

Hokusai's Fuji and French Impressionism

By John Ashbery

The Musée Guimet is showing a magnificent series of "36 Views of Mount Fuji" which, together with the ten additional views also on display, are among the finest of the thousands of works of the Japanese artist Hokusai (1760-1849).

This extraordinary genius, whose work was to have such a deep influence on French Impressionism, was an eccentric figure. During the 90 years of his life, he changed his name constantly and his residence 93 times, on one occasion twice in the same day. His restlessness and passion for change show up in the daring innovations in the prints of Mount Fuji, which form a set of variations whose fluidity and agility remind one of music.

"In Hokusai's day," says the catalogue, "people used to dress as pilgrims and, carrying a stick, go off to climb Fuji after drinking a ritual sip of water. They adored the sacred mountain, which, with its high, elegant silhouette, protected the whole country."

All Approaches Tried

Hokusai treated the silhouette in every conceivable way, with a versatility that suggests Wallace Stevens's poem. "27 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." In "Ryogoku Bridge at Twilight" the peak is almost invisible, a tiny blue triangle in the distance, while the foreground is given over to subtle formal games—the stylized undulations of waves played off against the curving form of a barque and of the bridge behind.

In "At Kanagawa, Under the Waves," probably his most famous work, the mountain is again tiny and delicate under the extravagant crest of the well-known wave breaking in the foreground. But in the also celebrated "Mount Fuji in the White Rain," we are on the mountain's flanks—dull brick-red in the light of beautifully stylized flashes of lightning.

Sometimes the variations are quietly humorous, as in "Fujimahara," where we perceive the mountain through a barrel a workman is constructing, or in "Ejiri," where the string of a flying kite exactly echoes the profile of the peak.

Colors Refined

The colors are everywhere of an extreme refinement. No one else could make the dark blue or terracotta which Hokusai most often used to depict the mountain look so transparent. And the use of several styles of drawing in a single work reminds one of the debt owed to Hokusai by Bonnard and Van Gogh, among others.

Some areas are indicated in the most summary way—clouds and mist are usually rendered as straight horizontal bands, rounded at one end.

In "River Sumida, Tokyo" certain stylized elements, such as the clouds, pines and the round hats of the men on horseback, which hide their faces, clash harmoniously with the realistic drawing of the horses and the house in the foreground.

This little show is the first artistic event of 1961 in Paris, and it is certain to go down as one of the finest. Artists of today would



HOKUSAI, a self-portrait, at the Paris Musée Guimet.

do well to study the innovations of Hokusai. (6 Place d'Iéna; through Jan. 31).

The Musée des Arts Décoratifs has an exposition devoted to several French architects and deco-

rators, all deceased, and including Robert Mallet-Stevens, Pierre Chareau, Francis Jourdain and Rose Adler.

The show itself is not particularly brilliant (it is thoughtfully entitled "Preface to a Retrospective") but the artists shown are interesting, as much for their successes as their failures. Mallet-Stevens ranks as one of France's leading 20th-century architects, not because he was a great figure but because he had so little competition.

His most important realizations, such as the street in Auteuil that bears his name, look a little tame and cold today, or else they must depend on our nostalgia for the 1920's to make an effect. They bring to mind the early films of René Clair and Marcel L'Herbier (for whom Mallet-Stevens designed a number of sets), the "Arts-Déco" Exposition of 1925, champagne and the Dolly Sisters.

So does the work of Chareau, represented here by a wildly geometrical desk-and-bookcase ensemble in palm wood, and who is best known for a cubistic glass house in a courtyard in the Rue St. Guillaume.

Whose the Fault?

Was this the fault of the architects or of a public notoriously hostile to modern architecture? Certain of Mallet-Stevens's unrealized projects, such as a skyscraper unit for the Porte Maillot, have a daring that his completed constructions lack and remind one that the architect, more than any other artist, is hampered by the restrictions imposed by public taste.

The negative virtues of discreetness and plainness characterize most of this work. The decorator Jourdain wrote: "Pieces of furniture must not be cumbersome and chatty visitors, but discreet servitors . . . an invitation to repose is the only remark one can tolerate from an armchair."

Perhaps—but a too self-effacing attitude can become as annoying as an aggressive one. The Mackintosh armchairs now being shown at the Musée d'Art Moderne seem to squeal "Don't sit on me!" but I think in the long run they would be as good company as Jourdain's silent servitors. (107 Rue de Rivoli; through Jan. 31).