

Why Could *Hokusai* Live and Work So Long?

Kazutoshi Fujihira

Katsushika Hokusai lived until he was nearly 90 and produced over 30,000 works, such as paintings and woodblock prints. When Hokusai was in his 80s, he visited Obuse in Shinano Province (now Nagano Prefecture) at the invitation of a wealthy farmer, Takai Kozan. During his stay in Obuse, he created several masterpieces, such as *Dragon on the Higashimachi Festival Float* and *Feminine Wave*. In order to explore the sources of his longevity and hard work, I traveled to Obuse Town in the summer of 2023.

A Short Trip to Obuse Town

On August 20, I made a short trip to Obuse Town, Nagano Prefecture. It took only two hours from Tokyo Station to Obuse Station, by using the Hokuriku Shinkansen and the Nagaden Railway. In Obuse Town, I visited the Hokusai Museum and the Ganshojin Temple to look at paintings created by Katsushika Hokusai.



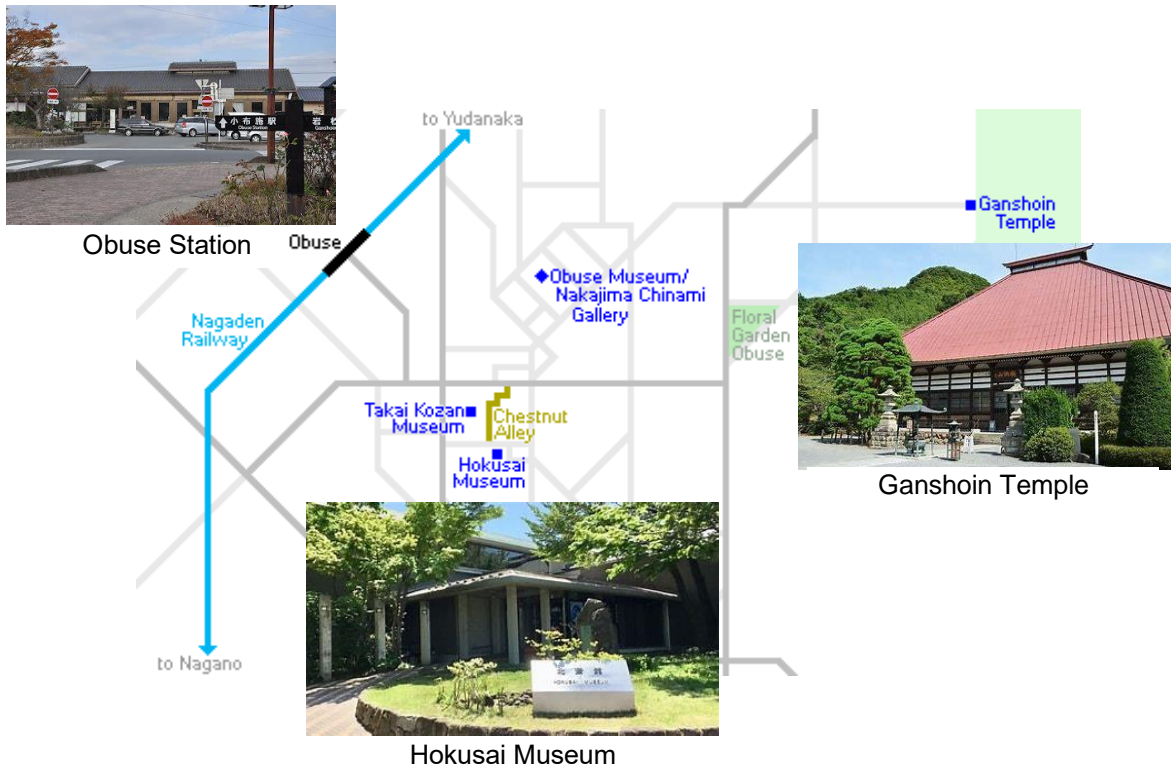
When traveling to Nagano, I used the *Kagayaki*, the fastest service operating on the Hokuriku Shinkansen line. It took only 80 minutes from Tokyo Station to Nagano Station.

An express train approaching Obuse Station of the Nagaden Railway.

Fujihira K. Why Could *Hokusai* Live and Work So Long?. September 2023. Institute of Environmentology.

<https://www.kankyogaku.com/docs/hokusai.pdf>

Institute of Environmentology: <https://www.kankyogaku.com/en/>



Obuse Town Sightseeing Map

(1) Hokusai Museum

I walked from Obuse Station to the Hokusai Museum, while viewing the picturesque town. This museum invites visitors to appreciate Hokusai’s artistic achievements, such as paintings, books of woodblock prints, and multi-colored brocade pictures.

The most notable works exhibited in this museum are the ceiling paintings for the two festival floats. In 1844, Hokusai created *Dragon* and *Phoenix* for the Higashi-machi Festival float. In 1845, he produced *Masculine Wave* and *Feminine Wave* for the Kan-machi Festival float.

Moreover, in the museum’s projection room, visitors can enjoy videos about Hokusai’s life and his stay in Obuse. Watching the video, I learned that Hokusai traveled alone from Edo to Obuse, walking about 250 kilometers in eight days. At that time, he was 85 years old.



Higashimachi Festival Float (front) and Kan-machi Festival Float (back)



Dragon on the Higashimachi Festival Float (1844)



Feminine Wave on the Kan-machi Festival Float (1845)

(2) Ganshoin Temple

After leaving the Hokusai Museum, I walked approximately two kilometers to the Ganshoin Temple under a blazing sun, imagining an old Hokusai going on walking and walking to Obuse. The reason why I visited the Ganshoin Temple was to look at *Phoenix Glaring in All Directions* painted on the ceiling of the temple's main hall.



Phoenix Glaring in All Directions painted on the ceiling of the Ganshoin Temple (1847)

In Edo, 1846, Hokusai produced the colored underdrawing for the *Phoenix Glaring in All Directions*. After that, it was delivered to Takai Kozan in Obuse, and Kozan accomplished the painting based on that underdrawing. This is the huge phoenix, the size of 21 tatami mats. No matter where you stand when you look at the phoenix, it seems to look right back at you.

The secret of Hokusai's healthy longevity

Hokusai lived to the grand age of 90. Other *ukiyo-e* artists contemporary with Hokusai, such as Keisai Eisen and Utagawa Hiroshige, died at around 60. Not only was Hokusai the most long-lived among noted *ukiyo-e* artists, but he remained healthy enough to continue painting until his death. The following discusses the secret of Hokusai's healthy longevity from three perspectives: (1) walking, (2) diet, and (3) passion.

(1) Walking

Walking long distances was no trouble at all for Hokusai. For example, from 1831 to 1833, when Hokusai was in his 70s, he produced a series of landscape prints titled "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji." In order to depict Mount Fuji from different locations and in various seasons, he often made long journeys on foot. Even in his late 80s, he was not deterred by rain. Hokusai went from Katsushika to Ryogoku in the rain, wearing only a straw hat and straw sandals for protection. Walking frequently made his legs strong, and strong legs made frequent walks possible.



Fine Wind, Clear Morning (or Red Fuji)



The Great Wave off Kanagawa

Two famous works in the "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji." Hokusai depicted them when he was around 72.



A *soba* shop in the Edo period



Longan: An edible juicy fruit from a plant related to the lychee, cultivated in SE Asia.

(2) Diet

Hokusai had a modest and simple diet. Meanwhile, he often had *soba* noodles. According to the Biography of Katsushika Hokusai, as soon as he awoke, he reached for a paintbrush and continued to create throughout the day. When his eyes and body got tired, he ate two servings of *soba* noodles and slept. *Soba* noodles are made from buckwheat flour and have been a staple in Japanese cuisine for hundreds of years. *Soba* can deliver nutrients different from rice and ensure a well-rounded diet. Eating buckwheat has benefits for controlling blood sugar, heart health, cancer prevention, and protection against anemia.

In addition to *soba*, a special drink might play a significant role in Hokusai's longevity. In *Daily Exorcisms*, Hokusai himself wrote: "If you put longan and sugar in *shōchū*, leave it for sixty days, and drink two sake cupfuls of it every morning and night, it works for longevity."

(3) Passion

However, in Hokusai's case, his enthusiasm to create pictures probably supported his health. For instance, when Hokusai was around 68 years old, he had a stroke of apoplexy. After that, he suffered aftereffects, such as shaking or trembling on his right hand, or dominant hand. Referring to a Chinese medical text, Hokusai prepared a medicine by himself and took it. Around one year afterward, he eventually recovered from the secondary disease. After that, Hokusai created the famous "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji" series when he was around 72 years old.

Furthermore, despite being over 80, Hokusai reportedly sighed that he could not draw even a cat correctly. His sincere attitude to devote himself, at that age, to studying drawing techniques must have given him the vitality to live on. Constantly seeking to produce better work, he exclaimed on his deathbed, "If only Heaven will give me just another ten years...Just another five more years, then I could become a real artist."



The Dragon of Smoke Escaping from Mt. Fuji. This was completed in January of 1849, three months before his death.