

Remarks by H.E. Mr. HAYASHI Hajime, Ambassador of Japan to the UK,
for the Opening Reception of “Hokusai: The Great Picture Book of Everything”
at British Museum on September 28, 2021

Dr. Fischer and distinguished Guests of this evening,

After having finished a tour of this tremendous exhibition, I do not honestly find proper words to describe my impression. I can only say that Hokusai is now back to the British Museum and that delights await us all.

Because of Hokusai’s well-deserved international stature, displays of his works are not at all unusual. This one, however, is absolutely special. As well as works including the artist’s masterpieces, such as *The Great Wave*, the exhibition features 103 recently re-discovered drawings the artist produced for an illustrated encyclopedia. In a sense fortunately for us, the book was never actually published. As a result, we can now savour these wonderful drawings which would normally have been destroyed as part of the woodblock printing process. And, thanks to the thousands of hours of study by the curators, we have the opportunity to further appreciate Hokusai’s world, not least the tremendous energy and inventiveness with which he imbued every stroke of his brush.

As clearly proved by the previous exhibition here, “Hokusai: beyond the Great Wave” in 2017, Hokusai is truly an artistic giant. He was, of course, one of Japan’s most acclaimed artists in the Edo Period, active mainly in the first half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, it is a matter of record that, later in Europe, he was an abundant source of inspiration and stimulation particularly for those artists lately categorized as Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters. He also played an unwitting role in the spread of Japonisme in the late nineteenth century. The rare set of drawings of this exhibition eloquently testifies to the global reach of his vision, clearly demonstrating Hokusai’s role as an artist whose works resonate around the world.

Meanwhile, Hokusai was a perfectionist who never gave up pushing the boundaries of his work till he died at the age of 88. This is an extraordinary accomplishment when the average lifespan was considered to be between 30 and 50 years. Old age held no terrors for him. In fact, he commented on the various aspects of his ability as an artist that he looked forward to improving by certain milestones, even anticipating the new heights he expected to attain by the time he reached 110 years old. He set himself the highest standards and was always confident he could reach or surpass them. His zest for life is something from which we, in our relentlessly ageing society, could well learn.

Taking today’s opportunity, I would like to offer my sincere appreciation to the British Museum, Asahi Shinbun, and everyone else whose tireless efforts have resulted in this splendid exhibition. Moreover, as a public institution with the highest standards, the

British Museum has been so scrupulous as in putting the drawings online, thereby allowing everyone access to the images and enabling far more people to enjoy and study them than Hokusai could have ever imagined. And now, just a few years since their re-discovery, we can relish them in person. I am sure you will all enjoy the exhibition as much as I did. Let me conclude my words by encouraging you to tell your friends and acquaintances that this is a must-see event. I believe you do not regret using that word.

Thank you for your very kind attention.