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# Visual Genesis of Japanese National Identity

HOKUSAI'S HYAKUNIN ISSHU



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# Introduction

*The delight of studying Hokusai is  
that he is a vast world in himself*

Ernest Fenollosa<sup>1</sup>

In spring 1835 Katsushika Hokusai 葛飾北斎 (1760-1849) wrote from Uraga to one of his publishers: “As for new *Hyakunin isshu chūhon* [中本 mid-size book]<sup>2</sup> at the outset I was going to have my daughter to do the preparatory drawings, but for various reasons I have decided to do the drawings for the new *Hyakunin isshu* myself”.<sup>3</sup> In the letter Hokusai announced the birth of the *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki* 百人一首うばがえとき (One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each, Pictorial Explanation by the Nurse, ca.1835-38) picture series illustrating the *Hyakunin isshu* 百人一首 (One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each, ca.1230s), the foremost classical poetry anthology compiled by Fujiwara Teika 藤原定家 (1162-1241).<sup>4</sup> It was Hokusai’s final large work in the medium of *nishiki-e* 錦絵 (brocade print), the result of nearly seventy years of artistic quest.

*Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki* is the last large picture series designed by the artist, and although only one-third of the images were transferred into *nishiki-e* and the majority of the pictures exist in the form of preparatory sketches, it was Hokusai’s most extensive project in the single print format. Despite the fact that two publishers subsequently suspended the publication, the artist continued his work and most probably completed one-hundred images, of which ninety-one pictures

<sup>1</sup> Fenollosa Ernest, *Catalogue of the Exhibition of Paintings of Hokusai Held at the Japan Fine Art Association, Uyeno Park, Tokio, from January 13<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup>, 1900*, Tokyo, Bunshichi Kobayashi, 1901, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> The issue of the work format will be discussed in Chapter 5: “Manipulating the Canon: Focus on The Series Title”.

<sup>3</sup> Iijima Kyōshin, *Katsushika Hokusai den*, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1999, p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> The letter was quoted in the first Hokusai biography written by Iijima Kyōshin 飯島虛心 (1841-1901). *Katsushika Hokusai den* 葛飾北斎伝 (Biography of Katsushika Hokusai) was published in 1893, more than forty years after the artist’s death. The sentence quoted here is a modified translation given in Kobayashi Tadashi, “Hokusai’s Letters”, in Calza Gian Carlo (ed.), *Hokusai*, London, Phaidon Press, 2003, p. 78.

are extant. Hokusai's perseverance was truly extraordinary. As stated in the letter quoted before, Hokusai dismissed his daughter from the task of illustrating the poems, although Katsushika Ōi 葛飾応為 (act. mid-19<sup>th</sup> c.) was an experienced designer and author of the *Hyakunin isshu* pictorialization executed only few years earlier.<sup>5</sup> The artist must have had a particular reason why at that very moment in 1835, during the Tenpō Crisis (*Tenpō kikin* 天保飢饉, 1833-1837), famines and socio-economical turmoil, he decided to take on the project. What is interesting, in most cases, instead of the pictures relying on the classical imagery perpetuated by his predecessors, the artist transposed the poems into the domain of his contemporaries, and by means of the pictures, evoked pastoral image of the late Edo 江戸 period (1615-1868) countryside and its inhabitants. It is a subject of further enquiry to determine why did Hokusai decide on the project and why did he do it in this particular way.

Moreover, this study is an investigation of Hokusai's reinterpretation of the *Hyakunin isshu* poems with regard to its aesthetic as well as extra-artistic features related to the issue of nativism. The most general definition of the trend states that nativism is "Any conscious and organized attempt on the part of the society's members to revive or to perpetuate selected aspects of its culture".<sup>6</sup> These "aspects of culture" are considered indigenous and characteristic for a given society and, as such, serve as a means to represent the country in face of the "other" cultures or countries structuring this society identity. The discourse on nativism has been developing within Japanese studies for at least thirty years, however it has mainly revolved around the literary, historical or religious studies of the Edo period commonly associated with *kokugaku* 国学 (national learning). This book takes a different perspective and introduces pre-modern visual arts into the discussion of nativism. The issue of nativism has not yet been sufficiently approached from this angle. A pioneering effort was made by John Carpenter, who analyzed the relations between Kubo Shunman 窪俊満 (1757-1820) and the *kokugaku* movement.<sup>7</sup> However, the question how and to what extend the visual arts participated in the process of constructing Japanese common identity is yet to be answered. Considering the social accessibility and power

<sup>5</sup> In 1829 Katsushika Ōi published *Senzai Hyakunin isshu yamato-kotobuki* 千歳百人一首倭寿 (One Thousand Years of *Hyakunin isshu* Yamato Longevity, 1829). I wish to thank Prof. Joshua Mostow for bringing this fact to my attention.

<sup>6</sup> Linton Ralph, Hallowell Irving A., "Nativistic Movements", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 1943, p. 230.

<sup>7</sup> Carpenter John T., "Textures of Antiquarian Imagination: Kubo Shunman and the *Kokugaku* Movement", in Reigle Newland Amy (ed.), *The Commercial and Cultural Climate of Japanese Printmaking*, Amsterdam, Hotei Publishing, 2004, p. 77-113.

of visual media, especially in the era prior to the development of general literacy, the impact of the visual world on the process of formation of Japanese identity must have been truly considerable. This study aims at discovering the role played by fine arts in the phenomenon of Edo period nativism and demonstrating how art reflected these trends and how it stimulated them.

The selection of Katsushika Hokusai's woodblock print series *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki* as a subject of the investigations was motivated by several reasons. First of all, the combination of the words "Hokusai" and "Hyakunin isshu" give rise to very specific associations, which go far beyond the domain of culture and into essential questions of national identity. Both "Hokusai" and "Hyakunin isshu" are two cultural icons essentially involved in the process of constructing as well as perpetuating this identity. The origins, scope, mode and power of operation of the two vary considerably. However they have been incorporated into the vocabulary of cultural images identified with "Japan" and, as such, have been utilized in different spheres, from scholarly discourse to popular culture.

First, "Hokusai" is undoubtedly one of the most widely recognized icons of Japan, both in his homeland and abroad. Interestingly, in popular culture Hokusai functions as an icon, representative not only of the fine arts but also of the country itself. As Suwa Haruo has recently noted, "Hokusai is an artist who represents Japan".<sup>8</sup> Suwa is referring to the results of a selection made by *Life* magazine in 1997, where Hokusai was the only Japanese included in the group of one hundred personalities of world historical importance. Hokusai, as the first Japanese artist "discovered" in the West in the mid-nineteenth century was considered a potent tool in the process of identification and signification of Japan as a distinct cultural and political environment. The artist's first exhibitions were organized in the West – the first one in 1890 in London and the second one in Boston in 1893.<sup>9</sup> The first Japanese show was organized as late as 1900 and, what is noteworthy, was a cooperative effort between a foreigner – Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908) and a Japanese – Kobayashi Bunshichi 小林文七 (1864-1923).<sup>10</sup> Thus, "Hokusai" as a cultural icon was first deemed such by cultures other than his "mother-culture". However, this established view provided an opportunity for his compatriots to project their image as a part of the process of building a

<sup>8</sup> Suwa Haruo, *Hokusai no nazo o toku. Seikatsu, geijutsu, shinkō*, Tokyo, Yoshikawa Kyōbunkan, 2001, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> The first exhibition was held at the Fine Arts Society of London and the second at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

<sup>10</sup> The exhibition was held at the Japan Fine Art Association at the Ueno Park in Tokyo from 13<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> January of 1900.

modern nation-state. The artist has experienced outstanding international popularity for more than one hundred fifty years, recently featuring two great monographic exhibitions held in the most prestigious exhibition spaces in Japan and in the United States – the Tokyo National Museum and the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. In addition, the year 2005 also saw collection of essays by art specialists from three continents.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is possible to observe a kind of revival of interest in Hokusai and his artistic production further reaffirming his iconic attributes, to which, however unintentionally this book also contributes.

Second, although it can be noted that whilst the “*Hyakunin isshu*” does not have the international range of influence possessed by “Hokusai” as a cultural icon, its role in the building of a common identity in Japan cannot be belittled. As part of the courtly literary canon, the *Hyakunin isshu* was in the center of poetics studies from the day of its compilation by Fujiwara Teika, whose cultural powers as an omnipotent *arbiter elegantiae* of his times stimulated interest in the work. The anthology was a topic of extensive commentary from medieval times onwards, booming in the Edo period. The widespread popularization of the *Hyakunin isshu* in the Tokugawa 德川 era resulted in the production of numerous textual and pictorial adaptations of the work. The anthology was officially recognized as part of the native literary canon during the Meiji 明治 period (1868-1912) and used to construct the idiom of “Japanese literature” (*kokubungaku* 国文学). Its political use was exploited during World War II in various versions of so-called *aikoku Hyakunin isshu* 愛国百人一首 (patriotic *Hyakunin isshu*) published to “activate the hearts of the nation” (*kokumin seishin sakkō* 国民精神作興).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the anthology is still included in the school curriculum and serves as a means of group identification even today. An interesting example of the modern application of the *Hyakunin isshu* format is the *Gendai gakusei Hyakunin isshu* 現代学生百人一首 (Contemporary Students' *Hyakunin isshu*) featuring 1000 poems written by students and published in 1997 by Tōyō University in Tokyo. Thus, both “Hokusai” and “*Hyakunin isshu*” bring to mind various associations with the process of building a common identity based on the elements perceived as native making *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki* a fascinating subject of research of pre-modern nativism.

<sup>11</sup> Carpenter John T. (ed.), *Hokusai and His Age: Ukiyo-e Painting, Printmaking and Book Illustration in Late Edo Japan*, Amsterdam, KIT Publishers/Hotei Publishing, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> For example: *Aikoku Hyakunin isshu karuta* 愛国百人一首かるた (Patriotic *Hyakunin isshu* karuta, 1942), *Aikoku Hakunin isshu hyōshaku* 愛国百人一首評釈 (Commentary on Patriotic *Hyakunin isshu*, 1944) or *Aikoku Hyakunin isshu* 愛国百人一首 (Patriotic *Hyakunin isshu*, 1943).

Numerous scholars begin their discussions on Hokusai with an emphasis on the iconic power of Hokusai and his works as representing “Japan”. Matthi Forrer, in the opening words of the catalogue of the 1991 exhibition held in the Royal Academy of Arts in London, stated: “Hokusai, Japan’s most famous artist, holds an assured place in the

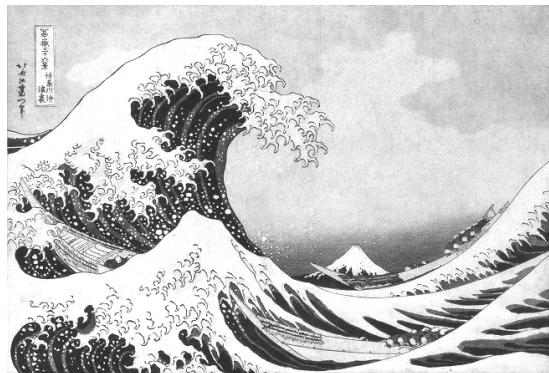


Fig.1 Katsushika Hokusai, *Kanagawa oki nami ura*, *Fugaku sanjūrokkei*, nishiki-e, ca.1831.

“Hokusai’s ‘Great Wave’, which frames a distant view of the sacred Mt. Fuji in the arc of a monumental wave is one of the most universally recognized images in world art”.<sup>15</sup>

However, this study of Hokusai’s *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki* series goes beyond the limits of the secondary projections, which transformed Hokusai into a modern cultural icon. The book investigates the artist’s presumable contribution to the nativistic movements developing in the late Edo period, before the birth of Japanese state. Taking into consideration the characteristics of the *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki*, it investigates Hokusai’s own contribution to the process of building a national identity – as Hokusai’s conscious involvement in nativistic movement of the times, when the series was created. The book challenges the image imposed by his powerful representations of Mt. Fuji as seen, for example, in *The Great Wave* and discovers the artist working in its shade.

<sup>13</sup> The original title of the print is *Kanagawa oki nami ura* 神奈川沖波裏 (In the Hollow of a Wave off the Coast at Kanagawa). It was included in the *Fugaku sanjūrokkei* 富嶽三十六景 (Thirty-six View of Mount Fuji, ca.1831) woodblock prints series.

<sup>14</sup> Forrer Matthi, *Hokusai: Prints and Drawings*, München, Prestel, 1991, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Yonemura Ann, *Hokusai*, New York, Washington, The Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2006, p. 1.

## **Outline of the Chapters**

In the following eight chapters, I investigate the *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki* images with reference to a wide array of contextual issues related to historical, socio-economical and cultural aspects of the late Edo period, and to Hokusai's artistic practice, both of which provide the basis for the discussion on the artist participation in the nativistic movement.

The study is divided into three main parts. The first section situates the *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki* within the modern discourse on nativism, the pictorialization history the *Hyakunin isshu* as well as Hokusai's life and artistic enterprises of the time. The second part is a detailed analysis of selected images from the series conducted with reference to the textual and pictorial sources from the époque. It also discusses the complex associations conveyed by the work title. The third and last part presents the results of the analysis and discusses various aspects of the process of narrating national identity conveyed by the *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki*.

The first section of the book comprises three chapters. The first chapter summarizes research on and analysis of modern nativistic discourse and discusses previous investigations of the *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki* series. The second chapter presents the genealogy of the *Hyakunin isshu* pictorialization from its beginning in the early Edo period till the mid-nineteenth century. The third chapter situates the *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki* series in the historical situation of the first decade of the Tenpō 天保 era (1830-44) and Hokusai's artistic practice of the time. It also provides information on the series itself and its process of creation.

The second part of the study comprises of two chapters. The fourth chapter features a detailed comparative analysis of the selected images from the series. The pictures are investigated with reference to textual sources, as well as a wide selection of images executed by different artist from the époque. The fifth chapter presents a detailed analysis of the associations conveyed by the title of the series. It subsequently discusses the artistic, literary and socio-cultural issues related to the three parts of the title: *Hyakunin isshu*, *uba* and *etoki*. It investigates the origins, function and consequences of their appearance within the series.

The third part of the dissertation consisting of three chapters presents the results of the analysis and my general conclusions. The sixth chapter discusses various modes of visual translation of the native literary works employed by Hokusai and situates Hokusai within cultural trends of the Edo period related to the pre-modern nativism. The seventh chapter discusses the visual image of "Japan" evoked by the *Hyakunin isshu uba*

*ga etoki*. The eighth chapter investigates the possible motives that led Hokusai to his particular visual interpretation of the *Hyakunin ishu* anthology and relates them to the issue of creating “Japanese community”.