Comparing Japanese and Dutch Works of Art

View *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* from the series "Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji." In collaborative groups, read and discuss the following information, then develop joint responses to the questions presented.

This print, one of the most well-known images by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai, is one of a series of woodblock prints published in 1823. Known as *Beneath the Wave off Kanagawa* in Japan, it is often referred to as *The Great Wave* in the Western world.

The image depicts a tsunami threatening men in narrow boats. Tsunami (tsoo-nah-me) is a Japanese word that translates in English as "harbor wave." Tsunamis are sometimes referred to as "seismic sea waves" by the scientific community and inaccurately as "tidal waves" by the general public. Tsunamis can be caused by earthquakes, volcanic explosions, landslides, and even meteorite impacts. Tsunamis may have waves as tall as 30-100 feet which savagely attack coastlines, causing devastating property damage and loss of life.

Compare *The Great Wave* with *The Stormy Sea* by the Dutch artist Jacob van Ruisdael. *The Stormy Sea* dates from the 1650s and also shows men in boats in danger from the sea. Locate Japan and Holland on a world map. Why do you think the sea was so important to both the Japanese and the Dutch? What other commonalities did the Japanese and Dutch share?

Refer to the Japanese chronology between 1603 and 1888. What connections can you discover between the Japanese and the Dutch within this time period? Can you also think of a more contemporary connection?

Both *The Great Wave* and *The Stormy Sea* include symbols of hope. What do you think is the symbol of hope in each image? Give reasons for your answers.

What elements help you identify one work as Japanese and one work as European?

What do we need to know about a culture to appreciate its art? Is it possible to appreciate unfamiliar art even without understanding the symbolism or the culture being expressed? Why or why not?

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