

TITLE: Todai-ji **LOCATION:** Japan **DATE:** 743 C.E.; rebuilt C. 1700

ARTIST: Various artists including Unkei and Kei Schools **PERIOD/STYLE:** Nara **PATRON:** Emperor Shomu

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Bronze and wood(sculpture); wood with ceramic- tile roofing(architecture).

FORM:

Todai-ji is a Buddhist temple complex located in the city of Nara, Japan. The complex includes one of the world's largest wooden buildings, a monumental bronze statue of Buddha weighing more than 1 million pounds, and two fierce guardian figures carved by acclaimed Japanese sculptors. Carpenters required over 80 massive cypress pillars to support a building measuring 288 feet long, 169 ft wide, and 156 feet high. The need for bronze posed an even greater challenge. In 743, Shomu issued a decree exhorting his subjects to melt any and all bronze available in the country. His appeal worked. During the next nine years, skilled craftsman cast a 53-foot high bronze statue of the Vairocana Buddha.

FUNCTION:

The purpose of the Todaiji was to act as the headquarters of a nationwide network of temples and become the Buddhist protector of the state. The nio guardian figures are towering wooden warriors guarding the entrance to the Todai-ji temple complex. They are made of woodblock construction. In contrast, the Assyrian lamassu are alabaster statues of winged bulls guarding the entrance to Sargon II Palace in Khorsabad. Although they differ in appearance, both works are intended to project fierce power as they perform their common function as Guardians. When completed in the 740s, Todai-ji (or "Great Eastern Temple") was the largest building project ever on Japanese soil. Its creation reflects the complex intermingling of Buddhism and politics in early Japan. When it was rebuilt in the 12th century, it ushered in a new era of Shoguns and helped to found Japan's most celebrated school of sculpture. It was built to impress.

CONTENT:

Todai-ji is noted for its colossal sculpture of seated image of the Vairocana Buddha. It is the largest metal statue of Buddha in the world. His left hand is in the mudra for "welcome", and his right is in the pose for "do not fear." Each one of Buddha's fingers is as tall as an average-sized person, somewhere around 5 feet 8 inches or so. The Great South Gate (AKA Nandaimon) has five bays, three that are open and two that are closed. It has no ceiling, just an exposed roof with deep eaves and a six stepped bracket system. The Nio garden figures are forbidding looking figures with intricate drapery set on either side of the gate. Todai-ji included the usual components of a Buddhist complex. At its symbolic heart was the massive hondō (main hall), also called the Daibutsuden (Great Buddha Hall), which when completed in 752, measured 50 meters by 86 meters and was supported by 84 massive cypress pillars. It held a huge bronze Buddha figure (the Daibutsu) created between 743 to 752. Subsequently, two nine-story pagodas, a lecture hall and quarters for the monks were added to the complex.

CONTEXT:

The early Japanese honored thousands of local gods and spirits. They're very customs and beliefs combined to form a belief system called Shinto, meaning "the way of the Gods." During the 6th Century Buddhism gradually spread from China and Korea to Japan. However, the Japanese did not give up their Shinto customs. Instead, Shintoism and Buddhism comfortably coexisted. As a result Buddhist temples honored Shinto traditions. Shomu became the 45th emperor of Japan in 724. He embraced Buddhism as a spiritual force that could unify the Japanese people and help consolidate his power. Almost 20 years later, Shomu launched an unprecedented project to construct a Buddhist temple complex in his newly established capital in Nara. The emperor's plan called for a vast Great Buddha Hall, or Daibutsuden that would house a colossal bronze statue of the vairocana or Cosmic Buddha. Todai-ji would be the chief temple of the Kokubun-ji system and be the center of national ritual.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

The Todai-ji complex built by Emperor Shomu suffered periodic damage from earthquakes, fires, and typhoons. Even worse, a destructive Civil War swept across Japan, leaving Nara and Todai-ji in ruins. In 1185 a military leader known as a shogun seized power and restored order. Shoguns and their fierce samurai warriors disdained refined elegance and instead prized bravery, honor, and strength. Japan's new leaders turned to a group of Master sculptors known as the Kei school to help restore Todai-ji. Led by Unkei and KeiKei, the Kei sculptors carved a pair of Nio guardian figures to occupy large niches in the Todai-ji's rebuilt Great Southern gate. Standing almost 28 ft tall, the Guardians feature bulging muscles swirling drapery, and scowling faces. The fierce warriors appear ready to spring into action to repel evil spirits and other unwanted intruders.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Despite Emperor Shomu's devotion to Buddhism, Todai-ji illustrates the continuing influence of Shinto traditions. In Shintoism, spirits known as Kami are thought to dwell in trees and other natural forms. In order to avoid offending these spirits Japanese carpenters did not pound nails into the wood. Instead they relied upon a system of complex wooden joints. The surrounding gardens at Todai-ji also reflect the complimentary interplay of Shintoism and Buddhism. Shintoism views deer as messengers of the gods. As a result, spotted Sika deer are allowed to freely roam the Todai-ji grounds. Every person in Japan was required to contribute through a special tax to its construction and the court chronicle, the Shoku Nihon-gi, notes that, "...the people are made to suffer by the construction of Todai-ji and the clans worry over their suffering."

INTERPRETATION:

The Daibutsuden has to be big because it contains a 15-metre (49 ft) high cast bronze statue of a seated Buddha, the largest such statue in the world and weighing in at around 500 tons. It is a representation of Dainichi Nyorai (aka Birushana, Roshana Butsu or Vairocana), most important deity of the Kegon sect, with his right hand raised in the gesture of teaching. The sculpture was made on the wishes of Emperor Shomu who wanted to reverse the effects of the devastating outbreak of smallpox which had hit in 737 CE. Another popular attraction is a pillar with a hole in its base that is the same size as the Daibutsu's nostril. It is said that those who can squeeze through this opening will be granted enlightenment in their next life.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

Unkei and KeiKei installed the pair of Nio Guardians and statues in 1203. Although their work remains intact, the great Buddha Hall suffered extensive damage in 1567. The Daibutsuden that stands today dates primarily from 1709 and is 2/3 the size of the original building. The bronze statue of Vairocana Buddha also suffered damage and required recasting. The 500-ton statue continues to welcome devout pilgrims. Buddha's raised right hand displays the famous abhaya mudra a gesture meant to dispel fear and promise divine protection to worshippers who follow the path of righteousness.

TITLE: Night attack on the Sanjo Palace **LOCATION:** Japan **DATE:** C. 1250-1300 C.E

ARTIST: _____ **PERIOD/STYLE:** Kamakura Period **PATRON:** _____

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Handscroll, ink and color on paper

FORM:

The work is a nearly 23 feet long and 16 inches high Illustrated hand scroll known as emaki. It portrays a triumphant warrior who is just taking part in a brief but violent attack on the Sanjo palace in Kyoto. Although the attack on The Emperor's Palace was an insignificant skirmish the painting is an enduring masterpiece of Japanese art and a gripping portrayal of the horrors of war. The narrative reads from right to left as the scroll is unrolled.

FUNCTION:

Stories of romanticized martial derringdo, gunki monogatari are history recounted by the victors. They celebrate Japan's change from a realm controlled by a royal court to one ruled by samurai. In Japan, one form that developed to convey secular stories of court life and political rebellions was the form of the long hand scroll, of which Night Attack on the Sanjo Palace is a fine example. Before there were motion pictures, the hand scroll served as a way to tell stories in pictures over time. One can imagine a group of courtiers or other dignitaries examining this story together, discussing the implications, maybe even sharing stories they had heard about the event that happened at least 100 years before the scroll was created.

CONTENT:

The painting provides an unfolding series of gruesome scenes. Mounted samurai warriors thunder across the scroll, unleashing a hail of arrows on the palace's overmatched dissenters. As the fire blazes out of control, merciless warriors decapitate once-proud aristocrats and then parade their heads on poles. The escalating violence traps the panic-stricken court ladies. When the desperate women rushed out to avoid the fire, they met a barrage of arrows. Terrified by the arrows and the flames, they jumped into wells, where they suffocated each other. The artist provides a pointed picture of the dead ladies still wearing their layered robes. The scroll's inscription underscored the tragic scene by stating, "it was more than terrible." The artist concludes his scroll with a portrait of a victorious commander leaving the palace. However, Nobuyori's victory proved to be fleeting. Taira no Kiyomori, the powerful head of the Taira clan rescued Go-Shirakawa and beheaded Nobuyori but the story does not in there. Kiyomori died during a bloody war with the Minamoto clan. Yoshimoto's son Yoritomo then became Japan's first shogun, or military dictator.

CONTEXT:

The Sanjo palace provided an opulent home for former Emperor Go-Shirakawa, his son Emperor Nijo, and their court. Noble ladies demonstrated their refined taste by wearing thick layers of multi colored silk kimonos. Their court life included endless rounds of elaborate ceremonies, lavish banquets, and poetry contests describing full moons, autumn leaves and spring flowers. While the royal ladies in their lovers hatched frivolous romantic plots, battle-hardened chiefs from the increasingly powerful Taira and Minamoto clans began to view the royal court with disdain. The Night Attack on the Sanjo Palace begins with an inscription explaining that a trusted high court official named Fujiwara no Nobuyori plotted to betray Shirakawa. Nobuyori commanded a force of about 500 fierce samurai warriors. He and his ally, Minamoto no Yoshitomo launched a surprise at night attack at 2 a.m. They refused Go-Shirakawa's urgent plea to negotiate and brusquely ordered him to hasten into the imperial carriage. Nobuyori then ordered his men to set fire to the palace.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Chinese art and architecture had a significant impact on Japanese culture during the Nara period from 645-784. For example the architectural and sculptural styles at Todai-ji reflect Chinese influences. In 794 the imperial family moved from Nara to Tokyo to Kyoto. The royal court in Kyoto soon developed a distinctive artistic style known as yamato-e or "Japanese painting." Yamato-e artists portrayed subjects that appealed to Japan's powerful military leaders. The Night Attack on the Sanjo Palace thus abandons the introspective Daoist philosophy found in Chinese works such as Travelers Among Mountains and Streams. Instead it provides an action-packed portrayal of war and violence. It's style was influenced by the Tale of Genji scrolls.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

The Night Attack also illustrates the new artistic vocabulary employed by Yamato-E artists. For example, the artist removes the Sanjo palace walls to provide viewers with an elevated or bird's-eye view of the horror and chaos taking place, as flames envelop the Imperial residence. The chieftain featured in this image also illustrates the new Yamato-E style. Like the other warriors he is a depersonalized figure with few facial features. By contrast his armor and weapons received detailed attention. Unfurled this work stands apart. Its now forgotten artist used the expressive potential of the long, narrow emaki format with such interpretive brilliance that he perhaps considered that on occasion it might be fully open. He organized a jumble of minutiae into a cohesive narrative arc.

INTERPRETATION:

Military rule in Japan from 1185 on had an interest in the code of the warrior. This painting not only among the very finest picture scrolls ever conceived, but also among the most gripping depictions of warfare—creating an irresistible urge to examine the work closely.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

This short war, with two other famous conflicts before and after, punctuated a brutal epoch that came to a close in 1192 with the establishment of the Kamakura shogunate. The stories of these flashpoints of blood thirst, collectively called gunki monogatari, or "war tales," have inspired a huge body of art over the centuries. The Night Attack on the Sanjo Palace, once part of a larger set that pictorialized the entire Heiji incident, survives with two other scrolls, one of them only in remnants. The remainder of the Heiji Rebellion story appeared on other emaki in the set, now mostly lost: the kidnapping of Emperor Nijo, the slaughter of another noble household, Nobuyori forcing Nijo to appoint him chancellor, Taira Kiyomori's return to decimate the schemers, and finally Kiyomori's mistake—banishing rather than executing several of Minamoto sons.

TITLE: Ryoan-ji **LOCATION:** Kyoto, Japan **DATE:** C. 1480 C.E.

ARTIST: Matsumoto or Sōami **PERIOD/STYLE:** Edo and Muromachi Period **PATRON:** Hosokawa family

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Rock Garden

FORM:

The Ryoan-ji rock garden presents a deceptively simple form. It is located within an enclosed courtyard measuring 30 feet by 78 ft. The garden contains 15 stones of different sizes, artfully placed in five isolated groups one with five stones, two with three stones, and two with two stones. A small moss border surrounds these island groups. Careful raked white gravel fills the remaining space. A nearly six foot high oil-earthen wall, made up of clay mixed with red seed oil, frames the garden on two sides. The wall prevents the sun's glare from reflecting off the garden's white gravel.

FUNCTION:

Ryoan-ji rock garden has become an internationally recognized symbol of Zen Buddhism. The word Zen means meditation or concentration. The practice originated in India and China before spreading to Japan in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Followers of Zen Buddhism believe that meditation is the primary tool to help them achieve a heightened sense of self-awareness. A rock garden provides a setting where devotees can achieve a sudden insight that deepens into more profound self-realization. The rocks and small pieces of gravel in the Ryoan-ji Garden can provide insight into the human condition. Like the garden rocks, we will all become insignificant pieces of gravel. Quiet meditation in the Ryoan-ji rock garden can guide devotees to the important insight that the cycle of life rests upon impermanence. This condition can only be broken by intensive self-awareness about one's true nature. It serves as a focal point for meditation.

CONTENT:

When visitors pass through main gate, they encounter the Mirror Pond (Kyōyōchi) on the left with a scenic view of surrounding mountains. Walking along the pilgrim's path and entering the second gate, visitors arrive at the main building of the monastery, the hōjo (abbot's residence). The rock garden is located in the front of the hojo and is viewed either from the wooden veranda embracing the building or from inside the room. During its long history the Ryoan-ji rock garden retained many distinctive features. It never offered visitors flowers to admire, paths to walk on, or benches to sit on. Like a painting or sculpture, the rock garden requires viewers to consider it from a distance. Devotees view the rock garden from the veranda outside the abbot's Hall. The stone islands are strategically placed so that only 14 of the 15 rocks can be seen from any single vantage point. Although the garden initially appears to look like a sandbox, its enigmatic arrangement invites quiet meditation.

CONTEXT:

The history of the Ryoan-ji rock garden contains many mysteries. Scholars believe that the original rock garden dates to the late 1400s. However, its current form can only be traced back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The creator of these gardens remain unknown. The wet garden contains a tea house. Although it seems arbitrary, the plants are placed in a highly organized and structured environment symbolizing the natural world. Water symbolizes purification and is used in rituals. Zen Buddhism came to Japan from China at the end of the 12th century C.E. and was strongly influenced by Daoist thought. Japanese samurai warriors were especially drawn to Zen Buddhism because it presented a doctrine of self-discipline. Part of this self-discipline involved meditation, a practice designed to lead the practitioner to enlightenment.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

A principal innovation in Japanese design is the Zen garden, which features meticulous arrangements of raked sand circling around prominently placed stones and plants. Each garden suggests wider vistas and elaborate landscapes. Zen gardens contain no water, but the careful placement of rocks often suggests a cascade or a rushing stream. Ryoanji is a Zen temple in Northwestern Kyoto, Japan. It covers about 120 Acres with a beautiful Pond, magnificent views of nearby mountains, and a renowned Zen Rock Garden. The garden's deceptively simple gravel and rock arrangement is one of the masterpieces of Japanese culture and one of the most photographed gardens in the world. Zen Buddhism was disseminated in the West and filtered through modernist artists, who were fascinated by the minimalistic perspectives and abstracted forms of Japanese rock gardens. Whatever the skepticism one reserves for existing assumptions about the Zen garden and culture, no one can deny the cultural and historical significance of Ryōanji and its rock garden.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

The gravel acts as water, the rocks are mountain ranges, meant to be viewed from a veranda in a nearby building. A 16th century gardener/painter wrote, "Caution should be taken not to be too anxious to overcrowd the scenery to make it more interesting. Such an effect often results in a loss of dignity and a feeling of vulgarity."

INTERPRETATION:

No one knows the artist's intent when he designed the Ryoan-ji rock garden. This has not stopped viewers from proposing a number of interpretations. For example, many visitors believe that the garden represents mountain peaks rising above the clouds, islands basking in the sun, or even a mother tiger leading her cubs across the stream. Although they provide interesting possibilities these interpretations do not deepen our understanding of Zen Buddhism's philosophical quest for enlightenment. The best Japanese art is suggestive rather than declarative. Viewed from his perspective, the 15 stones may suggest self-important but deluded individuals. In Buddhist thought, life is an illusion in which people are always moving yet going nowhere. Blinded by illusion, humans endlessly walk in shadows, futilely searching for light. It symbolizes the Japanese aesthetic concept of wabi (refined austerity) and sabi (subdued taste), or the fundamental ideal of Zen philosophy.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The garden is a microcosm of nature. It's probably the most highly regarded example of kare-sansui, or "dry landscape."

TITLE: White and Red Plum Blossoms **LOCATION:** Japan **DATE:** c. 1710-1716 CE

ARTIST: Ogata Korin **PERIOD/STYLE:** The Rinpa School **PATRON:** _____

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Ink, Watercolor and gold leaf on paper

FORM:

The stream's swelling metallic curls and spirals are a make-believe of flowing water, and its sharply tapered serpentine contour lines angle the picture plane in an unnatural upward tilt. The trunks of the trees are nothing more than pools of mottled color without so much as an outline. These forms and spaces appear flat to the eye. Yet the artist's intimate knowledge of how a plum tree grows can be seen in their writhing forms and tangle of shoots and branches.

FUNCTION:

Folding screens blocked drafts, and they also provided a perfect surface on which to make an interior setting more decorative and beautiful.

CONTENT:

The Japanese traditionally welcome flowering plum trees as harbingers of spring. Art historians believe Korin explored this popular subject in the years just before his death in 1715. He painted the memorable image *White and Red Plum Blossoms* on a pair of two-panel folding screens. Each screen measures almost 62 in wide and just under 68 inches high. A stream flows across the center of Korin's two panels. At first broad, the stream rapidly narrows as it recedes into the distance.

CONTEXT:

Ogata Korin's artistic career began in Kyoto, Japan in the 1690s and lasted for less than two decades. During this short period, he created striking images for screen paintings, ceramics, textiles, and lacquerware. Art historians recognize *White and Red Plum Blossoms* as Korin's supreme artistic achievement and a masterpiece of Japanese art. Korin enjoyed a youth filled with luxury and aesthetic refinement. His family owned a stylish clothing store where wealthy clients purchased expensive fabrics. Korin's father left him a sizable inheritance. However, he pursued a frivolous lifestyle and squandered his fortune. Facing financial ruin Korin turned to art. He soon established himself as a gifted painter, whose work reflected the taste of Japan's increasingly prosperous middle-class.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Influenced by the Yamato-E style of painting, Ogata Korin's works employ distinctive brush techniques and stylistic preferences for vivid colors, bold abstract designs, motifs drawn from nature, and extensive use of gold and silver. This combination of characteristics influenced several generations of Japanese artists known collectively as the RINPA school. The name Rinpa derives from the last syllable of Korin's name (Rin) and the Japanese word (pa), meaning school. Although Rinpa artists share similar interests, they did not constitute a formal school such as the Kei school of sculptors, who carved the fierce guardian figures at Todai-ji. Since the 19th century this combination of abstraction and naturalism, monumental presence, dynamism and gorgeous sensuality has commonly been referred to as Rinpa, or "School of Kōrin." It has profoundly impacted modernism in the West, most famously in the work of Gustav Klimt.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Korin places his abstract River and realistic trees in a space dominated by a gold background. Like Byzantine mosaics the gold background denies a sense of time and place. Instead, it creates a dreamlike setting that invites viewers to contemplate the ephemeral beauty of nature and the inevitable passage of time. Korin achieved his distinctive interplay of abstraction and realism by employing artistic techniques known as Tarashikomi and Mokkotsu. He used tarashikomi by dipping paint or ink into his initial layer of wet paint. The pigments then merge and blur, giving his painting depth and a quality of unpredictability. Korin's skillful use of tarashikomi added visual interest and variety to his work. Korin enhanced the striking appearance of his trees by adding mokkotsu to create vibrant red and white blossoms. Instead of filling in the outline of a flower, Korin painted each form without extensive lines. This natural look conveys each flower's sparkling color and vitality.

INTERPRETATION:

Korin uses stylized curls to represent a swirling current. His dark and gently twisting ripples suggest the passage of time in the changes in his own life. The abstract stream passes between two plum trees. A young and vigorous red plum stands to the right. Its brilliant red blossoms decorate branches that reach upward, suggesting the unlimited opportunities of Korin youth. In contrast, the white plum tree is much older. Delicate white blossoms decorate its thin branches suggesting the wisdom Korin has acquired as a mature artist.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

TITLE: Under the wave off Kanagawa **LOCATION:** Japan **DATE:** 1830-1833 C.E.

ARTIST: Katsushika Hokusai **PERIOD/STYLE:** Edo Period **PATRON:**

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Polychrome woodblock print; ink and color on paper

FORM:

This image of a towering wave threatening to overwhelm oarsmen and three fragile skiffs has fascinated, inspired, and challenge viewers since it first appeared in the early 1830s. It is a polychrome (multi-colored) woodblock print, made of ink and color on paper that is approximately 10 x 14 inches.

FUNCTION:

Hokusai created his woodcut as part of a commercial endeavor for a mass audience. The early 19th century witnessed a boom in popular travel within Japan. Many tourists included Mount Fuji as featured destination. Hokusai alertly recognized the commercial potential of inexpensive woodcut prints of Mount Fuji. A tourist could purchase a souvenir print for the price of a cup of noodle soup. Motivated by his inspired idea, Hokusai began a series of 36 woodcut prints that would all include an image of Mount Fuji. Named after the 36 immortals of Japanese classical poetry, the thirty-six views of Mount Fuji would ensure Hokusai an honored place in our history. Japanese woodblock prints were often purchased as souvenirs. The original audience for Hokusai's prints was ordinary townspeople who were followers of the "Fuji cult" and made pilgrimages to climb the mountain, or tourists visiting the new capital city.

CONTENT:

In 1830 Hokusai turned to portraying Mount Fuji, a subject he deemed "worthy of notice". Located 62 miles southwest of Edo, the majestic cone-shaped mountain played an important role in shaping Japan's national identity. Like Buddhist and Shinto worshippers Hokusai venerated Mount Fuji as an immortal and indestructible part of his homeland. Indeed the word "fu-shi" literally means "no death"

CONTEXT:

An artistic style known as UKIYO-E dominated Japanese popular culture during Hokusai's lifetime. Ukiyo-e artists focused on creating images of a transient urban "floating world", populated by Kabuki actors in beautiful geishas. Ukiyo-e is the name for Japanese woodblock prints made during the Edo Period. Ukiyo-e, which originated as a Buddhist term, means "floating world" and refers to the impermanence of the world. Hokusai moved away from the tradition of making images of courtesans and actors, which was the customary subject of ukiyo-e prints. Instead, his work focused on the daily life of Japanese people from a variety of social levels. The Great Wave off Kanagawa was likely printed between 1829 and 1832, but at the time, Japan was not engaging culturally with other nations except for trade with China and Korea, which was strictly controlled, and the Dutch, who were only allowed to operate in Nagasaki. Nearly 30 years would pass before political pressure pushed Japan to open up its ports and exports to foreign nations. In 1859, a wave of Japanese prints flowed across Europe, winning adoration from the likes of Vincent Van Gogh, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and Claude Monet.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Hokusai carefully studied how Dutch master painters used linear perspective to create the illusion of depth on a flat picture plane. He also purchased a dark blue chemical pigment called Prussian Blue. First synthesized in Prussia, the dye provided an ideal color for the sky and water scenes in his series on Mount Fuji. The changes Hokusai sensed swept across Japan in the years following his death in 1849. Less than a decade later, Japan opened its ports to foreign trade. Within a short time, ships carried prints by Hokusai and other Japanese artists to Paris and other centers of Western art. Manet, VanGogh, and Cassatt all responded enthusiastically to the Japanese style of using flat planes of color and partial views to depict scenes of everyday life. It is possible that Cezanne's famous sequence of paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire were an homage to Hokusai's Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji. This is the first time that landscape became a major theme in Japanese prints. From the Dutch artwork Hokusai became interested in linear perspective. Subsequently, Hokusai created a Japanese variant of linear perspective. The influence of Dutch art can also be seen in the use of a low horizon line and the distinctive European color, Prussian blue.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Hokusai's dramatic composition does not neglect Mount Fuji. A small wave-peak in front of the great wave repeats Mount Fuji's form. Hokusai uses linear perspective to draw the viewer's eye to the legendary snow-capped mountain position near the center of a low horizon line. Hokusai has arranged the composition to frame Mount Fuji. The curves of the wave and hull of one boat dip down just low enough to allow the base of Mount Fuji to be visible, and the white top of the great wave creates a diagonal line that leads the viewer's eye directly to the peak of the mountain top. Hokusai was interested in oblique angles, contrasts of near and far, and contrasts of manmade and the natural.

INTERPRETATION:

The Great Wave does more than create dramatic tension; it also serves as a visual metaphor for Japan's increasingly anxious state of mind. Although the island nation remained isolated, Hokusai's exposure to Dutch art served notice that Japan could not indefinitely resist joining the global trading network. The massive wave can thus be viewed as a symbol of the growing perils facing Japan. In this context, Hokusai uses Mount Fuji as a reassuring source of stability. "At some point, ukiyo-e was brought to foreign countries," says Takahashi, whose family has been making ukiyo-e for more than 150 years. "We Japanese didn't realize how wonderful they were, because we took them for granted in our daily lives."

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The Great Wave and Travelers Among Mountains and Streams explore the relationship between humans and the natural world. Both works depict humans as an insignificant presence in settings dominated by nature. The artist became famous for his landscapes created using a palette of indigo and imported Prussian blue.

Better know the Great Wave: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1ufFlXIwJA>