Japonisme Surges Into European Modernism

By Ricki Morse

Part of an ongoing series for the Van Gogh exhibit, Fall 2022

In 1853 Commodore Mathew Perry led his party of four battleships into Tokyo harbor, hoping to reopen American trade with Japan which had been closed for over 200 years, open only to Dutch and Chinese traders. But with the acquisition of California to the United States, and thus western ports as well as increased trade with China, access to Japan became important to American trade in the Pacific. Within a year, a treaty had been signed inviting American consulates to Japanese ports, something no other country had been granted, which began the process of opening trade agreements. The Japanese had been witness to China's bowing to American military power, and chose agreement as the better course. Within a few years, Japanese merchants were taking advantage of trade throughout the western world, flooding European markets with Japanese art and materials, as well as rebuilding its own military with American armaments, thus becoming the most powerful military in the Western Pacific.

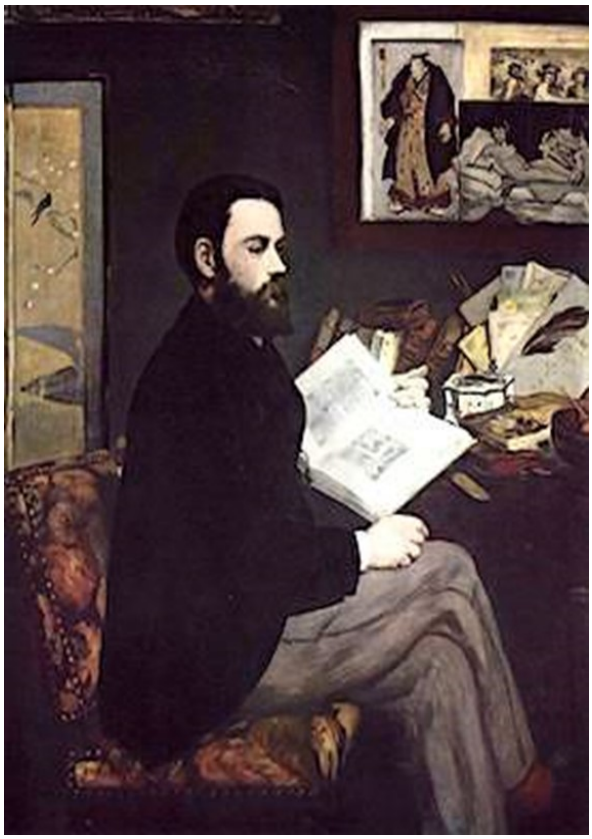
Katshshika Hokusai (1760-1849) Kirifuri Waterfall, 1932, woodblock print. We are captured in the moment, like the watchers at the base of the fall, by the beauty, force and immediacy of the torrent.

Utagawa Hiroshige (1790-1898) *Moon Pine in Ueno*, 1857, woodblock print. The cropped close-up of the looped pine branch overwhelms the landscape until we notice the lighted houses below, placing us in the landscape, making it ours. Anchored in the shadow on the water, the image conveys both power and serenity.

The French even invented a word for the influence of Japanese art and style—*Japonisme*. French artists adopted the ordinary daily scenes, flat figures, the shadowless view, the clear colors, the diagonal orientation, abandoning perspective for a single plane, bringing their subjects to the forefront of the picture—in effect accelerating the movement of impressionism into a new modernism, appearing first with Manet, then Monet and Degas, even more fully in Van

Gogh. Later we see it in Mary Cassatt and Toulouse Lautrec.

At the 1867 Art Exposition in Paris, the Japanese opened a booth, displaying woodblock prints, painted fans, kimonos, screens, ceramics and all manner of decorative items. Theo Van Gogh and his older brother Vincent began an extensive collection of over 600 woodblock prints, particularly Katsushika Hosukai (1760-1849) and (above) Utagawa Hiroshige (1790-1898).



Eduoard Manet, *Portrait of Emile Zola*, 1868, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Édouard Manet (1832-1883)

Happily, in our exploration of the influences on Vincent van Gogh, we keep bumping into the same people, in this case Emile Zola, the popular French novelist whom we met as a boyhood friend of Cezanne in Aix en Provence. Now Zola is championing Édouard Manet, under attack by the conservative Salon for his nude painting, *Olympia*. She rests a direct gaze on her viewers, quiet, assured, at ease. As Zola put it, she is nude but not naked. In appreciation for his support, Manet invited Zola to his studio to sit for a portrait which captures not only their relationship but the current influence of *Japonisme.*

Manet includes on the desk the light blue covered 1867 brochure in which Zola published his defense of Manet's *Olympia*, judging it his best painting to date. Above the desk are a small copy of *Olympia*, and one of Velazquez's *Bacchus,* celebrating their mutual love of Spanish art, as well as a Kuniaki woodblock print of a wrestler. On the wall hangs a Japanese screen, the whole scene cropped in woodblock print style, Zola's leg providing a central diagonal line.

In viewing Manet's *Boating,* (below) we see the lessons of Japanese art employed to great effect. Though the subject is thoroughly French, the sensitivity to design is Japanese. The point of view is close and cropped, the perspective is flat, lacking shading, the colors bright, while the line of the sail boom provides the energetic diagonal, enlivening the canvas.

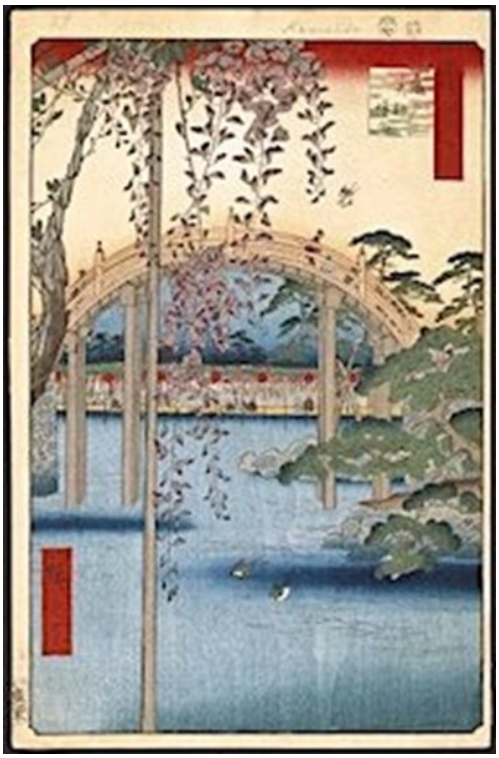
Éduoard Manet, *Boating*, 1974, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The pattern of her dress reflects the water's surface but in a slightly more lavender shade. The brush work applies the loose

post-impressionist strokes of the period. The boaters become a vivid moment in time.

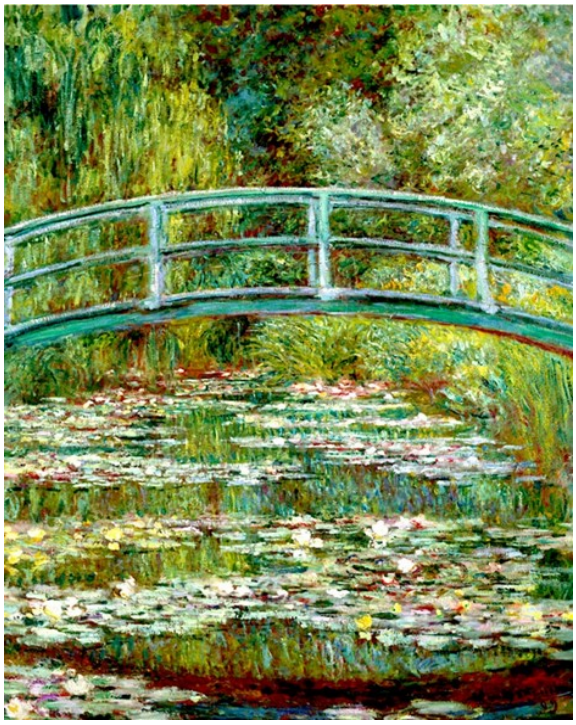
Claude Monet (1840-1926)

Monet was not only France's most famous Impressionist, he was also a dedicated and talented gardener, considering his greatest work to be not his painting but his garden at Giverny.



Hiroshige, *Inside Kameido Tenjin Shrine,* 1856, Woodblock print, Brooklyn MA.

And while he was as dazzled by *Japonisme* as other French artists, even to the length of painting his wife dancing in a kimono, he was particularly influenced by the painted screens of flowers and gardens and actually built a Japanese bridge over his waterlily pond. He thought of his garden as primarily designed out of a Japanese aesthetic as expressed in woodblock print panels.



Claude Monet, *Bridge Over a Pond of Waterlillies,* 1899, oil on canvas, Metropolitan. Reflections of the overarching trees appear between the floating waterlillies creating an additional impressionistic landscape.

In 1871 Monet began collecting Japanese woodblocks and prints in the Netherlands, accumulating over 200 of them and over 100 woodblocks, particularly by Utamaro, Hokusai and Hiroshige. He was particularly interested in Hokusai's large flowers, and all are on display in his museum in Giverny.

Edgar Degas (1834-1917)

Born into an aristocratic Parisian family with a classical art education and widely traveled in Europe, Edgar Degas' enquiring mind led him far afield, into photography beginning in 1830, and later into the insights of Japanese woodblock prints. These influences informed his growth as an artist, changing how he saw the world and producing work beyond Impressionism, inspired by his sensitivity to his subjects—a very modern perspective. Photography led him to consider the moment of seeing, the mo-

Edgar Degas, *The Tub,* 1886, pastel on cardboard, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Torii Kiyonagai, *Bathhouse Women* , 1780s, woodblock print.

ment of action on his canvas, an insight fundamental to the Japanese aesthetic—the second before the great wave breaks.

His *Woman Bathing*, 1886, with its jarringly configured design, a shelf containing a hair brush and water pitchers dissecting the wall at her back, reflects the view from above common in Japanese woodblock prints. The Kiyonaga, *Bathhouse Women*, which hung above his bed, shares this perspective, the figures sharing a single plane, activated not by depth but by the diagonal lines which give the scene movement.

Unusual poses are often seen in Japanese prints, but Degas while retaining the stark architecture of the framework, gives us a very naturally rendered stance, a rounded body shaded with the pastels retaining the intimacy of a woman alone in her bath.

Again reaching beyond the expected, Degas translates the severely cropped, close-up style of two women under an umbrella sharing tea onto a European setting, the orchestra pit of an opera house. We view musicians and arriving audience glimpsed as if we were seated and watching them take their places, seeing only parts of faces, laced with the diagonal lines of musical instruments and railings. The movement continues in the dancers' legs and sparkling tutus. In viewing

Left:

Edgar Degas, *The Orchestra at the Opera*, 1870, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Right:

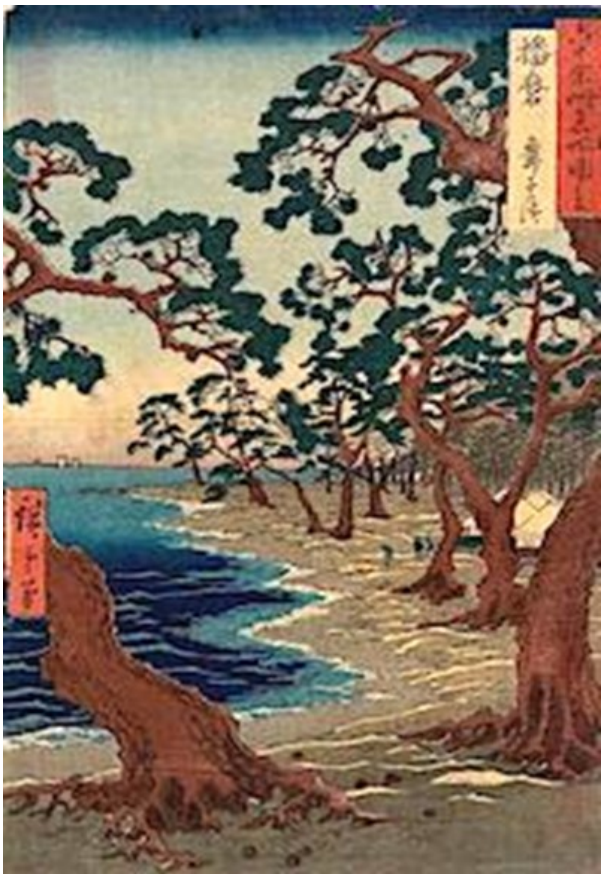
Kitawaga Utamaro, *Two Women Under an Unbrella*, 1790. woodblock print.

the works side by side, we become aware of the energy generated by the implied movement of glimpsed faces and tea service in diagonal lines of the rain. A sense of anticipation rises in each. We must pause, reimagine the cropped out details of the images, becoming aware of the illusiveness of the moment.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Unlike Manet, Van Gogh did not view Japanese art as a source of new pictorial devices, but as a different way of looking. In the self-portrait which he sent to Gauguin, he posed himself as a Buddhist monk, and certainly he became a visual advocate of Buddhist ideas. He believed that the influence of Japanese art marked a change that would sweep away the old academic, classical concepts of European art. He described Japanese art to Theo as, "The dream stands side by side with reality, the brightest light with opaque darkness, colour with tonal variation, space with surface; peace and harmony, too, stand side by side with uproar."

Vincent van Gogh, *Hospital at Saint-Rémy*, 1889, oil on canvas, Armand Hammer Collection, Los Angeles.



Hiroshige, *Maiko Beach*, 1854, woodblock print

The gnarled trees around the Saint-Rémy hospital not only echo Japanese woodblock prints but also carry his experience, his suffering and fear. It is this expressionism which he saw as replacing classicism in art, and it did. The Japanese trees are meaning-laden—age and survival, endurance, bombardment by time and wind—and simultaneously satisfying artistically. Quite a feat. When we view a Van Gogh painting, we begin a "felt" journey, not one of ideas but of experiences, requiring presence, acute attention, being in the moment. We understand his process by sharing it, buoyed as he was by brilliant color and movement.

In late 1890 Theo sent his brother in Auvers some double square canvases, and these provided the oblong land-

Takahashi Biho, *Two Crows Flying in Snow*, 1890s, woodblock print. Flights of birds, including crows, are popular Japanese images, adding immediacy to the image.

scape for Vincent's final paintings, including what is probably his last, *Wheatfield with Crows*. Our eye follows the road and is tossed back again to repeat the journey, like riding a wave, the strong green and dark red of the road petering out, our attention drawn into the cloud of marauding crows above and between us and the field, all enlivened by the brush strokes which flow unerringly along the road only to mound across the field under the cries of the crows. Each individual viewer is alone here, taking in the raw energy of the brush strokes, the brilliant yellow, the erratic movement of the crows above the sweeping flow of the road, a sense perhaps of foreboding, chaotic bird cries—the disparate emotional responses finding a place to settle within us, a way to **be** in this moment in his life.

It's not to think about, it's to experience. ■

Vincent van Gogh, *Wheat Field with Crows*, 1890, oil on canvas, VG Museum, Amsterdam

Sources:
Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme*, English translation, Park Lane, 1985.
Daniel Catton Rich, *Degas*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., NY, 1985.

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May 2021

Claude Monet, *La Japonaise (Camille Monet in Japanese Costume)*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 91 x 51 in. Boston Museum of Fine Arts

Monet exhibited this work at the second show of the Impressionists in 1876, where it attracted much attention. He created a virtuoso display of brilliant color that is also a witty comment on the current Paris fad for all things Japanese. Camille Monet, the artist's wife, is shown wrapped in a splendid kimono and surrounded by fans, wearing a blond wig to emphasize her Western identity.

Submitted by Ricki Morse

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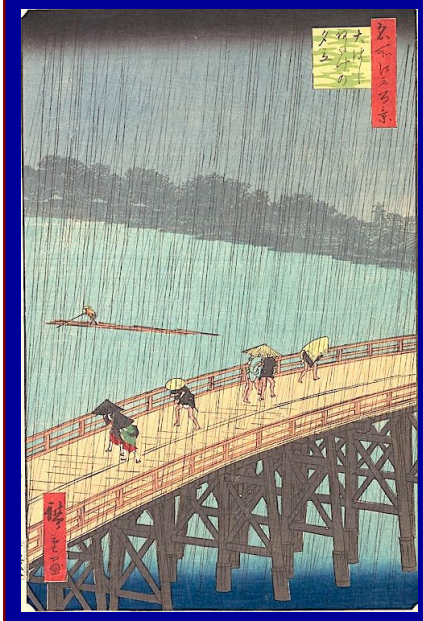
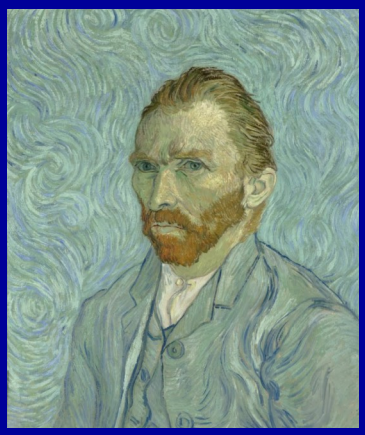


Left: Utagawa Hirosige, from *100 Famous Views of Edo*, 1857. Right: Vincent Van Gogh, *Bridge in the Rain* (after Hirosige), 1887. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

From Van Gogh Museum website:
"Van Gogh greatly admired Japanese woodblock prints for their bright colours and distinctive compositions. He made the colours more intense than in the original, however. He painted this work on a standard canvas, but wanted to maintain the proportions of the original, and so left a border, which he filled with Japanese characters copied from other prints. He had fallen under the spell of Japanese woodcuts. With their striking divisions of the picture plane and strong outlines, they were so different than anything he was used to. He even worked them into the background of his portraits. They changed his art forever. The art of the future, Van Gogh was convinced, had to be colorful and joyous, like Japanese print-making."

"And we wouldn't be able to study Japanese art, it seems to me, without becoming much happier, and more cheerful, as it makes us return to nature, despite our education and our work, in a world of convention."

Vincent to Theo, 23 or 24 September 1888



Self-Portrait, 1889

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