

Riding the Great Wave: A Personal Reflection on Japanese Art and Culture

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Activity: Q2

Section: FOPI04



Hokusai, K. (1831). The Great Wave off Kanagawa [Woodblock print]. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/45434>

1. What culture is the piece of art about? What did you learn about the culture from this art?

The Great Wave off Kanagawa comes from Japanese culture during the Edo period, and it is part of the ukiyo-e woodblock print tradition. What stands out to me is its balance and composition, the wave curves in a dramatic arch that almost seems to engulf the distant Mount Fuji, creating tension between nature and humanity. The sharp, foamy textures of the wave contrast with the stillness of the background, almost like chaos against calm. Through this, I learned that Japanese culture emphasizes not just the beauty of nature but also its power, reminding people of their place in the world. For me, as a 20-year-old working student in the Philippines who spends most of his time indoors coding, it was eye-opening to see how a single image could communicate resilience and respect for forces greater than ourselves.

2. How did the piece of art change the ways you understand yourself and others?

Technically, the print uses lines and rhythm to guide the viewer's eyes; from the fishermen struggling in their boats; to the wave towering above; to the calm Mount Fuji in the distance. I relate to that rhythm because my life often feels the same: I row through waves of deadlines, projects, and stress, but somewhere beyond that chaos, there is a calmer goal waiting, just like Fuji. Thematically, the artwork is about human vulnerability, but it also conveys perseverance. It made me realize that while I often feel small or overwhelmed, especially as a working student who barely goes out, others in different times and places face their own overwhelming waves. This taught me empathy: we all share the same struggles, though they take different forms.

3. Reflecting on the example piece of art you chose, what do you think are the roles that art plays in intercultural understanding and

multicultural societies?

On a technical level, art communicates through form, contrast, and theme. Even without words, *The Great Wave* uses its visual structure like movement, tension, and balance to speak across cultures. For someone like me, who loves Japanese culture through anime and pop art, this traditional piece shows me the deeper roots of the culture I admire. In a multicultural society, art becomes a bridge: it teaches us to see beyond language and lifestyle, and to connect through universal themes like struggle, hope, and respect for nature. Personally, art allows me to “travel” and learn about cultures without leaving my room. It proves that even as someone who stays inside most of the time, I can still engage with and understand the wider world through visual expression.