

## Mt. Fuji in History and Culture

Mt. Fuji is Japan's highest and most revered mountain. Its iconic cone-shaped peak, 3,776 meters high and 10,000 years old, dominates its surroundings. In geological terms, Mt. Fuji is still young and active. As recently as 864, the Jogan Eruption reshaped the entire region's geography, creating both the Fuji Five Lakes of today and the ground beneath the Aokigahara Jukai Forest. Yet, for all the awe and fear that the mountain's destructive power has inspired, it has long been viewed as a guardian and protector. Archaeological remains seem to suggest that it was worshipped as far back as the Jomon period (10,000–300 BCE), and poems in its praise appear in the seventh-century *Man'yōshū*, the oldest extant collection of Japanese poetry.

By the twelfth century, volcanic activity had subsided and the mountain was being used as a training ground by *shugenja* ascetics, followers of Buddhist sects that believed in hard physical training as a path to spiritual enlightenment. These were the forerunners of the Fujiko faith, a form of popular Mt. Fuji worship that was founded in the seventeenth century. Thousands of Fujiko pilgrims streamed to the mountain every summer, supporting a thriving local economy of inns, spiritual leaders, and luggage-bearers. Even today, Fujiko pilgrims, chanting as they climb, can sometimes be seen ascending Mt. Fuji's slopes.

The Edo period (1603–1868) saw the rise in popularity of the ukiyo-e woodblock print, and Mt. Fuji was a favorite subject. Artists like Hokusai and Hiroshige enjoyed great success with landscapes showcasing the mountain from every direction, and these artworks eventually found their way to Europe. Hokusai's *Great Wave off Kanagawa*, arguably the single best-known work of Japanese art from that period, is actually one of the artist's "36 Views of Mt. Fuji," with the mountain visible in the distance through the center of the wave.

Modernization and the rise of secular tourism only brought Mt. Fuji greater fame. In 1895, British-born Harry Stewart Whitworth opened a Western-style hotel with a view of the mountain across Lake Shojiko, and dubbed the region "the Switzerland of the East." In 1964, a highway and bus service to Mt. Fuji's fifth station (elevation 2,305 meters) brought the 3,776-meter peak within reach of millions of climbers of all skill levels from around the country and the world.

In 2013, UNESCO inscribed Mt. Fuji in the World Heritage List as a "sacred place and source of artistic inspiration." The listing is composed of 25 component assets that illuminate the mountain's towering presence in Japanese history and culture. With UNESCO recognition, visitors have begun to rediscover the charm of the mountain's lower reaches and surrounding areas. From visiting shrines and inns that once overflowed with pilgrims each summer to canoeing and fishing on the Fuji Five Lakes, time simply spent in Mt. Fuji's presence can be as memorable as the strenuous hike to the peak.