

The Great Wave: Hokusai

Donald Finkel

The Great Wave: Hokusai

But we will take the problem in its most obscure manifestation, and suppose that our spectator is an average Englishman. A trained observer, carefully hidden behind a screen, might notice a dilation in his eyes, even an intake of his breath, perhaps a grunt. (Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art*)

It is because the sea is blue,
Because Fuji is blue, because the bent blue
Men have white faces, like the snow
On Fuji, like the crest of the wave in the sky the color of their
5 Boats. It is because the air
Is full of writing, because the wave is still: that nothing
Will harm these frail strangers,
That high over Fuji in an earthcolored sky the fingers
Will not fall; and the blue men
10 Lean on the sea like snow, and the wave like a mountain leans
Against the sky.

In the painter's sea
All fishermen are safe. All anger bends under his unity.
But the innocent bystander, he merely
15 'Walks round a corner, thinking of nothing': hidden
Behind a screen we hear his cry.
He stands half in and half out of the world; he is the men,
But he cannot see below Fuji
The shore the color of sky; he is the wave, he stretches
20 His claws against strangers. He is
Not safe, not even from himself. His world is flat.
He fishes a sea full of serpents, he rides his boat
Blindly from wave to wave toward Ararat.

The Great Wave at Kamagawa

Katsushika Hokusai, 1831

woodblock print

