

READING PASSAGE 1

You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 1–13**, which are based on Reading Passage 1 below.

Katsushika Hokusai

Hokusai (born October 1760, Edo [now Tokyo], Japan—died May 10, 1849, Edo) was a Japanese master artist and printmaker of the ukiyo-e (“pictures of the floating world”) school. His early works represent the full spectrum of ukiyo-e art, including single-sheet prints of landscapes and actors, hand paintings, and *surimono* (“printed things”), such as greetings and announcements. Later he concentrated on the classical themes of the samurai and Chinese subjects. His famous print series “Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji,” published between 1826 and 1833, marked the summit in the history of the Japanese landscape print.



Early years

Hokusai was born in the Honjo quarter just east of Edo (Tokyo) and became interested in drawing at the age of five. He was adopted in childhood by a prestigious artisan family named Nakajima but was never accepted as an heir—possibly supporting the theory that, though the true son of Nakajima, he had been born of a concubine.

Hokusai is said to have served in his youth as clerk in a lending bookshop, and from 15 to 18 years of age he was apprenticed to a wood-block engraver. This early training in the book and printing trades obviously contributed to Hokusai's artistic development as a printmaker.

The earliest contemporary record of Hokusai dates from the year 1778, when, at the age of 18, he became a pupil of the leading ukiyo-e master, Katsukawa Shunshō. The young Hokusai's first published works appeared the following year—actor prints of the kabuki theatre, the genre that Shunshō and the Katsukawa school practically dominated.

To judge from the ages of his several children, Hokusai must have married in his mid-20s. Possibly under the influence of family life, from this period his designs tended to turn from prints of actors and women to historical and landscape subjects, especially *uki-e* (semi-historical landscapes using Western-influenced perspective techniques), as well as prints of children. The artist's book illustrations and texts turned as well from the earlier themes to historical and didactic subjects. At the same time, Hokusai's work in the *surimono* genre during the subsequent decade marks one of the early peaks in his career. *Surimono* were prints issued privately for special occasions—New Year's and other greetings, musical programs and announcements, private verse selections—in limited editions and featuring immaculate printing of the highest quality.

Hokusai's early 30s were to prove years of personal change. His master Shunshō died early in 1793, and somewhat later Hokusai's young wife passed away, leaving a son and two daughters. In the year 1797 he remarried and adopted the name Hokusai. This change of name marks the beginning of the golden age of his work, which was to continue for a half century.

Mature years

In format, Hokusai's oeuvre from this period covers the gamut of ukiyo-e art: single-sheet prints, *surimono*, picture books and picture novelettes, illustrations to verse anthologies and historical novels, erotic books and album prints, and hand paintings and sketches. In his subject matter, Hokusai only occasionally (in a few notable prints, in paintings, and erotica) chose to compete with Utamaro, the acknowledged master of voluptuous figure prints. Aside from this limitation, however, Hokusai's work encompassed a wide range, with particular emphasis on landscape views and historical scenes in which figures were often of secondary interest. Around the turn of the century he experimented for a time with Western-style perspective and colouring.

From the early 19th century Hokusai commenced illustrating *yomihon* (the extended historical novels that were just coming into fashion). Under their influence, his style began to suffer important and clearly visible changes between 1806 and 1807. His figure work becomes more powerful but increasingly less delicate; there is greater attention to classical or traditional themes (especially of samurai, or warriors, and Chinese subjects) and a turning away from the contemporary *Ukiyo-e* world.

In about the year 1812, Hokusai's eldest son died. This tragedy was not only an emotional but also an economic event, for, as adopted heir to the affluent Nakajima family, the son had been instrumental in obtaining a generous stipend for Hokusai, so that he did not need to worry about the uncertainties of income from his paintings, designs, and illustrations, which at this period were paid for more with "gifts" than with set fees.

Whether for economic reasons or not, from this time on Hokusai's attention turned gradually from novel illustration to the picture book and, particularly, to the type of wood-block-printed copybook designed for amateur artists (including the famous *Hokusai manga*). Very likely his intention was to find new pupils and hence new patronage, and in this he succeeded to some degree.

Though famed for his detailed prints and illustrations, Hokusai was also fond of displaying his artistic prowess in public—making, for example, huge paintings (some fully 200 square metres [about 2,000 square feet] in area) of mythological figures before festival crowds, in both Edo and Nagoya. He was once even summoned to show his artistic skills before the shogun (the military leader who, although theoretically subordinate to the emperor, was in fact the ruler of Japan).

In the summer of 1828, Hokusai's second wife died. The master was then 68, afflicted intermittently with paralysis and left alone, evidently with only a profligate grandson, who had proved to be an incorrigible delinquent. It is probably no coincidence, therefore, that before long Hokusai's favourite daughter (and pupil), O-ei, broke her unhappy marriage with a minor artist named Tōmei and returned to her father's side, where she was to stay for his remaining years.

An energetic artist, Hokusai rose early and continued painting until well after dark. This was the customary regimen of his long, productive life. Of Hokusai's thousands of books and prints, his "Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji" is particularly notable (see [photograph](#)). Published from about 1826 to 1833, this famous series (including supplements, a total of 46 colour prints) marked a summit in the history of the Japanese landscape print; in grandeur of concept and skill of execution there was little approaching it before and nothing to surpass it later—even in the work of Hokusai's famed late contemporary Hiroshige (*q.v.*).

Hokusai's frequent changes in domicile (more than 90 dwellings) and of his own name are indicative of the artist's restless nature. Besides his principal *noms d'artiste* (roughly one per decade), the artist had also some two dozen other occasional pseudonyms, though these were normally used as adjuncts to his principal name of a given period.

Despite his appeals to heaven for "yet another decade—nay, even another five years," on the 18th day of the fourth month of the Japanese calendar "the old man mad with painting," as he called himself, breathed his last. He was 89 but still insatiably seeking for an ultimate truth in art—as he had written 15 years earlier:

From the age of five I have had a mania for sketching the forms of things. From about the age of 50 I produced a number of designs, yet of all I drew prior to the age of 70 there is truly nothing of any great note. At the age of 73 I finally apprehended something of the true quality of birds, animals, insects, fishes, and of the vital nature of grasses and trees. Therefore, at 80 I shall have made some progress, at 90 I shall have penetrated even further the deeper meaning of things, at 100 I shall have become truly marvelous, and at 110, each dot, each line shall surely possess a life of its own. I only beg that gentlemen of sufficiently long life take care to note the truth of my words.

Legacy

Hokusai embodied in his long lifetime the essence of the *Ukiyo-e* school of art during its final century of development. His stubborn genius also represents, in its 70 years of continuous artistic creation, the prototype of the single-minded artist, striving only to complete a given task. Moreover, Hokusai constitutes a figure who has, since the later 19th century, impressed Western artists, critics, and art lovers alike, more, possibly, than any other single Asian artist.

Reference

Encyclopaedia Britannica. *Hokusai*. Retrieved August 27, 2025, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hokusai>