he painted on the ceiling in his late 80s, I had an extraordinary vision of Hokusai's immortal artistic energy in the swirling movement of feathers, talons and wings all spinning around the eye of the Phoenix, the calm center, like Hokusai's own eye seeing everything on earth and his passionate swirling brush documenting all of it, from insects and grasses to the infinite variety of human life to the mountains and clouds rising into the cosmos. His last writings as an 'old man crazy about art' tell us that he really saw himself as living forever, painting better and faster, making the whole world come alive through his brush. And so my "Journey to Hokusai" taught me how Hokusai achieved this extraordinary immortality as his art spread out across the whole world, influencing how we see both man and nature, and how we understand the mystical power of beauty in our world. What a wonderful journey, and an inspiration for my own last decades of art-making!

## About the Filmmaker and Subjects

### **Chikara Motomura (Producer/Director/Cinematographer/Editor)**

A Japanese native, Chikara has spent nearly 35 years in New York, Hawaii, and in the San Francisco Bay area as a Producer, Director, Cinematographer, and Editor for Japanese and American television networks and various profit/non-profit organizations. Chikara also was a principal collaborator on 14 independent films with Rob Nilsson, a Berkeley-based Sundance/Cannes award-winning filmmaker. Since 2011, Chikara has partnered with Paul Zehrer for PotentialSF -- working as Co-Producer, Cinematographer, and Co-Editor on numerous award-winning films including "Why Waldorf?", "Preparing for Life", and "Being Seen". Recently Chikara was a Co-Cinematographer for "The Test and The Art of Thinking," a documentary feature about the SAT exam.

### **Tom Killion: Woodblock Print Artist**

Tom was born and raised in Mill Valley, California, on the slopes of Mt. Tamalpais. The rugged scenery of Marin County and Northern California inspired him from an early age to create landscape prints using linoleum and wood, strongly influenced by the traditional Japanese Ukiyo-e style of Hokusai and Hiroshige. He studied History at UC Santa Cruz, where he was introduced to fine book printing by William Everson and Jack Stauffacher. In 1975, he produced his first illustrated book on UCSC's Cowell Press. In 1977 Tom founded his Quail Press in Santa Cruz, where he published a number of hand made illustrated books including his large folio volume on "The Coast of California" (1979) and a travel book that incorporated his years of work in Africa: "Walls: A Journey Across Three Continents" (1990). In 2000, Tom published a large-format book, "The High Sierra of California" in collaboration with Pulitzer prize-winning poet Gary Snyder. The two collaborated on two more books published by Heyday Press: "Tamalpais Walking" (2009) and their award-winning "California's Wild Edge: The Coast in Poetry, Prints and History" (2015). Tom is also a scholar in African history with a Ph.D. from Stanford University.

### **Kenji Takenaka: 5<sup>th</sup> Generation Woodblock Printing Master**

Kenji Takenaka studied under his father, Seihachi, a fourth generation master printer at Takenaka Mokuhan, which was established in 1891. Takenaka Mokuhan is a long-established and masterful woodblock printing business in Kyoto. They have inherited their techniques with a history of 1,200 years in Kyoto, and have evolved into their current company called Takezasado. Since 1891, Takenaka Mokuhan had been passing on their traditional printing techniques for over 100 years -- from master to master. The fifth master, Kenji Takenaka, established Takezasado with the purpose of "inheriting these ancient printing techniques to pass them to the future generations, and not only by preserving those techniques, but also by thinking about how they can evolve." He creates new works by applying his masterful techniques, and continues to search for new possibilities in contemporary woodblock printing. The original design and colors of Takezasado have been recognized as modern art, and have been widely acclaimed.

# Journey to Hokusai : CREDITS

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## MUSIC

TAIKO PERFORMED by  
CHAKO TAKAHASHI

"PIANO AND CELLO" by  
SOUNDTRAPPER  
"THE TALE-TELLER (STRINGS ONLY)" by  
LYNNEPUBLISHING

“ATMOSPHERIC CELLO AND PIANO FILM” by  
GESTONWREEN  
“RETRO LOUNGE JAZZ” by  
VUXELLE  
“SPACIOUS CELLO AND PIANO FILM MUSIC” by  
GESTONWREEN  
“QUIET WONDER (PIANO TRIO)” by  
GESTONWREEN  
“AMBIENT CELLO AND PIANO ATMOSPHERE” by  
GESTONWREEN  
“CELLO AND PIANO FILM MUSIC ATMOSPHERE” by  
GESTONWREEN  
“MYSTERIOUS, SUSPENSE - SPARSE CELLO AND PIANO ATMOSPHERE” by  
GESTONWREEN

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