A Pure Invention: Japan, Impressionism, and the West, 1853-1906

Amir Abou-Jaoude

Senior Division, Historical Paper

2,494 words
Introduction

The playwright and poet Oscar Wilde traveled little outside of Europe, yet he felt as if he had journeyed to Japan. In 1891, he wrote that after careful examination of the woodblock prints of artists like Hiroshige and Hokusai, you could “sit in the park or stroll down Piccadilly, and if you cannot see an absolutely Japanese effect there, you will not see it anywhere”\(^1\)—not even, Wilde proclaimed, in Tokyo itself.

Forty years earlier, in 1851, Westerners had known little about the floating kingdom. Since the early 17\(^{th}\)-century, Japan had been completely isolated from the West, save for a few Dutch traders who conducted business around Nagasaki. Then, in 1853, the American Commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan to trade with the West under threat of naval bombardment. Kimonos, fans, and especially woodblock prints by the great Japanese artists flooded European markets.

These Japanese goods had a particularly profound impact on the arts. Debussy was inspired to write *La mer* (1905), his most groundbreaking and influential piece, after seeing Katsushika Hokusai’s print of *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*.\(^2\) The Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein would turn to Japanese art as he was composing powerful cinematic images.\(^3\) Eventually, the image of the “Great Wave”\(^4\) that Debussy admired would become a symbol of all things Japan.\(^5\)

The “Japanese effect” was most prominent in art. As Japanese art entered European salons, French artists were beginning to experiment with Impressionism.

---

1 Wilde, p. 38-39.
2 Fulcher, p. 144-145.
3 Eisenstein, p. 34.
4 See Figure 1 in Appendix A.
5 Guth, p. 16-29.
Painters like Monet, reacting in part to the industrialization of Europe and the rise of photography, were interested in capturing how light interacted with a certain objet at a given moment in time. In Japanese woodblock prints, they found the simplicity and the ethereal quality that they strove to create in their art.

Critics called this fascination with the Far East “Japonisme.” By the end of the 19th-century, there were more woodblock prints in Europe than there were in Japan as wealthy individuals like Frederick Richards Leyland amassed huge collections. Yet, as Wilde noted, the Japan of Monet, van Gogh, Cezanne, Cassatt, and others only existed in the woodblock prints of Hiroshige and Hokusai, not in Tokyo. As the Impressionists created masterpieces, Japan was industrializing, becoming an imperial power that would annex Korea and win territory from China and Russia. The natural idyll of Hokusai and Hiroshige was long gone.

The encounter between Japan and the West that occurred in 1853 marked the beginning of a vast artistic exchange between two disparate regions of the world. As Western artists were acquainted with and subsequently captivated by the woodblock prints of Hiroshige, Hokusai, and others, their artistic exploration established the foundation for modern art.

**Japan and the West Before 1853**

Even Columbus knew of Japan, but unknown to Europeans, the country had been controlled by feudal lords (called daimyo) for over five centuries. In the late 16th-century, as the Portuguese began to purchase luxury goods from China and Jesuit

---

6 Lambourne, p. 91.
7 Commodore Perry, who would open Japan to the West, was compared to Columbus after his expedition. See “The Japan Expedition.”
8 Hall, p. 137.
missionaries arrived in the floating kingdom, a daimyo named Oda Nobunaga and his allies Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu sought to unite Japan under one central government.  

The Jesuits, meanwhile, attempted to convert as many Japanese to Christianity as possible. They brought with them detailed maps of the world that featured European-style illustrations of different peoples. Japanese artists began to copy the art that the Jesuits brought with them, but this encounter between East and West was not to last. In 1614, Tokugawa Ieyasu, having defeated the last of the rival daimyo and striving to rid himself of any threat to his shogunate, passed a series of decrees stating that all Westerners would be driven out of Japan, all Christians in the country would be persecuted, and Japan would not trade with any foreign power. The floating kingdom of Nippon was effectively isolated from the rest of the world.

For the next two centuries, while Europeans discovered the wonders of the New World, the marvels of China, and the great civilizations of Africa, Japan would remain a mystery. The policy of isolation initiated a “Pax Tokugawa” in Japan. Under the stable rule of the shogunate, Japan flourished, and Japanese art developed its own unique language, free of outside influence.

The Floating World

9 Hane, p. 111.
10 Hane, p. 122.
11 Lambourne, p. 13.
12 Tokugawa Iemitsu, Sakoku Edict of 1635. The policy began under Tokugawa Ieyasu continued under the rule of his grandson, Tokugawa Iemitsu. This 1635 decree is the most complete expression of the Tokugawa shogunate policy.
13 Hall, p. 161.
The two major Japanese artists of the Tokugawa period were Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) and Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Both began their careers apprenticed to artists who specialized in portraits of Kabuki actors. These portraits attempted to capture the exaggerated expression of the actor, but they also placed a special focus on fiction and reality. Artists enjoyed contrasting the mask of a Kabuki actor with his more solemn and realistic expression underneath. Both Hiroshige and Hokusai painted these portraits early in their career and both spent a considerable amount of time painting Japanese flora and fauna.

Both artists, however, were recognized for their series of woodblock prints, created in the ukiyo-e, or floating world, style. Ukiyo-e prints emphasized the supremacy of nature and the fleeting character of a moment. Woodblock prints were surprisingly cheap because an artist could create one image and it could be printed again and again. The artist might produce several editions of one print, varying the intensity and the tone of the colors each time. Hiroshige and Hokusai were commissioned by publishers to create a series of prints on one theme. Hiroshige’s most famous series is One Hundred Famous Views in Edo, while Hokusai was renowned for his Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji. In contrast to many of the Impressionists that they would inspire, both Hokusai

---

14 Forrer, *Hiroshige*, p. 11.
16 See Figure 2 in Appendix A.
18 Robinson, p. 9.
19 Smith, p. 36.
20 Forrer, *Hiroshige*, p. 21. Interestingly, Hiroshige also completed a One Hundred Famous Views of Mt. Fuji series in response to Hokusai’s work. Hiroshige attacked Hokusai because he felt he did not represent the majesty of Mt. Fuji adequately enough.
21 Forrer, *Hokusai*, p. 22. Hokusai also completed a series celebrating the Year of the Horse, the Pacific Ocean, and bridges across Japan.
and Hiroshige were recognized as great artists in their time. Hokusai published ten volumes of his *Manga*, collections of drawings designed to instruct aspiring artists how to draw like a master. The income he generated from his 3,500 woodblock print designs was considerable—he was able to live a comfortable lifestyle and pay off his grandson’s sizeable gambling debts. Unlike many working-class Japanese of his day, Hiroshige traveled extensively outside of Edo.

**Perry’s Encounter**

As Hiroshige and Hokusai built their reputations, profound change was occurring in Japan. In the 1830s and 1840s, peasant uprisings and famine rocked Japan, and the shogunate did little to address this instability. When four American naval ships arrived off the coast of Japan, the Tokugawa shogunate was already crumbling.

The Americans had sent two earlier expeditions to Japan with the purpose of establishing relations, but both the 1832 and 1846 ventures were unsuccessful. The 1853 expedition was able to open Japan to the West because of the precarious position of the shogunate and the personality of its leader, Commodore Matthew Perry.

---

23 Smith, p. 37.
24 Hokusai’s *Manga* included a volume that depicted daily life in Japan, and his focus on ordinary activities resonated with the Impressionists. See Duret, p. 28.
25 Forrer, *Hokusai*, p. 30
26 Smith, p. 39. Edo was renamed Tokyo during the Meiji Restoration of 1868.
27 Hane, p. 198.
28 Gordon, p. 46.
29 Daniel Webster, then Secretary of State, outlined the reasons for sending American ships to Japan. See Webster, p. 427-429.
30 The 1853 expedition was to be helmed by a Commodore Aulick, but he was replaced with Commodore Perry due to fear of another failure. See “The Expedition to Japan—Mr. Webster’s Instructions to Commodore Aulick.”
31 Morison, p. 264-265.
Unlike the commanders of the earlier expeditions, Perry did not ask the Japanese if they wanted to establish trading relations—he forced them to do so.\textsuperscript{32} He threatened the Japanese with a naval bombardment if they did not open their ports to American commerce.\textsuperscript{33} In his diary, he justified this decision by writing that as the United States was clearly superior to Japan. Therefore, the American “desire to be on terms of amity with all nations”\textsuperscript{34} outweighed Japan’s sovereignty. Commodore Perry was hailed as a hero in the West\textsuperscript{35}, and there were even calls for him to run for president.\textsuperscript{36}

**A Cultural Exchange**

Almost immediately after Commodore Perry arrived in Japan, the artistic exchange between Japan and the West started. One of the most popular woodblock prints of 1854 were portraits of the Americans who had played notable roles in the Perry expedition.\textsuperscript{37} While Perry and his lieutenants were depicted wearing the distinctly Western regalia of the navy, these portraits were not dissimilar to the portraits of Kabuki actors that had been created for centuries before Perry’s expedition.\textsuperscript{38} Japanese artists did not know how to depict the features of the Western “hairy barbarians.”\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{32} Morison, p. 324-325.
\textsuperscript{33} Perry, p. 90.
\textsuperscript{34} Perry, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{35} See “Testimonial to Commodore Perry.”
\textsuperscript{36} See “The Next Presidency.”
\textsuperscript{37} Morison, p. 305.
\textsuperscript{38} See Figure 3 in Appendix A.
\textsuperscript{39} The Japanese ruling classes used this term to refer to Perry and the Americans during the initial exchange of 1853.
Likewise, Western artists did not know what to make of the Hokusai and Hiroshige prints that soon started to appear in Europe.\(^\text{40}\) Since the Renaissance, all of Western art had been grounded in the principles of the Greeks. Even though styles varied, most artists accepted the guidelines for proportion and figure outlined by the classical sculptors. Most used the perspective and foreshortening techniques first developed by the Romans in their mosaics and then expanded on by early Renaissance artists like Masaccio.\(^\text{41}\)

Japanese art did not make use of perspective and foreshortening. Rather, Japanese landscapes seemed oddly flat. While post-Renaissance artists paid great attention to the anatomy of their figures\(^\text{42}\), Japanese artists only suggested the outline of a figure with cursory lines.

European artists had seen equally exotic painting from China before, but Japanese art emerged in the salons at a turning point in art history. Since the Renaissance, artists had pursued realism in their work. They wanted to make their landscapes and pictures reflections of the real world.\(^\text{43}\) Then, in the 1830s, photography was invented, and a photograph could reflect the real world better than any painting could\(^\text{44}\). As photography

\(^{40}\) Curiosity and admiration for Japanese culture was not limited to artists. See “The New York Crystal Palace—Arrival of the Japanese Contribution” and “The Japanese Empire—Predictions of the Country’s Trade and Commerce.”

\(^{41}\) Novotny, p. 350-51.

\(^{42}\) The Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood also sought to escape the influence of the Renaissance. They painted ethereal, decorative scenes meant to reflect art before the innovations on the painter Raphael. See Giebelhausen, p. 63.

\(^{43}\) Novotny, p. 344.

\(^{44}\) Novotny, p. 273.
became more widespread in an increasingly industrialized world, artists were left wondering what the purpose of painting was.\textsuperscript{45}

Among the first champions of Japanese art were the de Goncourt brothers. Before coming into contact with the prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige, the brothers, renowned for their hedonistic lifestyles, collected Rococo art\textsuperscript{46}, but upon seeing Japanese art, they wrote that it was “as great an art as Greek art” because “everything [Japanese artists] do is taken from observation.”\textsuperscript{47}

**Artistic Exploration**

As the de Goncourts built their collection of Japanese art, artists like Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro were experimenting with a new, Impressionist style of art.\textsuperscript{48} Impressionism was the art of the moment. On a typical day, Monet would take with him multiple canvases to a particular site. Then, as the light changed throughout the day, Monet would create paintings of the same subject at different times of day. Monet would take only a few minutes to sketch out a painting, and his rapid working method befitted an increasingly industrial society where trains passed in and out of a station in minutes\textsuperscript{49} and factory machines could produce hundreds of products in an hour.\textsuperscript{50}

Japanese art did not inspire Monet to paint the Rouen Cathedral or the haystacks or the water lilies\textsuperscript{51} again and again, but it did reaffirm his Impressionist convictions.\textsuperscript{52}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{45} Genova, p. 453-460.  
\textsuperscript{46} Lambourne, p. 32.  
\textsuperscript{47} De Goncourt, p. 241.  
\textsuperscript{48} See “Claude Monet par lui-même.”  
\textsuperscript{49} See Figure 4 in Appendix A.  
\textsuperscript{50} Novotny, p. 346-48.  
\textsuperscript{51} See Figures 5 and 6 in Appendix A. 
\end{footnotesize}
Hokusai’s manga gave the Impressionists a rationale for “liberating [themselves] from conventionally stiff portrayals of human and natural forms.”

For other artists, like Edgar Degas and Mary Cassatt, Japanese art did more than reinforce their views of painting. Cassatt, renowned for her scenes of mothers and children, took particular inspiration from the work of Utamaro, a forerunner of Hokusai and Hiroshige. Several of her works mirror Utamaro’s prints. Like Utamaro, both Cassatt and Degas would paint women bathing, and all three artists carefully examined curved forms and the power of line. Degas’s famous scenes of the theater and the ballet were presaged in the portraits of Kabuki actors and Hokusai’s vibrant prints of public baths.

Still, perhaps the great admirer of Japanese art was Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh would copy Hokusai and Hiroshige’s prints onto a canvas in order to better understand the way he used line and form. In one of his letters to his brother Theo, van Gogh wrote that even though the French countryside that surrounded him did not resemble any of Hokusai’s prints, looking at the landscapes in a Japanese way will “give you a true idea of the simplicity of nature here.” For van Gogh, Japan was a manifestation of nature,

52 Napier, p. 41. Although some of his paintings (such as those of the water lilies) were Japanese-influenced, Monet was already painting the same subject again and again before he came into contact with Japanese art.
53 Napier, p. 40.
54 See Figures 7 and 8 in Appendix A.
55 Dumas, p. 64.
56 Lambourne, p. 41.
57 Lambourne, p. 45-46.
58 Van Gogh, p. 363.
and in painting his own Impressionistic masterpieces, van Gogh would write that “all my work is in a way founded on Japanese art.”

**Disillusionment**

As van Gogh was writing, however, the Japan of the ukiyo-e prints was fading. Perry’s mission had brought strife to the island nation. Rebellious samurai soon toppled the shogunate, and civil war occurred. At the heart of this conflict was a choice. Japan could either resist Western influence and risk becoming a powerless nation like China, or Japan could emulate the West and have colonies of its own.

Ultimately, Japan chose the latter option. In 1868, the emperor Meiji was declared the head of state of Japan. Advisors to the emperor quickly established a German-style parliament and an English-style cabinet. After traveling to Europe to see the industrial wonders of the West, Japan began to build factories. Even Japanese art began to move away from the ukiyo-e style and towards the Western Greco-Roman tradition. By 1910, Japan had defeated Russia and China in territorial wars and had annexed Korea as a

---

59 Van Gogh, p. 364.
60 Gordon, p.61-75.
61 Although Western newspapers did report that the civil war in Japan was over and the Emperor (or the Mikado) was controlling the country, most did not realize the significance of the Meiji Restoration. See “Advises to December 15—Civil War at an End—The Mikado and Tycoon—Ship News” and “The Civil War in Japan is Nearly Over.”
62 Hall, p. 273-284.
63 Gordon, p. 95-96.
64 See Figure 9 in Appendix A. This print is by Hiroshige’s grandson, and it clearly depicts Western clothing and the modern architecture of Japan. It is a sharp contrast from his grandfather’s work.
65 Duret, p. 20.
colony of the Empire of Japan. Japanese artists had begun to paint in Western styles, and Western architects were invited to the country to build skyscrapers.

While the Japan of the Impressionist era was not the Japan of Hokusai and Hiroshige, Japanese art continued to have a profound effect on Western works, even as artists realized in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 that Japan was not a pastoral paradise. Just as Hokusai turned to painting Mt. Fuji in the last years of his career, so did Paul Cezanne. Cezanne’s Mt. Saint-Victoire, painted at multiple angles and at different times of day, was oddly reminiscent of Hokusai’s series.

The Legacy of Japonisme

Cezanne died in 1906, and in 1907, a massive retrospective of his work was held in Paris. A young Spanish artist attended that retrospective, and was so moved by Cezanne’s mountains that he would later say those paintings “flooded” all his work.

That artist’s name was Pablo Picasso, and his Cubism would represent the next step forward from Impressionism. Cezanne’s mountains were influenced by Hokusai’s work, and so indirectly, Hokusai played a role not only in the Japonisme of Impressionism, but in the development of modern art.

Artists like Monet, van Gogh, and Whistler relished in the exoticism and simplicity of Japanese art and glorified Japan as a natural paradise. However, Oscar Wilde was correct. Their Japan was a “pure invention,” and the art of late 18th-century

66 Hall, p. 301-302.
67 Napier, p. 15.
68 Lambourne, p. 50.
69 See Figures 10 and 11 in Appendix A.
70 See “French Autumn Salon—A Triumphant Success for the Artists Who Exhibit at It.”
71 Picasso as quoted in the Art Institute of Chicago curator’s notes on the exhibition “Picasso and Cézanne.” Available at http://www.artic.edu/picasso-and-c-zanne.
and early 19th-century Japan did not resemble the industrialized Japan of the late 19th-century and early 20th-century.

The Western encounter with Japanese art was a defining moment in art history, just as the Japanese encounter with the West had enormous repercussions on global politics. The Meiji Restoration and the industrialization that followed made Japan into a world power and an equal of many European countries. At the same time, modern art may not have developed in the same way had artists not come into contact with Japan. While these artists were unable to see what Japan was becoming around the turn of the 20th-century, they were able to see that art did not have to be confined by the boundaries of Europe. The cultural exchange with Japan launched decades of artistic exploration that did not end with the Impressionists or the post-Impressionists. After 1905, the pursuit of Wilde’s “Japanese effect” ended, but artists continued to seek out bold, modern, and abstract ways of seeing the world.
Figure 1: Hokusai, Katsushika. *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* from *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*, c. 1830-33. Color woodblock print. Image courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.
Figure 2: Sharaku, Toshusai. *The actor Ichikawa Ebizo IV as Takemura Sadanoshin*, 1794. Color woodblock print. Image courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.
Figure 3: Japanese print of Commodore Perry completed shortly after the American navy arrived. Image courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.
Figure 4: Monet, Claude. *Arrival of the Normandy Train, Gare Saint-Lazare*, 1877. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of Art Institute of Chicago.
Figure 5: Monet, Claude. *The Japanese Footbridge*, 1899. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.
Figure 6: Hiroshige, Utagawa. *Precincts of Kameido Tenjin Shrine (Kameido Tenjin keidai)*, from the series "One Hundred Famous Views of Edo (Meisho Edo hyakkei)", 1856. Color woodblock print. Image courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.
Figure 7: Cassatt, Mary. *The Letter*, c. 1890-91. Drypoint, softground etching, and aquatint on laid paper. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.
Figure 8: Utamaro, Kitagawa. *Courtesan Hinazuru of the Keizetsu House*, c. 1794–95. Color woodblock print. Image courtesy of the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts.
Figure 9: Hiroshige, Utagawa III. *The Fine Arts Museum and the Shôjô Fountain at the Second National Industrial Exposition in Ueno Park, 1881*. Color woodblock print.

Image courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Figure 10: Cézanne, Paul. *Mont Sainte-Victoire (La Montaigne Sainte-Victoire)*, 1892-1895. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of the Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia.

Figure 11: Hokusai, Katsushika. *A Mild Breeze on a Fine Day* from *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*, c. 1830-33. Color woodblock print. Image courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.