

LIBERAL ARTS

Hokusai, Japanese Folklore, and Modern American Horror

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Voluntarily isolated from foreign influence during the Edo period, Japan's heritage evolved with incomparable individuality. Nineteenth-century painter Katsushika Hokusai was one of many individuals who recorded Japan's culture, and he did so with a particular interest in the occult. His prints represent the obscure nature of common Japanese folklore, theater, and spirituality. Analyses on his works reveal gruesome stories that inspired directors to produce popular American media today.

Many of Hokusai's works portray popular characters from Kabuki Theater's *adauchi kyogen* (revenge play); typically a story about an abused woman who faces a ruthless death, but returns as a *yurei* (phantom in a white gown with long black hair) to seek retribution. Though common to Japanese folklore, the *yurei*'s story became the predecessor to plots seen in American horror flicks. The American movie "The Ring" (2002) was an adaptation from a Japanese film, "Ringu," developed

from the *adauchi kyogen* written centuries prior to its release. Antagonist Samara embodies the vengeful rage distinctive to Japanese fiction, and while the plot remains consistent, alterations relevant to a technology-driven culture make the story unique to its time in history and place in culture.

The folklore embedded in all of Hokusai's works has inspired artists and writers throughout history, and there is no doubt that there are works being produced now that maintain the spirit of Japanese horror. How their stories continue evolving in the future from an ever-accelerating society will define cultures and hopefully be respected as an origin of fear entertainment.

Research advisor Catherine Dossin writes, "Dillon's research on Hokusai's imagery illuminates an important aspect of Japanese folklore most Westerners ignore, but in fact know very well through the horror movies these ancient legends influenced. The visual connections Dillon establishes between Hokusai's prints and contemporary American movies provide compelling examples of cultural transfers and artistic hybridizations."