

山水

SHANSHUI

Introduction

Giacomo Bruni



Since the dawn of civilization, mountains have held a privileged place in the human imagination. Far more than mere geographical features, they have emerged as powerful and ambivalent presences, embodying spiritual, philosophical, and aesthetic symbols of extraordinary complexity. They have been venerated as the abodes of gods, feared as inhospitable and untamed realms, and contemplated as sources of inspiration and introspection. This collection arises from a desire to explore how diverse cultural, religious, and artistic traditions have interpreted, represented, and experienced mountains, transforming them into mirrors of humanity's deepest tensions and aspirations.

In ancient cultures, the mountain stands as an axis mundi—a sacred pillar connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld. This archetype recurs in strikingly similar forms across traditions: Mount Meru in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist cosmologies; biblical Sinai; China's Kunlun; or Greece's Olympus and Athos. Indigenous cultures, such as the Sámi, likewise recognize mountains as cosmic and sacred. It is no surprise, then, that this symbolic verticality inspired sacred architecture: Egyptian pyramids, Mesopotamian ziggurats, and Mesoamerican temples all sought, through form, to echo humanity's yearning for the divine.

In China, the mountain (*shan* 山) has held a central role in spirituality, aesthetics, and philosophy since antiquity. For Daoism, it is a place of retreat, regeneration, and the pursuit of immortality. Buddhism built temples and monasteries upon them, forging a profound symbiosis between natural landscape and spiritual presence. A quintessential example is the *Shanhai Jing* (《山海经》, Classic of Mountains and Seas, 4th century BCE), a mythological compendium describing peaks inhabited by fantastical beings, miraculous plants, and local deities. In *shanshui* (山水, "mountain-water") painting, mountains are never mere backdrops; they are living presences, interlocutors with whom humans seek harmony and contemplation.

In the West, the relationship with mountains has been more ambivalent. For centuries, they were viewed with suspicion—associated with primordial, untamed forces. The Greeks placed deities like Dionysus, symbol of ecstasy and chaos, upon their slopes; the Romans preferred cultivable, controllable lowlands. In the Christian Middle Ages, mountains were seen as sites of hermitage but also spiritual peril, where the devil tempted saints and nature revealed its harshest face. They were often relegated to the realm of wild beasts, outlaws, and those marginalized by civilization.

Yet even in medieval and Renaissance Europe, mountains inspired scholarly and contemplative engagement. A notable example is Valerio Faenzi's *De montium origine* (1561), a lesser-known but remarkable text compiling ten theories on the origins of mountains, revealing how Renaissance thinkers sought to reconcile scientific inquiry with lingering mythic and theological frameworks.

A pivotal moment in the Western imagination was Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux in 1336. His account oscillates between awe at the alpine vista and a self-reproach (guided by Augustine) for admiring creation over the Creator and ourselves. Here, we glimpse an early, if unresolved, attempt to recognize landscape as an aesthetic category.

Until the 18th century, Western appreciation for mountains remained rare. Leslie Stephen (father of Virginia Woolf and a pioneering mountaineer) captured this tension in *The Playground of Europe*, recounting a Swiss mountain guide's preference for London's "dreary expanse of chimney-pots" over the view from Mont Blanc—a stark contrast to the Romantic reverence that would soon follow.

With Romanticism, mountains gained full aesthetic and symbolic dignity. Artists like Caspar David Friedrich and poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley enshrined them as realms of the sublime: spaces where humans confront their fragility before nature's grandeur, yet also find revelation and spiritual connection. In *Mont Blanc* (1816), Shelley writes: "The wilderness has a mysterious tongue / Which teaches awful doubt"—capturing the Romantic intuition of mountains as both wondrous and unsettling, elevating and humbling.

In our contemporary world, marked by climate crisis and a growing disconnect from nature, redefining humanity's bond with mountains becomes not just a cultural pursuit but an ethical imperative. Western radical environmentalism—from Arne Naess's deep ecology—echoes Daoist wisdom, urging a symbiotic rather than domineering relationship with the natural world.

This volume, then, is an invitation to rediscover mountains not as passive scenery or exploitable resources, but as living interlocutors and silent teachers. In their stillness, in the ancient wisdom of their peaks, lies a guide to renewed awareness. They offer paths to reconnection: with ourselves, with slowness, with resilience. They teach humility in an age obsessed with noise, spectacle, and speed. To retreat "into the mountains," as in Chinese tradition, is to suspend distraction and reclaim clarity. Each essay in this collection adds a tessera to the mosaic, revealing how mountains have inspired—and continue to inspire—poets, philosophers, and seekers of meaning.

If we learn to listen, mountains may yet be our greatest teachers. They lift the spirit, purify the mind, and quiet the heart. In a world racing toward the oblivion of its own soul, their ancient, silent presence might remind us how to live.

Giacomo Bruni

