

Hokusai's Great Wave: The Upsurge of an Icon

For such monumental work of art, in person, *Under the Wave Off Kanagawa* by Hokusai is quite small in size. It precariously hanged in the middle of an unsuspecting wall installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Laid against a soft gray background, the print was strategically surrounded by other great works of art by famous Japanese *ukiyo-e* artist Hokusai. Though its dimensions are slight, this print's importance is immeasurable. *Under the Wave Off Kanagawa* [Fig. 1], commonly known as *The Great Wave*, is a pinnacle of Japanese art. It, along with Hokusai's other groundbreaking prints, have had a profound effect on key artists movements not only in Japan, but in Europe as well. *The Great Wave* acted as a catalyst to engage the rest of the world with the mysticisms of Japanese art. This essay will take a closer look at Hokusai's *Great Wave* and examine its significance, as well as examine the influence Hokusai had on European artistic movements in the late nineteenth century.

Katsushika Hokusai was a man of many different artistic talents. He started his career off by illustrating Japanese novels, namely Kyokutei Bakin's novel *Strange Tales of the Crescent Moon*.¹ Scholars even consider Hokusai's compiled sketches of this novel and others like it illustrated by Hokusai as the birth of modern-day manga. This work solidified his reputation as a successful artist, though Hokusai himself never seemed to be satisfied. He often changed his name and place of residence (nearly ninety times)² in hopes of reinventing himself as an artist.

¹ Tsuji, Nobuo, and Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere. *History of Art in Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, 360

² Lane, R. "Hokusai." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 6, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hokusai>.

As he got older and his artistic styles changed, the works he produced seemed to only get better. “If heaven gives me ten more years,” he is said to have exclaimed while on his deathbed at age 89, “or an extension of even five years, I shall surely become a true artist.”³ He painted many subjects, from men and women doing everyday chores, to kabuki actors, and of course, landscapes. He even wrote and illustrated some novels for women and children during the Kansei era, signing them as the author Tokitarō Katō and illustrator gakyōjn Hokusai (translated to “man crazy about drawing”).⁴ As it seems, Hokusai was always striving to do more, to create more.

It is worth mentioning that the method in which *The Great Wave* was created is one of the most ancient and laborious techniques in the field. The process of creating an *ukiyo-e* print was tedious and required many hands to create a single print. This included the publisher, designer, woodblock carver, and printer.⁵ The artist would first produce a print, which would then be transferred onto a thin tracing paper. The carver would paste this paper onto the wooden block and meticulously carve out each line and design, with the lined and colored areas raised in relief.⁶ Polychrome prints—that is, prints that required multiple colors—were created using separate blocks for each color, and then stamped onto a single sheet of paper to create a completed print.⁷ Knowing these careful and diligent steps that went into creating such masterpieces in Japanese art history truly elevate the viewer’s value of the illustration.

³ Lane, R

⁴ Goncourt, Edmond de. *Hokusai*. New York: Parkstone Press, 2014, 34

⁵ Tsuji, 332

⁶ Department of Asian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Woodblock Prints in the Ukiyo-e Style.” [metmuseum.org](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ukiy/hd_ukiy.htm), October 2003. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ukiy/hd_ukiy.htm.

⁷ Department of Asian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Ukiyo-e (ukiyo literally translates to “floating world), or woodblock prints, were popular during the Edo period in Japan.⁸ From the eighth century up until the eighteenth century, they were primarily used to circulate Buddhist scriptures and other written texts.⁹ During the Japanese Edo period (1603-1868) the term *ukiyo-e* was used to describe prints that depicted the world of pleasure and entertainment, or the brothel and theater districts.¹⁰ Previously genre paintings were depicted to be centered around the ruling shogunate’s family, or on Buddhist temples. This shift was because more common people, rather than the aristocracy, were creating art during the Edo period. Art was starting to lean away from the focus of the interest of people in authority, and towards the lives of everyday people. Hokusai’s prints, especially those in *Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji*, are reflective of this change.

In around 1831, Hokusai began to create the series *Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji*.¹¹ Each print of this series illustrates the everyday life of regular people from different perspectives, all contrasted with the view of the sacred Mt. Fuji somewhere in the background. The first print in the series was *The Great Wave*. Here, the viewer is first struck simultaneously by both stasis and movement. The movement is from the rounding curvature of the large wave and the stretch of the claws of seafoam, to the uncertain movements and expressions of the fisherman in their boats below the wave, and then to the contrasting smaller waves that surround them. Even the small drops of white sea foam that trickle from the large wave; the way it falls almost seems like snow that coats the top of Mt. Fuji in the background, as well as the half-hidden boat behind a growing wave on the lower left side of the print, both of which are more plays on perspective. This is

⁸ Tsuji, 318

⁹ Department of Asian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

¹⁰ Tsuji, 319

¹¹ Tsuji, 361

contrasted by the stillness of Mt. Fuji in the background. Hokusai seems to be reiterating the sacredness of Mt. Fuji here, as if to say that no matter how much the world continues to change and move, Mt. Fuji continues to stay still as a symbol of immortality.

The enormous wave commands the focus of the viewer, and it seems to dwarf Mt. Fuji in the background even though it is the subject of the whole series. Hokusai brilliantly plays with perspective by purposely making Mt. Fuji smaller and the wave larger, almost thrusting the viewer into the ocean as if they are looking inward towards the island. The viewer almost becomes a part of the drama of the scene from where they stand. The outstretch of clouds in the sky pointing towards the ocean (and therefore the viewer) further elevate this perceptiveness

The wave and the ocean are colored using a vivid shade of indigo called Prussian blue.¹² This use of this shade specifically was important at the time of the painting's conception. It was imported from Europe or China at the time, and its hue was much more vibrant and livelier than other shades of blue that were locally produced. It was a shade that was rarely used in Japanese prints, at a time where contact with foreign nations was nearly non-existent due to government restrictions. The use of foreign pigment to create a print that is so specifically Japanese materialized the relationship between Japan and the world, despite the governmental barriers.¹³ The contrast used between the darker and lighter shades of blue in the waves add another dimension of depth to the water. The blue of the rower's clothing makes them blend into the

¹² "Under the Wave off Kanagawa (Kanagawa Oki Nami Ura), Also Known as The Great Wave, from the Series Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji (Fugaku Sanjūrokkei)." [metmuseum.org](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/45434). Accessed June 19, 2021. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/45434>.

¹³ Guth, Christine M. E. "Hokusai's Great Waves in Nineteenth-Century Japanese Visual Culture." *The Art Bulletin* 93, no. 4 (2011): 468-85. Accessed June 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23208270>.

water, as if to intentionally hide them to make the wave and Mt. Fuji the main focal points of the composition.

If one takes a step back and looks at the composition as a whole, we can see how Hokusai played with straight and curved lines, as well as circular and triangular shapes. The curved lines of the rippling sea are offset by the straight rigidity of the rowing boats, as well as the stillness of Mt. Fuji. This is also illustrated by beginnings of the curve of the great wave in contrast to the peaking waves below it that are pulled up to a sharper point. The extended points of the rowing boats direct the viewer's line of sight towards the large wave as the focus of the print.

It is also important to analyze Hokusai's previous works with similar subject matters in order to truly appreciate his ever-changing artistry. In particular, his illustrations of ocean waves. Hokusai's fascination with waves goes back as early as 1810, two decades before he created *The Great Wave, with Rowing Boats in Waves at Oshiokuri* [Fig. 2], which depicts a less dynamic and fluid ocean scene.¹⁴ The viewer's perception of the wave's large size is achieved by the presence of the smaller rowing boats about to be engulfed by the water. There is movement suggested by the other teetering boats attempting to row against the neighboring tides. However, in comparison to *The Great Wave*, we see far less fluidity in the depiction of waves. Here there are straighter angles and stiffer figures. In *Rowing Boats in Waves off Oshiokuri*, though the focal point is obviously the large wave, the eye automatically moves from the wave to the boats to the adjacent scenery, whereas in *The Great Wave*, the gaze is transfixed on the dynamics of the largest wave, commanding the full attention of the viewer. The focal wave in *Rowing Boats in Waves* is launched up rather stiffly at an almost unnatural straightness, the foam of the tops of

¹⁴ Guth, 475

the water only slightly extending past its crest. In contrast, there is precise detail of *The Great Wave's* focal wave, with the far-reaching tendrils of the cresting wave and the showers of water that fall from it, along with the sharper angles of the surrounding waves. Three years later, in 1813, Hokusai created an illustration for the novel *Strange Tales of Northern Echigo* [Fig. 3].¹⁵ Here, he depicts a much more dramatic scene, with more powerful and turbulent movement. The viewer's gaze jumps from each disturbed wave to the ship that is hauntingly perched on the top of the chaos. It is a shame that this illustration is printed in monochrome, as it can be inferred that Hokusai would have impressed once again with his use of color. Despite this, it is obvious that in a span of a mere three years, Hokusai was able to dramatically improve on his skills of interpretation and perspective. Therefore, it's no surprise to see the magnificent work he created with *The Great Wave* and the subsequent prints in *Thirty-Six View of Mt. Fuji*.

During Hokusai's lifetime, the Tokugawa shogunate, the ruling samurai government of Japan during the late nineteenth century, restricted contact with foreigners and foreign culture, which inadvertently prompted artists to develop a more style that was more independently Japanese, with little outside influence.¹⁶ Hokusai's prints in therefore only gained exposure and popularity through their replication after the end of the shogunal rule.¹⁷ However, it wasn't until after his death in 1849 did these prints begin to reach as far as Europe, specifically France.¹⁸ A trade agreement was signed in October of 1858 that made is possible for France to import goods from Japan; until then, the people of France were only aware of Japanese lacquerware and

¹⁵ Guth, 471

¹⁶ Tsuji, 306

¹⁷ Guth, 483

¹⁸Farago, Jason. "Hokusai and the Wave That Swept the World." BBC Culture. BBC, April 9, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150409-the-wave-that-swept-the-world>

porcelain that was imported from the Netherlands.¹⁹ The first Japanese print to be purchased by the French was a copy of Hokusai's *Manga*, by the Goncourt brothers in 1852, just three years after Hokusai's death.²⁰

Hokusai's impact on the rest of the art world outside of Japan, particularly the French, was immense. Japonisme is a term coined by the French that referred to the giant influx of Japanese art that crashed into France in the late nineteenth century after Japan opened its borders.²¹ Claude Monet was famously influenced by Japanese artist in his paintings of his many gardens, and even owned twenty-three of Hokusai's prints, most of which were landscapes.²² There is a good example to illustrate this; though it cannot be said that Hokusai was to be directly credited for this, one can clearly see the similarities between Monet's *Haystacks (Sunset)* created in 1891 [Fig. 4] and Hokusai's *South Wind, Clear Dawn* c. 1830-1832 [Fig 5].²³ Here, it is obvious that Monet was able to capture the essence of light at sunset much more efficiently than Hokusai, but this was also created nearly sixty years after Hokusai's print. Monet, as key figure of the impressionist movement in France, was focused much more on the appearance of the fading colors of light than Hokusai during his lifetime. Additionally, Edgar Degas found inspiration in Hokusai's early manga work, as seen in the dynamic poses of some of his female dancers.²⁴

¹⁹ Tilborgh, Louis van, Chris Uhlenbeck, Tsukaa Kōdera, Cornelia Homburg, and Nienke Bakker. *Van Gogh & Japan*. Kyoto, Japan: Seigensha Art Publishing, Inc., 2017

²⁰ Tilborgh, 18

²¹ Ives, Colta. "Japonisme." In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jpon/hd_jpon.htm (October 2004)

²² Farago, Jason

²³ Harris, James C. "Under the Wave off Kanagawa." *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 65, no. 1 (January 2008): 12-13.

²⁴ Farago, Jason

Dutch post-impressionist Vincent Van Gogh once wrote to his brother Theo about Hokusai, saying, “He examines a single blade of grass. But this blade of grass leads him to draw every plant, then the seasons, then the grand vistas of the landscape, then the animals, and finally the human figure. Thus, he spends his life, and his life is too short for him to achieve everything.”²⁵ After witnessing an exhibition of Japanese woodcuts, specifically Hokusai’s *Suwa Lake in the Province Shinano Shinshu Suwako* [Fig. 6], Van Gogh was inspired to create similar landscape paintings with the same color palate, as seen in *Landscape with Houses* [Fig. 7].²⁶ Though van Gogh’s powerful brushwork is not at all like Hokusai’s peaceful vision, the influence here is obvious. More famously, one can see that van Gogh’s *Iris* [Fig. 8] drew inspiration from Hokusai’s *Iris and Grasshopper* [Fig. 9]. Here van Gogh seems less infatuated with replicating the actual subject matter, and more instead on the focus on the tranquility that Hokusai projects. Through admiring the works of Hokusai and various other Japanese artists, van Gogh was able to develop his own iconic stylistic devices.

Throughout the years, *The Great Wave* became its own sort of brand of Japan, or things related to Japan. Its façade is plastered everywhere, from facemasks to phone cases, to the sides of buildings and even footwear. Hokusai’s eternal image of *The Great Wave* has been used as marketing tools to advertise a range of businesses, often times not even giving credit to the original artist. Because of its widespread use, some can even doubt its relationship to the sense of “Japanese-ness.” In reality, during Hokusai’s lifetime, there were hundreds of prints of The Great

²⁵ Bailey, Gauvin Alexander, and Matthew McKelway. *Art in Time: A World History of Styles and Movements*. London: Phaidon Press, 2014.

²⁶ Tilborgh, 88

Wave in circulation.²⁷ The prints displayed in museums like The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston are well-preserved prints of the original (though museums themselves also use *The Great Wave* and other iconic works of art to sell their own merchandise). Examples of this can be seen everywhere, whether it be directly related to something Japanese like an advertisement for famous soy sauce company Kikkoman [Fig. 10]²⁸, or something completely unrelated like the sign for a business in a bike shop [Fig. 11]. Some may argue that this is a positive sign of Hokusai's influence. As it seems, modern reinterpretations make it difficult for one to fully appreciate the original exquisite work of art that is Hokusai's *The Great Wave*.

Hokusai was a groundbreaking artist during his lifetime, and even more so after his death. His creation of breathtaking *ukiyo-e* prints during the Edo period of Japan was unmatched. *The Great Wave* was the epitome of the Japanese style and continues to be so. Through modern day replication and popularization, it continues to be an icon of Japonisme. Despite Hokusai's importance, Japan struggled to find its place in the world after ending its ban on trade with foreign countries. Who's to say what Japanese art could have molded into had they not been isolated from the outside world for such an extended period of time. This is true today, as one can say that Japanese art has been largely relegated to anime and has significantly less influence on western European culture. Even so, Hokusai's influence is unquestionable, and that can still be said that centuries after his death.

²⁷ Gamerman, Ellen. "Art Exhibits: 'The Great Wave' How a Wave Swept The Art World." *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, March 27, 2015. <https://www.wsj.com/news/types/asia-news>.

²⁸ "Kikkoman: The Great Wave of Kikkoman." RSS, August 1, 2008. https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/kikkoman_the_great_wave_of_kikkoman.

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IMAGE SECTION

Figure 1: *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*,
Katsushika Hokusai, 1830-33

(<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/45434>)



Figure 2: *Rowing Boats in Waves at Oshiokun*,
Katsushika Hokusai, 1810 (<https://ukiyo-e.org/image/mfa/sc145710>)



Figure 3: Illustration from *Strange Tales of Northern Echigo*, Katsushika Hokusai, 1813
(https://www.jstor.org/stable/23208270?seq=8#metadata_info_tab_contents)

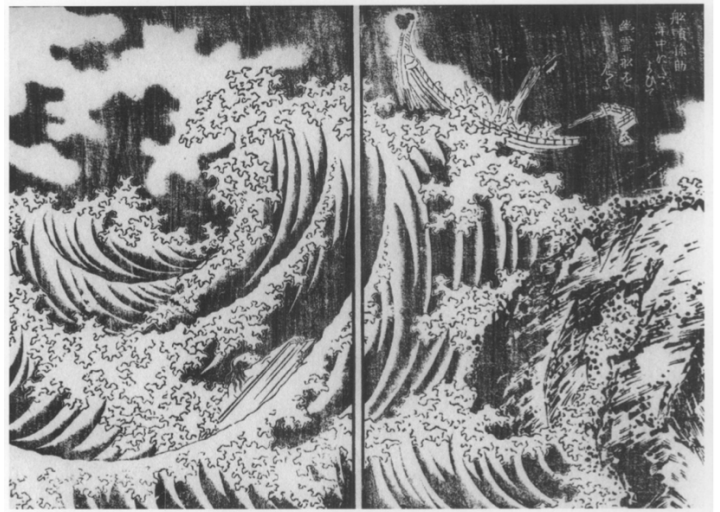


Figure 4: *Haystacks (Sunset)*, Claude Monet, 1891(<https://www.claude-monet.com/haystacks.jsp>)

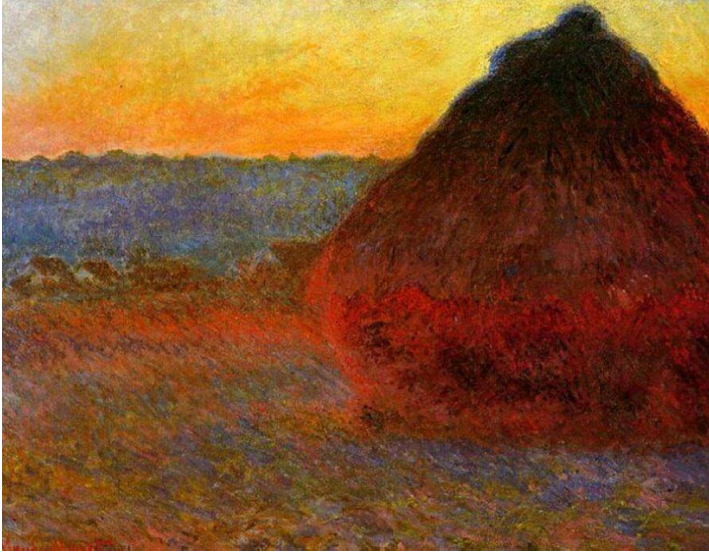


Figure 5: *South Wind, Clear Dawn*, Katsushika Hokusai, 1830-32
(<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/36490>)



Figure 6: *Landscape with Houses*, Vincent van Gogh, 1890
(<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/d0332V1962r>)



Figure 7: *Suwa Lake in the Province Shinano*
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(<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39798>)



Figure 8: *Iris*, Vincent van Gogh, 1889
(<https://www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/irisesindex.html>)



Figure 9: *Iris and Grasshopper*, Katsushika Hokusai, c. late 1820s
(<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/37192>)



Figure 10: *The Great Wave of Kikkoman*, Scholz & Friends, 2008
(https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/kikkoman_the_great_wave_of_kikkoman)



Figure 11: *View of Warm Planet Bike Shop, San Francisco, California*, Christine M. E. Guth, 2012
(<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41427823>)

