There was once a Japanese painter who wanted to produce the largest picture ever seen by man. His brush was made of straw from five sacks of rice; he painted the whole day long, watched by an amazed crowd. Shortly before sunset he had finished, and his pupils suspended the painting on a bamboo stand prepared in advance, forty-two feet above the ground. Even then half of this immense picture, representing the god Daruma, was still on the ground. The next day this artist decided to paint the smallest picture in the world, and two sparrows, amazingly alive, were suddenly playing on a space which could be covered with a single grain of rice.

Hokusai was the name of this versatile painter, and he was a young man then. When he reached the age of seventy-five he wrote, “Since the age of six I have had a mania for drawing; at the age of fifty I had already published an infinite number of sketches; but none I made before I reached seventy are worthy to be counted. It was at the age of seventy-three that I understood approximately the structure of nature, of animals, of flowers, of birds and of insects. Consequently at the age of eighty I shall have made still greater progress; at ninety I shall penetrate into the mystery of things; at the age of a hundred I shall certainly reach a state of perfection. And when I reach a hundred and ten all I do, if only a line or a dot, will be alive.”

Hokusai well personifies the genius of Japan. Likewise he is the symbol of the true painter, never quite satisfied with what he has done, always hoping to improve his art, and painting only when really inspired. This, I think, explains why all his work is beautiful.

Born in 1760, Hokusai became a pupil of the then famous artist, Shunsho. Following, not only the fashion of the time, but also his genuine inclination toward this branch of art, he soon consecrated his efforts to the making of pictures which were afterward converted into wood-blocks and printed. Wood-block prints are characteristic of Japan’s art at this time. Developed by the Tosa School, and, therefore, of Chinese origin, these prints, nevertheless, represent for us something typically
Japanese. Colour-prints date back only about two hundred years in Japan, and it was not until the latter half of the eighteenth century that this art reached its highest development. When Hokusai started his work, Harunobu, Shunshe and Kiyonaga were already well known and had produced some of the finest examples of Japanese art. His contemporaries, Utamaro and Hiroshige are equally well known and held in esteem. Still, the richness of his colours, the audacity of the composition of his pictures and an imagination without equal combine to make Hokusai, not only the best among Japanese painters, but also one of the greatest and most sincere artists in history.

He began by illustrating little books, called kybioshi because of their yellow colour. These sold for a few sen on the streets. This beginning characterises his entire career, for he was the first popular artist in Japan, working for the masses, escaping all conventions and the influence of the classical Tosa School, painting everyday life as he saw it.

Hokusai’s production was enormous. During the seventy odd years of his artistic career he made more than three thousand sketches and illustrated nearly five hundred books. I shall, however, attempt to enumerate only the most important of his works.

His first success came in 1792 as the result of a kybioshi recounting the well known story of the “Tongue-cut Sparrow.” While still working under the name of Katsukawa Shunro he published some rather remarkable surimono—sheets ordered specially and never meant to be sold, usually cards of invitation or greeting. Incidentally, Japanese artists often change their names, either to mark an important event in their careers or because their old name is passed on to a pupil as a mark of special attention and appreciation. Hokusai had about twenty names during his life. Katsushika, Gyobutsu, Raishin, Raito and Taito are the most frequent ones, while the most characteristic is certainly Kwakiojin Hokusai, meaning “Hokusai mad on drawing,” often used by the old Hokusai.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century an interesting incident occurred. The captain of a Dutch trading vessel asked Hokusai to paint a scroll for him on which should be depicted some scenes from everyday life in Japan. When the Shogun in Tokyo heard of the order, however, he forbade its execution, giving as his reason the statement that foreigners were not fit people to know the intimate details of Japanese life.

The idea of painting life as he saw it around him never left Hokusai, however, and in 1812 he published the first volume of his “Mangwa” (spontaneous designs), his most important work, consisting of rapid sketches, not only from everyday life, but from all branches of Japanese ideology—history, mythology and nature. They showed a surprising knowledge of anatomy and an amazing power of observation. The last three volumes of the “Mangwa” were published after Hokusai’s death, and were not up to the standard of the first twelve.

Another highly artistic set is formed by the twenty-seven prints of the “Hundred Poems,” illustrating poetry famous in Japanese literature, or rather, illustrating the artist’s feelings and sensations while reading them.
A hundred years in the eighteenth century that Hokusai started his well known and beloved art. His contemporary, and held in high regard for the composition machine to make it also one of the most popular bioshi because of its streets. This became the first popular conventions and everyday life as he seventy odd years and sketches and however, attempt to bioshi recounting while still working the rather remarkable intended to be sold, Japanese artists often in their careers mark of special names during his who are the most mainly Kwakiojin used by the old

Interesting incident for Hokusai to paint scenes from everyday order, however, statement that formed of Japanese life. Never left Hokusai, one of his "Mangwa" consisting of rapid sketches of Japanese seemed a surprising innovation. The last Hokusai's death, seven prints of Japanese literature, while reading

By Courtesy of Toyo Murakami.
A coloured Wood-block Print of one of Hokusai's many delightful Paintings dealing with Scenes in the every-day Life of the Japanese People.

Since early in T'ang times the artists of China, and likewise those of Japan, whom they inspired, had had a preference for landscape painting. Hokusai probably inherited the soul of one of the ancient Chinese masters, for, when he wandered along the shady banks of the Sumida River in Tokyo, the sparkling waters inspired him again and again. The result was the three-volume "Sumidagawa Riogon Ichiran" or "Views of the Two Banks of the Sumida," published in 1804. Mount Fuji, eternal source of inspiration to the Japanese artist, also attracted him. In 1823 he first published his famous "Thirty-six Views of Fuji," containing such well known sheets as the celebrated "Wave," the twentieth of the set, and the charming "Wind of a Winter Evening," so modern in its composition. The folio of the fifty-three stations of the Tokaido, the ancient seashore route between Tokyo and Kyoto, in delicate pinks and greens, is also highly esteemed by art lovers and collectors, as is the "Hundred Views of Mount Fuji," published toward the end of Hokusai's life.

Hokusai also illustrated many books, mostly popular novels written by the then famous Bakin. He even wrote the text of some of the books he illustrated.

The importance of Hokusai's work should be considered from two aspects. On the one hand he trained many pupils, amongst whom Hokukei, his daughter Omiyo and Gakutei were the best, and his influence over his contemporaries was immense. His prints taught the masses to understand and appreciate art, and if Hokusai's teachings seem to be forgotten now, only seventy-five years after his death, it is on account of political and economic changes rather than through any intrinsic failure in his philosophy.

Still more important to us, on the other hand, is Hokusai's influence on the development of European art. His prints first reached Europe, a few at a time, during the first decade after his death. These, with other Japanese prints coming to the continent as curiosities, soon attracted the attention, not only of collectors and connoisseurs, but of painters as well. Whistler and Manet are known to be amongst these. There is no doubt that the development of the Impressionistic movement in France was very much influenced by these prints. Since the Impressionists constitute the first modern movement in Western art, it is safe to say that the entire development of modern European art was greatly influenced by Hokusai and his contemporaries.

While I am writing I have a small volume on my desk, the book of the "Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido," published by Hokusai exactly a hundred years ago. I open the book and look at the lovely prints, not knowing which to admire the more, the masterful drawing and composition of the sheets or their delicate colouring. I have to agree with Takai Ranzan, author of the preface of this volume, that "the merits of an otherwise praiseworthy man are often lauded with an excess of words. This will never be the case with the artist Hokusai Tameichi, well known here and abroad, whose art is so magnificent that when looking at his paintings one is unable to find the proper words to express his admiration."