

HIROSHIGE

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THIRTY-SIX VIEWS  
OF MOUNT FUJI



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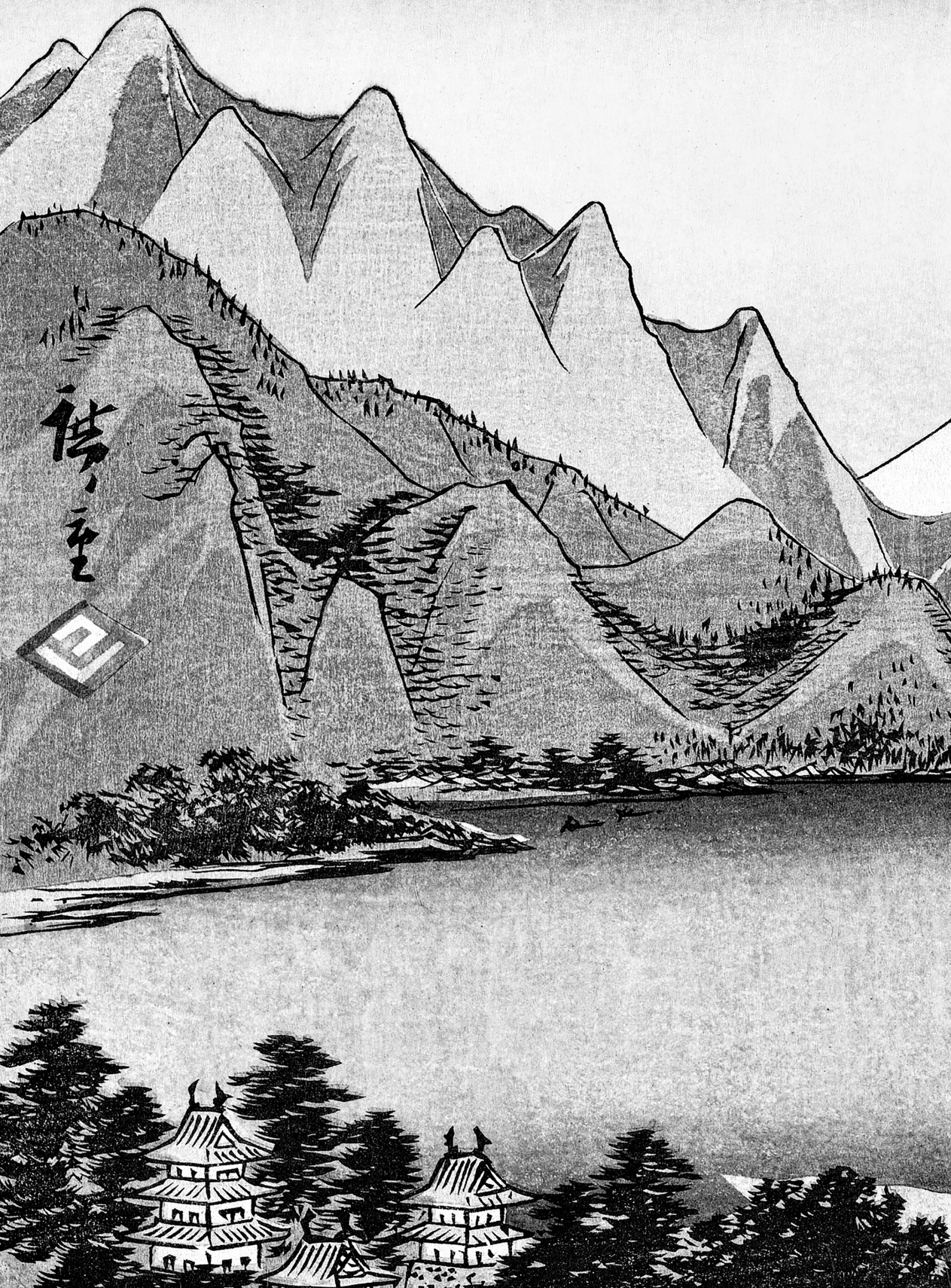
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**THIRTY-SIX VIEWS  
OF MOUNT FUJI**

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## HIROSHIGE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANDSCAPE PRINTS

This series of the *Thirty-six views of Mount Fuji*, published in horizontal format by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) in 1853, is reproduced here in facsimile for the first time in the West. It echoes, twenty years later, the famous eponymous suite by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), which caused quite a sensation at the time. In the 1830s, these two great artists renewed the traditional themes of Japanese woodblock printing, which up until then was mainly devoted to portraits of beautiful women, geishas and theatre actors. Together, they created a resolutely new genre, in which they excelled: the art of landscape prints. These works represented natural sites, which they treated for themselves as the main subject of their composition, whereas previously, in engravings, landscapes had only served as a background for portraits or as a frame for genre scenes.

The development of landscape prints coincided with the rise of domestic tourism: as a form of freedom of movement was granted within the country, travels and pilgrimages increased throughout the archipelago. The Japanese grew passionate about nature, with which they lived in symbiosis, admiring the beauty and the variety of the locations. Responding to this enthusiasm, publishers released illustrated albums for tourists and commissioned artists to create suites of prints based on the famous views (*meisho-e*) of Japan's picturesque cities and landscapes. A new synthetic pigment, Prussian blue (abundantly used to render the sky, the sea, rivers and lakes and more), was then imported from Holland, bringing renewed freshness and liveliness to these prints.

Hiroshige was spurred on by the dazzling success, in the early 1830s, of Hokusai's *Thirty-six views of Mount Fuji*. This series, luxuriously printed in wide and large format by Nishimuraya Eijudō, was an innovative publishing event: the master succeeded in capturing the



mountain in all seasons and in different atmospheric conditions, under changing lights, while also varying views and framing. Then, in 1833–1834, Hiroshige reached consecration with the publication of his series of *The Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō*, with plates providing wonderful panoramas from various locations along the road used to travel from the imperial capital, Kyōto, to the Shogunate capital, Edo (named Tōkyō since the Meiji era). Then, with poetic sensitivity and great attention to climatic phenomena, Hiroshige created numerous series of views depicting famous locations of Edo, Kyōto and the different provinces of Japan, as well as several series devoted to Mount Fuji.

#### THE CULT OF THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

Mount Fuji, a sacred volcano, holds a privileged place among natural sites. A symbol of eternity and changelessness, Japan's highest mountain stands 3,776 m tall. It was both admired for its beauty and feared for the danger that it represented, as its last very deadly eruption dated back to 1707. Omnipresent within the archipelago, Mount Fuji dominates the panorama. Its snowy peak rises majestically towards the sky, and is visible from many provinces in Japan. Nowadays, due to urbanisation and smog produced by industrial pollution, it is difficult to contemplate this perfect cone, located some sixty kilometres away from the city, from within Tōkyō. At the time of Hiroshige, however, a dozen districts of Edo were particularly renowned for their views of Mount Fuji. Poets and painters alike have celebrated it since time immemorial. Both a geographical and an affective landmark, it has become a symbol of Japan and an essential source of inspiration for artists. As early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, in the anthology of *Man'yōshū*, a poem hails it as the “Sacred Mountain”. An invitation to meditate, the contemplation of Mount Fuji can be likened to a spiritual quest.

The subject of religious cults and popular legends, the tether between sky and earth, the sacred mountain named “Fuji San” was popularised in Western culture under the improper name “Fuji-Yama”. It is revered in Japan as a deity in its own right, holding the secret of immortality.

According to ancient Shintō beliefs, it is inhabited by supernatural spirits called *kamis*, as well as by deities such as Fuji-hime, the “daughter of the mountain” (the wisteria flower that she holds in her hand is also called *fuji*). Buddhists consider that its shape is reminiscent of the lotus flower bud. A number of Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples have been erected on its slopes and, every summer, its ascent is a centuries-old ritual. In response to the growing desire to admire images of the sacred mountain, print publishers released ever more views of Mount Fuji, which travellers and pilgrims brought back as souvenirs of their religious stays and retreats on its slopes.

After Hokusai, Hiroshige therefore paid a heartfelt and repeated homage to Mount Fuji. This poetic meditation by the master contemplating the sacred volcano joins the ancestral theme, originating from China, of the *sansui-ga*: “images of mountains and water.” Both elements, constants of the Japanese landscape, appear in almost all of Hiroshige’s views of Mount Fuji, with the mountain rising in the background of the sea, a river or a lake.

Unlike Hokusai, who sometimes produced close-up views of Mount Fuji in all its magnificence, Hiroshige always depicted it on the horizon, incorporating a series of planes to convey an impression of field depth. Sometimes entirely devoid of human presence, Hiroshige’s landscapes often feature a few characters – travellers, peasants and fishermen, living in harmony with nature, in accordance with the artist’s Shintoist vision.

