

The Great Wave off Kanagawa



Katsushika Hokusai, 'Under the Wave off Kanagawa' (*The Great Wave*), circa. 1830-1832, woodblock print; ink and color on paper, 25.7 x 37.9 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (JP1847)

Key facts:

- Size: 25.7cm × 37.8cm
- Medium: Coloured woodblock print on mulberry paper
- Series: From 'Thirty-six views of Mount Fuji'
- Date: c.1830

1. Art historical terms and concepts

Subject matter: A huge wave threatens three small skiffs and their rowers. Its looming form is repeated by a small cresting wave below it, which in turn links back to the iconic silhouette of Mt Fuji in the background.

Viewpoint: Low and central – emphasising the vulnerability of humanity in the face of the huge power of nature.

Space and depth: Hokusai's exploration of 'deep space' here reveals his interest in the lessons of European art, particularly seen through the work of Shiba Kōkan (1747-1818) who was its strongest champion at the time. In fact, though, we see little of the mid ground, meaning that the strongest motifs are the huge wave and then the distant mountain.

Ukiyo-e: A genre of art which flourished in Japan, particularly Edo (later renamed Tokyo), from the 17th to the 19th century. Translates as pictures of the 'floating world'. Often produced commercially as inexpensive woodblock prints, these images were widely popular.

Composition: The strong rhythmic lines swoop from calm strength on the right to a huge display of power on the left. This line is echoed by the prow of the boats which serve to remind the viewer that the profile of Mt Fuji is much more perfect and stronger than anything human-made.

Line: Prominent use of line is emphasised by the woodblock technique. The downward momentum of the right lines splinter into the clawing power of the breaking wave on the left. This overlap of blue/white is echoed in the snow-capped peak of Mt Fuji, creating a powerful harmony to the whole. The contrasting pale yellow, grey and pink used for the boats add to the suggestion that their fate is entirely controlled by nature.

2. Cultural, social, technological and political factors

The narrow boats are 'oshiokwi' (high speed skiffs) used to take the spring catch of bonito to Edo's fish market. Presumably they are here headed out to sea to meet the fishing fleet and the viewpoint is looking back towards the land of Japan from the sea.

Japan had been closed to foreign travel since the 1630s. Trade with the Netherlands and China was carefully regulated exclusively through the western port of Nagasaki. In 1720, Shogun Yoshimune lifted the ban on imported Chinese translations of European books (as long as they did not deal with Christianity) and these together with the porcelain and textiles imported from abroad allowed artists to discover alternative artistic conventions. (Restrictions were eventually lifted following naval action in 1854 and an alternative name for the 'Impressionists' was originally 'Les Japonais' following their significant interest in the colours and forms of ukiyo-e.)

Mt Fuji is the highest peak in Japan (almost 4000m) and it was also revered as a deity. It was venerated in both the Buddhist faith and in Kami (the worship we now call Shinto). Soon after the founding of the city of Edo in the early 17th century, it became the focus of popular cults which mainly aimed to heal the sick and bring peace and prosperity to the community.

This work was made in the artist's old age when he was reputedly struggling following the death of his wife and his efforts to support a gambling grandson. He had retreated to a temple in Asakusa and this commission came at a poignant moment for him. He repeatedly uses the image of the mountain throughout his career as a personal symbol of an inextinguishable life force – and presumably also as a marker of his Edo identity. The artist changed his name and seals obsessively, reflecting his own search for artistic education and renewal. The signature (top left) reads "from the brush of Hokusai changing to Itsu". 'Hokusai' means 'north studio' and reflects his worship of Myōken Bosatsu – the deity of the north star. 'Itsu' means 'one again', and so shows that the artist has passed 60 – the year when the sixty year cycle of the calendar started to repeat.)

3. Developments in materials, techniques and processes

Thought to have been made using 8 colours: indigo blue for the outlines; 3 shades of Prussian (or Berlin) blue for the sea; pale grey in the sky and on foreground boats; dark grey for the sky & matting near the front of the boats; pale yellow for the foreground boats and pink for the clouds. Hokusai's original drawing (hanshita-e) would have been stuck on the printing block and destroyed during cutting. Four short planks of mountain cherry wood were used for the blocks, each cut both sides and each used for one colour and one for the outlines.

The use of Prussian blue is another example of Hokusai's readiness to use European ideas, despite the ban on travel at that time. Prussian blue was first mixed in Berlin at the beginning of the 18th century. It was less sensitive to light and therefore faded less quickly and could also be printed with more saturation than other blues. This meant it became popular in Japan (presumably also through the importance of Dutch and Chinese trade in textiles and ceramics).

Hokusai would have been consulted about colours and effects, but the process of transference onto the woodblocks and subsequent printing would have been carried out by skilled craftspeople hired by the publisher, Nishimuraya Yohachi.

4. Ways it has been used and interpreted by past and present societies

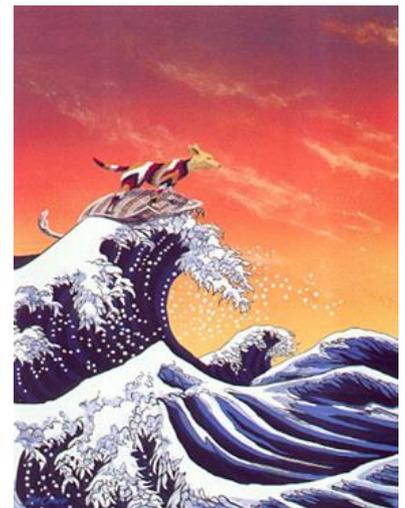
This image was one of a series of prints called 'Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji'. It was so successful that the number of views was extended by 10 to 46. The collection aimed to show the beautiful form of the mountain in all seasons, weathers and times of day.

The prints were sold for 'the price of a bowl of noodles', meaning they were widely accessible to the 1 million people of Edo in the mid 19th century. Many of the scenes show a viewpoint from behind ordinary people engaged in an activity which provides a compositional link to the key shape of Mount Fuji in the background. This link serves to heighten respect for the mountain by being less perfect, beautiful or elegant.

The publisher (and therefore commissioner) of this series, Nishimuraya Yohachi, was a member of the Fuji cult and the huge popularity of the series would therefore have built the prestige of the mountain and city and thus directly contributed to the prosperity which was their aim. The timing of the series also coincided with a boom in local travel.

Alternative readings of this image have suggested that the wave can be seen as the outside/foreign world threatening Japan, symbolised by Mt Fuji. Certainly, given the context that overseas travel was forbidden, Hokusai's choice of a perspective from the sea back towards the land seems interesting.

Although the 'Great Wave' was not originally the most popular of the 36 views, its subsequent popularity has grown and grown and it is often cited as the most iconic Japanese work. Two images below help to demonstrate its worldwide popularity: in London on a house painting by Dominic Swords and by Lin Onus (an Australian artist of Scottish/Aboriginal parents) who adopt or translate the materials, techniques and symbols of the work in their own ways and for their own times.



Left Roy Lichtenstein, *Drowning Girl*, 1963, oil and acrylic on canvas, 171.6 x 169.5 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (685.1971) / Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

Centre Dominic Swords, mural on an end wall in Camberwell based on the '*Great Wave*' by Katsushika Hokusai created in 1997. Digital image courtesy of the artist / London Mural Preservation Society

Right Lin Onus, *Michael and I are just slipping down to the pub for a minute*, 2000, archival ink on Hahnemuehle rag paper, edn 48/48, 77 x 57 cm. Digital image courtesy of Lin Onus

Further reading/links:

- TJ Clark 'Hokusai's Great Wave' British Museum Objects in Focus, 2011
- John Reeve 'Japanese Art close up' 2005
- <https://smarthistory.org/hokusai-under-the-wave-off-kanagawa-the-great-wave/>