

# The Great Wave: Looming Behemoth on the Cusp

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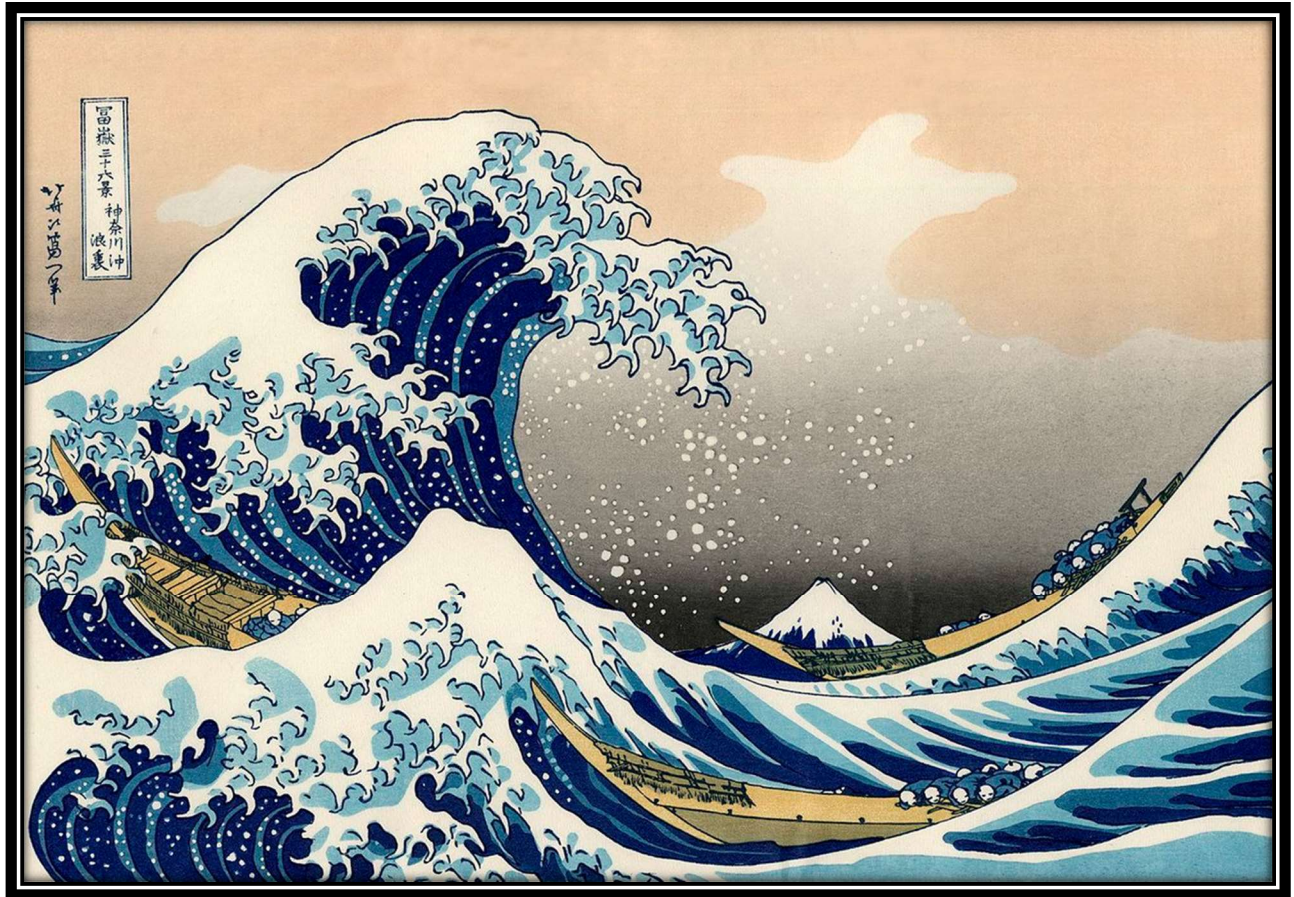


Figure 1—The Great Wave; Stephen Ornes, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, (<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1413975111>)

*The Great Wave*, also known as *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* (Kanagawa oki nami ura) is a woodblock print created by Hokusai, a Japanese ukiyo-e artist. The Great Wave print depicts a monstrous wave on the point of breaking, looming over several boats with Mount Fuji observing vigilantly in the distance. In the image, “man becomes a mere insect ‘crouching in his frail catamaran as the giant billow topples and shakes far above him.’”<sup>1</sup> Created in approximately 1830, *The Great Wave* was the first print in one of Hokusai’s most famous series: *Thirty-six views of Mount Fuji*. In this series, Mount Fuji is present throughout each scene, a constant reoccurrence in a variety of weather conditions, seasons and perspectives. Woodblock prints such as Hokusai’s were mass produced and priced cheaply for a wide audience. Technically, the woodblock printing process usually utilizes several carved wooden panels that have been carved with pieces of the final design. The main design is copied onto the paper with ink and then additional layers of the image are added with additional carvings—these carvings are the ones utilized to add color. The color and paper that the woodblock prints are produced on are light sensitive and can only be displayed for limited, measured, amounts of time. A woodblock print of Hokusai’s *Great Wave* has been exhibited at The British Museum since 2008 when The British museum acquired the print(s) with support from the Art Fund; there are currently three impressions in the possession of The British Museum. In 2017, supported by the Mitsubishi Corporation, The British Museum staged an exhibit called “Hokusai: Beyond the Great Wave” that focused on Hokusai’s later years’ life and art as well as the artist’s personal beliefs, religion and artistic quest through major paintings, drawings, woodblock prints and illustrated books.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Holmes, *Hokusai* (New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1901), 36

<sup>2</sup> Francesco Carelli, “Hokusai: Beyond the Great Wave.” *London Journal of Primary Care* 10 (4) (2018): 128–29.

The subject and meaning of Hokusai's Great Wave has been debated over time by artists, scientists and historians; Is the scene depicted that of a Tsunami or something else? Did Hokusai simply recreate a nautical event or was the wave meant to symbolize something more? The woodblock print depicts oshiokuri-bune—Japanese cargo boats—navigating a monstrously rough sea within sight of a snow-capped Mount Fuji.<sup>3</sup> Although the wave has largely been considered an illustration of a tsunami's power however this is a widely believed misconception according to the scientific analysis of wave patterns and forces. Tsunamis are waves born of powerful events such as underwater volcanic eruptions or earthquakes; these waves traverse the deep sea with low amplitude and long wavelength but swell to destructive proportions in shallows near the shore.<sup>4</sup> The profile of tsunamic waves does not align with Hokusai's Great Wave with regards to location, wavelength and amplitude. Rather than a tsunami, it is scientifically likely that Hokusai's Great wave was a rogue wave called a plunging breaker—a type of wave previously thought only to exist in legends.<sup>5</sup> According to Stephen Ornes' article, there are hints of the Great Wave's identity in physical wave features, origins and linearity. Hokusai's Great Wave is a wave on the cusp of breaking, looming an estimated ten meters, above the boats with additional tall waves appearing to follow the behemoth; the presence and location of these smaller waves also distinguishes the wave from a tsunamic wave as a tsunami is spread out over long distances and break close to the shore.<sup>6</sup> Ocean physicists have documented rogue waves in recent decades and have explored natural mechanisms that potentially govern rogues; it is possible that such waves result from linear processes (which means the heights of

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Ornes, "Science and Culture: Dissecting the Great Wave.", Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America. National Academy of Sciences (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

colliding waves sum to the height of the resulting, single wave) yet also have a nonlinear driving mechanism (meaning that the height of the rogue far exceeds the sum of the waves that made it).<sup>7</sup> Based on the work of Irish and French physicists, Ornes supports that directional focusing could have spurred the Great Wave and uses photo evidence from ocean photographer V. Sarano who photographed a giant breaking wave in sub-Antarctic waters that strongly resembles Hokusai's woodcut (figure 2).

A product of the late Edo period, *The Great Wave* was produced by Hokusai when he was seventy years old—a milestone that the artist designated as the true beginning of his artistic career. Japanese art in the nineteenth century is primarily split by the Meiji Restoration in 1868—the reinstatement of imperial rule under Emperor Meiji that was accompanied by strong nationalism. Although this split occurred after Hokusai's creation of *The Great Wave* and death, according to Ellen Conant, the first half of the century is still regarded as the purview of specialists in Edo art, who view these last few decades of Edo as a period of waning inventiveness and artistic decline<sup>8</sup> during which Hokusai was a revolutionary.<sup>9</sup> Regarding his artistic growth and future, he declared that,

“all I [Hokusai] have produced before the age of seventy is not worth taking into account. At seventy-three I have learned a little about the real structure of nature, of animals, plants, trees, birds, fishes, and insects. In consequence, when I am eighty, I shall have made still more progress; at ninety I shall penetrate the mystery of things; at a hundred I

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Conant, *Challenging Past and Present: The Metamorphosis of Nineteenth-Century Japanese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Holmes, *Hokusai* (New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1901), 7.

shall certainly have reached a marvellous stage; and when I am a hundred and ten, everything I do, be it but a dot or a line, will be alive.”<sup>10</sup>

Hokusai's honed abilities in nature-themed art and artistic ambition are prevalent in the production of the Great wave and following views of Mount Fuji as his work emphasizes the terribleness of nature's repose and motion.<sup>11</sup> Hokusai lived for his art and sought a sense of immortality through it. A key artistic point in his collections of Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji and One-Hundred Views of Mount Fuji, the mountain was not only an artistic model for Hokusai as it also held a spiritual significance in his quest for immortality during his later years.<sup>12</sup> Like Japan itself, Hokusai's work was influenced by foreign artists and ideas of the time period; through his usage of imported Prussian blue pigment and deep perspective, it is evident that Hokusai experimented with European art styles and adapted them to his own vision.<sup>13</sup> With regards to style, Hokusai often utilized Chinese conventions in his creation of waves and breakers; this made them look fantastic, and illusory, yet never fail at being furious.<sup>14</sup>

The period in which Hokusai painted The Great Wave and his thirty-six views of Mount Fuji was an era of tumult in Japan culturally as well as internationally as influences from the West began filtering into the archipelago bringing positivity and suspicion with them. Japan had been cut off from the outside world for two hundred years leading into the nineteenth century, forgoing foreign relations and trade with other countries. A prevalent source of conflict and suspicion leading up to 1830 surrounded foreign whalers and fishing boat presences off of the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>12</sup> Francesco Carelli, “Hokusai: Beyond the Great Wave,” 128–29.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 128–129.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Holmes, *Hokusai*, 36.

coast: were they innocent fishermen or spies using a cover to reconnoitre the coasts of Japan?<sup>15</sup>

Trade with foreign powers was controlled by Japan and limited to the ports of Nagasaki. As MacGregor supports, the Great Wave can be interpreted as a visual representation of Japan's cumulative mindset of barely contained control—of trade in particular—while on the threshold of entering the modern world; the United States would force Japan over this threshold in the 1850s.<sup>16</sup> Regarding internal crisis, L.M Cullen outlines the onset and early nineteenth century (1789-1853) as a period of “prolonged external crisis. While its outset followed the severe Tenmei economic crisis of the 1780s, the period, 1830s apart, was free from economic difficulties.”<sup>17</sup> During the 1830s, when Hokusai produced *The Great Wave*, the artist lived in poverty driven from his home and standing because of an errant grandson.

*The Great Wave* by Hokusai is a work that occurred at a time of increasing turbulence in Japanese history, as well as the artist's life that nearly paralleled the woodcut print's focal subject. The late-Edo period work's subject is an imposing conundrum of meaning and nature as its part of its intentions and identity remain unconfirmed despite modern research. Although historically recognized as an image of a tsunami, the wave has been analyzed and interpreted to be a rogue wave—a symbol that some would liken to the work's creator as his work continued to influence Japanese art in succeeding waves decades after his death.

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<sup>15</sup> L.M. Cullen, *A History of Japan, 1582-1941: Internal and External Worlds* (New York: Cambridge, 2003), 153.

<sup>16</sup> Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 607.

<sup>17</sup> L.M. Cullen, *A History of Japan, 1582-1941*, 135.

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## Figures

Figure 1—The Great Wave; Stephen Ornes, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, (<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1413975111>)



Figure 2—Comparison of Hokusai's Great wave with an observation in sub-Antarctic water. (a) The great wave off Kanagawa (Kanagawa-oki nami-ura) woodcut by Katsushika Hokusai. (b) Photograph of a breaking wave in the sub-Antarctic waters of the Southern Ocean; Royal Publishing Society, (<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/full/10.1098/rsnr.2012.0066>)

