The Biggest Picture on Record.

EVEN now few Europeans are acquainted even with the names of any of the great artists who made the art of old Japan. Japanese art, taking its origin in the China of a thousand or two thousand years back (as much of our own took its origin in Greece), developed and flourished under its own conventions and canons, undisturbed by influence from without, and, indeed, to all intents unknown beyond the coasts of Japan. In the result, it seems to us, at first glance, as the art of another planet, and, perhaps, as difficult to understand.

It *is* difficult for most people to understand without a little trouble, and, therefore, many find that the easiest way is to sneer at it, and to condemn it with the superior confidence that ignorance alone can give. These are reinforced by the many thousands who do not, and never can, understand any sort of art whatsoever, but who either fancy they do, or are not honest, and pretend they do. A real and deep knowledge of Japanese art is the attainment of very few; consequently, the amusing "howlers" perpetrated by those who undertake to talk confidently of "overrated Japan," cannot be so widely enjoyed as they deserve. For Japanese art is a matter beset with amazing traps for the smatterer, and perhaps there is no other subject in the world in which a little knowledge is quite so dangerous a thing. On the other hand, European art is to a Japanese as strange and as difficult to comprehend as the Japanese to us; and the ignorant and self-sufficient Japanese is as disdainful of Western art as his European counterpart is of Eastern. And, of course, one must remember that there is bad Japanese art as well as good, just as is the case with the art of other countries; and to commend a thing merely because it is Japanese is as foolish as to dispraise it for the same reason. But Japanese art in abstract and in general is not our business in this article.

Among the scores of great Japanese painters of all schools, Yamato, Tosa, Kano, Ukioyé, and the rest, the man whose name is most familiar to Europeans is Hokusai. Indeed, many have contrived to keep alive quite a small reputation as connoisseurs in Japanese art on the knowledge of that one name, and of nothing else whatever relating to the subject. Hokusai was not only one of the greatest of Japanese artists, but he was also one of the last—indeed, he was quite the last great painter, for he lived till ninety, and outlasted all his early contemporaries—Utamaro, Yeishi, Toyokuni, and others. After his death, Japanese art was the barren waste it has remained — but for the performances of one or two men—ever since. Hokusai was born at Yedo (which is now Tokio) on the eighteenth day of the first month of the tenth year of Horeiki, according to Japanese chronology—or, in plain English, on the 5th of March, 1760. He was the third son of his father, Kawamura Ichiroyemon, and as a child his name was Tokitaro. Names are plentiful in Japan, and a man may take several in the course of his life. Hokusai changed his again and again, and his many signatures are a bewilderment and a snare to the student. At the age of four, little Tokitaro was adopted by one Nakajima Isai, maker of mirrors to the Shogun, and when at last he was set to a trade he got a situation in a bookseller's, where, by unflagging idleness and strict disregard of business, he shortly achieved the distinction of the "sack." Next he was a wood-engraver, cutting the blocks for the books printed from the writing of the author, a block for each page. And at last, when about eighteen, his true vocation claimed him, and he became a pupil in the studio of the great artist Katsugawa Shunsho.

To treat with moderate fulness of the work he poured forth from this date till that of his death in 1849 would need not an article, but a large volume. He was never idle again. He was always poor, but he worked away merrily, with his heart in his drawings, and he delighted to sign himself, "Gwakiorojin"—the old man mad with drawing. His life-work was likewise his hobby, and he rode his hobby with passionate ardour. He was poor, as we have said, but he was proud and independent. He was despised by many because he threw aside the rules and conventions of the schools and brought something new into his art, something of his own. From the beginning of the world every man who has done this has been abused by the critics among his contemporaries, but he has been remembered afterwards. It was because of this independence that he broke with the school of Shunsho, and became a free-lance in art. He drew a poster for a print-dealer, and drew it in his own way. When this

HOKUSAI BEGINNING THE BIG PICTURE.

poster, handsomely mounted, was exhibited at the print-seller's door, it so scandalized another pupil of the Shunsho school that he tore it down on the spot. The result was a quarrel, and Hokusai's final shaking off of the fetters of the schools.

Hokusai now devoted himself to independent work in design and book illustration. As he grew in years, so his genius grew in strength. Some day we may have an opportunity of presenting our readers with specimens of his work, but the present article is chiefly concerned with a curious *tour de force* of Hokusai's rather than with his more serious work. In the year 1817, when the artist was in his fifty-eighth year, he paid a visit to Nagoya, where several of his pupils (he had pupils of his own now) had settled. At this time his book illustrations were in great demand, and his enemies took occasion to observe that he was capable of nothing more than little drawings of that sort. This irritated Hokusai, who proclaimed, ironically, that if the greatness of a painter were to be measured by the size of his work, he could prove himself great indeed. He and his pupils immediately set to work to confound their adversaries, and to make preparation for the drawing in public, by the master, of the largest picture on record.

First, arrangements were made for the use of the northern courtyard of the great temple of Nishigakeijo, at Nagoya. A temporary fence was placed round the space reserved for the work, and most of the space was covered by a great bed of rice-straw, on which the paper was to lie. The paper was specially made, of great thickness, many large pieces being deftly joined to make a sheet of the area of 120 *tatami*, or Japanese floor-mats. Now, as these *tatami* are invariably of one size, 6ft. by 3ft. exactly, it is easy to calculate that Hokusai's big picture was to occupy a sheet of paper of 240 square yards in area. A scaffolding was erected at the head of the courtyard, with pulleys and ropes, by which the picture might be raised to a vertical position. Brushes were made, of which the very smallest were brooms. Ink and colour were prepared in barrels, with buckets

for convenience of carriage. The preparations were not completed till the noon of the day appointed for the task, but from daylight a great crowd of people of all classes pressed about the fence to see the show. Hokusai, the "man mad with drawing," was to cover the vast sheet before them with an immense figure of Daruma, the ancient hermit, who was fabled to have spent nine years in contemplation, and in a sack. It was this same Daruma, by the way, who, indignant at finding himself asleep after a few years' wakefulness, cut off his eye-lids and flung them away, as a precaution against any such failing in the future; and, lo! the next morning, from the spot where the sainted eye-lids had fallen, there sprang up a new plant—the tea-plant—an infusion of the leaves of which was a sovereign remedy for all sleepiness.

Early in the afternoon Hokusai appeared at the head of his pupils. All were in ceremonial costume, but with garments girded up and legs and arms bare. The pupils passed the brushes and materials, and two of them constantly followed Hokusai, bearing a large bronze vessel full of ink. The master, taking his first broom, and wetting it with ink, drew first the nose of the figure. Then he drew the right eye, and drew it 6ft. across; then the left eye. This done, he took a little walk and drew the mouth—more than 7ft. wide; another little walk and he drew the ear—12ft. from top to bottom. All divine and saintly figures in Buddhist art are given big ears—they have some symbolic meaning.

Next he ran forward, keeping his feet from the damp ink, and drew the outline of the head at the top, continuing with the outlines of face and jaw. After this he changed his brush, and took one made of cocoanut fibre, dipped in ink of a paler tint. With this he drew the hair and the bristly beard. And then his pupils brought his largest brush—a bunch of rice-sacks, soaked in ink, with a cord attached. The pupils placed the bunch on the spot pointed out by the master, and then, dragging it by the cord, he proceeded to make the folds of Daruma's robe. The colour of the robe was to be red, and this colour was brought in buckets and swilled over the surface, the pupils mopping up the superfluity with large cloths as the completed picture was at last raised by the pulleys. The head of the figure, by the way, from the extreme crown to the lowest of the chins, measured

THE PUPILS REMOVING THE SURPLUS COLOUR.

THE GREAT PICTURE RAISED.

32ft. Hokusai's signature and the date appeared at the left-hand side, and the whole thing remained suspended on the scaffold till the next day for the wonder and admiration of the crowd, which was vast.

Our illustrations of this feat are taken from the "Katsushika Hokusai den," the biography of Hokusai by I-ijima Hanjuro. They were drawn by Yeiko, a later and smaller artist, the figure of Daruma being done from a copy made at the time. In the drawing representing the elevation of the picture in the midst of the crowd, the artist has not made the picture nearly of a sufficient size in relation to the people in the crowd. This is one of those quaint carelessnesses that many Japanese artists regard as mattering nothing. To consider a picture merely

as an exact record of some event or thing, correct in every proportion, never occurs to them, for in old days in Japan pictures were never designed to serve any such utilitarian purpose. The inscription seen to the left of the figure is the date and signature already mentioned. The date is expressed in the vertical line of characters next the figure, and it reads, "Bunkwa, the fourteenth year, the tenth month, and the fifth day." The fourteenth year of Bunkwa was our year 1817. The other line contains the signature, "Gwakiojin Hokusai Taito."

Hokusai performed other similar feats, though the figure of Daruma was his largest drawing. Once he painted, on the same day, a horse as large as an elephant, on paper, and two sparrows in flight, *on a grain of rice*.

We reproduce a portrait of Hokusai as he was after his eightieth year. It was drawn in colours by his daughter, O Yei. One of the most wonderful facts about this wonderful old man was his steady improvement in his art at an age when most men's faculties deteriorate. In the preface to one of his most celebrated books—that of the 'Hundred Views of Fujisan,' published when his age was seventy-five—he says this:—

"Since the age of six I have had a mania for drawing. When I reached fifty years of age I had published a vast number of pictures, but all that I drew before the age of seventy years is not worth counting. At seventy-three I had to some extent comprehended the structure of animals, plants, trees, birds, fishes, and insects. Consequently, at the age of eighty I shall have made still more progress; at ninety years I shall penetrate the mystery of things; at 100 years I shall certainly achieve wonders; and when I am 110 everything I draw, be it but a point or a line, shall be alive. I call on those who shall live till that time to observe if I fail to keep my word. Written at the age of seventy-five by me, formerly Hokusai, now Gwakiorojin."

PORTRAIT OF HOKUSAI: BY HIS DAUGHTER.

"Gwakiorojin" means, as we have already explained, "old man mad with drawing."

But the brave old fellow did not live to carry out his promise, though in truth he died a very old man, and an artist worthy to rank with the highest. And he died thinking of his work, as ever, and yearning still for improvement—improvement at ninety! "If Heaven would give me ten more years——" he said, and paused. Then, presently, he resumed, "If Heaven would give me only five more years of life, I might become a truly great painter!" But he was as great a painter as Heaven allows already, and he lived no longer, but at ninety "penetrated the mystery of things," as he had prophesied he would, though in another sense to that he had intended. It must be understood that when one puts his age at ninety, it is according to the Japanese computation, which counts a completed year at each New Year's Day, beginning with the first after birth. He fell a little short of ninety complete years of life. In his last hour he made a little verse, which is difficult to translate precisely, but which means something like this: "There will be freedom, noble freedom, when one walks abroad in the fields of spring, the soul alone, untrammelled by the body!"

His tomb stands in the garden of the Sukioji Temple at Asakusa, with the inscription on its face: "Gwakiojin Manji no Haku"—the tomb of Manji, the Old Man Mad with Drawing.

He was an eccentric old man, unfortunate in his worldly affairs, but a man of great character, quite apart from his genius. Many curious anecdotes are told of his doings, and of his relations with those about him, but for these we have no space in this particular article.