

Katsushika Hokusai's later life to feature in British Museum show

He produced [one of the most recognisable of all art images](#), but the [British Museum](#) believes there is much more to the 19th-century Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai, particularly his output as an older man.

The museum has announced details of the first UK exhibition to explore the later life and art of Hokusai (1760-1849), who produced his most famous work, the Great Wave, when he was at least 70.

[Tim Clark, the head of the Japanese section at the museum](#), said the final decades of Hokusai's life were remarkable. He wanted to live forever. "He fervently believed that the older he got the greater his art would become and this exhibition basically agrees with that premise ... you see an acceleration and an urgency."

It will be the first time many of the paintings, drawings and woodblock prints have been displayed in the UK, and some can only be on show for a limited time because of their sensitivity to light.

Clark said the issue provided a "happy incentive" to display even more works, with the show closing for a few days halfway through its three-month run to allow a rotation of about half of the works.

At any one time there will be 110 works on display, and there throughout will be the British Museum's prized print of the Great Wave, acquired in 2008 but rarely put on display. "We've been saving it," Clark said. "Since 2011, I don't think it has been on display here."

Between 5,000 and 8,000 impressions were made from Hokusai's woodblock. Several hundred still exist, and the museum's example is considered one of the finest.

The work is called the Great Wave in the west, but its subject is really the sacred Mount Fuji, dwarfed by the size of the wave.

It comes from Hokusai's series Thirty-Six Views of Mt Fuji, and there is something about the energy and awesome destructive power of the wave and the helplessness of the fishermen clinging on to their boats that has long resonated with people both in Japan and the rest of the world.

The image inspired Debussy's orchestral work *La Mer*, [was appropriated by Hergé for the ocean peril of Tintin and Snowy in Cigars of the Pharaoh](#) and can still be seen on countless tea-towels and mugs.

“It is a totemic, iconic image of the power of nature,” said Clark. “If you do a snap poll of people, pretty much everyone these days recognises this image.”

A major reason for the fresh appraisal of an artist many believe is Japan's greatest is to show British audiences that there was far more to Hokusai than his most famous image. To that end many of his later painted works, which are rarely seen, will be part of the show.

They include a group of paintings from the National Museum of Leiden commissioned by employees of the Dutch East India Company in the 1820s, and a striking [hanging scroll on loan from the Met in New York depicting Red Shōki, the demon Queller](#), a character who could protect your home against the scourge of smallpox.

In another slightly terrifying woodblock print, [Kohada Koheiji from One Hundred Ghost Tales](#), the roots of modern Japanese manga can be seen, Clark said.

It was made in 1833 for a book which was part of the Japanese tradition of people sitting around telling ghost stories. As each finishes, the storytellers extinguish their lamp so the room gets darker and darker until finally the ghouls come out.

Hokusai's image shows a husband who was murdered by his wife and lover coming back to haunt them, his bony fingers pulling back the mosquito net on their bed.

It is vivid and sensational with a fantasy that is very much part of the later manga tradition, Clark said.

Hokusai was devoted to his work, believing he would get better and better if he just kept going, producing works that brought to life dragons, phoenixes and eagles as well as landscapes and waves.

He did so in trying circumstances. His wife died in the late 1820s, he was ill and an errant grandson brought financial hardship. His daughter Eijo, herself an accomplished artist, left her marriage so she could care for him and work alongside him, and even though they sometimes lived in squalor, his bed quilt infested with lice, he produced some remarkable work.

“He was not interested in fortune,” said Clark. “He would get money and not even open the wrapper. Someone would bring food or provisions and he would just hand them the wrapped up coins.”

Hokusai imagined he would be an even greater artist at 100 and then at 110, but it was not to be. He died after a short illness in 1849, aged 90.

Hokusai: beyond the Great Wave is at the [British Museum](#) from 25 May to 13 August 2017 (closed 3 to 6 July)