

Japanese Art

Learning Objective:

To explore the Japanese art
of ukiyo-e

Ukiyo-e is a style of Japanese art which was popular during the Edo period (1603-1868). During this time, Japan was ruled by a military government, the head of which was called the shogun, who resided in Edo Castle. It was a peaceful time of economic growth, strict social order and a stable population.

Ukiyo-e literally translates as 'pictures of the floating world'. Often, artwork depicted images or subjects that were fleeting, or wouldn't last, such as female beauties or seasonal landscapes.



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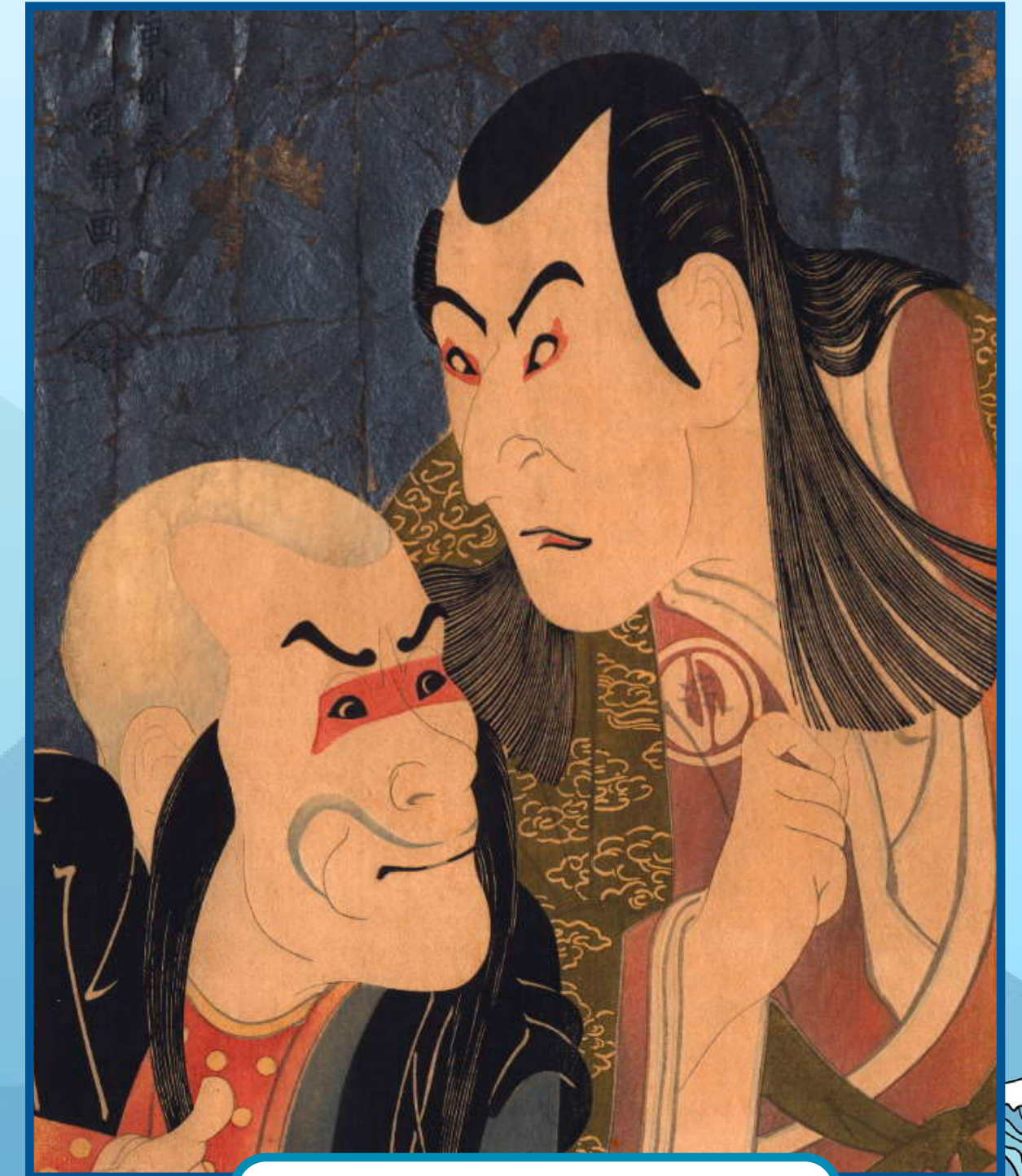
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During the Edo period many people were interested in arts and culture, and artists themselves were inspired by the interests of the general public. They created paintings of female beauties, kabuki theatre actors, sumo wrestlers, scenes from history and folk tales, nature and landscapes.



Kabuki theatre was extremely popular during the Edo period. The plays consisted of a mixture of singing, dance and drama, and actors wore elaborate costumes and make-up.

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Two kabuki actors
by Sharaku, 1794

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These ukiyo-e paintings became available to the general public when the method of woodblock printing became popular. It had been used for centuries in China, but mainly for printing text in books. Japanese artists adopted and adapted the technique to make multiple copies of artworks.

The prints were inexpensive to buy, and so affordable for many people at the time.

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Artist: Nishikawa Sukenobu
(1671-1751)

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How a woodblock was made:

1. The image was drawn onto thin paper.
2. The paper was glued face down onto a piece of wood (the image could be seen through the thin paper).
3. The wood was chiselled away, leaving only the outline of the image.
4. The woodblock was then covered in ink and pressed against a new sheet of paper.

Early prints were monochrome (one colour), with extra colours being added by hand. Later, multiple blocks for separate parts of the image were carved, so that a number of different colours could be used to create more detailed images.



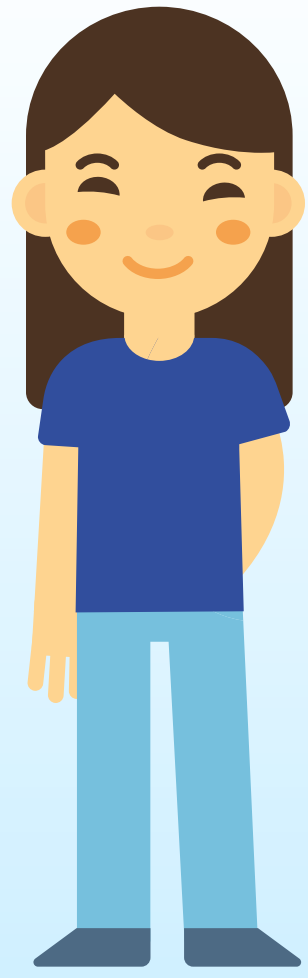
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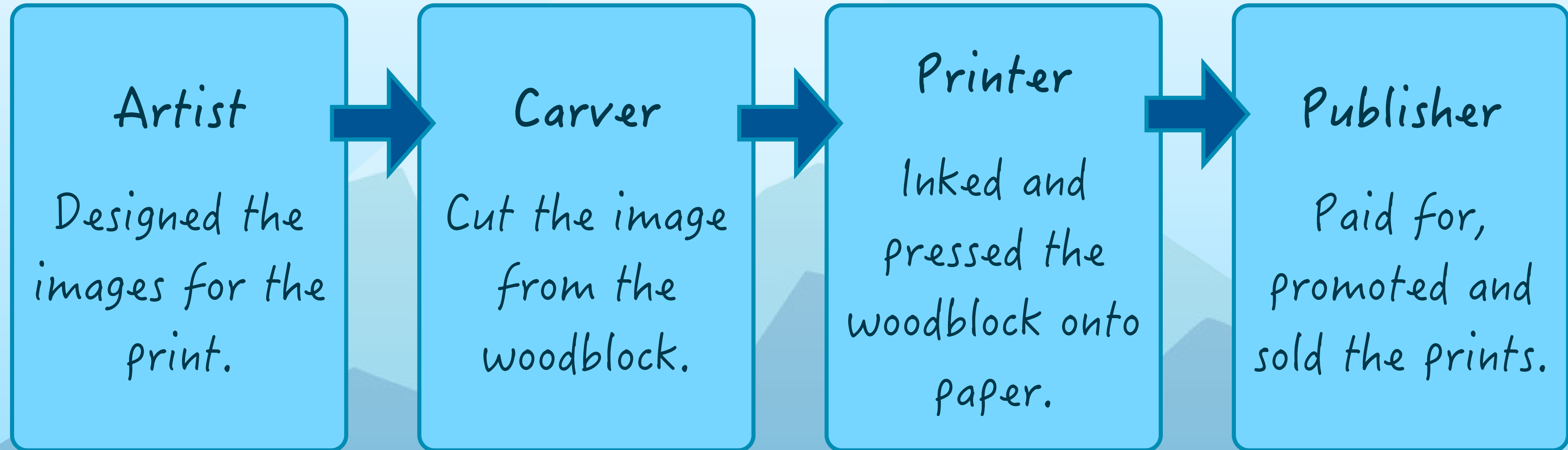


A printer's woodblock;
c.1730

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From creating to selling the image, four people were usually involved in the process:



Who do you think the most important person in the process is, and why?
Think, pair, then share your ideas.

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Now that you know how they were made, let's have a look at some examples of ukiyo-e prints...



Try to guess how many different blocks were carved in order to create the different colours on each artwork!

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Kabuki actor portraits by Tōshūsai Sharaku



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Two Women Standing
Torii Kiyonaga 1782



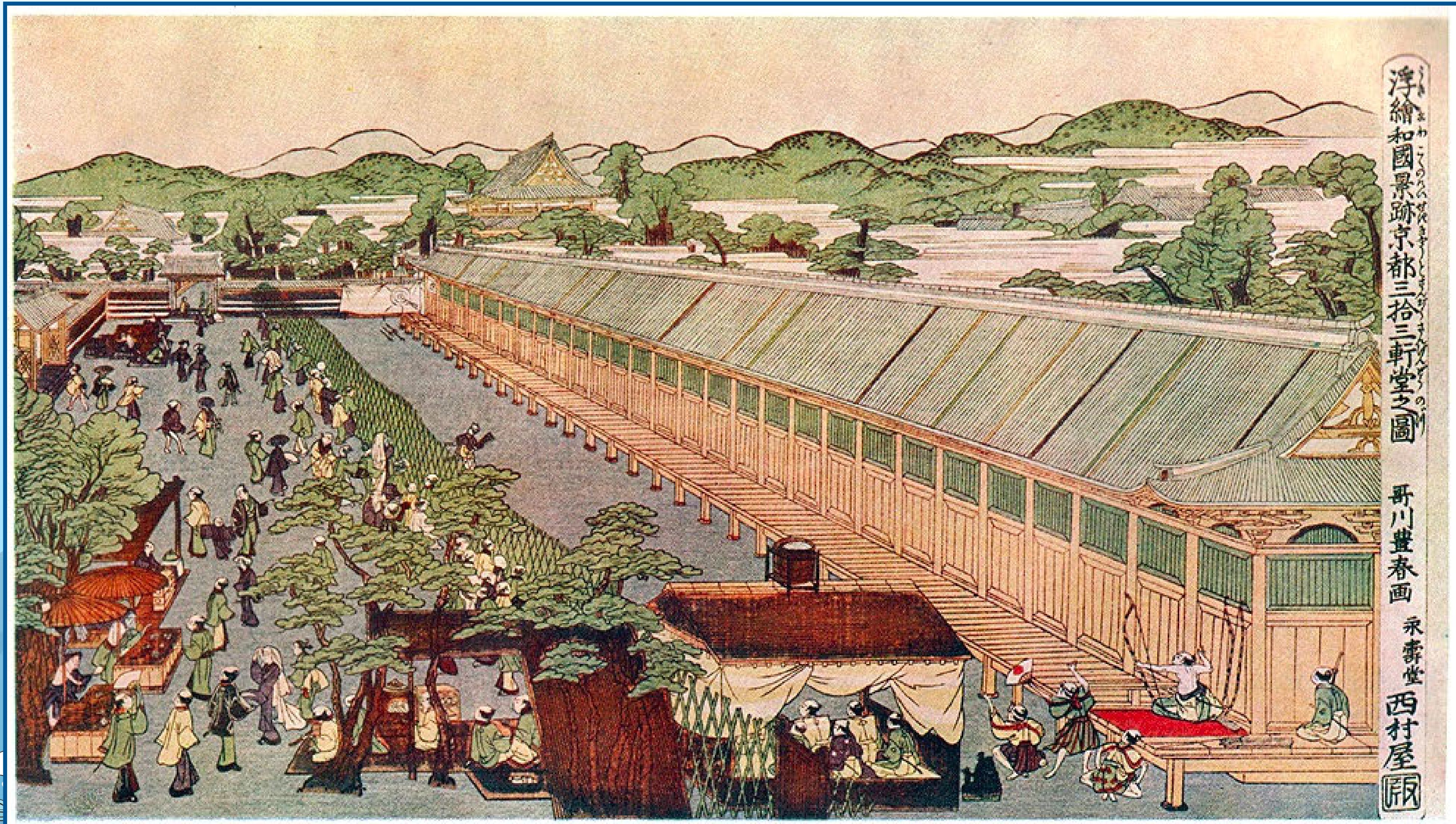
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Three Beauties of the Present Time
Kitagawa Utamaro 1793

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Perspective Pictures of Places in Japan by Utagawa Toyoharu c.1772-81



浮繪和國景跡京都三拾三軒堂之圖

哥川豊春画

永壽堂

西村屋

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Famous Views of Edo by Utagawa Toyoharu c.1770-1



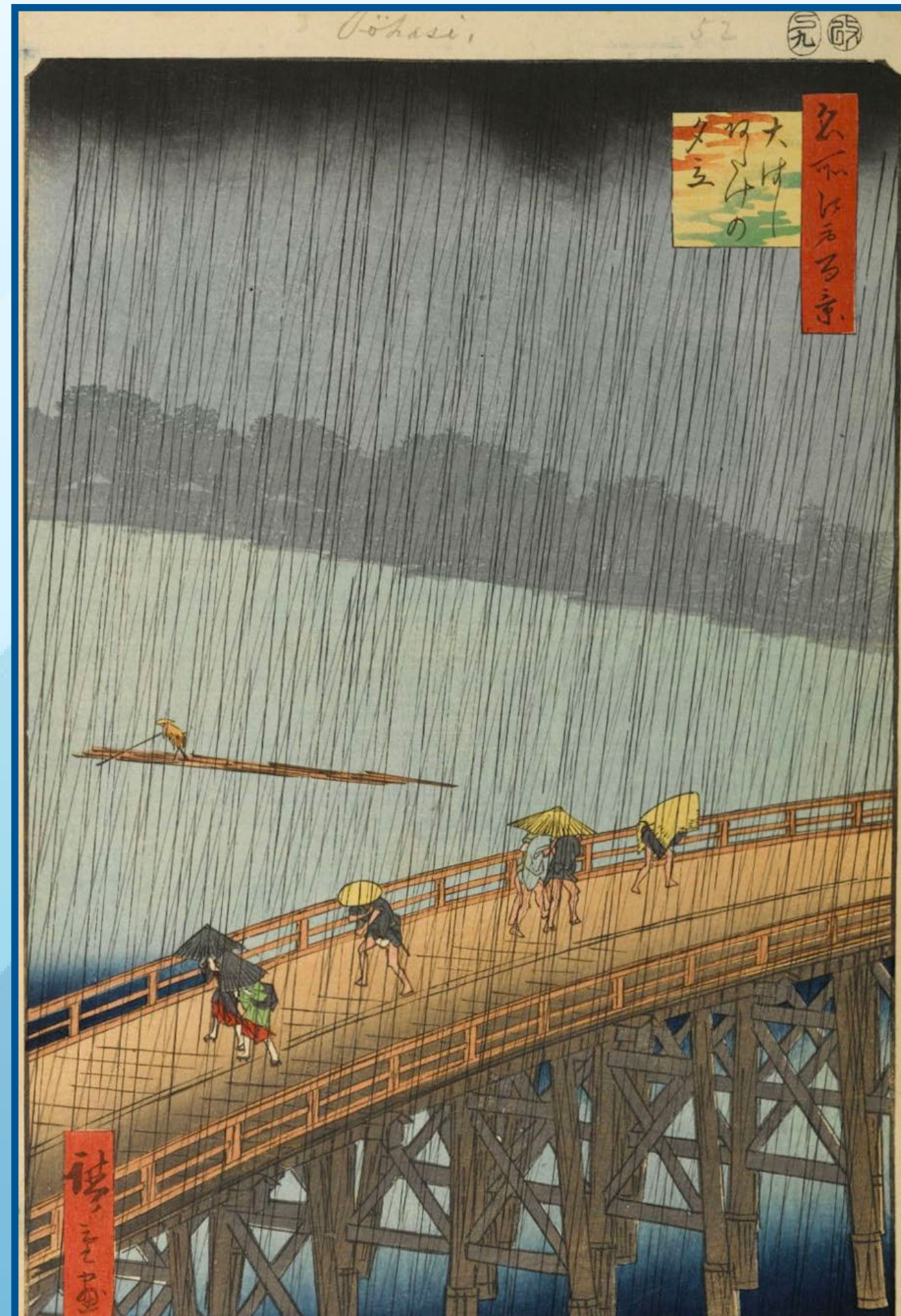
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Prints by Utagawa Hiroshige in 1857



The Plum Garden in Kameido



Sudden Shower Over Shin-Ohashi
Bridge and Atake



Moon Bridge in Meguro

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Self-portrait,
1839

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) is one of the most successful and well-known landscape painters from nineteenth century Japan. His most famous artworks are within a series of prints entitled, *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*. These images depict the mountain from a variety of different locations and in all four seasons. He created the 36 paintings over a two-year period when he was in his 70s.

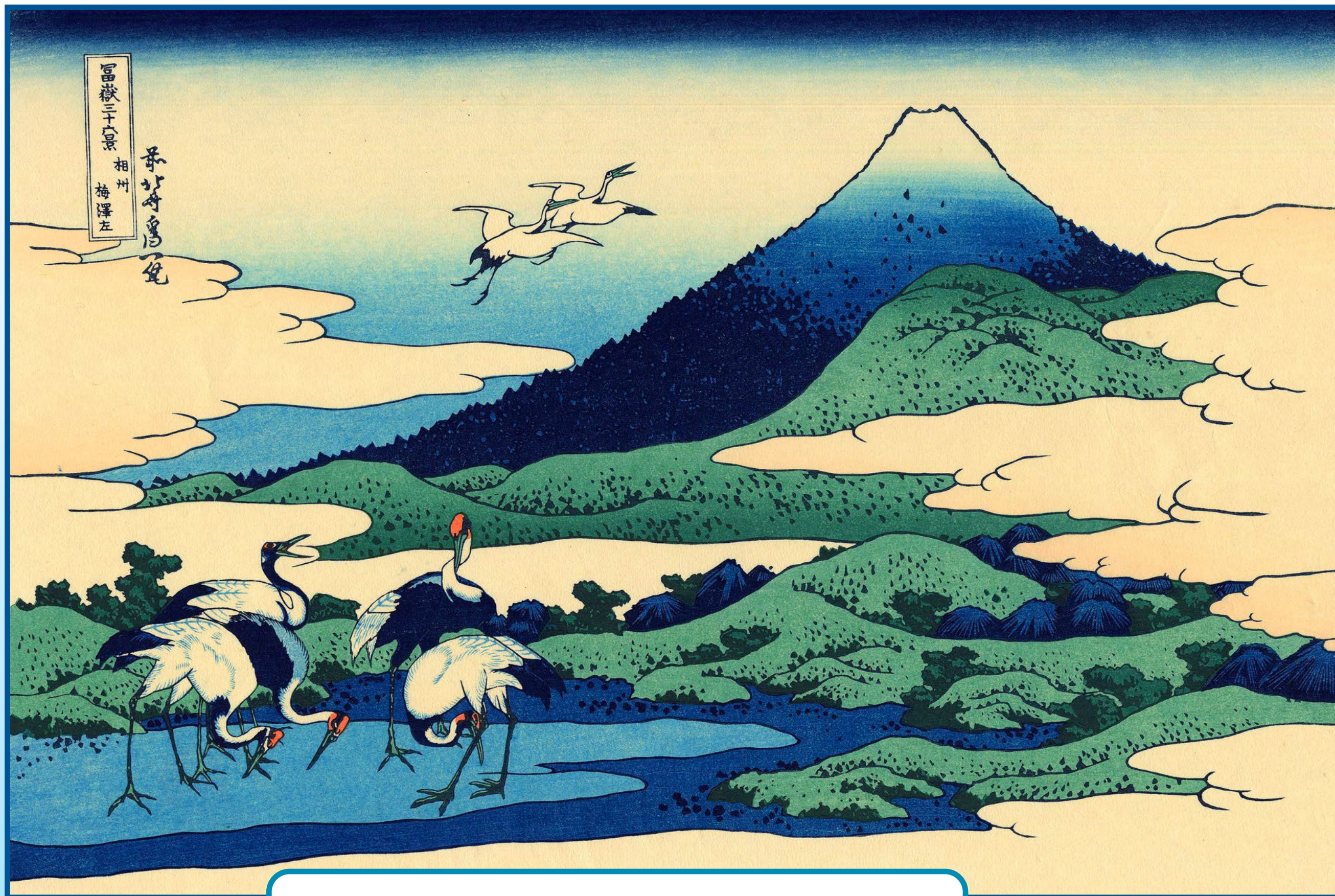
Do you think you have seen any prints from this series before? Let's have a look at some of them...

See if you can spot Mount Fuji in each one!



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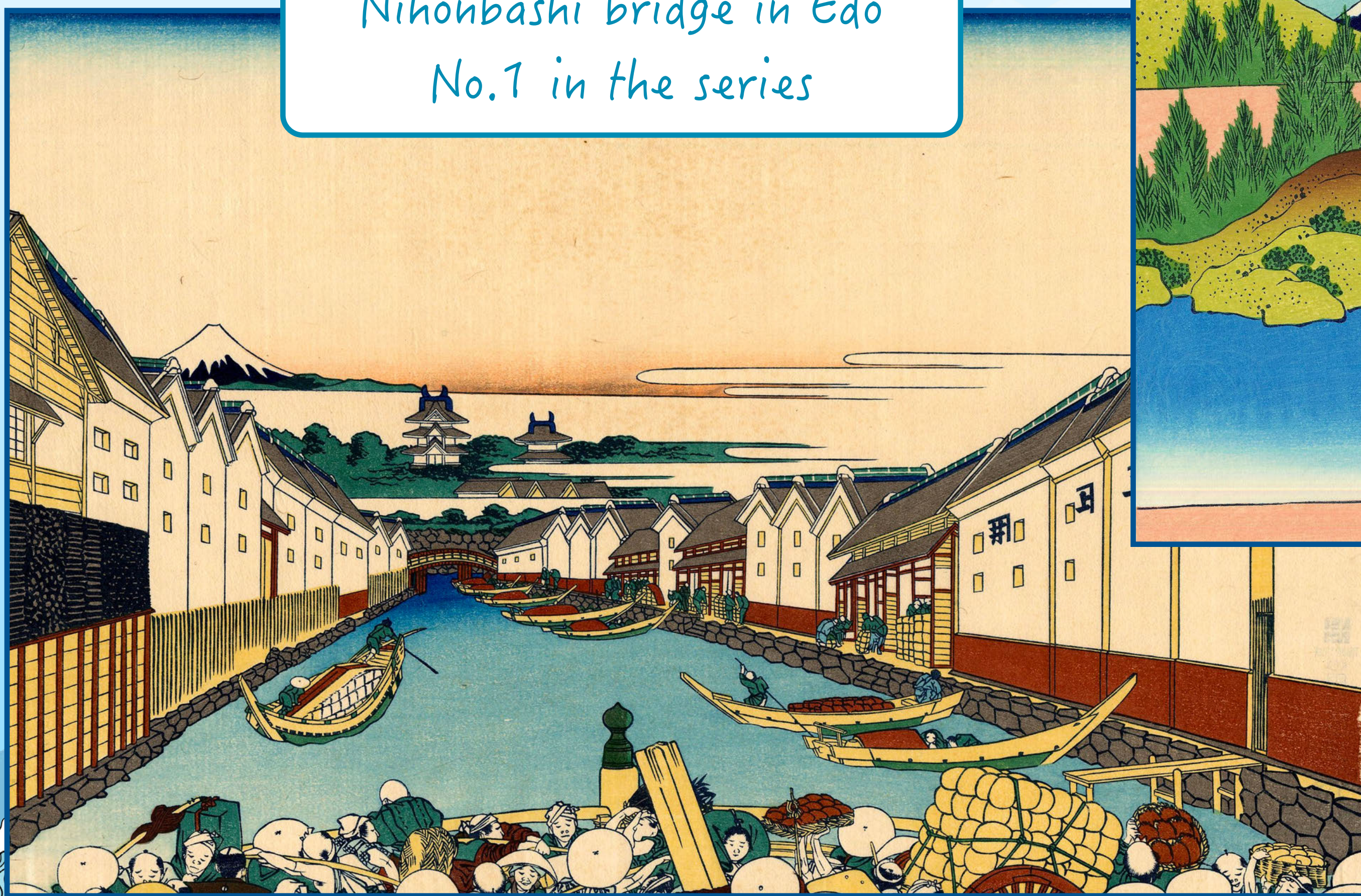


Umezawa in Sagami province
No.27 in the series

Hodogaya on the Tōkaidō
No.23 in the series



Nihonbashi bridge in Edo
No.1 in the series



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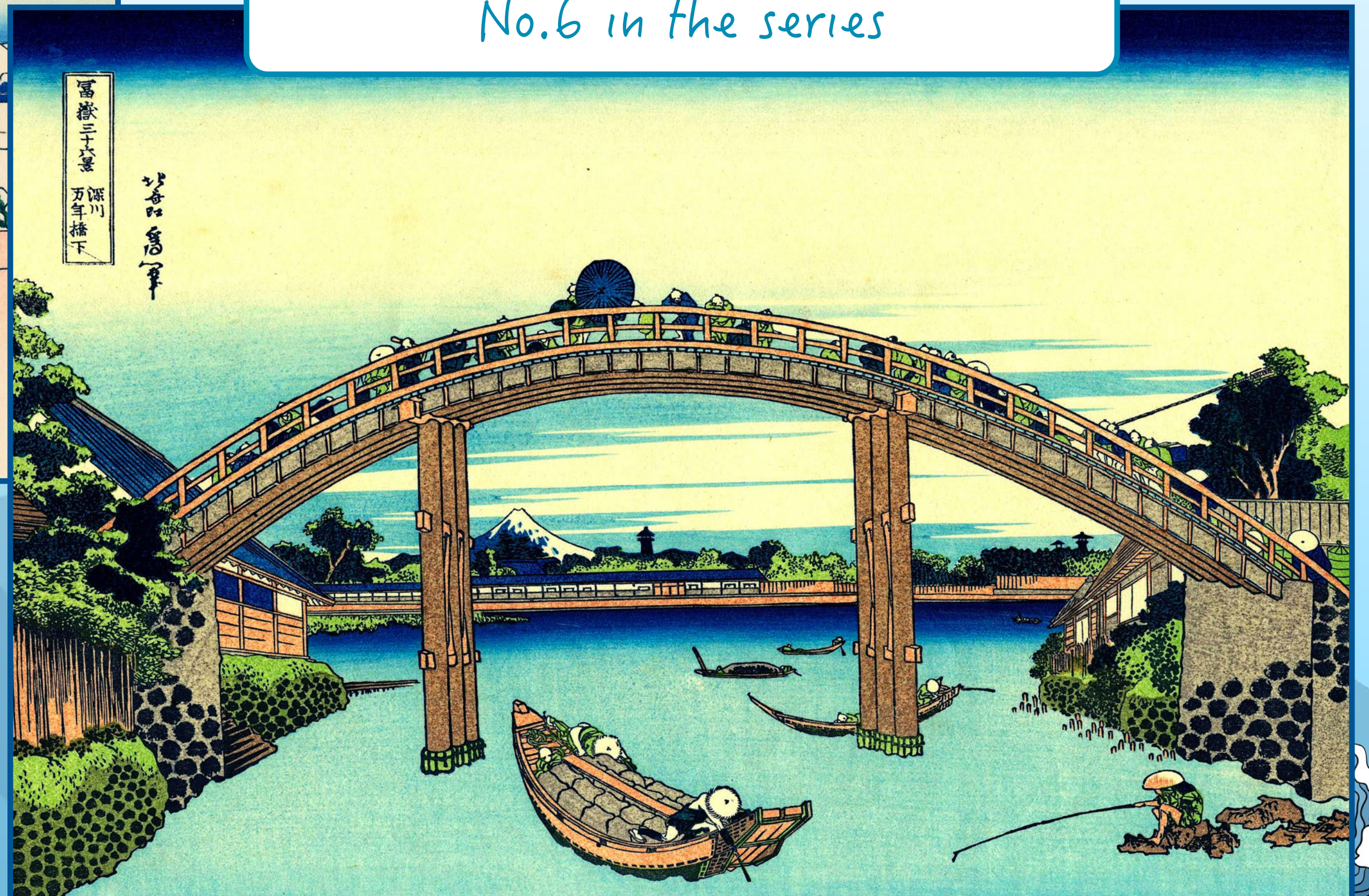
The lake of Hakone in Sagami province
No.28 in the series

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Tea house at Koishikawa
No.11 in the series

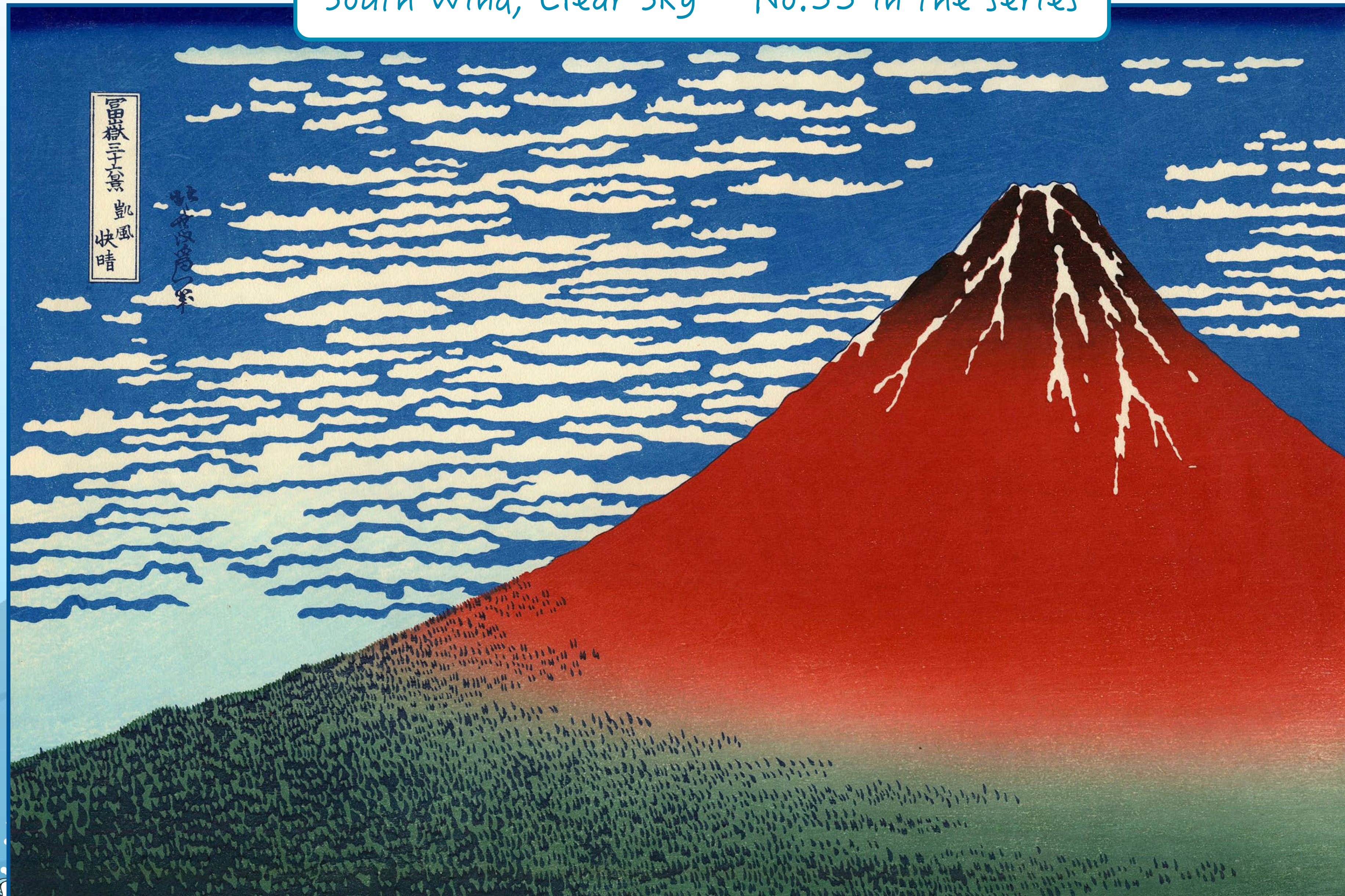
Under Mannen bridge at Fukagawa
No.6 in the series



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South Wind, Clear Sky No.33 in the series



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The Great Wave off Kanagawa



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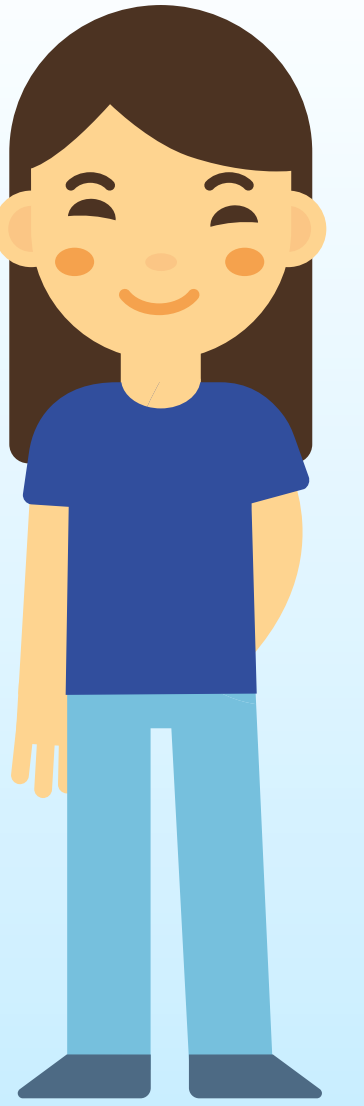
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This print is the most famous from Hokusai's series.

The Great Wave off Kanagawa



What is your initial reaction to the picture?



Can you explain what is happening?



Think, pair, then share your ideas.

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The Great Wave off Kanagawa



The painting shows an enormous wave threatening to capsize a group of three fishing boats. The water looks like it is reaching out to the vessels, almost like fingers or claws. Mount Fuji looks tiny in the distance, outsized by the wave. As a viewer, we know the wave will inevitably crash down on the boats. This creates a dramatic atmosphere.

The Dutch painter, Vincent Van Gogh, was an admirer of Hokusai's work. He said this print had 'terrifying emotional impact'.



What words or phrases would you use to describe this picture?

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Today, Mount Fuji is considered sacred, and is a symbol of national identity for the people of Japan, as well as a symbol of natural beauty.



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You are now challenged to
create a new print to add to
Hokusai's series, 'Thirty-Six
Views of Mount Fuji'!

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Plenary:

Depending on the complexity of the artist's image, cutting it into the woodblock would have taken the carver several days, or even weeks. Nowadays, we have special machinery which could carve the image into the wood within minutes.



An artist in 1969 carving an image by hand from a woodblock.

Which do you think is better: a hand-made or a machine-made woodblock?
Does it even matter?
Would it make a difference to the final print?



Think, pair, then share your ideas.

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A CNC (Computer Numerical Control) router carving out a design onto wood.

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