

Name: Daria Shmatko

Student Number: 2219579

Analysis of Japanese art and its influence on Western artists.

This essay will discuss how Japanese culture influences the artworks we know today. I grew up on Russian children's stories (called 'skazki') and quite a few Studio Ghibli films by Hayao Miyazaki, including My Neighbour Totoro, Howl's Moving Castle, Spirited Away, Ponyo and so on. During my teenage years, anime became an absorption, and it made me fall in love with its betrayal of the Japanese culture. All the architecture and landscapes shown in the anime and Studio Ghibli films alongside the culture made me question if another artist has taken any inspiration from such a beautiful country into account.

Japan is known to be a country with rich culture and art however that was only discovered in the second half of the 19th century. The country was closed to the world from the 1600s until the 1850s but when Commodore Matthew C. Perry arrived in Edo Bay in Japan in July 1853 from America it would change the course of history for good. After the borders were finally opened to the Western world after 200 years of Japan's isolation, everyone suddenly became obsessed with Japan and its culture. When imports from the East started to flood the shores of Europe a lot of inspiration and movements started to arise. One of the first European countries to start implementing Japonisme was France. A huge wave of shops started to open its doors in France with Japanese products such as kimonos, fans, ceramics, art materials, and especially the art itself. From that point, a French critic, Philippe Burty, established a separate term for the "craze for Japanese art and design" (Ref. 2) which is what we know now as Japonisme. Another huge attraction that helped Europe to get a glimpse into Japanese art was the Arts and Crafts Exhibition that was held in Paris in 1867. This event helped a lot of avant-garde artists to explore new ways of thinking about art and establish new movements. Some of these art movements were Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Art Nouveau, and Aesthetic movements. It strongly influenced artists such as Vincent Van Gogh, Monet, Degas, etc (Ref. 2).

The practice of Japanese artists and makers is what attracted the Western artist to Japan. Such practice involved the woodblock prints in the ukiyo-e style. Ukiyo-e in Japanese means 'Picture of a floating world' and it often depicts the everyday life of Japan and its people. The Ukiyo-e style also often highlights the Kabuki actors- which is traditional Japanese theatre. This specific style of art was produced in 1765 during the Edo period. Before the Ukiyo-e style, only the wealthy could be able to afford the painting by the artist, but the discovery of the Ukiyo-e helped the less fortunate to create art. The woodblocks were produced from cherry wood trees, this type of wood was very accessible and pleasant to work with as it had a fine and even grain to carve. The workers who created the Ukiyo-e prints were known as the Ukiyo-e quartet which was a group of people who were assigned distinct roles in the production of those prints (Ref. 2).

The Great Wave off Kanagawa by Hiroshige Hokusai is the one of most recognizable prints in the world. This print is part of the Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji series, a series that illustrates how Mount Fuji is seen from various locations. Immediately it is recognisable as being Japanese due to its technical application. The Great Wave displays a group of boats with passengers trying to escape or climb up the wave. In the distance we can see Mount Fuji however the wave dominates the

composition by taking half of the space on the paper. The meticulous brushstrokes, repetition of patterns, and lines of Hokusai is what stand out to the Western artist. As mentioned in the previous paragraph Japanese artists of the Meiji period were known to use the Ukiyo-e style, the same can be outlined about the Great Wave (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Hokusai (1831) *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* [Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper]

When thinking of a certain word or a culture, we have a certain individual contextual representation. For example, if we think of Japan immediate pictures come to our heads such as kimono, cherry blossom trees, the sea, temples, and many other associations. The study of semiotics can explain why there is a such significant relationship between words and visual imagery. When we grow up our visual language starts to develop profoundly, we get exposed to a lot of visual information and from that experience, we start to create links between images and words. As we learn “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak” (Berger, 1972, p.7)

Vincent Van Gogh is an example of a well-known painter in the art world, but even his immense popularity stemmed from years of research about other artworks, especially Japanese. In the book *Japonisme* by Siegfried Wichmann, he mentions that Van Gogh used to collect Japanese prints for an examination (1999, p.40).

“You will be able to get an idea of the revolution in printing when you think, for instance, of the brightly coloured Japanese pictures that one sees everywhere, landscapes and figures. Theo and I have hundreds of Japanese prints in our possession.” (Van Gogh, 1999)

He had purchased many Japanese artworks, one example being twelve prints from the famous artist Utagawa Hiroshige’s (born Ando Tokutaro) *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*. They were a series of prints that highlighted different landscapes of Japan during the Edo period. In the images below are the copies of the original works by Hiroshige that Van Gogh tried to copy. Looking at the paintings it is surprising to see how skilfully Van Gogh managed to recreate them both. They still have this Japanese quality to them but just in different media which adds a Western touch to the painting (Fig. 2,3,4,5).



Fig. 2 Hiroshige (1856-58) *Ohashi bridge in the rain* [Woodblock print]



Fig. 3 Van Gogh (1886-88) *Japonaiserie: the Bridge* [Oil on Canvas]



Fig. 4 Hiroshige (1856-58) *Flowering plum tree in the Kameido garden* [Woodblock print]



Fig.5 Van Gogh (1886-88) *Japonaiserie: tree in bloom* [Oil on canvas]

Not only did Vincent Van Gogh copy Japanese art, but he also liked to include this in his art, such as the *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* and *Portrait of Père Tanguy*, shown below in respective order. Those paintings highlight how Vincent Van Gogh fell in love with the Japanese culture. The biggest use that Van Gogh managed to take out from studying the Japanese prints were the use of colour (Fig. 6,7).



Fig. 6 Van Gogh (1889) *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* [Oil on canvas]

Fig. 7 Van Gogh (1887) *Portrait of Pere with Tanguy* [Oil on canvas]

Another strong example of seeing Japonisme in the artworks can be shown in the painting by A French painter Claude Monet called *La Japonaise* shown below.



Fig. 8 Monet (1876) *La Japonaise (Camille Monet in Japanese Costume)* [Oil on canvas]

Similarly, to Van Gogh Monet has also been exposed to Japanese items throughout his lifetime. The power of cultural items can help the viewer to identify if a certain artist has been influenced by the certain culture. In the case of Monet, the painting *La Japonaise* shows his wife wearing a kimono which is a traditional Japanese garment. Additionally, we can also notice two traditional Japanese fans called 'sensu' and 'uchiwa'. The colour of the garment is red which is very identifiable in Japan as it represents strength, peace, and power (Fig.8).

The final artist who was relatable to my interests is called Ivan Bilibin. He is a Russian Art Nouveau illustrator who became popular by painting old Russian countryside and folklore for children's book stories. It was noticeable from the work that he had used a lot of Japanese techniques as well as the well-known Art Nouveau which "drew upon elements of Japanese art ('Japonisme') (Ref. 1). An example of this would be Bilibin's *Baba Yaga* painting. It was done in watercolour paint, an extremely popular medium for Russian illustrators back in the 20th century. Similarly, to the Ukiyo-e style, Bilibin's illustrations display the use of solid colours that do not require shading (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 Bilibin (1900) *Baba Yaga (Illustration to the book 'Vasilisa the Beautiful')* [Watercolour, ink, white and gold colours on paper]

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been evident that the Japanese have a huge influence on Western artists. Throughout this research, I have found that famous artists like Vincent Gogh, Monet and Bilibin have all been guided by Japanese artistry whether it has been through the practice or the art style. It was also informative to research the history of the Ukiyo-e style that has been used in the famous prints by Hiroshige and Hokusai. This essay also helped to further strengthen my love of Japanese art as I would like to continue finding more historical facts about the way this country's art has been produced.

Bibliography

Figures

Figure 1. Katsushika Hokusai (1831) *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. Available at:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/45434>

Figure 2. Utagawa Hiroshige (1856-58) *Ohashi bridge in the rain*. Available at:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/55433>

Figure 3. Vincent Van Gogh (1886-88) *Japonaiserie: the bridge*. Available at:

<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0114V1962>

Figure 4. Utagawa Hiroshige (1856-58) *Flowering plum tree in the Kameido garden*. Available at:

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Figure 5. Vincent Van Gogh (1886-88) *Japonaiserie: tree in bloom*. Available at:

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Figure 6. Vincent Van Gogh (1889) *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*. Available at:

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Figure 7. Vincent Van Gogh (1887) *Portrait of Pere with Tanguy*. Available at:

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Figure 8. Claude Monet (1876) *La Japonaise*. Available at:

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Figure 9. Ivan Bilibin (1900) *Baba Yaga (Illustration to the book 'Vasilisa the Beautiful')*. Available at:

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