

Formal and Comparative Analysis:

‘*David*’ by Donatello, c. (1440-60) and ‘*Under the Wave Off Kanagawa*’ by Katsushika Hokusai,  
(1826-1836)

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Art Historical Methods + Theory  
May 5, 2021

‘*David*’ by Donatello, c. (1440-60), is the first free-standing bronze sculpture, standing about 6 ft. tall, and was commissioned by the Medici family. The Medici family was one of the biggest art patrons in the early Italian Renaissance. You can now find this statue in the Bargello National Museum in Florence, Italy (Figure 1). ‘*Under the Wave off Kanagawa*’ also known as ‘*The Great Wave*’ by Katsushika Hokusai, (1826-1836), is a woodblock print (Figure 2). The print was part of a series titled ‘*36 Views of Mount Fuji*.’ Hokusai traveled all over Japan where he could still see Mount Fuji and created an artwork that consisted of the daily life in Japan and Mount Fuji in the background. Although there was no distinct patron to the artwork in Japan at this time, artists created works that were popular with the increase of domestic travel. This print can now be found in numerous locations around the world.

The viewer of these artworks will go over a formal analysis of each artwork describing the use of the principles and elements of art found in each piece, and then move into a comparison of the two artworks by describing the differences and similarities between the non-western and western approaches in both. The formal and contextual processes used in this paper can be found in chapter 2 of the book *Methods and Theories of Art History* by Anne D’Alleva.<sup>1</sup> (17-45). Both Donatello and Hokusai were an inspiration with their techniques and approaches to art, which later influenced artists like Michelangelo and Vincent Van Gogh. With that, viewers can realize that non-western artists are just as influential and important to art history as the western artists are.

‘*David*’ by Donatello, c. (1440-60), (Figure 1), was one of the first freestanding bronze sculptures that stood in the middle of the courtyard of Palazzo Medici with no other architectural

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<sup>1</sup> D’Alleva, Anne. *Methods and Theories of Art History*, (2005), pp. 17-45

substrate around it. If the viewer starts at the head of David, they are pushed downwards from a combination of the contrapposto pose and the sword that come together to meet at the head of the decapitated Goliath, creating our focal point and emphasis on this area of the sculpture.

Donatello has achieved a sense of balance from the contrapposto pose, the head of Goliath, and the visual weight on the sword held in David's right hand. The scale of this sculpture is close to life-size, and although the sculpture isn't fully anatomically correct, the proportions of the sculpture also give us a visual balance in the sculpture. The viewer can visually create implied lines throughout the body that further guide their eyes throughout the sculpture. Donatello has created forms and shapes that render the human body to bring back the humanistic nude approach. Being able to interact in the 3-dimensional space of this sculpture allows us to feel the volume and mass of the artwork achieved by Donatello. Value is created by the lighting that casts highlights, mid-tones, and shadows across the sculpture, allowing us to see the visual texture on the bronze surface.

*'The Great Wave'* by Katsushika Hokusai, (1826-1836), (Figure 2). The live-nature of the wave guides our eye through the artwork to the focal point of Mount Fuji in the middle-ground. Hokusai achieved an asymmetrical balance by keeping the rolling tide on the right about the same height as the wave on the left. Unity is achieved by the monochromatic unison in color as well as the repetition of similar shapes throughout the artwork. The artist also gives a sense of variety, rhythm, and pattern in the artwork from realistic flow of the water and the claw-like white caps rolling over the wave. Hokusai has created a visual emphasis on the wave by making it the biggest object in the work, allowing the viewer to feel the scale and proportion of the wave to Mount Fuji and the fishermen boats. Hokusai has perfectly imitated a similar effect of a

painterly line quality in the wood block print. He has created a calligraphic outline that adds to the Japanese cultural feel of the work. Hokusai has also used shapes to distinguish the individual objects as well as create a sense of form in the image. Hokusai created a feeling of mass and volume from the wave achieved from the scale and proportion of the objects in the print. The artist has used color and value effectively by keeping a simple color palette ranging from deep Prussian blue to white. Hokusai has created a visual passage of time and motion that the viewer can feel as they follow the rolling lines of the wave. Finally, the visual space is achieved by the overlapping objects in the artwork.

If the viewer visually compares both artworks, the first major difference they can make is how they interact with the space the artwork is in. *‘David’* (Figure 1), is a sculpture that interacts with the visual space that the sculpture takes up in a room, but *‘The Great Wave’* (Figure 2), sits on a flat wall that doesn’t allow the viewer to interact with the space it takes up. Hokusai has created an image that interacts with the viewer's visual space even though it isn’t 3-dimensional. Hokusai is a non-western artist that began using the techniques from the western elements and principles, while keeping the non-western style and feel. There were no significant patrons that commissioned art in Japanese culture, so most artists spent their time creating works that pertained to the daily lives of the Japanese people, making it more popular to buy. In *‘The Great Wave’* Hokusai has depicted a scene of fishermen bringing live fish back to the city for food. If the viewer looks at artists in Europe, patrons were always commissioning artists for certain artworks. The biggest patrons in the early Italian Renaissance were the Catholic Church and the Medici family. The styles of the work are drastically different as well. James Ackerman said,

“Style thus provides a structure for the history of art.”<sup>2</sup> In this case Hokusai created artwork very familiar to Japanese culture and the “other.” Calligraphic lines and solid shapes of color create the forms that make up ‘*The Great Wave*.’ ‘*David*’ by Donatello creates more of a realistic style, by trying to capture the human body in the perfect image. By viewing these separate styles, the viewer can connect them to the period and area in which they were created.

There are also some similarities the viewer can find in both the formal aspects as well as the iconology and iconography of the artworks. As mentioned before Hokusai began experimenting with the western principles and elements of art, allowing viewers to make visual connections to the ideas they are familiar with and see in the sculpture by Donatello. Mount Fuji, found in ‘*The Great Wave*,’ symbolizes stability and perseverance, the same can be said with the rock found in the left hand of ‘*David*.’ Perseverance is also symbolized in the lifestyle and work of the Japanese fishermen shown in the boats trying to get through the giant wave. This same perseverance could be shown through ‘*David*’ as he fought off the giant Philistine Goliath. Another similarity the artists created in the iconology of both artworks, is the wave in ‘*The Great Wave*’ and the Sword in ‘*David*.’ The wave can symbolize an unpredictable future or disarray, much like the sword that could represent war. Both the wave and the sword can cause a certain destruction to a human culture that makes the future unpredictable in how to prepare.

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<sup>2</sup> Ackerman, James. “Style.” In James Ackerman and Rhys Carpenter. *Art and Archaeology*, 164-86. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015010537572&view=1up&seq=180>



**Figure 1.** *David*, by Donatello, c. 1440-60<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Donatello. *David*. Place: Museo nazionale del Bargello (Florence, Italy). [https://library.artstor.org/asset/LESSING\\_ART\\_1039490463](https://library.artstor.org/asset/LESSING_ART_1039490463).



**Figure 2.** The Great Wave off Kanagawa by Katsushika Hokusai, (1826-1836)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Katsushika Hokusai. 1826-1836. The Great Wave off Kanagawa (Kanagawa oki nami ura), from the series "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji (Fugaku sanjurokkei)". Place: The Art Institute of Chicago, Clarence Buckingham Collection.  
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Katsushika Hokusai. 1826-1836. *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (Kanagawa oki nami ura), from the series "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji (Fugaku sanjurokkei)". Place: The Art Institute of Chicago, Clarence Buckingham Collection.

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