

Recording Fuji-san for Europe: Von Siebold and his contemporaries

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This paper focuses on how Mount Fuji was presented to the European general public as well as to the scientific community by three ethnographic collectors in the 1820s: Jan Cock Blomhoff (1779-1853), Johan Frederik van Overmeer Fisscher (1800-1848), and Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796-1866). Each of them passed Mount Fuji on their travels between Nagasaki and Edo, and each collected material related to the famous mountain. What kind of objects they collected, what kind of information they collected, and how they presented 'Fuji' in Europe, differs per person. But through their collections, their measurements, their documentation, and their publications, they recorded Fuji-san for Europe, at a time when only very few Europeans had access to Japan, let alone to the iconic volcano.

Two main questions arise when studying these materials. The first is how these European men understood the significance of Mount Fuji within Japan at that time. The second is what they did to convey that significance to the general public in Europe, and in the Netherlands in particular. In this presentation, I will show and discuss a series of visual and textual materials from the 1820s and 1830s, now (mostly) kept in the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, The Netherlands. These materials consist of paintings, books, prints, 3D objects, diary entries, as well as texts and images published by the collectors. My analysis of these materials and their functions within each of the three collections allows me to demonstrate that the three men were able to gather precise information through their contacts in Japan. And, in answer to the second question, they endeavored to carefully transmit this information to a wider audience back home. On a more personal level, they each seem to have developed an appreciation and affection for Mount Fuji when they encountered the mountain in its surrounding scenery.

Especially the scientific work of Von Siebold deserves further attention, since it clarifies his professional attitude towards Fuji. He was not the first to write about the mountain, but his publication arguably had a larger impact than those by his predecessors. Von Siebold's strong network of scholars in Japan has certainly helped him develop his knowledge of Mount Fuji, and of Japanese mountains and geology in general. It is interesting to notice the balance between scientific approach and cultural and religious veneration of Fuji in Japan through the writings of Von Siebold. It is important to remember that Von Siebold was forced to leave Japan before the major woodblock prints series depicting Mount Fuji, such as by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), were published. Nonetheless, Von Siebold and his contemporaries succeeded in collecting plenty of materials that reflected Mount Fuji's significance and helped them convey this to different European publics.