PILGRIMS AT KIRIFURI WATERFALL ON MOUNT KUROKAMI IN SHIMOTSUKE PROVINCE

A lively waterfall dominates this famous work by printmaker Katsushika Hokusai (kah-tshuh-she-kah ho-ku-sah-e). The print is from a series by the artist called A Tour of Waterfalls of Various Provinces. Kirifuri waterfall was a popular site to visit during Hokusai’s time and still is today.

Strong white and blue vertical lines pour down from the top of the waterfall, dividing and spreading wider at the bottom like the roots of a tree. Three male travelers in front of the waterfall look up, mesmerized by the beauty and scale of the surging water. Above and to the right, two more figures look down at the scene from a higher point on the hill. Well-balanced colors of blue, green, yellow, orange, and white bring together many elements in the print. The importation of mineral pigments from Europe in the nineteenth century, especially Prussian blue, gave Japanese landscape printmakers like Hokusai new opportunities to express dramatic effects of sky and water. Hokusai carefully plays with warm and cool colors, creating contrasts between water, rock, and earth.

Born in Tokyo, Katsushika Hokusai liked to sign himself “The Old Man Mad for Drawing,” an apt nickname for an artist who made more than thirty thousand drawings in his lifetime. Apprenticed to a woodblock-print engraver in his teens, Hokusai learned the technical and interpretive skills involved in translating an original ink drawing into the engraved lines of the print block. Hokusai’s flat, decorative colors and lively designs would later influence many French Impressionist artists.

JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINTMAKING

Woodblock prints like this one are made by transferring an image carved on a block of wood onto a sheet of paper. Japanese
woodblock printmaking is known for its innovative use of materials. The first and one of the most important steps for the artist is selecting the proper wood. Traditional Japanese printmakers integrate the grains of wood into the design. After the woodblock is selected, the surface is cut away with knives or gouges varying in size to accommodate different thicknesses of lines. Next, ink is applied to the surface with brushes and then a piece of paper is placed over the colored block. The back of the paper is rubbed with a baren, a disk-shaped pad. The areas of the woodblock that are cut away will remain blank on the paper.

Artists, like Hokusai, enjoy using many colors in their prints. This requires a method of multipleblock printing in which a separate woodblock is carved for each color used. Each block has register guides called kentō cut into it. The guides help the artists align the blocks so that each color is printed clearly without spoiling other parts of the design. The paper made for woodblock printing must be strong and absorbent to stand up to many rubbings with a baren. Japanese printmakers favor paper made from mulberry trees.

**ART PROJECT: RELIEF PRINTMAKING**

**YOUNGER STUDENTS**

Have students sketch a design to make a print. Using a sheet of Styrofoam (available from art supply catalogues, or use trays from the supermarket), students can draw their design into the surface of the Styrofoam with a pencil. Next, using a roller, students can apply a water-based printing ink to the surface. Place a sheet of paper over the inked Styrofoam and rub gently and firmly. Then students can peel the paper away to see their printed design. Reapply ink to the Styrofoam to make multiple copies. If Styrofoam is not available, students can draw small designs into a half of a potato with a pencil and proceed the same way.

**OLDER STUDENTS**

Have students transfer a sketched design onto a linoleum block. Using linoleum cutters, students can cut into the block, removing all the linoleum that they do not want to appear in the final design. Apply printing ink to the block with a roller, or brayer. Next, students should lay a piece of paper over the block and apply even pressure to create a print. A wooden spoon or baren can be used for better pressure. Reapply ink to print multiple copies. Have students sign and number each print.
**RESEARCH IDEA**

Research the life of Katsushika Hokusai and the many prints he made. Learn his contributions to Japanese printmaking. Study artists from the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist movements, and discuss how Hokusai’s work influenced these painters.

**GROUP ACTIVITY**

Katsushika Hokusai visited many famous natural wonders in Japan, and created prints illustrating them. He included people in his prints to help us imagine what it might be like to actually be at the site. Have each student bring in a picture of a beautiful natural wonder; somewhere they have visited, or somewhere they would like to visit. Students can write an imaginary story of what it would be like to visit this place. Who would they go with? What kinds of activities might they do? How would it feel to see this place? How would they describe it so others could enjoy it as well? If they like, students can create a drawing to accompany their story.

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