Katsushika Hokusai’s (1760–1849) woodblock print ‘Under the wave off Kanagawa’, aka the Great Wave, from 1830–31 is undoubtedly the most well-known Japanese work of art in the world. Hokusai’s print is probably the only print in any culture about which entire books have been written, the latest being Christine M. E. Guth’s *Hokusai’s Great Wave: biography of a global icon*. Published in a small, handy format, the 256-page book aims, with the help of 195 illustrations, to portray the transmission of Hokusai’s iconic design from its origin to its distribution in Europe, its reception in America, its third-party reuse, and its present-day identification as representation of disaster.

To begin with an overview of the book, the first chapter is devoted to the creation of the Great Wave, its production process and the historical and cultural context in which it was created in Edo (present-day Tokyo) in the 1830s. Guth then continues to characterize Mount Fuji as a symbol of Japanese national pride and waves in Japan as representing great national danger. Chapter two, entitled ‘International nationalism’, describes the dissemination of books and prints by Hokusai in Europe in the late nineteenth century as a result of the interest among artists including musicians such as Claude Debussy and Igor Stravinsky.

In the third chapter, the author discusses America and the influx of Japanese art through immigration, World War II, and its resulting American Occupation of Japan. Japanese prints were actively collected in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; one reason for their popularity offered by Guth is that they were considered to be art for the common man and therefore more suited to the ostensibly democratic values of the United States than was art commissioned for and collected by feudal lords. Guth continues to list a few of the American museums with impressions of the Great Wave in their collections and also provides information on public auction sales in America. In connection with this, she suggests that the postwar writings of James Michener, Pearl S. Buck and others helped revise wartime views of Japan as an aggressive, militaristic nation to ‘a scenic country of nature-loving, artistic people’ (p. 107).

In the latter part of the chapter, Guth shifts back to Japan to discuss the design of stamps and posters in the 1960s that incorporate the Great Wave and other wave designs by Hokusai. The author then returns to the U.S. in the 1970s to discuss the exhibition, ‘The Great Wave: the influence of Japanese woodcuts on French prints’ at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1974–75), which she argues was instrumental in popularizing the term Great
Wave (p. 122). The chapter concludes with a discussion of artists living in the U.S. who have integrated the Great Wave in their works, namely Roger Shimomura, Masami Teraoka, Kozyndan and Brian Chan.

Chapter four is titled ‘Lifestyle branding’ and explores the Great Wave as ‘global commercial currency’ (p. 137) and its use in museum merchandise, food and drink, clothing, sports and leisure, and for Japan’s self-promotion campaign ‘Cool Japan’. For Guth, it is the non-figural character of the Great Wave that has facilitated its reception by many cultures and has led to it being readily adopted by environmentalists, tourism industries, youth culture etc.

‘Placemaking’ in chapter five highlights the Great Wave and its derivatives in popular imagery for public spaces like Lutz Haufschild’s (born 1943) ‘The Great Wave’ at Vancouver International Airport in Canada; murals in Washington DC, Newtown, Australia, and other places; ‘crop art’ in Inakadate, Japan; and the TWA Flight 800 International Memorial near John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York.

In her epilogue ‘After the tsunami’, Guth surmises that in the aftermath of the disaster of 11 March 2011, when an earthquake and tsunami devastated coastal areas of Japan’s Tōhoku region, the general public outside Japan now interprets the Great Wave as an image of a tsunami threatening Japan instead of that of a storm wave. It is strange that for such a significant occurrence, Guth does not mention the event by name. While Guth points out that research by wave scientists rules out the possibility that the Great Wave could be characterized as a tsunami and this was probably not Hokusai’s intention, she could have arrived at this conclusion by looking into the history of tsunamis in Japan. During Hokusai’s lifetime tsunamis were not common; reports exist of only two tsunamis that occurred far away from Edo (present-day Tokyo) in southern Japan: one in Okinawa (1771), the other in Kyushu (1792).

Christine Guth’s book is a welcome addition to the corpus of books on Japanese art for a mixed readership. However, there are many shortcomings, which are for the most part not directly related to the story the author is trying to tell. Chapters three to five represent the quality of research that readers are used to from her previous books such as Art, tea, and industry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). As a print scholar, most of my comments are concerned with the beginning of the book.

In general, Guth succeeds in providing a new, expanded view of the global tour of a great work of art, but her arguments are frequently undermined by unfounded statements that are at best distractions and at worst misrepresentations of Hokusai’s world. Guth, who wrote her PhD thesis in 1976 on early Shinto sculpture, has subsequently published widely in this area as well as more generally on the art of the Edo period. Since 2007, she has been Senior