

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 in posters, t-shirts and adverts. That sometimes means we need to look even more closely than usual as we think we know what we are looking at. Where do you think it was made? How do you know? **Japan. The writing looks Japanese, even if we cannot read it. Some people 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.**
- 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.**
- What is going to happen to the people on the boats? How would they be feeling right now? **A chance for some good vocabulary and phrases, e.g. I feel scared, terrified, petrified, anxious etc.**

- After “three” freeze in your most panicked, frightened pose showing how you feel with your whole body and face. Stay in that pose and then after another “three” make the sounds your character would be making.
- 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.** Practise getting into the brace position. Instead of being a scary image that we thought at first this one is actually showing us how to stay safe and calm in the face of danger. To underline this, show the same image back-to-front.



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.**



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- 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 printers!**

Follow on ideas

- *Imagine you are one of the people on the boat. Imagine you have just got home after your tough journey. Describe what you experienced and how it made you feel.*
- *Imagine a film has been made based on the story in this artwork. Design a film poster to advertise it. Think about which aspects of the image and story will work best.*
- *Life in Lockdown discussion: What techniques could you use if you want to stay calm during difficult times?*

Topic links:

- *Geography/Japan*
- *Water/The Ocean*
- *Weather/Climate Change*
- *Volcanoes/Natural Disasters*
- *Journeys/Transport*