

The Great Wave of Kanagawa

The Great Wave of Kanagawa is arguably one of the most known and reproduced Japanese wood prints in the world. Made in the 1830s by the famous Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) it is one out of 36 works in the series "Views of Mount Fuji", in which Hokusai depicts Mount Fuji from various places and different weather conditions. The reason why this one stood out so much compared to the rest of his works is still unknown. It is mostly popular outside of its country of origin, not because it's not adequate but it is not a popular concept (big waves) inside Japan. It even has a lot of European influence like the inclusion of "Prussian Blue" to create contrast and depth, which was a revolutionary color trend at that time. These kinds of works have been wood printed thousands of times and repurposed for popular consumption; they weren't seen as "art" they were seen as a form of expression and commercial printing.

The technique with which this piece came to be is a staple in Japanese art. Ukiyo-e (pictures of the floating world) at its origin specialized in showing and depicting women and children as well as portraits, but later on, based on the change in taste in the Edo period, artists started to dabble in the production of great landscape paintings and prints. This art form has quite an intricate process for which the collaboration of several people is necessary. Publishers were the key figures in the printing process, from start to finish. Hiring the designer, supervising production and arranging distribution. The commissioned artist would draw their design in black ink on a thin sheet of paper, this drawing would then be sent to the printer's workshop, where it was placed on a smooth woodblock. After, oil would be applied for the paper to leave behind a small trace of its original design. Then the engraver would cut away all the wood around the lines, which required great skill and was arguably the most important part of the whole process. This is how one of Hokusai's most famous and iconic woodprints came to be. His works were printed by Nishimuraya Yohachi, a commercial print publisher who took a risk with printing his works. The newly trendy pigment (Prussian blue) was incredibly expensive and was hard to obtain, while at the same time the Ukiyo-e market was, as previously mentioned, dominated by portraits of actors and courtesans. Pure landscape art was seen as a less profitable genre. But luckily, this gamble paid off and it became so popular that it was widely printed in massive editions.

It depicts a crescent wave looming over three fishing boats (likely on their way from nearby fishing villages to the markets of Edo), in which the occupants are crouching and hugging the deck. The main subject, Mount Fuji, can be seen in the middle of the print and could be mistaken for another wave. While many speculate about the underlying meaning of a rather simple looking wood print, most people would agree that Japan's infatuation with waves in their art works is historical. Throughout their history they have believed that the waves protect them from any outside intruders, this could still apply today since their rough waters have not changed since then. At the time of The Great Wave being made Japan was experiencing outside pressure from various countries looking to begin a trading relationship. One could argue that this wave depicts the fear and anxiety felt by the people of any outside influence, which could still apply today.

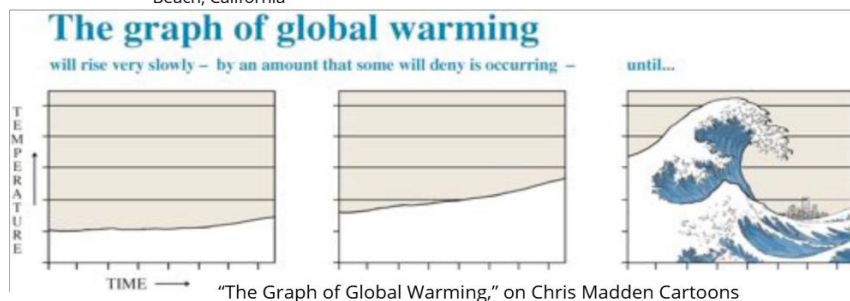
With how things change throughout time, we could definitely look at this woodprint in a different context regarding its meaning. Some replicas, while not necessary, do have a social commentary about them. One prominent theme is the catastrophic influence of climate change and the general anxieties about the sea (in the context of Japan). In these cases, the wave does not serve as a protector but more so a danger, unpredictable and ruthless.



Andre Faubert, Huntington Beach Fourth of July Parade Float, 2011, 580 pounds of refuse from the shores of Huntington Beach, California



Tsunami warning sign, Nijima, Japan. Photograph copyright Thomas Volstorf



"The Graph of Global Warming," on Chris Madden Cartoons

While the exact number is unknown, it has been estimated that a publisher had to sell at least 2,000 impressions from a design to make a profit. While some popular prints could have been printed as many as 12,000 – 15,000 times, presently experts believe that there were up to 8,000 impressions have of The Great Wave. Nowadays it has been reproduced, quoted and repurposed an immeasurable number of times. Modern technology has made it possible for any artwork to be on anything. You can find Hokusai's artwork on several items that don't include prints or canvases, but products like phone cases, bikinis, tote bags, t-shirts, cushions and even puzzles and sweatshirts.



Commercial products are but cheaply made replicas, there are still thousands of well-made reproductions of The Great Wave. While still similar they reimagine the artwork in many creative ways.



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2. Stefan Helmreich, "Hokusai's Great Wave Enters the Anthropocene", *Environmental Humanities* (2016) 7 (1): 203–217, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3616407>
3. Andrew Couldwell, "The Great Wave off Kanagawa", *Club of the Waves*, Jan 5, 2021, <https://clubofthewaves.com/feature/the-great-wave-off-kanagawa/>
4. Capucine Korenberg, "The making and evolution of Hokusai's Great Wave", PDF file, The British Museum, March, 2022, https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/korenberg_article-for_hokusai%20edited_volume_final-2020_accessible.pdf
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