VAN GOGH and Japan

Louis van Tilborgh

VAN GOGH MUSEUM

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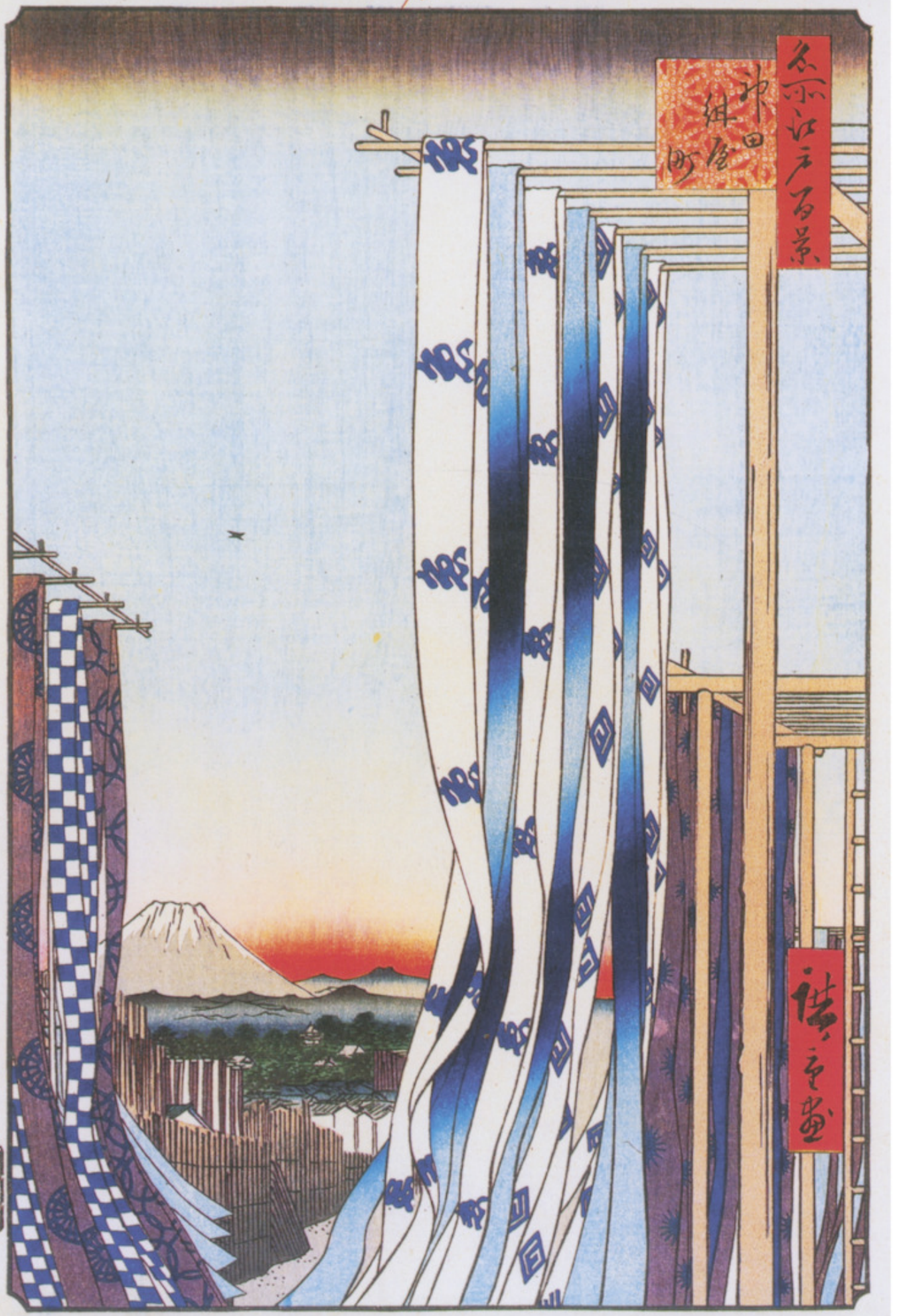
JAPANESE PRINTS MADE VINCENT VAN GOGH 'HAPPY AND CHEERFUL', as he wrote during his time in Arles, when he was at the height of his powers as an artist. They seemed to reflect something of his own ideals, and his recognition of their significance for him as an artist had brought about a rapid and radical change in his work and a spectacular increase in his abilities. This happened between the beginning of 1887 and the end of 1888, during the second year that he lived in Paris and in his first year in the Provence. Van Gogh had been familiar with Japanese art before this. He had had his first significant encounter with it at the end of 1885, when he left Nuenen and went to Antwerp. Very soon after his arrival in the Belgian port he bought 'a set of Japanese prints [...] that give me great pleasure,' as he wrote to Theo. 'You know, those little figures of women in gardens or on the beach, horsemen, flowers, gnarled thorn branches.' He pinned his acquisitions on the wall and described Antwerp with these scenes in mind: 'the docks [here] are one huge Japonaiserie, fanciful, original, extraordinary'.

1
Utagawa Hiroshige,
Flowering trees near Arashiyama (detail),
c. 1835
Rijksmuseum,
Rijksprentenkabinet,
Amsterdam


名所江戸百景
神田紺屋町

These last words tell us how Van Gogh regarded this exotic art at that time – as something intriguing and highly unusual. But there was as yet no question of artistic recognition – the prints had no influence on his work. This was to change during his time in Paris, where he moved in with his brother in early 1886. By the winter of 1886-87 he had built up a large collection of Japanese prints and had come to regard them not as an amusing curiosity but as artistic models. This marked the second phase of his interest.

At first he simply borrowed a few inventive ideas, but by the end of 1887 he lost any reservations that he had had. From then on he valued these woodcuts as highly as the acknowledged masterpieces of classical western art: 'Japanese art is something like the primitives, like the Greeks, like our old Dutch painters, Rembrandt, Potter, Hals, Vermeer, Van Ostade, Ruysdael. *There's no end to it*,' he wrote from Arles, where he went to live at the beginning of 1888. His admiration for Japanese art developed into what was almost a religion, and this took him onto a new, third phase. He now believed that the success, the very future of modern art was in large part, if not entirely, dependent on following this model, and that meant that he also wanted to derive inspiration from the viewpoint and mental outlook of Japanese artists. Japan became for him what, during his years in Holland, Jean-François Millet, the French painter of rural labour, had been: his 'counsellor and guide in *everything*'.

But this all-encompassing enthusiasm vanished as rapidly as it had appeared. After the end of 1888 Van Gogh hardly mentioned Japanese prints in his letters at all. He continued to love them, but Japanese art had been toppled from its position as the ultimate artistic paradigm. This book is about the rise and fall of his brief obsession. How did he fall under the sway of Japan, and why did this passion retreat so suddenly into the background?

2
Utagawa Hiroshige, *Dyed fabric hung up to dry*, 1856-58
Gerhard Pulverer Collection, Cologne

JAPONISME

The special quality of Japanese art, particularly its graphic art, remained hidden from the west for centuries. In 1639 Japan had in effect sealed itself off hermetically from the outside world; only the Netherlands and China were granted restricted freedom to trade. This did not change until 1854, the year after Van Gogh was born. Faced with the guns of the United States fleet, Japan opened its ports to the Americans and, in 1859, to other western nations as well.

This produced far-reaching cultural consequences. Japan was enthralled by the modern west, while the west looked spellbound at traditional Japan – a culture strongly reminiscent of that of the Middle Ages, or at least of the prevailing, highly idealized, view of it. The result was Japonisme, an admiration for and imitation of virtually everything that came from Japan – art, crafts, clothes, architecture – that was to endure until well into the twentieth century.

The charm of Japanese prints was recognized from the outset – particularly in France. Artists, critics and collectors delighted in the unusual, relatively inexpensive and cheerfully coloured prints. Painters of the Barbizon School, like Jean-François Millet and Théodore Rousseau, were impressed, and the artists of the next generation – Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro – also became great admirers. With their broad planes of colour, the prints were very different from contemporary art in the west, and the Impressionists, in particular, were greatly taken with the simple, bold colours and the strange, 'exotic' subjects.

But European artists saw similarities as well as differences. The endeavour of the Japanese to record the details of their own surroundings seemed exactly the same as their own western realism. In the unusual, at times somewhat mannered, perspective of Japanese artists (Hiroshige and Hokusai above all) they also discovered possible new ways to take further their own concepts of spatial illusion. The Japanese sometimes decided to leave out the horizon altogether, they cropped the edges of pictorial elements in unexpected ways, often omitted the middle ground from their

3
Edgar Degas,
Place de la Concorde. Count Lepic and his daughters, 1875
State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Gerstenberg Collection

compositions and blithely enlarged motifs in the foreground (2). One of the lessons to be learned from their practice was that it was not always necessary to divide up the picture-space like a peepshow, from near to far, in accordance with western tradition. The spectator could fill in any missing part for himself.

Interestingly, the spatial concepts of Japanese artists had been inspired in part by western examples; this process of mutual influence has sometimes been described as a 'cultural boomerang'. They showed their European colleagues possibilities of traditional perspective that had not yet been exploited, as a result of which their prints became catalysts in the development of a new aesthetic in the West (3).

GROWTH OF INTEREST

In the early years of his artistic career, at least until 1885, Van Gogh took no notice of Japonisme. While the Parisian avant-garde was obsessed by the sensational novelty of this surprising art from the Far East, Van Gogh was delving in the early nineteenth-century French Barbizon School and the associated Hague School. Although he never mentioned Japanese woodcuts in his early letters, he had probably seen examples of them. This can be inferred, at least, from the first description he gave of them to Theo, which suggests that these sheets were not entirely unfamiliar to him and his brother – 'you know, those little figures of women in gardens ...'.

If this inference is correct, it means that Van Gogh had simply not found Japanese prints worth mentioning before – an attitude that was entirely in line with prevailing opinion in the Netherlands. Although the centuries-old ties with Japan meant that there were countless examples of Oriental heritage in the Netherlands, it took longer there than elsewhere for their artistic value to be acknowledged properly.

In this period Van Gogh was certainly aware of Japan as an exotic destination for artists. His collection of illustrations from contemporary magazines contained several works depicting the country. Most of them were by Félix Elie Régamey, who was very strong 'in the Japanese', as Van Gogh wrote in 1883. In 1872 – four years before he went to the Far East for the first time – this French artist had depicted Japanese scenes based on the work of the British photographer Felice Beato (4), who lived in Yokohama from 1863 to 1884 and made an accurate photographic record of his surroundings (5). Van Gogh owned several engravings after Beato's photographs.

Van Gogh's interest in Japanese prints seems to have been kindled when, towards the end of his time in Nuenen, he read Edmond de Goncourt's 1884 novel *Chérie*, in which Japonisme featured. The passion for everything Japanese had reached a climax in 1883 with the publication of *L'art japonais* by the authoritative Louis Gonse, editor-in-chief of the art journal *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. The Goncourt brothers, writers, chroniclers of Parisian literary life and avid collectors of Japanese art, believed that they could take

4
After Félix Elie Régamey, from a photograph by Felice Beato. Engraving by R. Loudan in *Sketches of Japan: travels in the Kago*, 1872
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

5
Felice Beato, *Bearers in a river*, c. 1868-69
Musée Nicéphore Niepce, Chalon-sur-Saône

much of the credit for this. In his foreword to *Chérie*, Edmond unblushingly quoted his brother Jules: 'the search for truth in literature, the revival of the art of the eighteenth century, the triumph of Japonisme: these are [...] the three great literary and artistic movements in the second half of the nineteenth century ... and we have led them, these three movements ... we, poor unknowns.'

Van Gogh liked the realist writing of the two brothers, and these references to the popularity of both eighteenth-century and Japanese art in France sparked his curiosity. This was bound up with his recent decision to go to Antwerp and shift his focus away from the example of rural art in the manner of Millet. He was looking for alternatives – hence his interest in the foreign fashions of the day. Soon after this, he began reading about eighteenth-century French art, and Japonisme was resonating in his mind when he chanced on that set of prints in Antwerp and bought them.

It was not until he got to Paris early in 1886 that Van Gogh understood the real consequences of the Japanese fashion described by Goncourt. Everything that came from Japan had become the focus of interest, and art dealers were quick to take advantage of this. In 1886 there were around forty 'Japonneries' and 'Chinoiseries' in the city, and Oriental goods could also be found in curio shops – indeed, even in the large modern department stores. The supply was so great that prices actually fell sharply in 1886-87.

6
Maurice Guibert, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec as a Japanese, photograph, c. 1890
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

COLLECTING

Perhaps tempted by the low price of Japanese prints, Van Gogh, once he had arrived in Paris, started to form a collection. He may have been modelling himself on the examples of the Australian artist John Peter Russell and the French painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, both of whom he got to know in the course of 1886. Russell had been collecting Japanese art since 1877, Lautrec since 1883. The latter even enjoyed dressing up in Japanese costume, as photographs from this period reveal (6).

By the beginning of 1887, Van Gogh's own collection was already so extensive that he put together an exhibition for the café, restaurant and

7
Vincent van Gogh,
In the café: Agostina Segatori in 'Le Tambourin', 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

8
Verso of:
Vincent van Gogh,
Three books, 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

cabaret Le Tambourin at 62, boulevard de Clichy. The owner of this establishment was the Italian Agostina Segatori, his mistress at the time, whom he immortalized in a fine portrait (7). She is seated at a small table in her own café, and in the background we see Japanese prints, only one of which – a composition with two geishas – is actually identifiable.

We cannot be sure where Van Gogh bought his first prints in Paris. Some of the examples in his collection, which is now in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, bear the stamp of Decelle's 'L'Empire Chinoise', but this shop at 53, rue Vivienne, founded in 1856 and one of the first in Paris to sell Japanese goods, had closed down by 1886, so he must have bought them elsewhere.

It is possible that he bought prints from Kiryō Kōshō Kaisha, the trading company set up in Japan in 1873 to sell their national goods and art on the western European market. In 1878 this firm began selling its wares in France, and since Van Gogh painted two still lifes on the lids of Kiryō Kōshō Kaisha wooden crates at the beginning of 1887 (8), we may assume that he (or Theo) frequented 'Japonneries' that were supplied by this organization. After Van Gogh's death, a contemporary said that the artist exchanged several oil studies for a hundred Japanese prints from the dealer Delarebeyrette (probably Gabriel), but there is no other evidence of this.

9
Utagawa Kunisada,
The courtesan Takao,
1861
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

10
Utagawa Hiroshige,
Fuji from the Sagami river, 1858
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

11
Utagawa Hiroshige,
Ishiyakushi: the Yoshitsune cherry tree near the Noriyori shrine,
1855
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

12
Vincent van Gogh,
Portrait of Julien Tanguy,
1887
Musée Rodin, Paris

The only thing of which we can be absolutely sure is that, towards the end of his time in Paris, Van Gogh bought prints from Siegfried Bing. This German-born art dealer had opened a gallery for Chinese and Japanese art in 1878, which almost immediately attracted attention because of the quality of the works he sold. Later, the firm was renamed 'S. Bing et Cie', and several branches were opened, one of which Van Gogh visited a number of times at the end of 1887, as we know from his correspondence. It was at this time that he painted a portrait of the colour merchant and art dealer Julien Tanguy (12), whom he depicted against a background composed entirely of Japanese prints – probably Vincent's most recent acquisitions from Bing (9, 10, 11). After he moved to Arles at the beginning of 1888, he urged Theo to continue adding to their collection by buying prints from the attic of this branch of Bing's, where extremely cheap examples could be found.

ARTISTIC MATERIAL

We do not know the full extent of Van Gogh's collection. As it survives today, it contains 531 prints (and albums). It is impossible to say with certainty that all these works stem from Vincent and Theo's collection. In 1888 Van Gogh told his sister Willemien that he and Theo had 'hundreds of these Japanese prints'. It has been suggested that Vincent Willem van Gogh, Theo's son, may have added purchases of his own to the collection, but there is no way of verifying this. We do, however, know that Theo gave away examples from the collection – some to Willemien, who in turn gave 'fifteen or so' to a friend.

Van Gogh's voracious desire to buy was prompted by more than pure love of Japanese prints – he also had a financial motive. He wanted to start dealing. His exhibition at the café Le Tambourin was an initial attempt to find customers, but it was a financial disaster. 'As far as the money goes, I've lost rather than gained on it,' he frankly confessed later. He did not mind. As an artist he benefited from a thorough study of these 'japonaiseries', as he called the prints, and the 'practical side interests me more than the *trade*'. In short, his collection was primarily artistic material, intended for his own education, and a serious connoisseur of Oriental art, he suspected, would even be 'a bit shocked' and show 'pity [...] because of my ignorance and poor taste'.

He bought cheaply, because he bought in bulk. At Bing's the prints actually cost no more than 'three sous each', fifteen centimes. His limited financial resources obviously dictated not only the quality of the prints but also the choice of artists. The three most important Japanese printmakers were Hiroshige, Utamaro and Hokusai, but only the first of these figured in his collection. Impressions of works by the other two were rarer – and consequently more expensive. He was evidently aware of these omissions, since he wrote to Theo from Arles telling him that he must buy 'the 300 views of the sacred mountain and the genre pieces' by Hokusai in Bing's attic.

It is hard to judge the extent of Van Gogh's knowledge of Japanese art, but he was certainly not a specialist, nor did he come into the same category as people like the Goncourt brothers, who were well-informed collec-

tors. The fact that 'there might well be something else' apart from 'run of the mill prints' had passed him by, as he himself wrote. It is doubtful, for example, since he was an amateur with no knowledge of Japanese, that he always recognized which artists had made his prints and the series related to them. In the whole of his correspondence he mentioned only two Japanese artists by name: 'Monorou' – a misspelling of Hishikawa Moronobu – and Hokusai. Anyone who thinks of Hokusai automatically thinks next of Hiroshige, but he is not mentioned by Van Gogh, nor is Utagawa Kunisada – who, although less highly rated as an artist, was represented with the largest number of prints in Vincent and Theo's collection.

Much of Van Gogh's knowledge probably came from dealers, among them Nephtalie Lévy, the manager at Bing's, whom he praised as 'a *serious* connoisseur of japonaiserie'. He also gleaned information from Louis Gonse's *L'art Japonais*, which was reprinted in 1886. In Arles he wrote that Japanese artists exchanged works with one another and that they drew 'quickly, very quickly, quick as lightning', and he had taken both these statements from Gonse's book. He also had a copy of the 1886 special Japan issue of *Paris Illustré* (27), in which there was an essay about the art and culture of the country by the dealer Tadamasa Hayashi, who had lived in Paris since 1879.

We do not know whether he was familiar with other literature in this field, but it seems unlikely. After he had read *Madame Chrysanthème*, Pierre Loti's novel set in Japan, in the summer of 1888, this book – though it is full of imaginary details – became his primary source of information about the country. In Arles he also discovered *Le Japon Artistique*, a journal that Bing had started in the spring of the same year. Theo sent him several issues, but Vincent was not impressed, although he did draw inspiration from them (40, 42): 'Bing's text on Japan is a bit dry and leaves something to be desired – he says: there is a great, typical art, but although he shows something of it, he really doesn't bring out the character of this art very well.'

13
Vincent van Gogh,
Terrace and belvedere at the Moulin de Blute-Fin, Montmartre, 1887
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection

14
Utagawa Hiroshige,
The Seven-Ri ferry at Atsuta, Miya, 1855
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

15
Utagawa Hiroshige II,
Six prints from:
Glimpses of newly selected flowers and birds, c. 1850
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

16
Sketch in a letter
to Theo van Gogh,
28 May 1888
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

17
Vincent van Gogh,
The kingfisher, 1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

INFLUENCE

Van Gogh started to collect Japanese prints in Paris at almost exactly the same time as he first began to try and master the achievements of modern French painting. In his own way, he imitated the Neo-impressionists, and he admired the work of artists like Degas and Monet, who themselves admired the example of the Japanese. Following in their footsteps, he focused his attention first of all on the inventive perspective and unusual compositional techniques of Japanese graphic art. Early in 1887 he began to experiment with cropping pictorial elements at the edges, placing large, seemingly unimportant objects in the foreground, and introducing strong diagonals into the composition, to reinforce the realism of his work (13, 14).

In a very few cases his imitation was quite literal, as in his *Kingfisher* (15, 17). In this little painting Van Gogh left the horizon out and depicted the bird among the reeds, which cut the picture plane virtually from top to bottom. He borrowed this composition from a print in a Japanese album in his own collection of which he was particularly fond. This particular album is what is known as a Leporello album: the sheets are folded concertina-wise and can be opened out. This attractive manner of presentation later gave him the idea, while he was in Arles, of putting together some drawings in the Japanese style that he was making at the time in the same way (16), but this never got beyond the planning stage.

18
Emile Bernard,
Still life with begonias,
1887
Norton Simon
Art Foundation,
Pasadena.
Gift of Jennifer Jones
Simon

Van Gogh's emulation of Japanese graphic art intensified dramatically in the autumn of 1887, when his young friend Emile Bernard developed new ideas about the direction that modern art should take. Bernard had also been inspired by Neo-impressionism, but now – together with Louis Anquetin – he advocated a style in which compositions were conceived in bold planes and colouring was as simple as possible (18). Fired by Bernard's revolutionary ideas and their inspiration in Japanese prints, Van Gogh began to subordinate space and perspective to an emphasis on the flat plane, thus radically changing the nature of his approach to art.

Unlike Bernard, he combined this quest for flatness with an almost undulating movement in his brushstroke, and this shows clearly that he did not want to relinquish the key Neo-impressionist idea of vibrating light. He was evidently seeking a compromise between the example of Japan and his own version of pointillism, and this produced strange, intriguing paintings like his *Still life with cabbages and onions* (19).

COPIES

To put these new ideas into practice, Van Gogh started simply by copying a Japanese woodcut in his collection with unusually large areas of colour: Hiroshige's *The plum tree teahouse at Kameido* (20, 21, 22). It shows an orchard, well-known at the time, on the eastern outskirts of Edo (present-day Tokyo), in which the main attraction was a very old plum tree with unusually low branches. The roots of this tree had spread further up the orchard and produced shoots that developed into new, similarly low-branched trees, and the group had become famous as the 'sleeping dragon plum tree' – although it is doubtful whether Van Gogh was aware of this poetic name.

He did not follow the colours in Hiroshige's print but, in line with modern colour theory, worked only with the three primary colours (red, blue and yellow) and the three secondary colours (purple, orange and green) – ignoring the black, grey and white in the print, since these were not regarded as colours. He used a standard-size canvas, which meant that large areas were left empty to the left and right; these he painted orange. When the work was

19
Vincent van Gogh,
Still life with cabbages and onions, 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

almost dry he came up with the idea of adding Japanese characters, which he took from another woodcut. The painting was thus instantly transformed from an exercise in the use of planes and colour into a conscious japonaiserie, a 'curiosity' in the Japanese style.

The result was quite unprecedented, and Van Gogh decided to make a second, larger japonaiserie (23), for which he took as his model Hiroshige's *Sudden shower on the Great Bridge near Atake* (24). The subject, rain, was typical of Japanese prints, and this must have governed his choice. This time he framed the composition with an all-round decorative border, again filling it with Japanese characters – but now even more stylized.

Van Gogh then made a third copy in an even larger format, this time after a print by Keisai Eisen depicting a courtesan (25, 26), as classic a Japanese subject as rain and orchards in flower. He did not work from the woodcut itself but after a reproduction of it in *Paris Illustré*, which shows the image of

20
Vincent van Gogh,
Flowering plum tree (after Hiroshige), 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

21
Utagawa Hiroshige,
The plum tree teahouse at Kameido, 1857
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

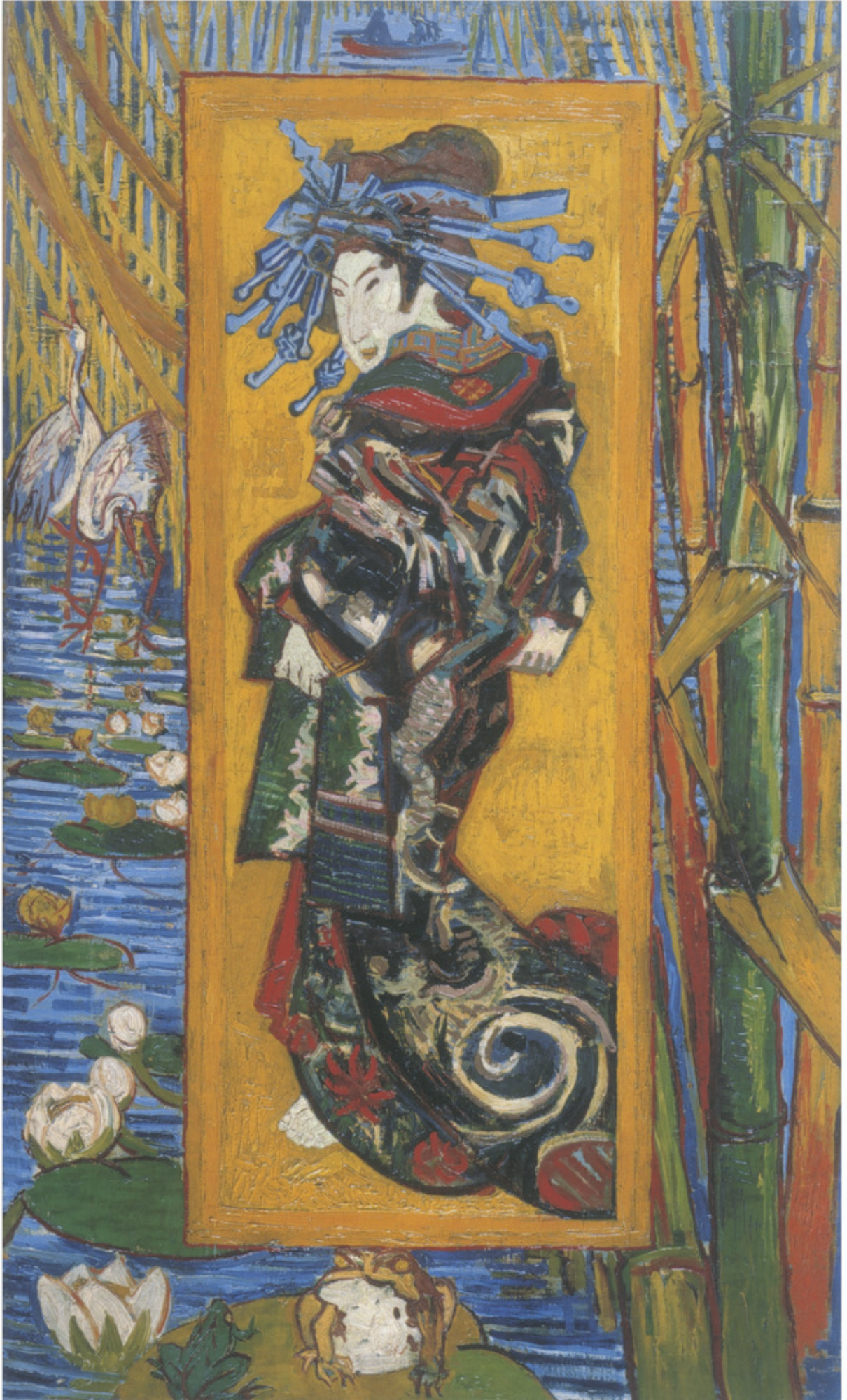
22
Vincent van Gogh,
Tracing of Hiroshige's print, 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

23
Vincent van Gogh,
Bridge in the rain (after Hiroshige), 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

24
Utagawa Hiroshige,
Sudden shower on the Great Bridge near Atake, 1857
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

the woman reversed in relation to the original (27). She can be identified as a courtesan by the fact that her *obi*, the sash around her waist, is fastened in front not at the back of her kimono. Her hairstyle and magnificent dress – a kimono with a dragon in splashing water – reveal that she belonged to the highest class of Japanese prostitutes, but we do not know whether Van Gogh was aware of this.

This time he did not surround the image with characters, but instead painted a second composition – the edge of a pool filled with bamboo stems, frogs and cranes, most of which were borrowed from Japanese works (28, 29, 33). He used bright colours and strong outlines, just as if it were a woodcut. Despite these attempts to make the composition as true to nature and as Japanese as possible, it is a fiction. Bamboo is not a reed and does not grow in water, and one of the frogs on the waterlily leaf at the bottom is not a frog at all – although Van Gogh probably thought it was – but a toad, which is not found in sunlit watery places.



His highly imaginative decoration also has a fascinating hidden meaning. In the French vernacular of the time the word for a crane (*grue*) was also used for a prostitute, while the word for frog (*grenouille*) traditionally meant a woman of easy virtue. The word *grenouillère* (frogpool) was moreover used as a euphemism for a house of ill repute. All this suggests that Van Gogh, a regular frequenter of brothels, was providing an indirect – but to the initiated eminently understandable – clue as to the profession of the beautifully dressed woman. The scene surrounding the courtesan on the cover of *Paris Illustré* was a flowering tree (27), and this decoration was an ironic comment on it. Rather than treating the figure as a symbol of a poetic, innocent Japan, he used the border to reveal her essentially prosaic occupation.

25
Vincent van Gogh,
The courtesan (after Eisen), 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

26
Vincent van Gogh,
Tracing of Eisen's print on the cover of *Paris Illustré*, 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

27
Cover of Paris Illustré, 4 (1886), May
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam


勢板虫之三芳光画
神田 明治十六年九月 日
画工兼出板人
浅草區森田町廿番地 真井忠兵衛

<< 28
Utagawa Yoshimaru,
New prints of worms and insects, 1883
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

< 29
Sato Torakiyo,
Geishas in a landscape,
early nineteenth century
Courtauld Institute of Art Galleries, London

30, 31
Details of fig. 29

32
Detail of fig. 28

33
Illustration from *Paris illustré*, 4 (1886), May

JAPAN IN ARLES

At the end of his time in Paris Van Gogh was still in two minds as to whether Neo-impressionism or Japanese graphic art would be the most important guiding principle for the art of the future, but in Arles he firmly decided in favour of the latter. Given his own spontaneous manner of painting, pointillism did not really suit him. Another factor, perhaps, was that at the end of 1887 he had met Paul Gauguin, a man who was also drawn to Japanese prints. Gauguin already had a secure reputation within a small circle of connoisseurs, and Van Gogh's secret hope was that if Gauguin were to join him this would greatly the benefit the success of the new direction of art.

In Arles, what is more, Japan did not seem that far away. Van Gogh had thought that he would find 'the clarity of the atmosphere and the gay colour effects' of Oriental prints in Provence, and he was not disappointed. On his journey to Arles he had 'sat looking out to see whether it was Japanese yet! Childish, wasn't it,' he later wrote to Gauguin. He described the city, surrounded by fields full of flowers, as 'like a Japanese dream', and he described a young girl he knew as a 'mousmé', a name he had taken from Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème*. In short, he lived in the South of France but imagined himself elsewhere. 'I always say to myself *that I'm in Japan here*; and that consequently I just have to keep my eyes open and just have to paint what makes an impression on me in my immediate surroundings.' This perception of the region awakened surprising new powers in him, as he himself realized. 'After a while your view changes, you look more with a Japanese eye, you experience colour differently. I'm convinced that my personality will develop if I stay here long enough.'

Although he may well have believed this himself, Van Gogh's view of the South of France as Japan must be seen first and foremost as an artistic justification for his decision to stay in Arles, an area that none of his artist friends found at all interesting. Since meeting Gauguin he had formed the view that modern artists should seek southern, more primitive regions, and by portraying Provence as an unspoiled Japan, he tried to convince his two friends, who were staying in Brittany, of the sense of his surprising decision to move

34
Vincent van Gogh,
Self-portrait as bonze,
1888
Fogg Art Museum,
Cambridge (Mass.)

35
Illustration by Felician
von Myrbach, in
Pierre Loti, *Madame*
Chrysanthème, Paris
1888
Van Gogh Museum
Library, Amsterdam

to this part of France and tried to persuade them to come and keep him company there.

To set a seal on his ties with Japan, in the autumn of 1888 he portrayed himself as a *bonze*, a Buddhist monk (34). In this self-portrait his eyes have a Japanese slant and his head is shaven. He had hit on this idea while reading Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème*, which describes the ethical code of these *bonzes* (35). They withdrew from the world and lived a simple life, and in this he saw similarities to his own ideal. This was the only attitude, he believed, that made it possible to concentrate on what was important: the small, telling details of unspoiled, primitive nature.

Van Gogh saw this as something typically Japanese: 'If you study Japanese art, you see an unarguably wise, philosophical and intelligent man who

36
Paul Gauguin,
Self-portrait with portrait of Bernard, 'Les misérables', 1888
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

spends his time – on what? Studying the distance between the earth and the moon? No. Studying Bismarck's politics? No. He studies a single blade of grass.' He was referring here to a reproduction in one of the issues of Bing's *Le Japon Artistique* that Theo had sent him. 'You see,' he went on, 'isn't that almost a true religion that we are taught by the Japanese, who are so simple and live in nature as if they themselves were flowers.' Their art 'makes us return to nature, despite our education and our work in a world full of conventions.'

Van Gogh painted this self-portrait to exchange with one by Gauguin (36), and his decision to picture himself as a *bonze* stemmed from this. He

had asked Gauguin and Bernard to paint portraits of each other, but they each sent a self-portrait (albeit with an image of the other in the background) (36, 37). Gauguin had responded seriously to the request by setting out in his portrait his view of the artist's profession. He presented himself and Bernard as 'les misérables', as the inscription on his painting tells us. This was a reference to Jean Valjean, the protagonist of Victor Hugo's *Les misérables*, the ultimate pariah. By, as it were, 'giving this outcast his own features', as he wrote to Van Gogh, he had made the work a portrait 'of us all, poor victims of society'. The 'childish flowers' in the 'girlish' background were there to testify to their common struggle for 'artistic virginity'.

37
Emile Bernard,
Self-portrait with portrait of Gauguin,
1888
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

By portraying himself as a Buddhist monk, Van Gogh's response indicated both agreement with and criticism of Gauguin's ideas. He indicated that he shared his colleague's desire for primitive purity, but at the same time he rejected Gauguin's conception of the artist as pariah. *Bonzes* live in a community, and it was this that he presented as the ideal in his self-portrait. Furthermore, he also believed that he was following in the footsteps of Japanese artists. They had 'by nature a sort of brotherly life [...] and not a life full of intrigues. The more we resemble them in that respect, the better it will be for us.'

LOOKING WITH A JAPANESE EYE

Bernard's self-portrait was far less forthcoming about his artistic endeavour than Gauguin's. However, he did portray himself with a Japanese print (37), and even such a token acknowledgement of their shared artistic ideal was clearly understood in Arles. Van Gogh exchanged the work for his *Sand barges at a quay*, which was a recent, very successful, effort to depict his surroundings in the manner of a Japanese woodcut (38, 39).

There is no horizon visible; from a high quay we look down at the Rhône, in which moored sand barges – the main subject – appear to have been included almost incidentally. Van Gogh's idea for this simple but surprisingly effective composition had its origins in something he had observed earlier at this same spot, when he saw 'a very large barge laden with coal [...] moored at the quay. Seen from above it was all glistening and wet from a shower. [...] It was pure Hokusai.'

This last observation reveals yet again just how much Van Gogh was observing 'with a Japanese eye' at this time. Apart from a few examples, he had left his print collection behind with his brother Theo in Paris, but even without completely surrounding himself with woodcuts, he found no difficulty making paintings and drawings in the Oriental style while he was in Arles. Sometimes he found similar subjects, such as crabs (40, 42); sometimes his eye lighted on a single seemingly insignificant detail in nature, such as thistles in bloom, which he depicted prominently in the foreground

(41, 43); sometimes he framed shapes with heavy outlines; sometimes he omitted the shadows; sometimes he elected to use bright, 'flat' colours, and he also made several watercolours with broad areas of colour (44).

Van Gogh experimented with all these elements, but his most ambitious works were paintings in which planes of colour played a very important role. He always combined this with heavy impasto handling, which, as it were, negated the flatness – an interesting contradiction that testified to his confidence in his own powers. In *The bedroom* he strove for 'flat colours, but with coarse brushstrokes' (45). In this painting he deliberately left out the shadows and preferred to use clear tints, as he reported to Theo.

38
Utagawa Hiroshige, *Flowering trees near Arashiyama*, c. 1835
Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam

39
Vincent van Gogh,
Sand barges at a quay,
1888
Museum Folkwang,
Essen

40
Katsushika Hokusai, *Crabs*, in *Le Japon artistique. Documents d'Art et d'Industrie*, 1 (1888), May
Van Gogh Museum Library, Amsterdam

41
Utagawa Hiroshige, *Flowering irises at Horikiri*, 1857
Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam

42
Vincent van Gogh, *Crabs*, 1888
Private collection, on loan to The National Gallery, London

43
Vincent van Gogh, *Thistles*, 1888
Private collection

DRAWINGS

Seen from our point of view, the Japanese influence was perhaps even more sensational in Van Gogh's drawings than in his paintings. Soon after his arrival in Arles, he produced works that he had drawn wholly in the spirit of Japanese artists (46). They are breathtakingly fresh and spectacular in style, and he clearly realized this, since he suggested making paintings after them. Later he came up with another idea: 'Do you know what we should do with these drawings? Make albums of 6 or 10 or 12 of them, like those albums of original Japanese drawings.' He was referring here to the album of this kind that they had in their own collection (15, 16). '*I am really keen* to make such an album for Gauguin and one for Bernard. For they will get even better, the drawings.'

With hindsight, we can say that Van Gogh was right in this assertion. In his drawings he used dots, little vertical lines, hatching, short strokes and so on, and he learned to control this almost stenographic vocabulary better and better (48, 49). He had looked carefully at the style of Hokusai's prints, and borrowed from his work not only the vocabulary but also the measured, natural and spontaneous way in which it had to be applied (47). Van Gogh believed that his large drawings in this style therefore had to be looked at in the right way. 'Have you read Madame Chrysanthème? It really made me think that real Japanese *have nothing on the wall* [...] So this is how you should look at a japonaiserie – in a bright room, quite bare, with a view of the landscape. Would you try it some time with those two drawings of the Crau and the banks of the Rhône, *which don't look Japanese*, but perhaps are more so than others, in fact' (49).

These drawings are at the same time spontaneous and controlled, and Van Gogh believed that in this way he was working in the style of Japanese artists. 'The Japanese draws quickly, very quickly, quick as lightning, this is because his nerves are more refined, his feelings simpler.' This judgement was not, of course, based on woodcuts, but on drawings by Japanese masters (50). Vincent and Theo's collection does not include any examples, but it is very likely that he saw drawings like this when he was in Paris. Japanese

44
Vincent van Gogh,
Fishing boats on the beach at Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, 1888
Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

45
Vincent van Gogh,
The bedroom, 1888
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

46
Vincent van Gogh,
Farmhouse in the wheatfield, 1888
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

47
Katsushika Hokusai,
Mount Fuji with seven bridges in one view.
From *One hundred views of Mount Fuji*,
1835, vol. 2.
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

48
Vincent van Gogh,
Garden of flowers, 1888
Private collection

> 49
Vincent van Gogh,
The Rhône seen from Montmajour, 1888
British Museum,
London


Campagne du côté des bords
du Rhône vue de
Mon■ Majour.

50
Katsushika Hokusai,
Two trees, c. 1830
Rijksmuseum voor
Volkenkunde, Leiden

drawings are characterized by a simple and powerful, yet always flowing, use of line, which can be explained by the Oriental custom of writing and drawing from the elbow, not the wrist. It was this calligraphic quality that Van Gogh was trying to emulate in his drawings with a reed pen, but if we place the original and the imitation side by side, it is clear that he was usually more spontaneous – and perhaps even faster – than his Japanese models.

AIMING TOO HIGH

Although Van Gogh had been seduced by the example of Japanese art to adopt a rather more abstract point of view, his work in Arles remained essentially realistic in comparison with that of Bernard and Gauguin. He still took nature as his point of departure, and this caused him some concern. He wanted to follow his friends' example and draw more on his imagination. After Gauguin joined him in Arles towards the end of October 1888 he began to work in a more stylized manner than he had ever done before.

51
Vincent van Gogh,
The Alyscamps, 1888
Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo

Before Gauguin's arrival Van Gogh had painted *The furrows*, a composition with an unmistakably Japanese character. He boldly placed a tree in the foreground and concealed the actual subject – the ploughed field – behind it (52, 53). The manner is in no way stylized, but not long after Gauguin arrived, Van Gogh set out to show his friend that as a modern artist he had more to offer than this. *The Alyscamps* was one of the first successful efforts (51). In this work he omitted the horizon, introduced a strong diagonal and a bird's-eye-view perspective, cut the composition through the middle with trees, and painted the scene largely in planes of colour. With its combination of perspectival invention and the strong emphasis on the flat plane, this work was in *all respects* the result of his study of the Japanese graphic

art of the past. During the period of his creative rivalry with Gauguin he continued to produce similarly radical works.

Their collaboration ended two months later with the all-too-familiar tragedy. Gauguin departed, leaving Van Gogh behind in hospital. The first signs of Vincent's illness, probably a form of epilepsy, had just manifested themselves. He was deeply shocked, although he did not let Theo know this. Not only had his dream of a community of artists based on the Japanese model come to nothing, but the lack of understanding about his illness and the hostile reaction of anxious neighbours drove him to despair. At first he did not know which way to turn; later he decided to have himself committed to the asylum in Saint-Rémy.

Because of these personal and, indeed, fortuitous circumstances, he lost his belief in his own abilities. He now thought that his efforts of the past year to advance modern, contemporary art by emulating the Japanese

52
Vincent van Gogh,
The furrows, 1888
Private collection

53
Katsushika Hokusai,
Mishima Pass in Kai Province, c. 1831
Rijksmuseum,
Rijksprentenkabinet,
Amsterdam

54
Anonymous,
Autumn flowers,
late nineteenth
century
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

55
Vincent van Gogh,
Butterflies and poppies,
1890
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

56
Vincent van Gogh,
Almond blossom, 1890
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

example had been aimed too high. 'Well then, I shall never mean anything significant as a painter, I fully realize that,' he wrote at the end of his time in Arles. 'Sometimes I regret that I didn't just stick to the Dutch palette with the grey tones and simply painted landscapes in Montmartre.' After this, he mentioned his beloved Oriental prints just once more.

This did not mean, however, that from then on he abandoned Japanese techniques. Some of them had by now become part of his standard repertoire, so he continued to look 'with a Japanese eye'. The abrupt cropping of motifs in the foreground, leaving the horizon out of the picture, and enlarging details from nature – all continued to be used, sometimes with a surprisingly fine result (54, 55, 56, 57). Japanese prints also led him to make independent paintings of an extraordinarily difficult subject – pouring rain.

57
Bumpō
Study of pinks, in
Le Japon artistique. Documents d'Art et d'Industrie, 1 (1888), May
Van Gogh Museum Library, Amsterdam

Few painters had dared tackle the subject, but Van Gogh made it into something highly personal, so that it became un-Japanese again (58, 59), as Walter Sickert clearly understood, when he wrote about the painting: 'The discomfort, the misery, the hopelessness of rain are there. Such intensity is perhaps madness, but the result is interesting and stimulating.'

In this period, however, Van Gogh no longer allowed himself to be tempted to make compositions with large areas of colour. He also avoided using bright, intense colours, and everything indicates that he no longer dared attempt the most revolutionary elements of his earlier emulation of Japanese woodcuts. In his own mind his powers were not great enough for him to make a contribution to the art of the future.

With hindsight, it can be said that Van Gogh, as a natural-born realist, had recognized himself above all in the obsession with which masters like Hiroshige and Hokusai had wanted to record nature as convincingly as possible in their prints. Their way of observing things seemed identical to his own, and it was this that was at the heart of his admiration. At the same

> 58
Vincent van Gogh,
Landscape in the rain, 1890
Amgueddfa ac Orielau Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Museums & Galleries of Wales, Cardiff

>> 59
Utagawa Hiroshige,
Rainstorm at Shono, c. 1833
Gerhard Pulverer Collection, Cologne


東海道
庄野
白雨

time, their prints, with the broad areas of colour and the stylizations of both line and perspective, offered him solutions with which he could meet the modern demand for a more abstract style of painting that had followed after Impressionism. Ever since his encounter with the French avant-garde in Paris, Van Gogh had wrestled with the problem of wanting to satisfy this requirement, without at the same time having to renounce nature as his starting point.

Japanese graphic art showed him the way and brought him his period of bliss in Arles, when he succeeded so magnificently in translating this model into work in his own, wholly individual, style.

> 60
Detail of fig. 59

>> 61
Detail of fig. 58


東海道
五拾三次之内
庄野
白河

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Back cover: Utagawa Hiroshige, detail of *The plum tree teahouse at Kameido*, 1857, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Van Gogh in focus is published under the auspices
of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Editorial board *Van Gogh in focus*
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Graphic design
Griet Van Haute, Ghent

Colour separation and printing
Die Keure, Bruges

First print run 2006
Second print run 2007
Third print run 2010

www.vangoghmuseum.com
ISBN 90 6153 698 7, EAN 978 90 6153 698 7, D/2006/703/51


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'Japanese art is something like the primitives, like the Greeks, like our old Dutch painters, Rembrandt, Potter, Hals, Vermeer, Van Ostade, Ruysdael. There's no end to it.' (Letter from Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo).

In *Van Gogh and Japan* Louis van Tilborgh explores Vincent van Gogh's love of Japanese graphic art. Van Gogh started collecting Japanese prints while he was living in Paris, and became convinced of the need to look at things and to work 'as the Japanese do'. When he moved to Arles in 1888, this developed into almost a religion. He now regarded the success, the future of modern art as being almost wholly dependent on emulating this exotic example. Passionate as it was, however, Van Gogh's love affair with Japan receded into the background after a year. He continued to venerate Japanese artists, but he new saw his own efforts to work in their soirit as overambitious. 'Well then, I shall never mean anything significant as a painter, I fully realize that,' he wrote despondently. *Van Gogh and Japan* shows just how wrong he was.

LOUIS VAN TILBORGH is the curator of Van Gogh research at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

VAN GOGH IN FOCUS

ISBN 90-6153-698-7