

富士 Mt Fuji 山

Japan's newest world heritage site

On 22 June 2013, Mt Fuji was declared Japan's seventeenth UNESCO World Heritage site.

Mount Fuji and its surrounding lakes and forests make for some wonderful scenery, close up or from afar. The mountain changes colour through the days and seasons. At times Mount Fuji appears crystal clear to the onlooker; at others it seems a mere suggestion. Its almost symmetrical shape from certain viewpoints has a serene grace; then remember it is a dormant volcano which left ash in the streets of Tokyo, then Edo, when it last erupted in 1707.

At 3,776 metres tall, Mount Fuji is a physically impressive mountain. However, it was not made a World Heritage Site because of its undeniable beauty. It was listed for its cultural significance, which is no less impressive.

Mount Fuji was inscribed on the World Heritage List as a cultural site and is described by UNESCO as a "sacred place and source of artistic inspiration".

It meets criteria (iii) to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilisation which is living or has disappeared and (vi) to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.

Mount Fuji has long been a powerful presence in the Japanese landscape and the collective consciousness. The mountain has inspired artists and writers through the ages. In the earliest collection of poetry in

Japan, the famous Manyoshu, a poet even refers to Mount Fuji as the god protecting Japan.

During the Edo Period, mountain worship grew, and religious groups made pilgrimages to climb Mount Fuji. Even today, the goddess of Mount Fuji is said to reside in Sengen Shrine at the foot of the mountain.

It was also during the Edo Period that some of the most famous images of Mount Fuji were made. The *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige were a great success at the time, and today, Hokusai's 'Great Wave off Kanagawa' from *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* must be one of the best known images in Japanese art around the world.

In some images the monumental place of Mount Fuji is clear, such as in Hiroshige's Suruga-cho from *One Hundred Views of Edo* which shows the street running towards the mountain. Others depict Mount Fuji as part of the backdrop of Edo life, as in Hokusai's picture of men working in a lumberyard in Tachikawa, present-day Sumidaku, Tokyo. Modern Tokyoites, however, need fine weather and a high spot to see their Mount Fuji.

The Mount Fuji World Heritage Site includes multiple locations: the mountain itself, surrounding lakes, parts of the Sengen-jinja Shrine, lava tree moulds, waterfalls and even the Miho-no-Matsubara pine tree grove which is more than 40km from the mountain.

Ukiyoe images courtesy of Tokyo National Museum—www.tnm.jp

Mount Fuji in Edo Arts and Minds by **Shuji Takashina** explains the place of Mount Fuji in Japanese history, art and culture. An informative read, it is also well illustrated. See: www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00021/

(Published 02/01/2012, first published in *Japan Echo*, Vol. 30 No.1 [February 2003].)

