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A Differentiation of Influences of Japanese Culture in Mid-nineteenth Century France

Lisa Krahn

“Art is always the index of social vitality, the moving finger that records the destiny of a civilization. A wise statesman should keep an anxious eye on this graph, for it is more significant than a decline in exports or a fall in the value of a nation’s currency.”

— *Sir Herbert Read*

Much ink has been spilled about whether Japanese culture, present in mid-nineteenth century France in the form of imported goods, had a tangible influence upon French culture and art. One of the primary vehicles of this influence was an object of Japanese culture—the *ukiyo-e* print. These artifacts were imported from Japan to meet the demand of Parisian fashion, and in addition, careful study of the *ukiyo-e* by major French artists possibly resulted in the incorporation of *japonisme* (formal Japanese aesthetics) into paintings of the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Thus it is quite possible that *japonisme* transported by *Ukiyo-e* subtly but invariably altered the French aesthetic through these artists and, as a result, altered the history of art.

This world-changing art piece had humble origins. *Ukiyo-e* are color or black and white woodblock prints first produced in the mid-seventeenth century by craftsmen in the calm, static environment of peacetime, feudal Japan. A truly popular art, *ukiyo-e* catered exclusively to the pleasure-seeking middle-to-lower classes. *Ukiyo-e* means “floating world” (Bazarov 29) or “fleeting world” (Smith 46) in the Buddhist sense of the word, an appropriate term for a medium that refers to the whim of the popular and the transient—the worlds of entertainment and fashion. These prints met the public demand for inexpensive access to elegance, entertainment, and high fashion like that of the Kabuki theater or geisha. The prints also heralded popular Sumo wrestling. Like precursors of today’s fashion magazines, *ukiyo-e* depicted common people as well as idealized forms. These forms worked to maintain postures of grace and elegance at-

tainable in everyday life, including images of actors and courtesans sporting the latest robes and hairstyles, and entertainment within interior or street environments. The prints contained stylized two-dimensional shapes bordered as a basic mainstay by expressive linear outlines or representations, which resulted in the *ukiyo-e*'s characteristic flatness—a derivation of Heian period decorative painters of the ninth through twelfth centuries.

Ukiyo-e artists never attained recognition from the official court painters and academicians of the day who dealt with traditional aesthetic refinements of the past. Sherman E. Lee recognizes that although these artists developed increasing skill and expression in their small woodblock prints—achieving subtlety and placement worthy of past decorative masters—they were never respected artists. Due to the sheer number of prints produced, Japanese consumers of the hundreds of thousands of prints produced between 1658 and 1858 did not fully appreciate *ukiyo-e* quality. Availability made the works expendable amusements—not of high art or keepsake quality (Lee 497). It took the French Impressionist painters situated half a world away to finally take an authentic interest in the formal aesthetics presented in these prints, and even this phenomenon was accomplished only after the prints were first filed away as curiosities in import shops.

Ukiyo-e were brought to mid-nineteenth century France, among other objects, to satisfy France's growing penchant for things exotic and oriental. At this time, quality *chinoiserie* for wealthy collectors was difficult to find in mainland China. Trade with Japan had begun in the early seventeenth century through the Dutch United East India Company at Nagasaki but was limited from 1638 to 1855 by the Japanese government. When trade was reopened under Meiji

rule, so was a whole new frontier of collectibles for the investment-conscious, and the craze for *japonoiserie* was unleashed. Trendy Parisians desiring to keep in vogue soon owned kimonos, fans, and painted screens, and ate from blue-and-white porcelain. Inevitably, the unwanted *ukiyo-e* were also swept along to the West in large numbers; dealer Hayashi Tadamasa alone (remarked upon in depth by Segi Shinichi) imported 156,487 *ukiyo-e* to Paris during his short career (1890-1901). Because it was a vehicle of fashion and amusement, demand for the *ukiyo-e* vanished quickly—until it became appreciated by artists.

The Japanese prints arrived at a time ripe for change when painting was ready for inspiration. By 1850, Courbet had reached the momentary limit of realism and naturalism, and by 1860 William Morris had begun to seek inspiration from the medieval past for his Arts and Crafts movement. Discovery of the work of *ukiyo-e* was during a turning point for both the artists and the art itself. The novelty of *ukiyo-e* was quietly recognized as a legitimate aesthetic by artists who bartered their paintings to collect more of them. Hayashi's records list customers including Degas, Monet, and the Goncourt brothers, who invariably discussed the new prints with their fellow artists at the Cafe Guerbois. The prints could have ranked highly among discussion of new topics such as new scientific color theories and photographic technological advances which would later influence their art. Appreciation of *ukiyo-e* was a symptom of the artistic search for new identity, rebelling against that of the vapid neoclassicism prescribed by the 19th century French Salon. It was a new identity that was less pretentious and more accessible and potentially derived, in part, from the unique aesthetic presented in *ukiyo-e*.

The *ukiyo-e* prints could have served as a point of departure for new and now familiar techniques of composition, subject matter, and representation. It must be noted that there is only circumstantial evidence to support this. Deborah Johnson states in her 1982 article that we “cannot yet postulate with confidence a direct influence of *ukiyo-e* on Western art early in the nineteenth century” (348).

Johnson is one of many academicians who cites Japanese influence as possibly one of many sources of the artistic revolution of 1860, with significant regard given to photographic technology and a range of other influences. However, I am in agreement with Yamada Chisaburo, editor of a volume dedicated to *japonisme*. He remarks that stylizations such as birds-eye perspective, linear emphasis on composition, strong diagonals, and abstract repetition of line and flat shape incorporated by Western painters of the period can claim to have root in Japanese stylization. Chisaburo says:

Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists. . . did not simply imitate. They found hints and suggestions in Japanese prints of methods for expression or expression itself, and they incorporated these into their own methods of expression. [16]

There is no doubt that Japan directly influenced art in this time period. For instance, Claude Monet painted studies of his kimono-clad wife in “La Japonaise” (1876), and, as seen in his waterlilies series, put an arched Japanese-style bridge in his backyard pond at Giverny. Both are deliberate attempts to include Oriental motifs. Any obvious Japanese influence in paintings of this era must be classified as *japoniserie*, belonging to the fashion of the day, not true

fully-incorporated *japonisme*. Monet's style of painting, composition, and vision in these instances remains intact—he may as well be painting any exotic culture's objects, for subject matter remains independent of *oeuvre*. Vincent van Gogh, living in Paris in the midst of the Japanese craze, also followed this trend. He made a careful study in oil of Hiroshige's print entitled "Sudden Shower on the Ohashi Bridge" (1886 or 1887)—the former of which can be classified as a *japonoiserie*.

However, van Gogh makes a fine example of an artist who possibly internalized the *ukiyo-e* influences and took them to heart in his painting. In his work after 1888, *japonoiserie* is less ostentatiously displayed, yet it is well documented that he remained quite fond of Japanese graphics. He and his brother Theo owned a collection of over 400 *ukiyo-e*, most by artists recognized as the greatest in the field: Eisan, Harumasi, Hiroshige, Kunisada, and Kuniyoshi. Van Gogh left Paris for Arles in the south of France during February, 1888, in search of sunlight and color like that he saw in *ukiyo-e* prints. He admired Japanese clarity of flat colors, remarking to Theo in a letter: "I wish you could spend some time here. . . you can see things with an eye more Japanese, you feel colour differently" (Sullivan 233). This identification with a Japanese way of seeing surfaces is apparent in his painting "Bedroom at Arles" (1888), of which he wrote "here colour is to do everything. . . the shadows and shadows cast are suppressed: it is painted in free flat tints like Japanese prints" (Sullivan 233).

Other aspects of *japonisme* incorporated into van Gogh's artistic vision are revealed in his letters. This includes oriental perspective, which stacks objects atop one another from the bottom of the composition to the top while reducing them in size. Van Gogh refers to

such a perspective in his landscape pen drawing “View of La Crau” (1888). Medieval perspective also includes this form of presentation, but it is clear that van Gogh refers to a bird’s-eye oriental perspective through his comment to Theo that this drawing “does not have a Japanese look, and yet it is really the most Japanese thing I have done” (van der Wolk 219). Also evident in this drawing is van Gogh’s interest in varied markmaking. Objects and figures are simplified to calligraphic, shorthand strokes. The representation is stylized, and emotion is internalized to the expressive quality of line. His short, deliberate strokes are precursors to his later paintings that burst with vigorous color and line. While this may be attributed to van Gogh’s connection to Impressionism, Michael Sullivan traces the tension between line and color that runs through such later paintings as “The Starry Night” (1889) to the visual excitement of the best prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige (235).

Not all artists of Monet’s generation reacted as much to Japanese influence as van Gogh, but his paintings serve as clear examples for both the inclusion of Japanese objects in art as a passing fad, and the potential internalization of Japanese formal principles in later work—both testaments to the influence of Japanese culture. In the long run, the fad of *japoniserie* that affected van Gogh’s work matured and was soon replaced in favor of a more current vogue. But the *ukiyo-e* print attained an influence that it never reached in Japan, resulting in a permanently enhanced aesthetic bequeathed to art in successive generations.

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