

Hokusai: The Great Wave – Katsushika

Hokusai (c.1829-33; British Museum)

https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=787334&partId=1&searchText=hokusai&page=4





This is one of the most famous works of art ever created. We see it all the time on posters, t-shirts and on adverts. That Sometimes means we need to look even more closely than usual as we think we know what we are looking at.

Answer these questions in your Remote Learning Journal

- Where do you think it was made?
- How do you know?
- What is about to happen?
- Does this look a normal wave?
- How has the artist shown us how big the wave is?
- What is going to happen to the people on the boats?
- How would they be feeling right now?
- Can you freeze in your most panicked, frightened pose showing how you feel with your whole body face.
- Stay in that pose and then try make the sounds your character would be making.



Now have another look at the people on the boat.

- Are they screaming and panicking?
- What are they doing?
- Why do you think that?

The original Japanese audience would have read this artwork from right to left. If we turn it around, because we still look at it from left to right we can get a sense of how they might have seen it.



Does it make a difference to how we understand the story?

When viewed back-to-front it looks as if the momentum is with the boats and the wave is retreating. This makes sense: the boats are in a hurry! They are couriers, the Amazon or DHL of their day and the boats were the fastest, slickest possible at the time. They are returning from the big fishing boats further out to sea with their loads of fresh tuna or bonito. They are eager to get it back to the markets as soon as possible as the freshest fish would reach the highest prices for sushi or sashimi. That means they are not going to divert from their course – nothing will get in their way, even a big wave.

- How do you think this work was made? It is a woodblock print. The drawing was scratched onto a wooden block that then had ink applied to it before being turned around and pressed onto paper. This is how prints were made before electrical gadgets and it meant that unlike a painting, where you could only see it in a gallery, people could see it all over the world. Artists like Vincent Van Gogh loved Japanese prints and their work was affected by them.



ANSWERS. (These are not the “answers” but some ideas about how to interpret this picture)

Where was this made? Japan. The writing looks Japanese, even if we cannot read it. Some of you might even recognise the volcano, Mount Fuji, in the distance.

What is about to happen? A huge wave is about to land on top of three boats.

Does this look a normal wave? It is a bit like a cartoon or comic. The ends of it are like a monster’s claws or fingers. Some children might know Japanese Manga which is part of a long tradition of comics in Japan.

How has the artist shown us how big the wave is? It reaches up to the top of the picture. The volcano looks tiny next to it – almost like one of the waves. You might call this a tsunami, however, this is not a tsunami, just a freak big wave. Tsunami do not look like breaking waves like this one but are more like a rising tidal wave (and can reach much greater heights).

Have another look at the artwork. Are the people on the boats screaming and panicking? They are actually curled into a ball in the brace position. They know that if they hold on tight they will survive! They will get wet of course but they will come out the other side.

