

Itsukushima Shrine: Images of the Thirty-Six Immortals of Poetry

These six paintings are all that remains of a series of 36 portraits presented to Itsukushima Shrine at some point during the Edo period (1603–1868), although records indicate that similar series were donated to the shrine as early as 1516. The series represents the Thirty-Six Immortals of Poetry, a group of *waka* poets from the seventh to the tenth centuries. The poets were selected in the early eleventh century by Fujiwara no Kinto (966–1041), a renowned poet and court official who anthologized their works.

This group became a popular motif for serial paintings in the Kamakura period (1185–1333). In these series, each poet is usually depicted in a realistic manner, although never based on sketches from life, and the portrait is accompanied by a famous verse from the poet's works. Sets of these portraits were often presented to shrines and temples as *ema* paintings, donated as a sign of the donor's faith and as a gift to please the deities, and were frequently displayed in their entirety on the shrine grounds.