

Van Gogh and ukiyo-e: The construction of an iconic aesthetic

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Abstract

This essay explores the significant influence of Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints on the artistic development of Vincent van Gogh. By considering the context and distinct characteristics of these woodcuts, one can identify the presence of those components in van Gogh's later works. Additionally, the comparison of van Gogh's work before and after engaging with the Japanese art form reveals a distinct aesthetic opposition, which alongside the prevalence of visual languages associated with ukiyo-e, exposes clear causation. The bright colours and graphic tendencies of van Gogh's most prolific works are techniques that were significantly informed through interactions with the design and aesthetics of ukiyo-e woodblocks. Beyond these considerations, this paper shows the way in which van Gogh's mental health influenced and skewed his perception of the medium's meaning, therefore informing his recontextualisation of their visual language. The writing of van Gogh himself affirms the conclusion that Japanese artmaking techniques played an informative role in the development of his posthumously acclaimed visual style.

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Japonisme was an artistic movement in which traditional Japanese art and culture became increasingly appreciated by Europe's fine artists, informing new aesthetics and techniques.¹ As interest in impressionism began to dwindle, artists sought a radical new visual language, one that would reflect a desertion of historicism.² The increasingly globalised world offered unprecedented access to international artistic practices, such as Japanese coloured woodcuts, which European artists then coopted in an aesthetic assimilation.³ Discerning the visual characteristics and ideology associated with these woodcuts allows us to recognise their manifestations in Vincent van Gogh's most celebrated works. Through a comparative and chronological analysis of his work, I will show how van Gogh's introduction to Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints significantly informed the creation of his recognisable style, with the bold outlines, colour, and flat planes featured in his most renowned works reflecting distinct conventions of the Japanese discipline. Reflecting on the differences in style between *The Potato Eaters* (1885) and his later works, particularly his incorporation of iconography and techniques associated with ukiyo-e woodcuts, it is evident that van Gogh's introduction to the Japanese art form led to an aesthetic upheaval. Beyond visual languages, van Gogh's world view and outlook on life were influenced by this cross-cultural engagement. I argue that van Gogh's mental state and limited knowledge of ukiyo-e prints' context influenced his perception of the medium, leading to an understanding of Japanese art that reflected a desire for the tranquillity, discipline, and community he lacked in his own life. This developing perspective is evident in the evolving use of stylised lines and colour, which can be observed throughout *Japonaiserie: the bridge* (1886–88), *Le Père Tanguy* (1887), *Irises* (1889) and *The Starry Night* (1889). In what follows, I will first discuss the history of ukiyo-e woodcuts as well as their relationship with the European art world and will then analyse van Gogh's early aesthetic. Following this, I will explore his introduction to ukiyo-e and establish the connection between his mental health and perception of the art form. Considering works from across his career, I will highlight aesthetic changes and expand on the role his mental health played in this shift.

¹ Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence on Western Art Since 1858* (New York: Harmony Books, 1981), 1–62.

² Klaus Berger, *Japonisme in Western Painting from Whistler to Matisse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

³ Berger, *Japonisme in Western Painting from Whistler to Matisse*, 9.

Finally, I will argue that these aesthetic and emotional elements are present in his most famous work. Examining his technical evolution alongside the development of his personal doctrine, it is undeniable that Japanese art and design was instrumental in the formation of van Gogh's aesthetic.

Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints, carved wooden blocks used to create coloured prints for mass production, were introduced to Europe around the mid-1850s. However, the 'tour of the Orient' conducted by Théodore Duret and Henri Cernuschi in 1871–73 is often considered to be the event that initiated Japonisme.⁴ Ukiyo-e is a Buddhist word derived from a sense of transience innate to human life, meaning 'floating world'.⁵ Originating in the Edo period (1603–1868),⁶ ukiyo-e prints contradicted the term's initial meaning, reflecting hedonistic and fleeting luxuries and joys.⁷ The ability to mass produce these decorative works meant they were readily available and became a staple of commercial culture, similar to that of modern gift-shop souvenirs.

The principles underpinning ukiyo-e emphasise the imperative of surrendering to life's chaos.⁸ As a commercial medium, the subject matter was largely a reflection of public interests and trends rather than artistic endeavour or ideology. Erotica was a significant subgenre of ukiyo-e throughout the medium's popularity, therefore despite its spiritual etymology, the art form was not a source of moral guidance.⁹ In their context, ukiyo-e were not perceived to be a depiction of reality, but instead a reflection of a glorified version of the past.¹⁰ Landscapes make up some of ukiyo-e's most recognisable images, such as Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (1831). Within this practice emerged the *bunjin-ga* (symbolic landscape). These symbolic landscapes depicted the 'quintessence of nature' within stylised and exaggerated events, often centred around the elements, that highlight the paradoxical capacity of nature to be a force of both peace and destruction.¹¹ On a broader level, Japanese art was connected to Buddhist spiritual themes—most pertinently, the absence of the individual and favouring the depiction of the emotional complexities of human nature. These Japanese schools of thought were accessible within Europe at the time; however, they made minimal impact beyond academia and were widely overlooked by artists in favour of surface-level aesthetics and motifs.¹²

Visual attributes varied between artists, with two masters of ukiyo-e landscapes (and significant sources of inspiration for van Gogh), Hokusai and Hiroshige, developing unique aesthetics within the medium.¹³ The art form relied on natural pigments for colour; however, these materials would change over time, reacting to light and air, changing the prints as a whole.¹⁴ The colour blue was a staple among all genres of prints. From the sky to ornamental details, blue was overwhelmingly present, however, it was particularly susceptible to chemical change, prompting significant innovation to ensure a staple of the ukiyo-e aesthetic

⁴ Janet A Walker, 'Van Gogh, Collector of "Japan"', *The Comparatist* 32 (May 2008): 83, doi.org/10.1353/com.0.0025.

⁵ Andreas Marks and Stephen Addiss, *Japanese Woodblock Prints: Artists, Publishers and Masterworks: 1680–1900* (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2010), 9.

⁶ Marks and Addiss, *Japanese Woodblock Prints*, 10.

⁷ Marks and Addiss, *Japanese Woodblock Prints*, 9.

⁸ Marks and Addiss, *Japanese Woodblock Prints*, 9.

⁹ Marks and Addiss, *Japanese Woodblock Prints*, 17.

¹⁰ Marks and Addiss, *Japanese Woodblock Prints*, 10.

¹¹ Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence*, 278–80.

¹² Berger, *Japonisme in Western Painting from Whistler to Matisse*, 4.

¹³ Nagai Kafū, Kyoko Selden and Alisa Freedman, 'Ukiyo-e Landscapes and Edo Scenic Places (1914)', *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 24 (2012): 217, doi.org/10.1353/roj.2012.0008.

¹⁴ Lawrence Bickford, 'Three Aspects of Ukiyo-e Woodblock Printmaking', *Impressions* no. 18 (1994): 1.

was maintained.¹⁵ The introduction of Prussian blue and synthetic alternatives extended the longevity of prints, ensuring the blue would remain striking long after their completion.¹⁶

As an aspect of commercial culture, the discussion of woodblock prints was intertwined with production. Artist, carver, printer, and publisher all played key roles in creating a final product.¹⁷ The debate surrounding the validity of woodblocks as art and where most credit was due dominated considerations of the art form in early European writings on the medium.¹⁸ There is an irony in a commercial decorative medium influencing the most elite spheres of European art. One must wonder whether the status of ukiyo-e prints as a commercial art form, outside the hierarchical structures of high art, contributed to its innovative nature.

Figure 1: Vincent Van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*, 1885. Oil on canvas, 82 cm x 114 cm.



Source: Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Van Gogh's earlier works, such as *The Potato Eaters* (1885) (Figure 1), highlight how much his aesthetic changed throughout his career. The bleak colour palette, tone, and graphic rendering of figures are reflective of van Gogh's immediate aversion to European artistic tradition.¹⁹ Throughout his career, van Gogh's work often served as a mirror reflecting his worldview. By the time of this painting's creation, van Gogh had found minimal career success and lacked stable romantic or platonic relationships beyond his brother Theo. Van Gogh took an immersive approach to his work, living among peasants for months in preparation for

¹⁵ Bickford, 'Three Aspects of Ukiyo-e Woodblock Printmaking', 1.

¹⁶ Carole Biron, et al. 'Colours of the « images of the floating world ». non-invasive analyses of Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints (18th and 19th centuries) and new contributions to the insight of oriental materials', *Microchemical Journal* 152 (January 2020): 10, doi.org/10.1016/j.microc.2019.104374.

¹⁷ Bickford, 'Three Aspects of Ukiyo-e Woodblock Printmaking', 3.

¹⁸ Bickford, 'Three Aspects of Ukiyo-e Woodblock Printmaking', 3–4.

¹⁹ Bradley Collins, 'The Potato Eaters and the First Vincent Revisited', *Notes in the History of Art* 35, no. 1–2 (Autumn 2015/Winter 2016): 44, doi.org/10.1086/685626.

this painting, leading to a raw, austere image of rural life and by extension his own.²⁰ Despite the aesthetic opposition to his later work, his ability to immerse the viewer in a scene is already evident. When discussing the painting, van Gogh described it as smelling of ‘bacon, smoke, potato, steam’.²¹ The visceral qualities and texture of this work are possibly the only features of van Gogh’s aesthetic that remain consistent after his introduction to Japanese woodblock prints.

Although Japonisme emerged around the 1870s, van Gogh only became truly exposed to the prints in 1886, when he and his brother began collecting them. After forging a relationship with Samuel Bing, the owner of a local shop selling ukiyo-e prints, van Gogh began to study and purchase the works in Bing’s collection, with the van Gogh brothers acquiring an estimated 400 pieces.²² The value of these prints was apparent to the brothers from early on, with Vincent writing ‘Japanese art ... takes root again among the French Impressionist artists’, referencing his observation of the medium’s influence among circles of impressionist painters.²³ This period was key for van Gogh’s creation of a romanticised understanding of Japanese lifestyles and values.

While European artists held a distinct aesthetic interest in ukiyo-e woodcuts, there was minimal understanding surrounding their context and Japanese society, with perceptions of Japan being informed by primitivism rather than primary sources, that is, the reflection on a simpler life preceding European technological development, often inaccurately imposed onto non-European cultures.²⁴ Van Gogh’s interest in Japonisme extended beyond aesthetics into theology, with the artist writing, ‘what these simple Japanese teach us almost amounts to a religion’.²⁵ I argue that his study of these works provided not only artistic inspiration but also introduced him to ideas that altered his approach to life. Van Gogh interpreted landscape woodblocks through the lens of meditative relationships with nature, leading him to the conclusion that Japanese people ‘live in nature as if they themselves were flowers’.²⁶ His 1888 self-portrait employs the image of a Buddhist monk, emphasising his shaved head and absent gaze, showing that notions from Buddhist philosophy influenced his perspective on his internal and external environment. Conflating the traditional iconography of the prints with his limited understanding of Japanese culture, van Gogh idealised Japan as a traditional world of sunlight in which industrialisation was yet to sever the relationship between man and nature.²⁷ In actuality, the 1880s marked the beginning of significant industrialisation in Tokyo and Osaka, thus his perception was immediately inaccurate.²⁸ Walker argues that within the construction of a romanticised Japan, van Gogh forged a perfected version of himself, idolising a simple life marked by nature and community.²⁹ This idealisation is evident in van Gogh’s move to Arles, France, in 1888 in hopes of replicating this perception of Japanese culture, with the painter writing, ‘here my life will become more and more like a Japanese painter’s, living close to nature like a petty tradesman’.³⁰ It is reasonable to conclude that an individual whose life was marred by emotional instability and seclusion would connect with a structured, simplified lifestyle in which the individual disappears.

Beyond its perceived similarity to Japan, van Gogh moved to Arles with the intention of creating an artist collective dubbed the Yellow House. Taking into account his lifelong pattern of tumultuous relationships, this endeavour can be seen as an attempt by van Gogh to replicate his perception of a Japanese artist’s

²⁰ Collins, ‘The Potato Eaters and the First Vincent Revisited’, 43.

²¹ Collins, ‘The Potato Eaters and the First Vincent Revisited’, 44.

²² Walker, ‘Van Gogh, Collector of “Japan”’, 84.

²³ Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence*, 9.

²⁴ Walker, ‘Van Gogh, Collector of “Japan”’, 85.

²⁵ Berger, *Japonisme in Western Painting from Whistler to Matisse*, 126.

²⁶ Walker, ‘Van Gogh, Collector of “Japan”’, 88.

²⁷ Walker, ‘Van Gogh, Collector of “Japan”’, 86.

²⁸ Walker, ‘Van Gogh, Collector of “Japan”’, 85.

²⁹ Walker, ‘Van Gogh, Collector of “Japan”’, 87.

³⁰ Walker, ‘Van Gogh, Collector of “Japan”’, 87.

‘austere, disciplined communal life’.³¹ Statements from his letters that Japanese artists ‘liked one another and stuck together’ can be read as an expression of his isolation.³² In this sense, his depictions of himself and the world around him reflect a bid to impose an idealised version of reality in the absence of security and community.

Figure 2: Vincent Van Gogh, *Bridge in the Rain (After Hiroshige)*, 1886–1888. Oil on canvas, 73.3 cm x 53.8 cm.

Source: Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Figure 3: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Sudden Evening Shower on the Great Bridge near Atake*, 1857. Colour woodcut on Japanese paper, 22.6 cm x 33.8 cm.

Source: Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



Between 1886 and 1888 van Gogh created close replicas of significant ukiyo-e woodblock prints by artists such as Hiroshige and Keisai Eisen in his Japoniserie series, often adding a border and taking slight stylistic liberties that utilised impressionist techniques.³³ Through these studies, van Gogh was able to forge a greater understanding of the composition and colour used in woodblock prints. However, I believe the differences between the originals and van Gogh’s versions are more revealing than their similarities. With the example of *Japoniserie: The bridge* (1886–88) (Fig. 2), van Gogh transforms the water from a crystal blue to a muddy green, layered with rapid brushstrokes of various shades. These small strokes reflect a distinct quality of van Gogh’s impressionist aesthetic, contrasting the original subject matter. Further, van Gogh

³¹ Patrick Grant, *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh: A Critical Study*. Vol. 7 (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2014), 152, doi.org/10.15215/aupress/9781927356746.01.

³² Grant, *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 60.

³³ Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence*, 41.

changed the indistinct shrubbery across the water into seemingly snowy hills or bushes. This change may reflect an attempt to conflate the ukiyo-e depiction of landscapes with the scenery around him. While many European artists borrowed motifs from Japanese art, van Gogh sought to learn from the medium's emotional depiction of the environment and life, believing that reflecting how a scene feels rather than how it looks allows one to accurately capture the ephemeral, internal experience.³⁴

Figure 4: Vincent Van Gogh, *Portrait of Père Tanguy*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 65 cm x 51 cm.



Source: Privately Owned

Beyond the Japoniserie series, van Gogh began to integrate Japanese iconography into works such as *Le Père Tanguy* (1887) (Fig. 4). The rapid movement of brushstrokes and textured application of paint used to depict the titular figure are exemplary of van Gogh's distinct style. However, the background of the piece consists of entirely loose replications of ukiyo-e prints. This work reflects a greater conflation of the two styles than previously seen, as van Gogh's bold use of colour and dynamic application of paint is used to depict Japanese images such as kimonos, mountainous landscapes, and ukiyo-e portraits.³⁵ This painting communicates a collision of worlds in the separation between figure and background, punctuated by a loose red outline separating the two. The figure is much more precisely rendered, suggesting a background blur, while the muted and dull colours of his jacket and pants create a distinction between the back and

³⁴ Berger, *Japonisme in Western Painting from Whistler to Matisse*, 134–36.

³⁵ Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence*, 43.

foreground. On a more symbolic level, this work reflects a journey of experimentation for van Gogh, in which his personal style developed through studies of Japanese woodblock prints.

Figure 5: Vincent Van Gogh, *Irises*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 74.3 cm x 94.3 cm.



Source: Getty Center, Los Angeles.

While creating direct replicas of significant woodblocks was instrumental in furthering his style, van Gogh wanted to go beyond copying, instead identifying what he believed to be pillars of Japanese society in order to view life and art through a new lens.³⁶ As mentioned previously, this lens was highly affected by an idealised version of Japanese culture, fuelled by a lack of research and an internal desire to attain the tranquillity present in ukiyo-e scenes.³⁷ Despite a violent and disturbing episode in which he severed his ear and was admitted to St Remy Asylum, van Gogh's commitment to painting and his hybrid impressionist–ukiyo-e style persisted. Within the first month of his institutionalisation, van Gogh had begun studies of the asylum gardens, producing *Irises* (1889) (Fig. 5). The landscape of St Remy was at significant odds with that of Arles, lacking the lush farmlands and orchards of the latter.³⁸ The mental break that led to his institutionalisation had undercut van Gogh's perception of Arles as his artistic Japanese arcadia,³⁹ however some sentiments of his Japanese ethos are reflected in *Irises*. In an 1888 letter, van Gogh contemplates the idea that Japanese artists would study a blade of grass rather than overwhelming philosophical questions, claiming that through studying this blade of grass one may gain an artistic understanding of all life.⁴⁰ Despite the painting's slightly overwhelming scale, the subject matter is more modest. Irises appear repeatedly in Japanese art, chosen for their upward composition. Both Hokusai and Hiroshige produced multiple studies of irises that highlight their vertical growth in a way that can be read

³⁶ Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence*, 42.

³⁷ Walker, 'Van Gogh, Collector of "Japan"', 87.

³⁸ Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński, 'Vincent van Gogh's Paintings of Olive Trees and Cypresses from St.-Rémy', *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 4: 648, doi.org/10.2307/3045988.

³⁹ Jirat-Wasiutyński, 'Vincent van Gogh's Paintings of Olive Trees', 650.

⁴⁰ Walker, 'Van Gogh, Collector of "Japan"', 88.

to imbue optimism or resilience in the flower.⁴¹ The weaving leaves and rich purple petals dominate the work, suggesting a lengthy examination of the flowers akin to that of a Japanese master studying a blade of grass.

While this painting was in many ways a product of philosophical upheaval, van Gogh's initial goal 'to see another light, to believe that looking at nature under a brighter sky can give us a more accurate idea of the Japanese way of feeling and drawing' still underpinned his art.⁴² Significantly, the bold outline of the flowers adds a graphic sense to the work, emulating the linework of woodblock prints. Such graphic lines also limit the depth of the scene, with the poppies in the top left corner suggesting sprawling fields being largely obscured and overpowered by the irises in the foreground. The lack of depth and graphic linework are characteristics intrinsic to the medium of woodblock prints, a product of the two-dimensional nature of the form. Notably, the painterly characteristics of ukiyo-e prints are somewhat ignored by van Gogh, with the work of the carver appearing to resonate more with him. Unlike *Le Père Tanguy*, *Irises* reflects a more harmonious collaboration of styles, in which van Gogh has balanced both bright dynamic brushwork (particularly seen in the ochre dirt) and graphic sensibilities to create an aesthetic synonymous with his work.

Figure 6: Vincent Van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 74 cm x 92 cm.



Source: The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁴¹ Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence*, 87.

⁴² Vincent van Gogh, *To Theo van Gogh. Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 10 September 1889* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 1962).

Though one could argue that the works discussed above consistently hold a resemblance to Japanese art because they feature Japanese iconography, I would argue that the influence of ukiyo-e prints is present in works that do not feature significant themes or imagery synonymous with Japan. Undoubtedly his most renowned work, *The Starry Night* (1889) (Fig. 6) depicts a landscape scene in which dynamic shades of blue and yellow dance together to create a night sky that feels idyllic. Van Gogh's intention with this work was to portray the pure essence of nature with the reverence of religious paintings.⁴³ This veneration for nature is emblematic of symbolic landscapes and suggests van Gogh's continued conflation of Japanese depictions of nature and internal stability.⁴⁴ While the lively application of paint is more impressionist, the graphic lines and shallow depth of Japanese art are still present. The town, cypress, and sky are all distinct from one another, separated by stark lines and contrasting saturation. The aforementioned historical significance of blue in ukiyo-e practice is also indirectly referenced in this work. The Prussian blue depths of the sky and mountains, as well as the greater saturation of yellows, are reminiscent of the colour palette of woodblock prints. While the colour of prints could range from subtle to extreme, the emphasis on primary colours is a distinctive characteristic of the Japanese art form. The composition of sprawling mountains in contrast with the overwhelming sky reflects the idyllic mystique and grace often sought after in landscape prints. Thus, the aesthetic characteristics of Japanese ukiyo-e prints may be identified in even the most established of van Gogh's works.

Van Gogh stated in a letter in 1886, 'In a way all my work is founded on Japanese art'.⁴⁵ The contrast between his earlier work *The Potato Eaters* and later *Irises* and *The Starry Night* suggests van Gogh underwent a significant re-evaluation of aesthetics and design that borrowed extensively from the practice of Japanese woodblock artists. As van Gogh's work entered the canon of art history, so too did his life and mental health issues, such that I believe you cannot analyse his work without considering his internal experience. While van Gogh lacked stable relationships and mental health, he found solace and inspiration in his reading of ukiyo-e woodblocks. The narrative of discipline, community, and serenity grounded his artistic practice amid internal turmoil. The work of van Gogh has been revered alongside some of the most acclaimed artworks in history, with many from his era borrowing from non-European artistic practices with varying degrees of recognition. However, van Gogh was perhaps the most open about his influence. Beyond his outspoken acknowledgement, van Gogh's cross-cultural interaction goes further than aesthetics and captures a transfer of ideas that took root in his art and perspective on life. As an artist whose work is often discussed in conjunction with his life and is repeatedly tied to the notion of the 'tortured artist', van Gogh's work highlights the capacity of art to physically manifest one's internal experience. The study of Japanese iconography, graphic lines, bold colour, and composition allowed van Gogh to develop and articulate a distinct style that rejected Renaissance tradition and distinguished itself from other impressionist approaches. Thus, it is indisputable that Japonisme and ukiyo-e woodblock prints informed van Gogh's art, design, and aesthetic.

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⁴³ Lauren Soth, 'Van Gogh's Agony', *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 2 (1986): 301, doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1986.10788341.

⁴⁴ Jirat-Wasiutyński, 'Vincent van Gogh's Paintings of Olive Trees', 660.

⁴⁵ Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence*, 52.

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