

# Great Waves in Ukiyo-e

## Analyzing the Artistic Spirits in Katsushika Hokusai's Landscape Paintings

Dongying Dou

Zhuhai College of Jilin University  
Zhuhai, China 519041

**Abstract**—This paper has made a systematic research and analysis of Katsushika Hokusai's works, such as *Great Waves off Kanagawa* and *Red Fuji*, from the aspects of the origin of Ukiyo-e, its artistic characteristics and cultural connotation. The paper has made an in-depth comparison with the important works of Western impressionism artists, and showed the artistic charm and international influence of Japanese Ukiyo-e culture, to convey the artistic value and cultural spirit of Artist Katsushika Hokusai.

**Keywords**—Ukiyo-e; Katsushika Hokusai; *Great Waves off Kanagawa*; the artistic spirits

### I. INTRODUCTION

"If God give me five more years, I will become a true painter." It is the last words of Katsushika Hokusai, who call himself artisan-painter in his final days. As the only Japanese of "Top 100 World-influential Celebrities in Millennium", Katsushika Hokusai had life experience different from ordinary people. He also had an admirable artistic spirit and the artistic height that others cannot reach.

### II. UKIYO-E AND KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI

Katsushika Hokusai was the Ukiyo-e artist in the late Edo period. "Ukiyo", sourcing from Buddhist word, refers to all kinds of things in this world, the bustling, illusory and short earthly world, or the society we see and hear every day. The early Ukiyo-e was the genre painting with beautiful woman as theme. The making method first was mainly the relatively common, but expensive hand-painted method (with paper or silk scroll). And then slowly our well-known prints appeared. "Yakusha-e" is another theme of genre painting, which mainly takes images and stage photos of Kabuki as primary. The exaggerated models and unique performances are magnificent and romantic. The landscape scenery was the theme of Ukiyo-e prints in the late Edo period, which was usually referred to as "the painting of scenic spots". Its content involves in vulgar life and natural landscape. The natural landscapes in the painting of the scenic spot mostly are surrounding area of Edo, scenes of post houses and Japanese places of interest, especially Mount Fuji, which is the most frequent landscape, and one of important themes under the painting of artists. A lot of artists are good at the painting of scenic spot, and Katsushika Hokusai is an outstanding one.

"36 Views of Mount Fuji", published at the beginning of the 19th Century, are master works of landscape painting. In

this series of views, *Great Waves off Kanagawa* is the most excellent one. This painting, *Red Fuji* and *Rain Store beneath the Peak* in same group of prints are known as the three great works of Katsushika Hokusai. In the name of "Great Waves", it has become one of the most well-known Ukiyo-e works.

Before the creation of the painting, Katsushika Hokusai seems to be enlightened by the picture composition method of Sima Hangang. This seed of inspiration continued to ferment and grow in the later period. Soon, he created *Spring of River Island*. In this works are many small waves that can be the source of "Great Waves". In his another works with figures off the sea as theme, Katsushika Hokusai even tried and painted more exaggerated dangerous shape (of waves). Then, he created two paintings drawing towering waves. It was the first time to put figure in the wide sea. At this time, the works of Katsushika Hokusai were not only of traditional Japanese style. He researched the Westerns oil paintings of Sima Hangong and learned the focus perspective method of Dutch prints, tried and applied the painting methods of copperplate etching, which endowed his works with Western characteristics. Katsushika Hokusai wrote titles of paintings from left to right (The titles of Japanese traditional paintings are wrote from top to bottom.). He also added a decorative frame for each print works (following the painting frame of Western works). But he didn't repeat all the Western styles. He had his own view on the Western focus perspective method.

### III. ANALYSIS OF DRAWING METHODS AND ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS

Although the Western focus perspective painting method meets people's demand for visual authenticity, the photography technology in the era has emerged. It was a great challenge to realistic classic paintings, because photos were more realistic than paintings. After learning the Western perspective method, Katsushika Hokusai combined the characteristics of Oriental painting and used some non-rigorous perspective methods, such as, scattered perspective method, foreshortening perspective method and overlapping perspective method. The works, *Great Waves off Kanagawa*, well used the overlapping perspective method. Katsushika Hokusai generally divided this works into five layers. The first two layers were the two groups of waves on the lower right corner and on the left front of the painting. One group is big and the other is small, they were mutually interwoven. The middle layer was the key point of the painting – great waves and fishing boats. Behind the fishing boats is the well-known

Mount Fuji. The last layer is the background, sky and clouds. Katsushika attached the foreground objects to the foreground objects. He used the front objects to shield the back objects in order to express the sense of space, which is the most common technique of the overlapping perspective method. Katsushika Hokusai was very familiar with this method. If we deeply understand this piece of work, we can found that the snow line of Mount Fuji showed that it was spring. Spring happens to be the right season for fishermen to catch fish. People in Edo treat the first batch of caught fish as delicacy, so fishermen would like to send the valuable delicacy to markets for the first time. If we carefully view this masterpiece, we will find that the moving direction of fishermen is not the direction to market, but the direction to go home. So, the real situation should be the horizontal reversal (turn) of the painting. The boats should move from left to right, and great waves are opposite to the direction of boat head. That is the right side of the painting. But if the artist composited the picture according to the real situation, there is no dramatic tension for Japanese who read from left to right. If the artist designed the great waves on the left side of the picture, people may feel that the great waves surge into the face when they appreciate this painting from left to right. It seems that the next moment the great waves would devour all living things on the sea. The expressive shock force of the painting will be stronger and more lasting. We can also see this wave expression method from the works of Genius Artist Tsukioka Yoshitoshi in the late Ukiyo-e period. He followed the picture composition method of Katsushika Hokusai. In his works *Giant on Moon Sea*, Tsukioka Yoshitoshi placed the great waves on the left side of the picture. The difference is that this genius artist directly painted the height of wave above the moon, which makes the whole picture more dramatic. From the works *Great Waves off Kanagawa*, we can see that this works is full of the atmosphere of death and destruction, and feel that the unity of heaven and man in the Oriental philosophy. The relationship between man and the universe is like the relationship between waves and fisherman in this works. They were not fighting against the nature. On contrary, they used wisdom of human beings and went with the stream. This view can be explained with the form beauty of the works (the shape of the boat is very similar to the dynamic trend of the waves). Katsushika Hokusai also endowed the great waves with obvious personal style. This works expressed his obsession on the antonyms of longevity and death. Maybe he used this works to express his plight in his twilight. Perhaps he also implied that it is ultimately impossible to maintain the enjoyment life in Ukiyo-e, or natural disaster may happen at any time and never stop. In short, we can feel his worry and anxiety on the concept of nothing lasting forever.

#### IV. ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL CONNOTATION

The pleurism in Ukiyo-e deeply affected the majority of people in that period, but Katsushika Hokusai's works have a different characteristic from that of other Ukiyo-e artists. His landscape paintings have showed the daily life of Japanese common people. We can see farmers, fishermen, woman servants and slaves. It is clear to see that Katsushika Hokusai extremely respected and valued these work behaviors and ordinary life of common people.

In the early 19th century, the sightseeing industry was rising in Japan. Urban citizens often visited places of interest around the country in the name of religious pilgrims. In this series of landscape paintings, Katsushika Hokusai had only extracted one theme. It was Japanese guardian god Fujin Mount. Mount Fuji is a very important active volcano. People, on one hand, worried about the eruption of the volcano, on the other hand, they gratitude it (because the accumulated snow on the top of Mount Fuji was the important water source at that time). Over time, this kind of reverence was blended with people's living habits, and their emotion on Mount Fuji is stronger. The works *Climbers on Mount Fuji* has depicted the worship scene of people to climb the mountain in summer. Katsushika Hokusai arranged the towering mountain, flowing clouds and climbers sitting on the ground as the foreground of the picture. They echoed with the creeping sleeping people in the upper right cave, forming a sloping perspective line. It subtly rendered the steep mountain and hardship of climbing believers. It is the only works to show the nearby view of Mount Fuji in this series of paintings.

We can also feel his love for Mount Fuji in another works *Red Fuji*. This is one of representative Ukiyo-e print painting depicting natural scenes. At the same time, it is a scarce landscape painting with no figures in it in this series of landscape paintings. It is known as the most abstract painting. It depicts the twilight scene in the early autumn. The south wind was breezing on the face, and the sky was very clear. With a ray of sunshine, Mount Fuji showed a bright red. Katsushika Hokusai had only designed two layers in this painting, sky and Mount Fuji. The artist concisely depicted the subject and background. The picture composition method like a silhouette kept people's sight on the sloping contour line of Mount Fuji. This contour line is the dynamic line of the whole works, which makes the stable Mount Fuji with a dynamic sense. The verdant green forest at the foot of the mountain and the flaming red mountain, under the background of blue sky, are particularly eye-catching. The orderly changing clouds make the background infinite and deep, and create a peculiar space effect on the plane picture. Katsushika Hokusai had used this special method to depict the beautiful Mount Fuji and put it in a high angle. In the whole works, it undoubtedly is the overriding protagonist (showing no sign of human). Katsushika Hokusai used the classical technique to depict the classic scenery. With extraordinary line drawing and the picture composition ability, he made the lines and colors fully expressed and vividly applied in his works. In his works *Local Measurement Map*, he also used the scattered perspective method and overlapping perspective method. The complication of the painting surpasses any previous works. Overlapping mountains and interlaced roads are shielded by far and near, small and big plants and houses. They were arranged in different positions and in different size. The industrious surveyors were measuring every inch of land carefully. It reflects the industrious and plain Japanese and their respect for nature.

#### V. COMPARISON WITH WESTERN PAINTINGS

For composition and design of works, Katsushika Hokusai always get rid of the stale and brought forth the fresh. For the

change of painting style, it is inevitable to be affected by the Western art. The root of the influence of Western culture lies in economic exchange. Ukiyo-e works have a distinctive artistic style, but the Japanese people at that time did not pay attention to it, and they only treated it as ordinary leaflet or poster. They were spread to the overseas, especially the Europe largely in the late Edo period and early Meiji era, and soon Ukiyo-e became a hot commodity. Men of literature and writing were obsessed with it. There were more than ten Japanese arts stores in Paris. Japanese works sprung up. Ukiyo-e also deeply affected a large number of impressionist painters. In the middle of the 19th Century, artists used the colorful Japanese patterns to increase the effect and decoration of the picture in succession. The folk art Ukiyo-e artists dared not to challenge the traditional painting like the impressionists, but the common people theme in Ukiyo-e is in line with impressionists' pursuit of citizen personality. The town landscape paintings of Katsushika Hokusai had a deep-rooted influence on the impressionism, especially the most characteristic continuous cropping of the impressionism. His works "36 Views of Mount Fuji" provided Monet a great inspiration. There should be a coherent process to depict and express one thing or one kind of things. When this coherent process is recorded, the power of this series of works is beyond comparison of one or two single works. Monet's works always pursued the changes of same thing under different light and shade. It is not difficult to see that he took a big step on the art road of Katsushika Hokusai. From *Waves*, the works of impressionist Vincent Van Gogh, we can also feel the artist's worship to *Great Waves off Kanagawa*. The materials and expression methods are different, but we can feel the acceptance and inheritance of the later on former artistic ideas. At same time, in works *Frog Pond*, we can also see that Renoir was also deeply affected by the cloud painting method of *Red Fuji* in depicting large and small water waves. The form of waves on the surface is like soft white clouds in the sky, light but not floating, mobile but not disorderly. In *Red Fuji*, the red mountain has also deeply affected another impressionism works *Boy Plays Flute*. In this works, Monet used the plane figure painting method with no projection, with simplified details. He used simple large blocks of colors to increase the drawing speed, which makes the picture more planar. He used immixing transition method to express the close and distant relationship. It is characterized by obvious contrast, showy colors and rich dynamic sense. At same time, in his portrait painting *Portrait of Emile Zola*, he added an Ukiyo-e print painting on the background part of the figure, the upper right of the whole works. Zola also highly praised the Ukiyo-e artist as "the earliest and most perfect impressionist painter". Under the guidance of Monet, they drew materials from life and depicted the nature. It slowly became the pursuit of the impressionist painters to capture momentary light and shade impression.

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