Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)
Japan
Nobotoura (The Coast of Noboto)
From the series: *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*
circa 1880, Edo period (1600-1868)
color woodcut
24.9 x 37.5 cm
William Bridges Thayer Memorial
1928.7794
Essay by Annie Kroshus

Ritual and place are important practices in Japanese Shinto religion. The Shinto religion combines the worship of ancestors, nature, and sacred deities, or *kami.* Harmony between humans and nature is a Shinto ideal evinced in the print *Nobotoura (The Coast of Noboto)* from the collection at the Spencer Museum of Art. The print is part of a large series titled *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* by the Japanese print master Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Beloved across the world, Hokusai's series revolutionized Japanese printmaking. Figures in the print gather clams at low tide in the small fishing village of Noboto, located on the east coast of Japan (modern day Chiba prefecture). Two *torii* gates indicating an entrance to a Shinto shrine, likely Towatari Jinja, stand in the water. The larger *torii* gate frames Mount Fuji, a unifying subject of this series and often present in Hokusai's prints. Occasionally portrayed at a close vantage point in the series, Mount Fuji is more often in the background, serving as an accompaniment to the many activities taking place at the foreground. The tallest mountain in Japan, to some Mount Fuji represents a symbol of immortality, resulting in a very large devotional following. The sacred peak was a pilgrimage site, and some pilgrims would journey to Mount Fuji in the summer months hoping to obtain immortality themselves. Although there is no evidence to support that Hokusai ever embarked on this specific pilgrimage, he often alluded to his own

personal goal of reaching one hundred years of age, perhaps indicating his fascination with Mount Fuji and immortality.

Arguably one of the most famous Japanese woodblock print artists, Hokusai was born in 1760 in the Katsushika ward in Edo, present-day Tokyo. He began to show an interest for art at a very early age. By his mid-teenage years, Hokusai began working for a printer learning a variety of carving techniques. By the age of eighteen, Hokusai was an apprentice for the great woodblock print artist Katsukawa Shunshō (1726-1792). It was under Shunshō's tutelage that Hokusai was able to perfect his craft. The subject matter that Hokusai produced under Shunshō varied from beauties, to actors, to birds and flowers. After the death of Shunshō, Hokusai continued to explore his artistic abilities. He experimented with Chinese literati painting techniques, traditional Japanese painting, referred to as *yamato-e*, and Western-style painting, all of which would greatly enhance the creation of Hokusai's later prints.

Interest in a variety of media and subject matter demonstrate Hokusai's range, but also allude to a man who was never truly satisfied. Another indicator of Hokusai's seemingly restless character was the constant changing of his artist pseudonym. Throughout his artistic career, Hokusai would change his name approximately thirty times. Additionally, never wanting to stay in one place for too long, it is estimated that Hokusai moved ninety-three times throughout his lifetime. While these inconsistencies indicate an artist who was perhaps dissatisfied, Hokusai was an artist who came to know great success. However, Hokusai's most well known works, including the *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, were conceptualized when he was in his seventies. Hokusai himself was quoted as saying: "From the age of six I was in the habit of drawing all kinds of things. Although I had produced numerous designs by my fiftieth year, none of my

works done before my seventieth is really worth counting."[1] After completing his *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* series in 1833, Hokusai continued to use Fuji as a theme and created another series of landscapes of the famous mountain titled *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji* (1834-1840), three picture book volumes printed in black and white ink as opposed to his colorful *Thirty-six Views* series.

Most Japanese prints created in the late eighteenth-century featured beautiful women and kabuki actors. Hokusai broke with this tradition when he began to design landscapes featuring a variety of everyday characters from different social classes. In preparation for the *Thirty-six Views* series, Hokusai traveled through the Japanese countryside to remote districts around Mt. Fuji in order to get a sense of the changing landscape and the inhabiting people. Between the years 1830-1836, Hokusai created the initial thirty-six prints. His publisher, Nishimuraya Yohachi issued the following statement in 1831 to prepare the public for the series: "*The Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*: designed by the old Iitsu, formerly known as Hokusai. Single sheet prints in blues, each featuring one view, issued one after the other. These prints show how the shape of Mount Fuji is different from varying locations…"[2] This advertisement was printed many times over the next several years to heighten the anticipation for Hokusai's series. Highlighting the use of blue ink is significant and is one of the most distinguishing features of the series. The prints were not made with indigo, but rather with a recently imported synthetic blue dye, known as "Prussian Blue" or "Berlin Blue." This new chemical dye was much more stable than earlier blue pigments, which were primarily vegetable based and would thus fade greatly over time. The final result is a much higher saturation of color, ultimately creating greater contrast. While the title of the series implies that there were only thirty-six prints, ten more prints

[1] Translated in Matthi Forrer, *Hokusai: Mountains and Water, Flowers and Birds* (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 7.

[2] Ibid., 10.

were created due to initial success three years later. Although the prints are in no particular order, the additional ten prints are done with black outlines as opposed to the first thirty-six, which used blue. One of the reasons for this is that the newly imported blue pigment actually caused more damage to the woodblock; therefore reprints were made much more easily when using black ink.

Hokusai's prints of Mount Fuji from various vantage points can be identified geographically by their titles, which are in the rectangular cartouche at the bottom of each print, opposite Hokusai's signature. The inclusion of people in the prints indicates Hokusai's exploration of the relationship between humans and nature. Hokusai's previous expertise of carving figures is evinced in the careful design and execution of the figures in this series. The people are never lifeless or simply depicted to fill the space, but rather serve a specific purpose. The variety of activities that Hokusai selected to portray perhaps indicates that he identified with the working-class.

Nobotoura (The Coast of Noboto) is a balanced composition with near equal proportions of land, sea, and sky. Located on the eastern side of Edo, the shallow bay area allows for individuals to wade out from shore in order to dig for clams or to catch shellfish. Two tall *torii* gates stand in the bay, indicating the entrance to a Shinto shrine. Shinto shrines were constructed for people to leave offerings and to pay homage to certain deities (*kami*). Tall, unadorned post and beam gates called *torii* mark entrances to Shinto shrines. The *torii* gate signals change and reminds the devotee that he or she is crossing the threshold from secular to sacred space, thus delineating a boundary. A *torii* gate has no door or barricades; therefore passage through the *torii* toward the shrine indicates a shift in attitude. While the *torii* gates denote a change in behavior, Hokusai seems to have used the *torii* gates as visual schemes to draw attention to certain aspects of the landscape. Here Mount Fuji is enclosed by the larger of the two *torii* gates. As framing

devices, the *torii* help solidify a relationship between the mountain in the distance and the activity in the foreground.

Hokusai's true talent is in his rendering of the figures. Expressions, gestures, and the presentation of fabric are just a few of the ways that Hokusai gives life to the figures in the bay whose activities seem to ignore the sacred space surrounding them. A variety of men, women, and children are in the bay collecting shellfish or clams at low tide. Clam digging was both a trade and a recreation and Hokusai has captured this by depicting an array of individuals engaging in this task. Two men hold baskets full of mollusks or clams, one on his shoulder, and the other above his head. Their muscles strain with the weight of the baskets. Another man wearing a large, round hat carries a pole towards the men, equipped with a basket to collect more clams. Behind the men, a woman looks over her left shoulder as she converses with a man. She holds a hook for gathering in her right hand and a basket in her left. Two children scurry beneath the smaller of the *torii* gates toward the deeper water. In the middle of the bay, framed by the taller *torii* gate, two more men bend over dipping their baskets into the water. Their knees bend in unison and their rolled pants expose their thighs. Two fishing boats located in the middle ground add depth, as one boat is significantly smaller than the other, denoting distance between the shallow end of the bay and the deeper water.

The rolling green hills of the landscape are littered with trees. Several thatched roofs peek out from behind a set of hills indicating the presence of a small village. Framed by the larger *torii* gate, Mount Fuji is the farthest point of the landscape and its pristine white surface contrasts greatly with the blue sky and dark green trees at the foothills. The *torii* gates assist the overall composition by creating horizontal, diagonal, and vertical lines, thus preventing the scene from

splitting simply into foreground and background. The *torii* gates link religious symbols to the activity of the villagers and the greater landscape.

The presence of the *torii* gates in *Nobotoura (The Coast of Noboto)* further enhance the relationship between people and nature by indicating the presence of a Shinto shrine in a natural and bustling habitat. The framing of the immortal Mount Fuji in the distance reminds the viewer of its powerful significance to both Hokusai and the Japanese people. Hokusai signed this work "Iitsu, the former Hokusai" the name that he used from 1820-1833. Despite his constant name changing, writings by Hokusai indicate that he was rather humble about his own work and was always looking for ways to improve it. Mount Fuji continued to inspire Hokusai, yet he was unable to reach his goal of living to be one hundred years old and died at the age of eighty-eight. His *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* has influenced artists throughout the world and these images retain a spiritual resonance that withstands the test of time.

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