How Hokusai's 'The Great Wave' Went Viral

By Lance Esplund
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"The Great Wave," Katsushika Hokusai's woodblock print from the early 1830s, may be the most famous artwork in Japanese history, and its popularity isn't cresting anytime soon.
The image of a wave towering over Mount Fuji is the subject of a new book and recent exhibits in Paris and Berlin. It is on view in a show at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and another major display is expected at the British Museum in 2017. Starting April 5, the piece takes a starring role in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston's largest ever exhibition of Japanese prints.

The artwork exists in that rare stratosphere of images that are both instantly recognizable and internationally famous. "The Great Wave" has gone viral over time, first circulating the old-fashioned way—via traders and tall ships in the 19th century. Since then, the woodcut has been called an inspiration for Claude Debussy's orchestral work, "La Mer," and appears in poetry and prose by Rainer Maria Rilke, Pearl S. Buck and Hari Kunzru. Levi's and Patagonia used it in marketing campaigns. It has been preserved in cyberspace as a Google Doodle and an emoji.

"There is no work of nonwestern art that has a comparable level of recognition," said Christine Guth, author of "Hokusai's Great Wave: Biography of a Global Icon," released this year. Ms. Guth, who is acting head of the history of design program at London's Royal College of Art, said the print has been used to symbolize everything from economic power to military threats to natural disaster: "An image that originated in Japan took on a life of its own."

Sarah Thompson, the MFA show's curator, said the museum was the first in the world to stage a Hokusai exhibit in the early 1890s.

The show in Boston, which runs until early August, features more than 230 works from Hokusai's seven-decade career, including illustrated printed books, a long screen painting and paper dioramas. The exhibit, six years in the making, is built on works entirely from the MFA's collection. It just finished a multicity tour in Japan.

"The Great Wave"— formally titled "Under the Wave off Kanagawa" from the Hokusai series "Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji"—adorns marketing for the Boston show. Inside the exhibit, though, visitors will have to look for it. The work, about the size of a piece of legal paper, will be grouped with the series of Mount Fuji prints.

The image is a mix of east and west—a blending of techniques that Hokusai picked up from Japanese artists and his own knowledge of European prints. The woodblock depicts Mount Fuji, a hallowed place in Japan, but pushes the peak deep into the distance using western perspective. The wave was printed on Japanese

mulberry paper but marked by a color new to Japan—a vibrant Prussian blue created from synthetic dye in Germany.

The work was fairly accessible to the Japanese—one scholar has said it went for the price of a large bowl of noodle soup—while the snobbish view of prints inside the country made it easier for the series to travel abroad.

"The prints were a popular art, they were not something intellectual connoisseurs really admired at the fine-art level," said Ms. Thompson. "They were discovered by the Europeans before the Japanese."
Ms. Guth hypothesizes in her book that a devastating tsunami in Japan in 1896 helped give the woodcut its international renown. Hokusai's print was becoming more familiar just as the word tsunami was working its way into the English language, she wrote, and the word and image soon became linked.

The print, which does not depict a tsunami, shows fishermen rowing frantically across a stormy Tokyo Bay after delivering their cargo to the city. Fingers of sea foam curl over their heads. It's unclear if they're going to make it home alive, though some scholars believe the presence of the sacred Mount Fuji works in their favor.
Roughly 100 impressions of "The Great Wave" exist today from an original print run estimated by some experts at more than 5,000. The quality of the remaining prints varies widely, and "The Great Wave" has not hit it big on the market. Hokusai's auction record is nearly $1.5 million, but this image has never sold publicly for more than about $160,000.

Art historians say New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the British Museum own two of the world's best impressions of "The Great Wave." The MFA, which has the largest collection of Japanese prints outside Japan, calls the work in the show one of its best examples. It owns other impressions, including what Ms. Thompson called a comparable print that a pair of donors gave the museum nearly a century ago on the condition that, to preserve its original state, the work never be exhibited.
Little is known about Hokusai's early life. Born near Tokyo in 1760, he was studying with artists around the city by his teens. Alternately described as a master of self-promotion and a recluse, he is said to have moved 93 times and changed his name repeatedly. In his 60s, he adopted the name Iitsu, which some scholars translate as "one year old again."

Though he was prominent in Japan, Hokusai created the Mount Fuji series while scrambling for money. One theory holds that he was trying to pay off a grandson's gambling debts.
Hokusai had drawn since he was six, but he had a seemingly dim view of his own talents until his 70s, when he created "The Great Wave." In a forward to a book of Mount Fuji prints, he called all his work that came before that time "not worth bothering with." The artist, who died in his late 80s, considered himself the ultimate late bloomer.

"At 75 I'll have learned something of the pattern of nature, of animals, of plants, of trees, birds, fish and insects," he wrote. "When I am 80 you will see real progress. At 90 I shall have cut my way deeply into the

mystery of life itself. At 100, I shall be a marvelous artist. At 110, everything I create; a dot, a line, will jump to life as never before.”