

Introduction

It seems exceptional, in the history of art, to come across an eminent artist who would say of his own work: ‘although I have produced numerous designs since my fiftieth year, none of my works done before my seventieth is really worth counting. It is only since the age of seventy-three that I have finally understood the true forms of animals, insects and fish, and the nature of plants and trees. Consequently, I will have made more and more progress by the age of eighty-six, and at ninety I will have got even closer to the essence of art. At the age of one hundred I will have reached a magnificent level, and at one hundred and ten each dot and each line will be alive. I would like to ask those who outlive me to see that I have not spoken idly.’

This was written by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) in 1834 under the name Gakyōrōjin Manji, which he adopted that year at the age of seventy-four. He had originally trained with the *ukiyo-e* artist Katsukawa Shunshō (1726–1793), seemingly with the intention of becoming a designer of prints showing kabuki actors on stage – the speciality of the Katsukawa atelier. But in 1794 he left the workshop to establish himself as an independent artist, finding employment with well-to-do amateur poets for mostly private publications. He subsequently took on the name Hokusai and worked mostly on commercial landscape prints and on illustrations for popular novels. At the age of fifty he changed his name to Taito and in this period worked on a series of drawing manuals – books designed for amateur artists who wanted to learn to work in the ‘Katsushika Hokusai style’. The *Hokusai manga* volumes (Hokusai’s Random Sketches; 1814–78) are the most well known of these, and this is what he is referring to when he describes his ‘numerous designs since my fiftieth year’.

Hokusai goes as far as to say that ‘none of my works done before my seventieth is really worth counting.’ Here he is referencing the series begun after that age: the *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, the *Tour of Waterfalls in Various Provinces*, his *Remarkable Views of Bridges in Various Provinces*, his untitled series of ‘Large Flowers’, the *One Thousand Pictures of the Ocean*, *A True Mirror of Chinese and Japanese Poems* and *One Hundred Poems Explained by the Nurse*. Indeed, it is on the basis of this expansive body of wonderfully imaginative views that Hokusai became perhaps the best-known Japanese artist in the world. His treatment of the Japanese landscape and the way human beings figure in these settings is probably unequalled. In view of this, it is perhaps even more impressive to learn of the humility he expresses in the letter that accompanied his *Self-portrait at the Age of Eighty-three*, in which he dismisses his drawings as ‘immature work from the past’. We may only hope that he would also have appreciated this selection of representative works, all created after the age of seventy by the artist known as Katsushika Hokusai.



風凱
晴伏
景三子嶺

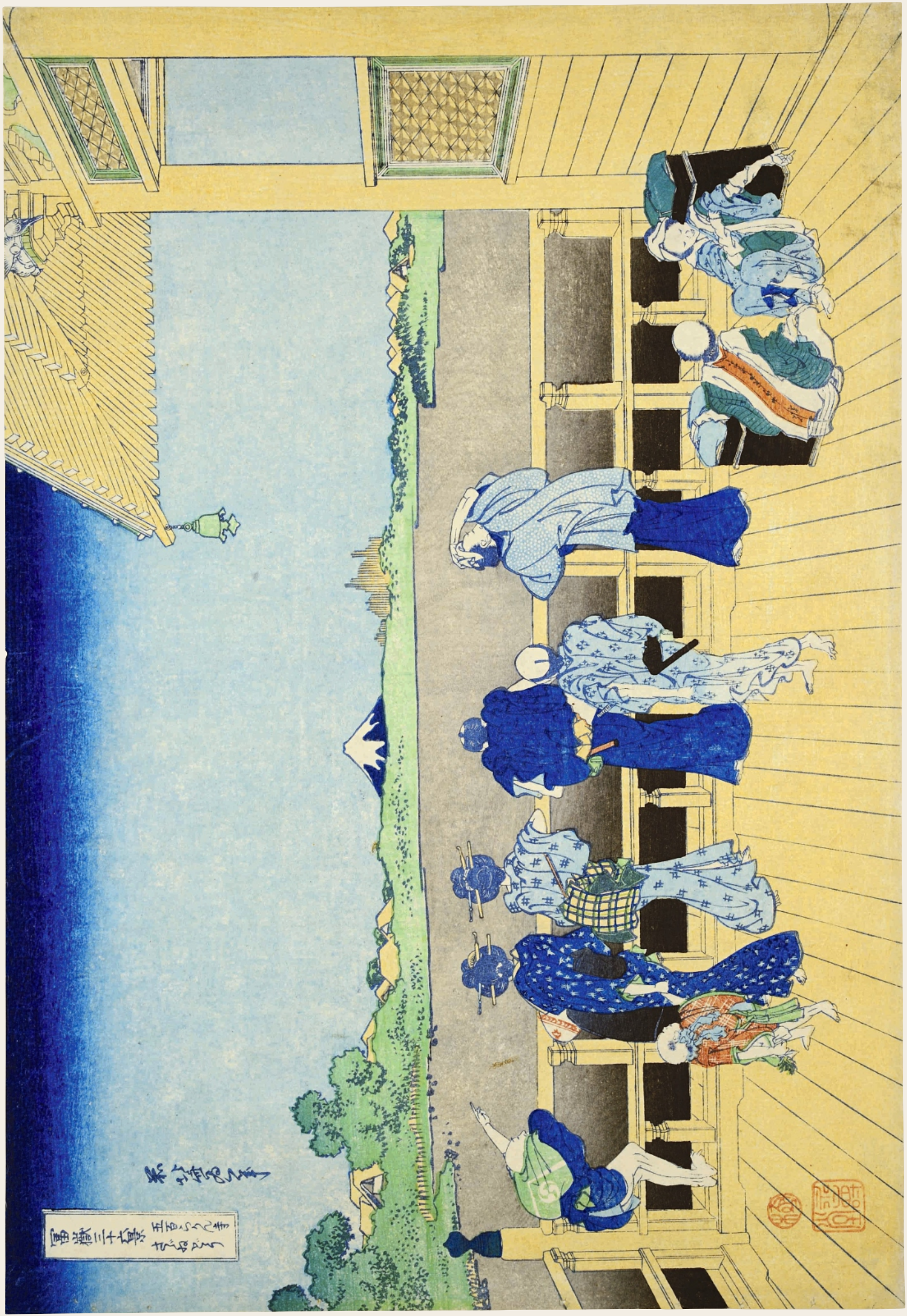
Mount Fuji in Clear Weather

South Wind, Clear Dawn (Gaifū kaisei), c. 1830–31
From the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji (Fugaku sanjūrokkei)*
Colour woodblock print, ōban, 25.4 × 36.5 cm, published by Nishimuraya Yohachi
Signed: Hokusai aratame litsu hitsu

The southerly wind and clear morning of the title refer to the fine weather conditions said to cause Mount Fuji to appear red, as depicted in this print. The kanji character Hokusai uses for ‘south’ can also be read as ‘triumph’, suggesting a victorious wind that helps create this striking scene. Popularly known as *Red Fuji*, the print is one of only two designs in this series devoted to the mountain in which there is absolutely no human presence (the other being *Shower below the Summit*). We see only the peerless mountain – Hokusai elsewhere writes its name using characters meaning ‘unparalleled’ or ‘without equal’ – rising high and seen against a blue sky studded with bands of white clouds.

Here Hokusai shows the prodigious scale of this 3,776-metre-high mountain, unlike in some other designs of the series where it appears rather small. This, Hokusai seems to want to demonstrate, is the advantage of an essentially two-dimensional surface, the sheet of paper, using it to evoke a three-dimensional reality. In most prints in this series – eventually comprising forty-six views of Mount Fuji – Hokusai plays with his compositions, producing a variety of different ways of seeing the mountain; much, he seems to suggest, depends upon how we perceive reality. Since ancient times the mountain, believed to be home to Shinto gods, has been revered as sacred. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, only Shinto or Buddhist priests and monks were permitted to climb the mountain – and this only after a two-week period of purification. This was later also extended to laymen, on the same condition. The period of purification was considerably shorter for pilgrims from Ōmi Province, however, as it was said that Mount Fuji was created when an earthquake in Ōmi created Lake Biwa, the displaced earth forming the mountain at the border of Suruga and Kai provinces. Climbing, as it were, their own ground, pilgrims from Ōmi needed only two days’ purification before they could begin their ascent.

A much earlier double-page sketch of Mount Fuji showing the pine trees along Shichirigahama (Seven *Ri* Beach) in the foreground, printed in 1816 in the artist’s *Hokusai manga* (Hokusai’s Random Sketches; volume 5), seems to prefigure this majestic design.



五重の寺
眞三十獄
馬

新編浮城物語

People on a Temple Balcony

The Sazai Hall of the Temple of the Five Hundred Rakan (Gohyaku Rakanji Sazaidō), c. 1834
From the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji (Fugaku sanjūrokkei)*
Colour woodblock print, ōban, 25.4 × 37 cm, published by Nishimuraya Yohachi
Signed: Saki no Hokusai litsu hitsu

On seeing this image, people who had been following Hokusai since the early 1800s might have said something like: ‘Oh, there he is again,’ referring to the boy on the left who points towards the mountain. Indeed, Hokusai had depicted the same location some thirty years earlier in the privately issued album *Birds of the Capital (Miyakodori; c. 1802)*; there, the boy drops sheets of paper from the balcony, watching them fall slowly to the ground on currents of air. Or they might have remarked that they had never seen the balcony of the Sazaidō from this perspective, with the wooden planks converging and Mount Fuji as the vanishing point. Though the mountain, seen on the distant horizon, appears only very small, all the lines in the composition converge on it – even the eaves of the roof – and there is not really any need for the boy also to point to it.

This print, together with his view of the Japan Bridge (*Edo Nihonbashi*) in the same series, is probably the most explicit demonstration of Hokusai’s understanding of the principles of Western perspective. He had already demonstrated this in 1815 in his *Hokusai manga* (Hokusai’s Random Sketches; volume 3), in which he reduced a European perspective view (*vue d’optique*) print to a schematic design. Whether he owned that print himself or used a copy created by Utagawa Toyoharu in the late 1770s as his example, we cannot know. But many such European ‘optical’ prints found their way to Japan, imported by the Dutch.

The Sazai Hall of the Temple of the Five Hundred Rakan was a three-storey building constructed on the east bank of the Sumida River in 1741. It gained its name, meaning ‘turban shell hall’, because of its spiral staircase, which was reminiscent of grilled turban shell, or *sazae*, a delicacy popular even today. This part of the city of Edo (now Tokyo) was still barely developed at the time Hokusai made his print. However, in later views of the location, especially in prints by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) dating from the 1840s and 1850s, the land beyond the temple had been reclaimed.



第一鳥奇山景

富嶽三士堂 甲州 石舞澤

Fisherman at Kajikazawa

Kajikazawa in Kai Province (Kōshū Kajikazawa), c. 1831
From the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji (Fugaku sanjūrokkei)*
Colour woodblock print, ōban, 26.2 × 38.6 cm, published by Nishimuraya Yohachi
Signed: Saki no Hokusai litsu hitsu

A fisherman stands on a jutting rock at Kajikazawa, holding the lines to which his cormorants are attached. River fishing with cormorants was a fairly common technique at the time, and Hokusai was especially interested in the specialised skills and methods of different kinds of craftspeople. A somewhat similar design of a cormorant fisherman appeared in 1823 in a booklet of designs intended for pipe-makers. There too, Mount Fuji rises high above the clouds, but here it is reduced to simple outlines, echoing as it were the lines held by the fisherman as well as his bent body and the jutting rock on which he stands.

The lines below the mountain and the waves in the foreground render a sense of movement to the scene, whereas the configuration of the rock, fisherman and fishing lines, and Mount Fuji in the background, appear static. Moreover, the billowing waves at bottom right seem to echo the artist's *Great Wave*, which he had published only about a year earlier. The fisherman and his assistant seated behind him, however, concentrate on their work, unmoved by the great mountain in the distance and unhampered by the wild waters. In all its quiet peacefulness, this is one of the most impressive designs in the *Fuji* series. In fact, it is probably its simplicity and direct appeal – with its focus on the activities of the isolated figures in the landscape setting – that give this design its prominent place in the series.

諸國鏡廻 下野黒髪山
きりぎりす滝



茶坊主 金屋



Pilgrims at Kirifuri Waterfall

Kirifuri Waterfall at Mount Kurokami in Shimotsuke Province
(*Shimotsuke Kurokamiyama Kirifuri no taki*), c. 1832

From the series *A Tour of Waterfalls in Various Provinces (Shokoku taki meguri)*
Colour woodblock print, ōban, 38 × 25.8 cm, published by Nishimuraya Yohachi
Signed: Saki no Hokusai litsu hitsu

Three travellers look up at Kirifuri Waterfall, its water coming down in various streams; two other men can be seen high up on the slope to the right. The men are pilgrims, most likely on their way to the Tōshō-gū Shrine at Nikkō in central Japan, where the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu is enshrined. Mount Kurokami, literally ‘black hair mountain’, is part of the Nantaizan mountains a little to the north of the historic city of Nikkō. Kirifuri Waterfall descends in two streams of some 75 metres.

While Hokusai opted for a horizontal format for most of his series of landscape prints of the 1830s, his series devoted to the waterfalls of Japan is, quite understandably, in portrait. This print of the falls at Kirifuri (literally ‘falling mist’) is an excellent example of how Hokusai focuses on the power of lines to define his landscapes. However, it is worth noting that the double-page illustration by Fuchigami Kyokkō in his *Exceptional Views of Mountain and Water Landscapes (Sansui kikan; 1800–1802)* that served as Hokusai’s example also displays an impressive play of lines. In Hokusai’s depiction, the falls’ two main streams break up into an endless play of white, dark blue and light blue. The rocky hillside, meanwhile, is studded with numerous dots and short lines to give it three-dimensional volume. Not only is this characteristic of Hokusai’s designs of the 1830s but it is also an important distinguishing difference between his works and the landscapes of his contemporary Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858).

The man in the centre admiring the waterfall has the mark of the publisher of this series, Nishimuraya Yohachi, on the bundle on his back, and one of the men higher up the slope holds his hat so as to display the character ‘ei’, for Eijudō, the firm’s shop name.

諸國名橋奇覽
如月軒
生



如月軒
生

Pontoon Bridge at Sano in Winter

View of the Old Boat-bridge at Sano in Kōzuke Province
(*Kōzuke Sano funabashi no kozu*), c. 1834

From the series *Remarkable Views of Bridges in Various Provinces* (*Shokoku meikyō kiran*)
Colour woodblock print, ōban, 25.4 × 37.2 cm, published by Nishimuraya Yohachi
Signed: Saki no Hokusai litsu hitsu

Hokusai's fascination with bridges is already clear from several examples found in his *Hokusai manga* (Hokusai's Random Sketches; 1814–78) volumes, and in a large print he designed around 1832 of a *Landscape with a Hundred Bridges*, a scene he saw in a dream, as he states in the inscription. In his series of *Remarkable Views of Bridges in Various Provinces* he focuses on a number of famous bridges, including at least two that no longer existed by that time, this pontoon bridge being one of them. In the foreground we see a man leading a horse with a rider, with packages attached to the saddle, across a bridge in a snowy landscape. The two other figures crossing the bridge, which consists of wooden planks resting on a large number of small boats floating on the water, merely confirm the desolate setting. It is not even clear whether there is a road to follow on reaching the far bank.

Since this bridge was no longer extant in Hokusai's time, his design was most likely inspired by a plate depicting a pontoon bridge in the province of Etchū that he found in Fuchigami Kyokkō's *Exceptional Views of Mountain and Water Landscapes* (*Sansui kikan*), a popular compilation of views from provinces all over Japan published in 1800–1802.

By 1834, the publisher Nishimuraya Yohachi had come to realise that his use of blue ink for printing the line-blocks in Hokusai's *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* and *A Tour of Waterfalls in Various Provinces* – both being so successful that Nishimuraya had to make regular reprints – caused too much wear. The indigo pigment was not as fine or smooth as the black *sumi* ink traditionally used, and so he reverted to black outlines both in the final ten designs of the *Fuji* series and in this series of *Remarkable Views of Bridges*.



春風得意

