

# Miss Hokusai (2015)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 30 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

Director Keiichi Hara's beautifully animated film is not for children. Not only do some scenes unfold in a brothel, but there is no thrilling easy to follow plot. Instead there are a series of vignettes loosely joined concerning the relationship between the great Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai (voiced by Yutaka Matsushige) and his less known daughter O-Ei (Anne Higashide). She too was an artist, working in the same studio, both on her own work and assisting with his—indeed, the film suggests that some works attributed to her father are actually by her. She serves as the narrator, telling us at the beginning about “this nutty old man” (whom she calls Tetsuzo) painting pictures on giant sheets of paper as well as upon a tiny grain of rice.

The time and place of the story are “Edo, Summer, 1814,” Edo being the name of Tokyo during the last days of the old Samurai period. The kimonoed O-Ei knows “her place” when walking the thronged city streets, but at home she is anything but the demure wall flower that Japanese (and indeed, European) tradition forced upon women. She smokes a pipe, speaks brashly, works at her own drawing board close to her father, and refuses to clean the paper-littered house. She says that when things get too dirty, she and her father pack up their art work and materials and move to another house. Also, frequently present is the young apprentice Hatsugoro (Michitaka Tsutsui) and visiting artists.

Believing that she could paint just as well as her father, the

girl gets her chance when she accidentally ruins a large dragon painting due shortly, which she does just in time. However, she is regarded by Tetsuzo as more of a craftsman than creative artist. He sees his inspiration as more mystical, relating a story about his hands extended from his body and reached around the world. O-Ei is but 23 years of age, lacking her father's experience, so he takes her with him to the home of a geisha to expand her horizon. She also accompanies him to the house of a wealthy but seemingly possessed courtesan for what amounts to an exorcism by art. His painting of demons in hell so deeply disturbs her that he adds a positive little scene to it, thus restoring her mental health.

The father is depicted as a workaholic artist, gruff with his daughter but encouraging her in her work. There is also another daughter, the blind O-Nao, but he totally ignores her. This is easy to do because the little girl lives with his divorced wife. There are numerous scenes in which O-Ei visits and takes her sightless younger sister on excursions. The little girl has a favorite bridge on which she loves all the many smells that come to her while people pass by. These trips provide the more tender moments in the film. In the one involving a boy and a snowball, the usually somber little girl laughs. Returning from one such trip, O-Ei asks if she would like to stop by and greet their father, but the O-Nao replies No, that she does not want to disturb him. Tetsuzo passes by them on the other side of the narrow street, but does not acknowledge them.

Today Hokusai might be the best known Japanese artist, his "The Great Wave Off the Coast of Kanagawa" reproduced in hundreds of books and available in virtually every art museums gift shop. This film centering on what might be an overlooked female artist is a welcome addition to a very small genre. There have been few films about women artists because there have been so few women able to break into what has been a male

bastion. The best known of these, Artemesia, flourished in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The struggles she faced to express herself on canvass are recounted in the film that bears her name.

Mr. Hara's Manga-inspired film is itself a lovely work of art. The animation is simple, but the street scenes and those of nature are intricately wrought. There is a delightful homage to "The Great Wave.." when O-Ei sails with her sister in a small boat so she can experience the sea. Although this is a film for adults, parents of older children will find this an excellent way to introduce them to Japanese art, and their daughters to a spunky but kind young woman who is every bit as interesting as any of those princesses celebrated in other animated films.

*This review with a set of questions will be in the Nov. 2016 issue of VP.*