

KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI

The Great Wave off Kanagawa, 1829-1832
Color woodblock print, 10.1 x 14.9 in



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EMANUELE TREVI

The Education of Beginners and the Spirit of Things

Hokusai's Wave Obsession

I entered the large portal of the Palazzo Reale, just a few steps from the Duomo, more for shelter from the icy cold Milanese drizzle that had started at dusk than from a real desire to see the Hokusai exhibit. I was early for an appointment, and the only alternative was an nth-time reconnaissance of the underground rooms of the nearby Virgin Megastore, an overused resource in those days of foul weather. The Palazzo Reale's rooms were presumably heated and comfortable. Besides, the exhibit's title, *The Paint-Crazy Old Man*, had a certain attraction. Blessed is he who is crazy for something, and even grows old while at it.

In other words, I wasn't prepared for the shock. I was expecting little branches of blossoming almond trees, geishas wearing their hair in buns, ponds with herons and bamboo tufts. Instead I immediately realized that I had stumbled in those galleries upon the work of a genius, one of the greatest, most inimitable, and astonishing artists ever. All things considered, this kind of sudden revelation is rare. Artistic education and taste aren't known to be conducive to sudden revelations and that is supposed to be a good thing. And that's because "education" necessarily and essentially is *prejudice* the sum of things that we know about an event before the event takes place. "Culture," in other words, is a sort of preventative measure. And then there are some people who don't have enough patience or determination to follow any measures at all. They look for fortuitous clues, keys found by chance that fit the right keyhole, the melody of coincidences.

My amazement over the beauty and intensity of those paintings and drawings by Hokusai was such that I emptied my pockets to buy the exhibit catalogue, a heavy thing that I had to drag around Milan all evening and which then, as always happens with objects of sudden and irresistible desire, I placed somewhere when I arrived back in Rome and ended up forgetting about completely.

Days before I departed for India, as I was watching the images of the 2004 tsunami for hours on TV, the catalogue for the *Paint-Crazy Old Man* came to mind, its subject the artist of the most famous and reproduced wave in the world, now often described as "Hokusai's tsunami." But that wave, painted in Hokusai's old age, was neither the first nor the last of a nearly infinite series of waves that he painted between his adolescent apprenticeship and the