

## REVIEW ARTICLE



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## JAPONISME: THE CULTURAL EXCHANGES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

Japonisme refers to the genre of art, fashion and aesthetics in the West deriving motifs, subjects and techniques from Japanese art. The most prominent expression of Japonisme was seen in European art, especially on the nineteenth century art movement, *Impressionism*. After two centuries of political and economic isolation, Japanese opened their ports to the west in 1868. This political development set into motion series of experimentation in the art world when Japanese prints, ceramics, lacquer and other artifacts reached the west. With the Paris Exposition Universelle 1867, Japanese craze truly began. The surprise and awe that an exhibition of non-western art created was unprecedented and artists found an avenue for liberation from the pressures of their own past and academism of older masters. In this paper, I have attempted to trace the history of Japanese prints in their origins and socio-political significance of their themes, going on to describe 'the great wave' that hit Europe and America. This paper also describes the impact of Japanese subject matter and technique on famous artists like Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Mary Cassatt and Vincent Van Gogh. Their attempts depict the creative ways in which one art style is adapted and moulded to form something distinctive while retaining the essence.

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### Japan in the Eighteenth century

Japan was isolated from the world from the 1630s (*Sakoku*), at a time when Christianity and Christian missionaries were associated with deceptive forms of western military conquest. Christianity had spread among the lower strata in Japan. Suspecting their loyalty towards the Daimyo, the Shogunate started persecuting them severely. In 1637, 30,000 peasants revolted in the Shimbara Rebellion facing the Shogun Army that though repressed the rebellion, incurred severe losses. After the eradication of the rebels, Japan acquired a status of political, economic and social isolation from the West in particular and the world in general. It monopolized foreign policy and expelled traders, missionaries, and foreigners with the exception of the Dutch and Chinese merchants who were restricted to the man-made island of Dejima in Nagasaki Bay and several small trading outposts outside the country.

The eighteenth and nineteenth century Japanese art was therefore a product of the peculiar social, economic and political structure of Japan. Throughout the period of Tokugawa Shogunate (1615-1867), the emperor remained a ceremonial head while the real power shifted in the hands of the Shoguns, who ruled from Edo. The Japanese social structure divided into four categories included the military (Shogunate, Daimyo and Samurai classes) at the top, followed by farmers and then by artisans, with merchants forming the lowest rungs of society.

During this period, samurais were impoverished and it was the merchants who prospered and commanded the services of artists and craftsmen. They continued the tradition of contrasting artistic traditions with highly ostentatious porcelain of elegant form and refined decoration being produced side by side with rough tea-ceremony pottery wares of artless simplicity.

## Ukiyo-e printmaking technique

The principal innovation of this period was the Ukiyo-e created by the lower classes, especially the urban lower class of Edo, which had grown into a metropolitan under the shogunate. Ukiyo-e describes a sub-culture with a plebeian, secular and strictly topical artistic distinction unattained by any other art style in any time or space. The word Ukiyo-e literally means "painting of the floating world"; that is to say of a changing or fashionable scene, often interpreted synonymous to "modern". Forms were indicated by firm, curving or rigidly straight lines and there could be no variation or spontaneity in handling, in the drawings from which the prints were made. Ukiyo-e is best known for common everyday life: a communal bath house with a squatting man, whose head and knees are glimpsed through openings into an adjoining room- perhaps the artist himself. Extremes of realism and stylization, of awkwardness and elegance, are combined in the naked and dressed figures. The general idea is to record a casual moment of no historical significance that was the realm of earlier artistic traditions. A part of a human figure may be cut off on the edge, the sea and the birds above it in the far background have a sense of alternative realism in them. Edgar Degas took inspiration from this illustration that he hung above his bed.



**Fig 1: Station of Otsu: From the *Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido* (The "Reisho Tokaido"),** Edo period (1615–1868), ca. 1848–49 Ando Hiroshige (Japanese, 1797–1858), Polychrome woodblock print; H. 8 23/32 in. (22.2 cm), W. 13 23/32 in. (34.9 cm) Frederick Charles Hewitt Bequest Income, 1912 (JP804)

The origins of Ukiyo-e can be traced to two diverse sources: to popular religious prints as well as Yamato-e (Japanese style paintings of everyday, though courtly, life). The woodblock print technique was imported from China with the arrival of Buddhism in the eighth century. Gradually the handwritten and painted scrolls began to be substituted by printed books and with time, printed books for the masses were produced. Hishikawa Moronobu, regarded as the father of Ukiyo-e initiated the tradition of depicting popular subjects, especially the brothel district of Edo, Yoshiwara.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, the polychrome printing technique was rapidly developed, which furthered the appeal of Ukiyo-e. However, unlike European printmaking, Japan had a system of cooperative printing. The artist designed the prints, the carver cut the woodblocks onto handmade paper, and the publisher financed, promoted and distributed the work. A woodblock print image is first designed by the artist on paper and then transferred to a thin, partly transparent paper. This paper is pasted to a wooden block usually of

cherry wood, the carver chisels and cuts to create the original in negative—with the lines and areas to be colored raised in relief. Ink is applied to the surface of the woodblock. Rubbing a round pad over the back of a piece of paper laid over the top of the inked board makes a print.

In the fully developed Ukiyo-e, themes range from erotic women, kabuki actors and landscapes. The women have pride of place, dressed in the height of fashion from their kimonos to jet black hair with bodkins and combs. They appear in bathhouses, idling away time on a river boat, watching the moon rise on a warm summer night. They are courtesans and geishas of sensual pleasures, recognizable from the pleasure districts of Edo. The Japanese religion does not consider representation of sex as an offence and it usually passed through the strict censorship laws of the Shogunate. Until the Meiji Restoration, Shunga erotic prints were a major genre.



**Fig 2: SUZUKI HARUNOBU**

Young man greeted by a woman writing poems,  
Coloured woodcut

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The H. O. Havemeyer Collection.  
Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929, no. 1628

Retrieved from Ives, Colta. *The Great Wave: The  
Influence of Japanese Woodcuts on French Prints*



**Fig 3: KITAGAWA UTAMARO**

Girl dressing a companion's hair. Color woodcut from the  
series Twelve forms of women's handiworks.

Prints Division, New York Library

Kabuki theatre, a more popular form of entertainment than the formal *No* dramas, provided numerous subjects for the printmakers. Toshusai Sharaku impersonated kabuki actors in his Ukiyo-e portraits, especially female impersonators.

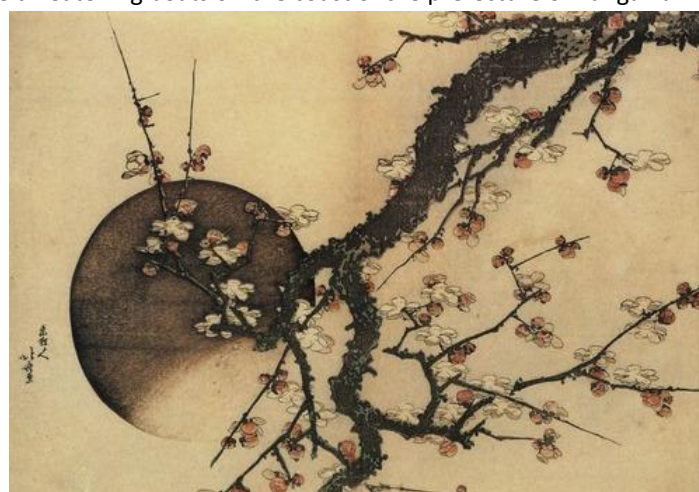




**Fig 4:** KITAGAWA UTAMARO, 1799

A Box at the Kabuki Theater, from the illustrated book "Guide to the Actors' Dressing Rooms (Yakusha gakuya tsu)" Color woodblock print; double-page illustration from book  
Charles F. Kelley Memorial Fund, 1964.287 Art Insitute Chicago

Scenes from nature have often been important in Asian arts throughout history. Kacho-e ("flower and bird pictures") though more than just flowers and birds, formed the branch of nature themed Ukiyo-e. Hokusai's detailed kacho-e prints gave a fine shape to this genre. The greatest Ukiyo-e master of the early nineteenth century was Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). A prolific and gifted artist, he made more than 30,000 drawings, most of which were reproduced as book illustrations. The street life in and around Edo in the period under Shogunate can be accounted for in detail by the 15 volumes of his *manga*. His view of humanity is humorously objective and he does not attempt to hide the physical gracelessness of things that are supposed to be beautiful, eg. A kabuki actor caught off guard by his audience. However, his most important contribution to Ukiyo-e were the polychrome landscapes, with a distinct identity of being strongly colored that are neither realistic nor idealized. Mount Fuji's snow covered peak appears in many of them, like in *The Great Wave off Kangawa*, a great wave threatening boats off the coast of the prefecture of Kangawa.



**Fig 5 :** KATSUSHUKI HOKUSAI

Plum blossom and the moon (Kacho-e)  
Color woodblock-printed book  
Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 26136 (4-1-55)



**Fig 6: KATSUSHUKI HOKUSAI**  
**The Great Wave at Kanagawa**  
**(from a Series of Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji),**  
Edo period (1615–1868), ca. 1831–33  
H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (JP1847)



**Fig 7: ANDO HIROSHIGE**  
**Evening Snow at Kanbara**, Edo period (1615–1868), 1834  
Woodblock print; ink and color on paper; 8 7/8 x 13 3/4 in. (22.5 x 34.9 cm)  
The Howard Mansfield Collection, Purchase, Rogers Fund, 1936 (JP2492)

Like Hokusai, the younger artist Ando Hiroshige (1797- 1858) too reveals an intense response to natural forms and the genius for decorative pattern-making. Hiroshige's prints are more realistic and less stylized than Hokusai's. Yet often more poetic and ambient in feeling than Hokusai's bolder, more formal prints. Hiroshige is best known for his landscapes, such as the series *The Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō* (fig 2.1) and *The Sixty-nine Stations of the Kiso Kaidō*; and *kacho-e* prints. In many, he adopted the novel technique of framing the picture with a foreground of plants (irises, maple leaves, etc).

### Economic opening of Japan

Four years after Hokusai died, the isolation of Japan ended and his prints were almost immediately imported into Europe, where they had an electric impact on artists trying to find ways of breaking away from convention. In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry displayed the threatening power of his four warships' cannons during a Christian burial which the Japanese observed. He requested that Japan open to trade with the West. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1854 two Japanese ports were opened to the west. Commercial treaties with France, Great Britain, Russia, and United States in 1855 and Netherlands in 1856 were concluded that initiated a series of rapid changes. In 1868, the Tokugawa shōgun was forced to resign and the emperor was restored to power, beginning a period of fierce nationalism and intense socio-economic restructuring known as the Meiji Restoration. In reality, a group of *samurais* took control over Japan in the name of the 15 year old Meiji who had succeeded as the 122<sup>nd</sup> emperor.

The art of the following Meiji period was marked by the contradicting tendencies toward Westernization on the one hand and aggressive nationalism on the other. Competition with the West introduced oil painting and the mass production of porcelain overburdened with Japanese decorative motifs of untraditional garishness began both for export and the home market. But calligraphy remained unaffected; and painting on scrolls and screens for Japanese houses was little influenced by Western Art. In country regions, pottery, lacquerware and textiles continued to be made as they used to and instead of being 'Westernised' they soon began to inspire European and American designers and craftsmen. It was this apparently uneasy dualism of political nationalism and cultural pluralism that shaped twentieth century art and architecture in Japan.

Before Matthew Perry reopened commerce with Japan, Japanese art in Europe and Americas was rare indeed. The Japanese economic opening in 1855 bought the first wave of Japanese artifacts to European shores. In the

international spirit that ensued, Japan took a pavilion at the Paris Universal Exposition in 1867. This was the first formal display of Japanese craftsmanship and expertise in Paris.

The etcher Felix Bracquemond came upon a volume of Hokusai's manga at the shop of Delatre, his printer and a decade later, designed a complete set of tableware based on motifs from Hokusai and Hiroshige. The Goncourt brothers, known for their connoisseurship of valuables were among the earliest and most devoted collectors of Japanese Art.

When Louis Gonse published *L'Art Japonais*, he reserved special praise for Utamaro, Harunoby and Kiyonaga with Hokusai as the undisputed master, whose prints could be placed beside works of Rembrandt.

Nineteenth century *Japonisme* was completely different from earlier Orientalisms, eg the seventeenth and eighteenth century *Chinoiserie*. That had been essentially an art of fantasy and exoticism, without any attempt being made to understand Chinese art or the principles on which it was based. Not until the mid nineteenth century had any attempt been made to humbly approach a non- Western culture and to learn from it. And so great was the impact of Japanese arts that every major nineteenth century painter was to be influenced by it, often fundamentally and spiritually. The provided a catalyst to break away from Classical tradition, free themselves of the authority of the old masters and seek new conceptions in art, new ways of seeing. Edgar Degas confesses that it was in Japanese prints that he really understood what painting is- 'a way of seeing form'. Without them, Monet and the impressionists would not have been able to realize their vision of the new world. Theodore Duret, the first writer of the discussions on Impressionism writes "before the arrival among us of Japanese books, there was no one in France who dared to seat himself in the banks of a river and put side by side on his canvas a roof frankly red, a white-washed wall, a green poplar, a yellow road, and blue water."

## **Japonisme and Japonaiserie**

The earliest Japanese influence in Western art was witnessed in Americans John La Farge (1835-1903) and James Abbott McNeill Whistler's works. It is said that Whistler discovered Japanese prints in a Chinese tearoom near London bridge. At first his Japonisme was limited to the use of Japanese motifs but by early 1860s he began to absorb Oriental art creatively into his own works. Complete assimilation came in works like *Nocturne in Blue and Silver*, *Cremorne lights* where the exquisite arrangement of colors makes this painting a translation of Japanese art in Western terms.



**Fig. 8;** James Abbott McNeill Whistler, 1871

### **Nocturne: Blue and Silver - Chelsea**

Oil paint on wood Tate Collection, Bequeathed by Miss Rachel and Miss Jean Alexander 1972



In Europe, Ukiyo-e came to stand for a world of entertainment and daily past times. The prints were sold cheaply on city streets, used as posters, billboards and the picture postcard of the day. Their casually treated views of contemporary life was therefore, very close to impressionist aims. The democratic relaiism of Ukiyo-e was but only one of the factors that attracted nineteenth century French artists. Manet, the 'father' of Impressionism was the first to respond to Ukiyo-e's altered vision. The peculiar flatness and static quality due to pure colors and unmodeled shapes of Japanese origin typified his art. Degas trained his eye on unstudied poses and novel perspectives of the Japanese. His insisently patterned wallpapers, rugs, and upholstery are the impressionist counterparts of the decorative fabrics that occur in Ukiyo-e designs.

Other aspects that drew French to the Ukiyo-e included the Japanese flair for depicting seasonal changes and fugitive weather conditions- wind, water, whirlpools, waves, the falling rain, etc. Late in the century, when the Nabis deemed all art essentially decoration, the very Ukiyo-e inspired patterns became the prominent elements in lithographs of Bonnard and Vuillard. Elsewhere, Japanese prints empowered Toulouse-Lautrec and Gauguin with a new abstraction based on simplification of form, a few principal planes and a focus on line. The expressionists recognized the potency of oriental art's frank distortion.

At the close of the century, French artists came closest to imitating Japanese art styles by borrowing both design and technique. Felix Vallotton, Emile Bernard and Gauguin reverted to the most basic process of Oriental printmaking and began cutting woodblocks. Mary Cassatt, in a series of color etchings that combined aquatint and drypoint, recreated the look of Ukiyo-e and applied it to the parlors and nurseries of Paris. The popularization of Japanese prints created a demand for color images that sparked a technological innovation in lithography. Japanese woodblock prints were the determining influence on the French age of the poster- 1880s and 90s. The poster's stress on the line and its broad unmodeled form put the greatest emphasis on readability on advertising design.

The Japanese impact reverberated far beyond the borders of France, reaching London, Vienna, Glasgow, Boston and New York. That the French took the most from this association has basis in the perfection of timing that it happened- the impressionists were struggling toward a social and aesthetic reordering and in the Ukiyo-e, they saw the revolution accomplished.

## EDOUARD MANET

Manet was eager to shun history in order to focus on 'la vie moderne' or the world here and now. He painted portraits of his fellow *Japonistes*- Zacharie Astruc, Theodore Duret, Emile Zola adding elements of Japanese art in each of them. Later, with his growing fascination with Spanish and Japanese art, he began including exotic trappings as well: in the later 1860s and 70s a Japanese fan, an Ukiyo-e woodcut, or a folding screen occasionally appeared. Manet's 'Olympia' is so redolent with *parfum Japonais* that she might have been a Japanese geisha in an Ukiyo-e print. Parisians were scandalized by this regally titled prostitute and over the black cat at her feet. Manet adopted Hokusai's samurai in the rain to form a semiabstract mass of overlapping bodies and umbrellas that figure in *Line in front of the Butcher Shop*.



Fig. 9: Edouard Manet, 1863

### Olympia

Oil on canvas Musee d'Orsay Cultural Institute, Powered by Google

### On Manet

Retrieved from Ives, Colta. *The Great Wave: The Influence of Japanese Woodcuts on French Prints*.

According to Theodore Duret:

[Manet] always used to keep sheets of drawing paper ready to use in his studio, and a notebook and a pencil in his pocket. The slightest object or detail of an object which caught his interest was immediately noted down on paper.... I know no one with whom he can be compared in this respect except Hokusai, whose rapid drawings of the Manga combine simplicity with perfect definition of character. Manet greatly admired what he had been able to see of Hokusai's work, and praised unreservedly the volumes of the Manga which he had come across. Indeed, like Hokusai, Manet conceived the purpose of drawing to be to seize the salient characteristics of a figure or an object, without any of its embarrassing accessories.

## EDGAR DEGAS

Degas was specially enthralled by the asymmetry, aerial viewpoint, compacted space, astounding juxtapositions of close and distant planes. He was one of the earliest French artists to discover Japanese artifacts and his collection of Japanese prints was extensive. However, he later regretted the degenerate condition that the Japanese art had declined to in France. He did not include Japanese objects, fans, kimonos, etc into his paintings, rather with covert depictions, he paid his respect to the newly found Oriental arts. 1875 onward, he started including Ukiyo-e elements like subtle use of line, daring foreshortenings, and unusual organization of space into his works. He also began to direct his subject matter to everyday contemporary life, especially pictures of women: engaged in their toilettes, their daily chores and diversions of social company. Just like the older Ukiyo-e masters, Degas shunned the practice of painting goddesses and queens in favor of Parisian laundresses and ballerinas. The theme of bathers in their tubs that Degas often deployed owe their existence to Japanese prints where they are shown in large numbers in naturally awkward positions. Degas' pursuit of depicting women honestly led him, just like Utamaro, to houses of prostitution.



(left)  
EDGAR DEGAS, 1888-90  
**Woman Combing Her Hair**  
Pastel on light green wove paper  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs.  
Nate B. Spingold, 1956  
(right)  
UTAMARO KITAGAWA

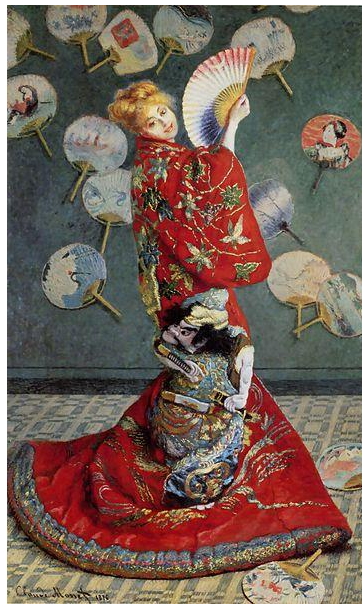
*Woman combing her hair. Color woodcut from  
the Series Ten Forms of Feminine Physiognomy.  
About 1802*

Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London

## CLAUDE MONET

Monet was closely related to Japanese art since the day he bought his first print at the age of 17, lasting up to the last of his water lilies paintings. He was allured by the freshness and brightness of color, the unconventional designs and subject matter. Moreover, Japanese art solved the problem the problem of combining and reconciling pictorial three- dimensional illusionism with the flat painted surface.





CLAUDE MONET, 1876  
**La Japonaise, Madame Monet en costume japonais**  
oil on canvas  
Museum of fine Arts, Boston

## TOULOUSE- LAUTREC

Henri- Marie-Raymond de Toulouse Lautrec revolutionized the art of print-making by flattening illusionistic space in the Japanese manner and uniting the pattern of pictorial elements with that of the lettering. In his *Jane Avril au Jardin de Paris*, the lack of modeling, the economy of line and using blank paper in a composition all emerge in Japan. Using of a framing pattern or device is also derived from Japan: the pictorial elements merge into the frame so as to create a Hokusai-like calligraphic flourish on the same plane as the foreground.



Left  
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, 1892  
**Ambassadeurs: Aristide Bruant dans son cabaret**  
Privatsammlung  
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Right  
**Divan Japonais**, 1892-93  
Lithograph printed in four colors on wove paper  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Clifford A. Furst, 1958

## PAUL GAUGUIN

Symbolist painters, especially Paul Gauguin enthusiastically collected Japanese prints and combined their essence in their own works. Gauguin's *The Vision after the Sermon* has strong elemental similarities to one of the folios of Hokusai's *manga*, which also shows a similar hand to hand combat. More than that, it is felt that the Japanese influence is intrinsic in this picture: the flattened strokes with rich colors, the thick contours, absence of shadows, the unmodulated and pure colors.



Paul Gauguin, 1888  
**The Vision after the Sermon**  
Oil on canvas  
Scottish National Gallery

## MARY CASSATT

She hated conventional art. After visiting the exhibition at Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1890, she modeled a set of her own prints after specific Ukiyo-e and a set of ten color aquatints done as "An imitation of Japanese methods". As she transplanted Ukiyo-e bathers and kimonoed mothers to French boudoirs, Cassatt converted the medium of Japanese woodcut to the process that she knew best: using metal plates instead of woodblocks. She was most inspired by the works of Kitagawa Utamaro and copied his colors, compositions and themes. She first approached the mother and child theme through Correggio, but found her comfort with Utamaro, where she found an 'Oriental sweetness'<sup>[1]</sup> in the maternal care rather than awkward poses. But the later *Maternal Caress* demonstrates a comfortable meeting of the Japanese manner and her own. In most of her ten color prints Cassatt placed her figures in secure surroundings instead of Utamaro's open space.



**Midnight: The Hours of the Rat; Mother and Sleepy Child**, Edo period (1615–1868), ca. 1790  
Kitagawa Utamaro (Japanese, 1753–1806)  
Polychrome woodblock print; H. 14 3/8 in. (36.5 cm),  
W. 9 5/8 in. (24.4 cm)



**Maternal Caress**, 1891  
Mary Cassatt (American, 1844–1926)  
Drypoint and soft-ground etching, third state, printed  
in color; 14 3/8 x 10 9/16 in. (36.5 x 27 cm)



## VINCENT VAN GOGH

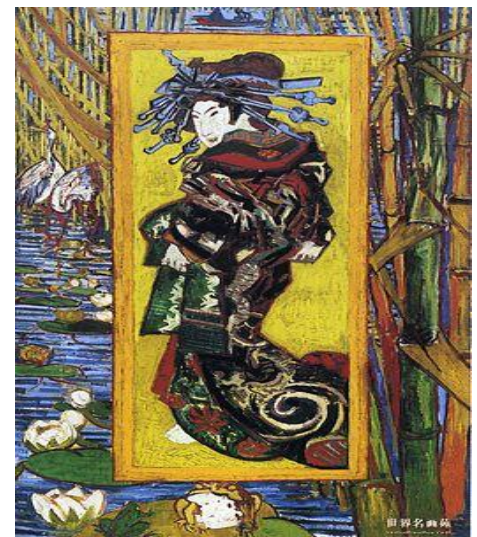
Vincent van Gogh wrote from Antwerp to his brother, Theo, that "My studio is not so bad, especially as I have pinned a lot of little Japanese prints on the wall, which amuse me very much." Attracted by the decorative flatness and color schemes of Japanese art in the last four years of his life, he made three copies of Japanese woodcut prints. Two of these-*Japonaiserie: The Plum Tree in Bloom* and *Japonaiserie: Bridge in the Rain*, were based on works by Hiroshige. Though he did not achieve the smoothness and delicate forms of Hiroshige, he was successfully able to Europeanize Japanese art while moulding it in his own very distinctive style. Besides, he painted several portraits that contained references to Japanese prints, of which he owned 400. In painting his undeniable admiration for the Japanese, he once painted a self portrait as a Buddhist priest.



Vincent Van Gogh, 1888  
**Portrait of Père Tanguy (Father Tanguy)**

Musee Rodin  
Vincent van Gogh, 1887  
**La courtisane (after Keisai Eisen)**  
Van gogh Museum, Amsterdam

**Plum Blossoms**  
(left) Hiroshige, 1857  
(right) Vincent van Gogh, 1887  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



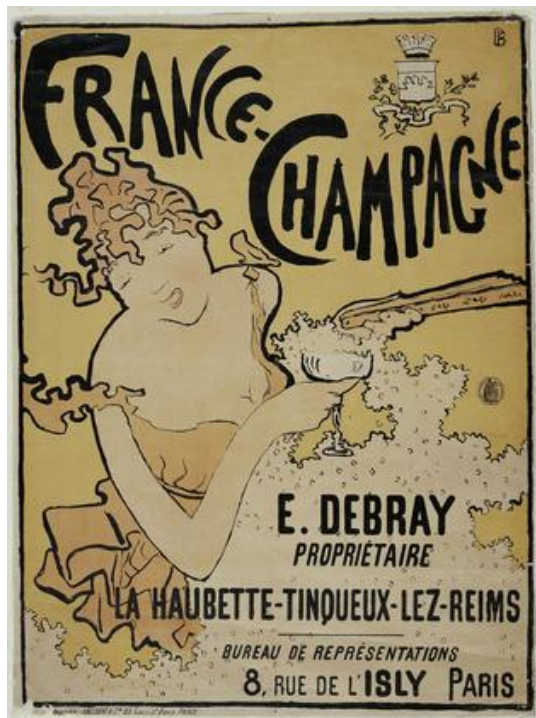
## PIERRE BONNARD AND EDOUARD VUILLARD

The young artists who formed the Nabi group in 1889 included Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard among others. Due to Bonnard's preoccupation with Oriental calligraphy and prints, he came to be known as "le Nabi tre's jeponard" ("the ultra Japanese Nabi"). As Denis noted, the potency of Japanese art "spread like heaven" through the whole Nabi movement. Bonnard was just beginning his career when the Japanese prints flooded France. The influence of Ukiyo-e can be clearly seen in his first print, a lithograph for advertisement for a wine



merchant in 1889. The France-Champagne poster mingles lessons from Hokusai's the Great Wave which did for the bubbles in the Champagne bottle.

Until 1980, it was little known that Vuillard was influenced by Hokusai, Hiroshige and Harunobu. The evocative, almost spiritual rendering of daily life characteristic of Vuillard's art seems to be inspired by those of Harunobu, which depict quiet interiors and simple figures bathed in nostalgia and melancholy. The prominent role of decorative patterns in *Landscapes and Interiors* links him to Japanese who rely on sumptuous patterning of the fabrics for much of their attractiveness.



Pierre Bonnard, 1891

**France - Champagne**

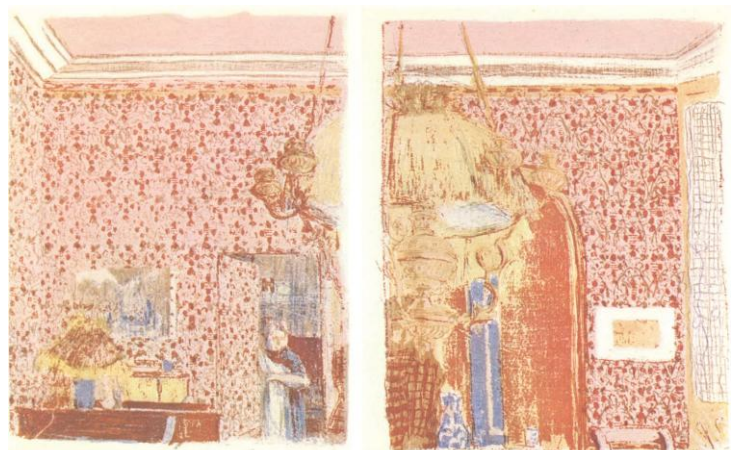
Lithograph

Museum of Modern Art, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund

EDOUARD VUILLARD

*Interior with Pink Wallpaper I and II. Color lithographs from the series Landscapes and Interiors. 1899*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 25.70.14, 19



Pierre Bonnard, 1895

**Nursemaids' Promenade, Frieze of Carriage**

Minneapolis Institute of Arts



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