From the age of six I had a penchant for copying the form of things, and from about fifty, my pictures were frequently published; but until the age of seventy, nothing that I drew was worthy of notice. At seventy-three years, I was somewhat able to fathom the growth of plants and trees; and the structure of birds, animals, insects and fish. Thus when I reached eighty years, I hope to have made increasing progress, and at ninety to see further into the underlying principles of things, so that at one hundred years I will have achieved a divine state in my art, and at one hundred and ten, every dot and every stroke will be as though alive.

From Hokusai’s autobiography, written in 1835, at age 75

“T he old man mad about painting” was how Katsushika Hokusai signed some of his work in his later years (1). Passion for art defined his life. And on his deathbed, at age 89, he bemoaned, “If only Heaven will give me just another ten years... just another five more years, then I could become a real painter” (1).

Hokusai was born in Edo, present-day Tokyo. He showed early interest in art and was apprenticed to Katsukawa Shunshō, master painter and printmaker, to paint ukiyo-e, “images of the floating world,” a style focused on everyday activities and their fleeting nature. He painted the transient lives of actors in Edo’s theater district, then moved on to study other art styles and become famous for his illustrations of poetry and popular novels. He drew from diverse artistic traditions, among them Chinese and Western art, which was then beginning to appear in Japan. Versatile and prolific, he left thousands of works, signed in more than 30 artistic names. He created a series of sketchbooks as instruction to those who wanted to draw in his style. The series was called Hokusai manga, a term he coined (2).

In a traditional society of Confucian values and rigid regimentation, Hokusai was bohemian. Eccentric, rebellious, and temperamental, he cared nothing about convention and was reputed to move each time the notorious clutter and disorder of his home became unbearable. Legend has it that when invited once to paint maple leaves floating on the Tatsuta River, he drew a few blue lines and then repeatedly imprinted atop the scroll chicken’s feet he had dipped into red color. When his contemporaries drew the shoguns and samurai, he portrayed the common people,
and when he painted landscapes, it was strictly from his
own point of view (3).

Even though Hokusai’s work did not receive full appre-
ciation in Japan, it gained high status and respect abroad.
The Great Wave (on this month’s cover) became a global
icon, as recognizable and revered as Leonardo da Vinci’s
Mona Lisa or Vincent van Gogh’s Sunflowers. Hokusai
prints were collected by Claude Monet, Edgar Degas,
Mary Cassatt, and many others, who were influenced by
them.

Hokusai reached the peak of his creativity in his seven-
ties, when he began work on his thirty-six views of Mount
Fuji (3,776 m), Japan’s summit and spiritual epicenter.
These images, like much of his mature work, reflect fami-
larity with such European trends as innovative pigments
and the telescope. Fascinated by Western design princi-
ples, he integrated them with Japanese technique, not only
in landscape paintings but also with flowers and birds,
which he showed in horizontal close-ups and cut-outs as if
seen by a telescope. His imaginative efforts captured the
essence rather than the likeness of what he painted and cre-
ated an altogether novel effect, which appeared Japanese to
outsiders and Western to the Japanese.

The Great Wave is Hokusai’s most celebrated work.
Although renowned nature scenes featured often in
Japanese art, the landscape as ukiyo-e theme did not gain
prominence until after views of Mount Fuji prints became
popular. The Great Wave inspired other artistic works, as
diverse as Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem Der Berg (The
Mountain) and Claude Debussy’s symphonic masterpiece
La Mer (The Sea), whose full score featured The Great
Wave on its first edition at the request of the composer (4).

This refined woodblock print epitomizes the artist’s
skills. Although meticulously structured, it appears effort-
less, its flair equaled only by the purity of its composition.
Undulating lines are fine, at times almost invisible, the col-
ors deliberate and intense. The viewer is guided through
the perilous ebb, past the boats to the landmark mountain.

The scene could not be more ukiyo-e: three light boats
carrying fish to market on a work day. But on this day, the
sea is in charge, a monstrous wave commanding the fore-
ground, cresting high above the horizon, dwarfing majes-
tic Mt. Fuji now a bump in the fluid scene. Like leaves
tossed to sea, the boats tumble, their tiny occupants
crouched in fear, clinging to the sides, unable to face the
wave and its claws of foam curling toward them.

In The Great Wave, Hokusai captured the uneasy senti-
ments of a nation surrounded and defined by water, as well
as the deeper, primal, human terror of the sea. Enchanting
but treacherous, water lures and repels. Seeking livelihood,
fortune, adventure, or just solace in its calm, humans ride
the waves, risking capricious tempests, settling in precari-
ous coastal regions frequently battered and overpowered
by the sea. When the earth moves or climate and other ele-
ments stir the waters, environmental markers shift, boats
and settlements crumble, and humans perish. In the after-
math comes infectious disease, originating in the disrup-
tion and lingering for lack of hygienic conditions and
adequate medical care.

Hokusai’s fishermen typify human plight against over-
whelming force. Their posture embodies the horror of
imminent physical harm and death. Fear and anxiety about
the long-term consequences of environmental catastrophe
are left to survivors and public health workers, who face,
along with the loss of infrastructure, compromised sanita-
tion, contamination of water supplies, secondary wound
infections, unsafe food, increased poverty, and compounding
disease.

The formidable challenge of water-related illness and
death persists, from the Indian Ocean to the Gulf of
Mexico—despite global prevention and control efforts.
Like the fishermen caught in Hokusai’s wave, unable to
confront the culprit, we cling to a life line: managing the
physical trauma and addressing resultant infections and
complications.

References
http://users.exis.net/~jnc/nontech/prints/hokusai.html
2. Forrer M. Hokusai: mountains and water, flowers and birds. Munich:
3. The bohemian vs. the bureaucrat: Hokusai and Hiroshige. [cited 2005
bk_issue/1996/marapr/hokusai.htm
4. Impressionist influences in the music of Claude Debussy. [cited 2005
debussy.html

Address for correspondence: Polyxeni Potter, EID Journal, Centers for
Disease Control and Prevention, 1600 Clifton Rd NE, Mailstop D61,
Atlanta, GA 30333, USA; fax: 404-371-5449; email: PMP1@cdc.gov

“Hope” is the thing with feathers/That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune—without the words./And never stops at all...
Emily Dickinson