Hokusai is undoubtedly the best-known Japanese painter in the world, especially in Western countries. Some scholars would hesitate to regard him as the greatest master in Japanese art history, yet many studies have worked to justify and consolidate his reputation. Most of this writing, however, fails to note that Hokusai's popularity is a historical product, or to examine the contexts in which his admirers first felt compelled to champion him as the preeminent hero of Japanese art. By questioning the apotheosis of Hokusai in the context of the vogue of “japonisme” in the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe, this paper tries to elucidate some of the underlying social and historical conditions that enabled and prepared the way for his glorification. How was a simple Japanese ukiyo-e print craftsman transfigured into the ultimate oriental master, comparable to such giants as Michelangelo, Rubens, and Rembrandt, and why was he so much admired by such great figures of modern art as Edouard Manet and Vincent Van Gogh?¹

**Keywords:** Katsushika Hokusai, Louis Gonse, William Anderson, Théodore Duret, Ernest Fenollosa, Edmond de Goncourt, Historiography, Art Evaluation, Authenticity, Canon Formation

Hokusai’s reputation as the most eminent Japanese painter owes mainly to the interpretations of French “Japonisants.” One of the first of these was Philippe Burty, a leading art critic. In his *Chefs-d’oeuvre des Arts industriels* (1866), Burty evaluated Japanese prints more highly than Chinese prints or European lithographs, and to exemplify Japanese superiority, he cited “twenty-eight (sic) books by famous Hokusai.” He was referring to the Manga and other collections of Hokusai, with countless illustrations of specimens from natural history, scenes from family life, caricatures, demonstrations of martial arts, and depictions of pilgrimages to the sacred Mt. Fuji. Burty compared these sketches to...
Watteau in their elegance, to Daumier in their energy, to Goya in their fantasy, and to Eugène Delacroix in their movement. The French writer declared that Hokusai’s richness of subject matter and dexterity in brush strokes are comparable only to Peter Paul Rubens.²

Such a comparison was not as whimsical or gratuitous as it looks at first glance. On the one hand, Burty insisted on Hokusai’s importance as a master. Being likened to great European artists accorded Hokusai, a man from a non-Western nation, an honored status; by extension, it acknowledged Japan’s competitiveness with European nations in the realm of painting. On the other hand, let us remember that Burty’s book dealt with industrial, or applied, arts, and he treated Hokusai in that context. Still, by comparing Hokusai to European masters of “fine arts,” Burty, a republican, challenged the orthodox views of the established hierarchy in Second Empire France. Paying high esteem to a Hokusai implied criticism of the authority of the Académie des Beaux-Arts and the conservative professors of the École des Beaux-Arts.

In 1867, the year following the publication of Burty’s book, Japan participated at the Exposition Universelle held in Paris. In a semi-official report of this world’s fair, Les Nations rivales dans l’art (1868), Ernest Chesneau singled out Hokusai as “le plus libre et le plus sincères des maîtres japonais.” Chesneau, another republican art critic, praised Hokusai’s rapidity in sketching, his richness of expression, his incomparable vivid depiction of human figures in every imaginable gesture, his variety of subject matter, his sureness of skill, his keen and observant eye, and the truthfulness of the emotions grasped by his simple lines of ink on paper. “All the virtues and vices, all the frankness and violence are depicted there with a subtle tone of derision while betraying a mischievous, ironical and philosophical smile, free from any rancour.”³

In Chesneau’s somewhat exaggerated and redundant description, four principal characteristics of Hokusai’s work emerge: (i) his illustrated books have an encyclopedic nature, (ii) the lives of the common people are depicted from a detached and somewhat ironical viewpoint, (iii) his sketches are slightly caricaturized but sharp and spontaneous, and (iv) the work is marked by a simple but skillful technique of fixing the image and the effectiveness of its graphical reproduction. Almost certainly not coincidentally, these four characteristics were what the French realists and naturalists of the epoch were searching for in the movement of “Société des graveurs et aquafortistes,” for example, which was organized as a reaction to the mainstream academic hierarchy of Fine Arts.⁴

Probably the most comprehensible exam-

(1) Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi, “Neko no hyaku-mensō” (One Hundred Portraits of Cats), Tempo era (1830-1844). From Suzuki Jūzō, Kuniyoshi (Heibonsha, 1992), Pl. 369.
An example of this tendency is found in Champfleury’s illustrated anthology of cats, *Chats*, published in 1869. Novelist and caricaturist, Champfleury, known as one of Gustave Courbet’s earliest defenders and a combative propagandist of Réalisme (ill. 2), inserted in this popular encyclopedia several sketches of Japanese cats he believed to have been drawn by “a Japanese extraordinary artist, dead about fifty years ago.” (Champfleury thus killed Hokusai thirty years earlier than old age had in reality. His error betrayed that he lacked precise biographical data. Still worse, he failed to distinguish Hiroshige and Kuniyoshi from Hokusai) (ill. 1). It is worth remembering that Édouard Manet’s famous lithograph *Le Rendez-vous des chats* was executed as an advertisement poster for Champfleury’s book (ill. 3). The primitive brushwork, the contrast between black and white, and the humorous caricature of the cats’ behavior “en chaleur” could be the artist’s intentional imitation—Manet’s mané—of Hokusai’s illustrated books.
During the Franco-Prussian War and the days of the Paris Commune that followed, Édouard Manet deposited his major paintings with a young republican friend and art critic, Théodore Duret (ill.4). As it happened, Duret would later become the first French specialist on Hokusai. In 1872, Duret made a world tour with Henri Cernuschi and stayed for two months in Japan. In his Voyage en Asie, published in 1874, Duret referred to “Hokousai” as one of the masters in Japan, famous for his fourteen great illustrated books. Duret admired the gestures, the behaviors, and even the grimaces of the Japanese people, all marvelously rendered just as he had seen them himself in Japan. As an early and privileged eyewitness of Japan, Duret published an influential article “L’art japonais, les livres illustrés, les albums imprimés, Hokusai,” in a prestigious art magazine, Gazette des Beaux-Arts, in 1882 (ill.5). In that article, Duret, a follower of Herbert Spencer, recognized Hokusai as the culminating figure of Japanese art, incarnating by himself the whole evolution of its history. He declared, “Hokusai is the greatest artist that Japan has produced.”

At the Parisien Galerie Georges Petit the following year, Louis Gonse, the chief editor of Gazette des Beaux-Arts, organized a great retrospective exhibition of Japanese art. Gonse also published a sumptuous book, L’Art japonais, the first tentative synthesis of Japanese art in the world (ill.6). Of ten chapters that compose the book, one was devoted entirely to Hokusai, this “viellard fou de dessins” (old man crazy in drawing). Accepting Duret’s assertion about Hokusai’s greatness, Gonse quoted Duret, adding that Hokusai’s “works rise high in the domain of aesthetic Japanese art, and... they establish for it a definitive formula.” “[A] talent so complete and so original should belong to all humanity,” Gonse maintained, as he offered the judgment that Hokusai bears comparison to such European artists as...
“Rembrandt, Corot, Goya, and Daumier at the same time (ill.7).”

This high French evaluation of Hokusai gave rise to sarcastic reactions and objections on the part of Anglo-Saxon specialists such as Ernest F. Fenollosa, who published a harsh attack in his review of Gonse’s book in Japan Weekly Mail on 12 July 1884, and William Anderson, author of The Pictorial Art in Japan (1885) (ill.8). Four points in this controversy are worthy of notice: (i) For both Anderson and Fenollosa, it was out of the question to compare a simple print craftsman like Hokusai to fifteenth-century Zen Buddhist master painters. For Anderson, it was no less scandalous to compare Hokusai (ill.10) with Chô Densu, Sesshû (ill.9), or Shûbun than to draw a parallel between John Leech, “Mr. Punch” (ill.12), and Fra Angelico (ill.11).

(ii) It is clear that these Anglo-Saxon specialists apprehended Japanese art and its history in line with the received Japanese academic judgments, which they never doubted.

(iii) While these Anglo-Saxon connoisseurs, who had resided in Japan for long periods, respected domestic Japanese judgment, French amateurs insisted on their own aesthetic judgment. Anderson and Fenollosa found French overestimation of Hokusai not only ridiculous but also potentially harmful to his posthumous reputation in his native country. French critics, on the other hand, including Edmond de Goncourt, were proud of having discovered Hokusai’s talent when the Japanese still did not fully recognize or acknowledge it. But Fenollosa found these Frenchmen’s attitudes arrogant, and opined that they were “amazingly and amusingly” duped by the Japanese merchants’ condescending flattery toward them.

(iv) While the “conservative” Anglo-Saxon specialists disdained the “vulgarity” of Hokusai’s art, French avant-garde...
critics praised Hokusai’s “vulgarité” precisely in order to attack the conservative, academic, and aristocratic views that then predominated in the European art world. For Duret, Gonse, and de Goncourt, “L’école vulgaire” was by no means a pejorative notion; rather, they regarded it positively as a mark of anti-academic “avant-garde” in artistic achievement. Significantly, the book Duret published in 1885 was titled Critique d’avant-garde. He dedicated it to his late friend Edouard Manet, and included in it his defense of Manet, Monet, and the Impressionist painters alongside his pioneering study of Japanese art and Hokusai.7

(9) Unkoku Tōeki, “Portrait of Sesshū,” Joëjji temple, Yamaguchi
(10) Attributed to Hokusai, “[Self]portrait,” ink on paper, Musée Guimet, Paris. (Although this portrait was attributed to Hokusai by Kobayashi Bunshichi and Hayashi Tadamasa, specialists today suspect that the attribution may have been tainted by the commercial tactics of the Japanese dealers who wished to sell the work at a high price to Charles Gillot.)
(12) John Leech called “Mr. Punch,” “Mr. George and the Dragonflies.”
It is quite clear that French Japonisant art critics were mainly responsible for Hokusai's glorification, and that declaring Hokusai a master was related to (or at least was consistent with) liberal republican criticism of conservative academic aesthetics. Hokusai's reputation was solidified in a process related to the aesthetic program that these Japonisant critics espoused. Both Duret and Edmond de Goncourt called their beloved Japanese prints "impressions." This suggests they saw an ideological affinity between Japanese prints and the Impressionist aesthetics. Let us now take a closer look at the significant role Hokusai would play in context of aesthetic renovation (or even revolution, for some). Three points will be examined: (i) composition or lack of composition, (ii) drawing technique and brushstroke, and (iii) vividness of color.

First, in terms of composition, both Ernest Chesneau and Théodore Duret remarked that the Japanese dislike symmetrical repetition. In 1869, Chesneau invented the term "disymmetrie" to characterize Japanese aesthetics. This idea was implicitly borrowed by an American artist, John Lafarge, in his "Notes on Japanese Art" in 1870, and it was developed again by another American critic, James J. Jarves, in his A Glimpse at the Art of Japan (1876). Duret remarked, "Following their caprice, the Japanese abandon themselves to fantasy, and freely throw around decorative motifs without any apparent system, but thanks to their secret instinct of proportion, the result fully satisfies the visual taste" (p.169). As Oshima Seiji has suggested, Auguste Renoir's manifest of "irrégulariste" aesthetics (1884) might also be understood as an outcome of this conception.

The most striking illustration Hokusai offered to theorists of "disymmetrie" and the "irrégulariste" approach is Mt. Fuji off the Coast of Kanagawa, popularly known as the "Great Wave" (ill.13). The view of Mt. Fuji at sunrise was a marvelous scene for foreigners traveling to Japan by ship. Lafcadio Hearn treated it rhapsodically in his "A Conservative," and Duret himself described it with some emotion in his Voyage en Asie. Still, it is an open question whether or not the dynamic contrast between the great wave in the foreground and the small cone-like form in the background (the mountain) was a result of Hokusai's free and exaggerated interpretation of Western linear perspective.

Western linear perspective, reinvented during the Italian Renaissance, consists of reducing the three-dimensional space into two dimensions by a series of geometrical operations. As Naruse Fujio has proposed in the case of the Akita school of Western-style
painting, this Western technique was reinterpreted and transformed into an aesthetic
device of exaggerating the effect of contrast between the near and the far,\textsuperscript{10} which is clearly
suggested by the Japanese translations of the word “perspective”: enkin no dosū
(“degree of far-near”—Satake Shozan, 1778) and enkin no ri (“principle of far-near”—Shiba Kōkan,
1799). Instead of implanting European rationalism in Japan, the Japanese
artists employed linear perspective as an element of design, editing the pictorial plane by
“assemblage,” “montage,” and “découpage.” This sense of arrangement “without apparent
system” (Duret), which Tsuzumi Tsuneyoshi would call the Rahmenlosigkeit (“frameless-
ness”) of Japanese aesthetics, finds its typical application in Hokusai’s landscape prints.
Paradoxically enough, what Duret and other French Japonisants regarded as typically
Japanese composition was in reality the result of recent European influence among
Japanese artists.”\textsuperscript{11}

The free arrangement of the pictorial plane, clearly
deviating from the principle of linear perspective, is com-
monly observed in the compositions in Hokusai’s Manga
(ill.14). Duret observed that “in the first volume of
Manga, the human figures and objects have only one
inch or so, and are scattered here and there, from the top
to the bottom of the pages, without a ground to sustain
them or a background to put them forward. And yet
they are posed there with such convenience and econo-
my that each of them retains its movement and charac-
teristics of its own line and position.”\textsuperscript{12} This description
reveals the astonishment Europeans felt in observing a
page of Manga.

Curiously enough, contemporary critics censured
Manet for a similar strangeness of “assemblage” and
“montage.” Borrowing freely from diverse sources rang-
ing from such classics as Titian, Velasquez, and Goya to
graphic illustrations and reproductions of prints, Manet
often created paintings made up of combined images.

Some unsympathetic viewers of his work found it lacking compositional skill, and said
that it distorted or miscalculated perspective and rendered human figures anatomically
disproportionate. Such shortcomings in Manet, however, can be perfectly defended in
terms of the Japanese aesthetics visualized in Hokusai’s Manga.

Secondly, a similar lack of perfection is also frequently seen in Manet’s violent brush-
strokes and sketchlike drawing techniques. Once again, Théodore Duret’s remarks on
Japanese art justified these apparent defects and turned them into Manet’s merit. “Using
exclusively the brush sustained by the hand, the Japanese artist, for whom no retouching
is possible, fixes his vision on the paper upon his first attack, with a boldness, grace-
fulness, and confidence that even the most talented European artists cannot attain. It is
thanks to this procedure, unfamiliar in Europe, along with their distinctive taste, that the
Japanese had been recognized as the first and the most perfect Impressionists.” 13

Already in 1874, shortly after Duret’s return from Japan, Manet was imitating this
oriental brushwork. A drawing preserved at the
British Museum of Art is a typical example (ill.15). On the same sheet of paper appear the head of a
drawn raven prepared as an illustration for Mallarmé’s
translation of Edgar Allen Poe’s poem “The Raven,”
some awkward imitations of Japanese painters’ seals,
and the head of the Japanese Spaniel “Tama” that
Duret had brought from Japan. The “tache hardi”
(bold dripping) of The Raven was applauded by
Ernest Chesneau in 1878 as a successful Japonisant
achievement. It is also well known that in his later
paintings, Manet avoided retouching, preferring
instead to repaint the whole canvas spontaneously.
To “fix a vision upon the first attack, with rapidity,
boldness, gracefulness and confidence” was what
Duret and Manet meant by “impressionistic” execu-
tion.14

It is therefore no surprise that in his biography of
Manet (1902), Duret drew a parallel between his
subject and Hokusai in order to convince his readers
that the “unfinished” quality of Manet’s work was a
strength rather than a defect.

The drawings by Manet generally remain in the state of a sketch or a croquis. These
drawings were done in order to grasp a fleeting aspect, a movement or an eminent
detail. The slightest object or detail that interested him was immediately captured
on the paper. These drawings, which one can call instantaneous photographs, show
how surely Manet grasped the characteristics and the decisive movement to be sin-
gled out. To compare with Manet in this respect, I can find nobody else but
Hokusai, who knew how to combine simplification with a perfect determination of
character in his drawings, made upon first attack, in the Manga.15

Thus Manet’s “unfinished” brushwork was justified as an instantaneous fixation of fugitive aspects of his subjects. Duret also explained his “impressionistic” manner in
terms of the “first attack” (“de prime saut”) of Hokusai. Of course, this explanation
would have lost much of its persuasive force if it had been known that Hokusai and oth-
er ukiyo-e craftsmen did not in fact make their drawings “de prime saut” or “saisi sur le
vif” (by capturing life), but that their technique depended much more on “de chic,” that

(15) Édouard Manet, “Raven, Portrait of Tama, and Imitation of
Oriental Signatures,” 1875, brush and pen with ink, transposed as lith-
ograph, British Museum, London.
is, a “memory of the hand” (as Baudelaire called it with deprecating intent). The apparently improvised “dessin d’après nature” (sketches made after life) in the Manga were in reality based more on the physical skill of the habituated hand, trained by the repetitive copying of the master’s model, than on the direct observation of nature and the spontaneous capturing of its effects. In short, Duret’s attempt to authenticate “Impressionistic” aesthetics by referring to Hokusai’s Manga proves to be baseless and positively misleading.

The third problem relates to color. Duret observed:

When we looked at Japanese images [in the prints], where the most contrasting and harsh colors were laid side by side on the page, we finally realized that there was a new procedure worth trying which would reproduce certain effects of nature that we had neglected or thought impossible to render until then. For these Japanese images which we had at first taken for a “bariolage” were, in reality, quite faithful to nature. 16

“Bariolage” was the term chosen by the conservative art critic Paul Mantz when he criticized in 1863 the violent tone of colors Edouard Manet had employed in his Laura de Valence (ill.16). Here Duret tried to justify this inharmonious combination of primary colors by insisting on the faithfulness of the Japanese prints to nature. As a privileged traveler to Japan, Duret could claim to be qualified to testify to the “fidelité” of Japanese landscape ukiyo-e prints, in which, as he put it, “green, blue, red in their brightest tones [were] juxtaposed without any intermediate half-tone or transition.”17

Partly influenced by Duret’s debatable statement, not only Monet, but also Manet went to Argenteuil to paint the landscape by juxtaposing “side by side,” without attenuation, the most striking tones, just as the Japanese saw nature with “vivid colors full of luminosity” (ill.17). The effect was so unnatural and
unfamiliar that even a friendly critic like J.-K. Huysmans ironically called it “indigo-
manie,” or an indigo-maniac disease. According to his diagnosis, the Impressionist
painters were suffering from a sort of “daltonisme” (color blindness). It was in the face of
such ill-natured criticism that Duret proposed the above-mentioned comparison of
Monet and the Japanese. In his opinion, it was not Impressionists’ eyes that were ill, but
that the European’s eye was too weak and too lazy to resist the truth of light effect experi-
enced in the “plein air” (open air). How valid is this statement?

Henry Smith has recently advanced the argument that without the importation of
the chemical pigment Berlin blue (Prussian blue), invented about 1706, the vivid color
expression in Hokusai’s Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji would not have been possible. This
presents an example of interesting cross-purposes in cultural exchange. Contrary to
Duret’s fantasy, the blue of the “indigomanie” and the red of the “anilinmanie” (beni-
gurui) of the late ukiyo-e prints were by no means proof of the Japanese faithfulness to
color effects under open-air sunlight. Far from justifying the cause of Impressionist aes-
thetics, as Duret fancied, these chemical pigments, newly imported from Europe, bear
witness to the exotic color revolution Hokusai and his contemporaries were prepared to
undertake.

IV

In all respects that we have examined so far—composition, drawing technique, and col-
oration—French Japonisant interpretations of Hokusai proved to be strongly biased. Yet it can-
not be denied that these interpretations, however distorted, did contribute to the development of
European art in the second half of the nineteenth century.

We can identify some prominent fin de siècle examples. Emile Bernard’s experimental
composition, Les Bretonnes dans la prairie (1888) (ill.18), which intentionally throws off the yoke
of linear perspective by scattering the human figures across the pictorial plane, is evidently an application of the compositional design we observed earlier in the Manga pages (ill.19). Bernard himself complained that this
arrangement was plagiarized by Paul Gauguin in his La Vision après le sermon (1888),
where the composition is divided into two separate parts by the trunk of a tree (ill.20).
Gauguin inserted a sketch of this painting in a letter to Vincent Van Gogh in Arles. Probably inspired by this spatial effect, the latter also created Le Semeur (1888). Both of
these works have a strong affinity with the way Hokusai, and Hiroshige after him, rein-

(18) Émile Bernard, “Les Bretonnes dans la prairie,” oil on canvas, 1888, 74x92 cm, Private Collection.
terpreted Western linear perspective. Even Paul Cézanne, who seems to have ostenta-
tiously opposed Gauguin’s japonisme, still bears some resemblance to Hokusai in his
transgression of academic linear perspective. Comparisons between La Montagne Sainte
Victoire (ill.22) and The Mishima pass (ill.21) or between Jas de Bouffan (ill.24) and
Hodogaya (ill.23) do reveal some parallels between the two artists in their efforts to
“destroy Renaissance pictorial space,” to use Pierre Francastel’s terminology.20

As for the juxtaposition of primary colors, it is evident that Van Gogh also suc-
cumbed to “indigomanie.” Le Pont de Langlois (ill.26), executed shortly after his arrival
in Arles, can be regarded as an application of the color effects Van Gogh had learned by
copying Hiroshige’s Evening Rainfall at the Bridge of Atake (ill.25), which he had mistak-


(21) Katsushika Hokusai, “Kōshū Mishima goe” (The Mishima Pass), Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji, ca. 1831.
(22) Paul Cézanne, “La Montagne Sainte-Victoire,” oil on canvas, 65.5x81.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum, New York.
(24) Paul Cézanne, “Les Maronniers au Jas de Bouffan,” 1885-86, oil on canvas, 73x92 cm, Art Institute, Minneapolis.

(25) Vincent Van Gogh, “Copie d’après une estampe japonaise,” (copies after Utagawa Hiroshige’s “Ohashi Atake no Yūdachi” (Evening Rainfall at the Bridge of Atake, in One Hundred Views of Edo), 1887, oil on canvas, 73x54 cm, Vincent Van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam.


en to be a print by Hokusai. Van Gogh might have been inspired not only to contrast the vivid blue of the water and the yellow of the bridge, but also to identify the Japanese climate with the Midi in France, by the following passage on Monet that Théodore Duret published in his Critique d’Avant garde:

It was not until the Japanese albums came into our hands that painters could juxtapose on the canvas a roof of audacious red, a yellow road, and the blue of water. Before the model was provided by the Japanese, it was impossible... Every time I contemplate the Japanese albums, I say to myself, yes, it was just in that way that nature appeared to my eye, in a luminous and transparent atmosphere... without attenuation or gradation, [just as] in the Midi of the France, where every color appears glaring and intense in summer.

Finally, as for the “oriental” brushwork that Manet tried to master, some of the sketches by Vincent Van Gogh in which he accentuated dots suggest his appropriation of Hokusai’s vocabulary, which was accessible to him in illustrations published in the monthly Le Japon artistique (ill.27). As Ursula Perucchini Petri has observed, these expressive brushstrokes were tactfully transposed into lithographs by Toulouse Lautrec, Edouard Vuillard, and Pierre Bonnard. Members of the Nabis group are known to have subscribed to Le Japon artistique, and Bonnard himself was known by the sobriquet “Nabi très japonard.”

V

This inquiry into Japonisme finally suggests a new hypothesis about the spiritual inspiration that Hokusai and other Japanese print craftsmen provided to Vincent Van Gogh. In a famous passage sent to his brother Théo, Van Gogh wrote:

If we study Japanese art, we see a man who is undoubtedly wise, philosophic, and intelligent who spends his time doing what? In studying the distance between the earth and the moon? No. In studying Bismarck’s politics? No. He studies a single blade of grass (“un seul brin d’herbe”) But this blade of grass leads him to draw every plant, then great views of the countryside in every season, then animals, then human figures. So he passes his life, and life is too short to do the whole. Come
now, isn’t it a true religion that these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers.23

Dr. Kōdera Tsukasa has demonstrated that the “blade of grass” refers directly to the words in the “programme” written by S. Bing for the first volume of Le Japon artistique (May 1888), which Théo sent to Vincent in Arles. An anonymous illustration inserted in the same issue (ill.28) must also have been the source of direct inspiration. Bing says, “There is nothing in creation, not even the smallest blade of grass, which does not deserve a place in the elevated conception of art.”24 The encyclopedic view of nature, ranging from natural history to human figures in the countryside, may reflect the idea shared by the European Japonisant circle in their view of the Manga, as we have already seen. The name of Hokusai represented for Vincent this image of Japanese artist as a philosopher.

In addition, an illustration of crabs attributed to Hokusai in the same issue of Le Japon artistique was also borrowed by Vincent. The image of a crab thrown upside down has been interpreted as a metaphor of Vincent’s own personal struggle for existence.25

Along with this idyllic image of Japan, Vincent fancied that Japanese artists lived in an idealized community sustained by mutual emulation and brotherhood. He wrote to Emile Bernard,

For a long time I have thought it touching that Japanese artists often used to exchange works among themselves. It certainly proves that they liked and sustained each other, that a certain harmony reigned among them, and that they were really living in some sort of fraternal community, quite naturally, and not beset with intrigues.26

The exchange of works that Van Gogh believed Japanese artists to have
practiced remains a mystery among Japanese specialists. Dr. Kôdera mentioned one copy of Shinsen kachô no kei in Vincent's possession as a possible source of inspiration. That album of birds and flowers, however, was painted by a single artist, and therefore it does not hint at "exchange" among artists. I would like to advance the hypothesis that Vincent Van Gogh might have had the occasion to see examples of surimono prints put together and bound as an album. One such specimen is still preserved intact today at the Cabinet des estampes in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. This example, comprising three albums (Ten [Heaven], Chi [Earth], and Jin [Man]) assembled by the satirical kyôka poet Nagashima Masahide, is a memoir of his collaboration with other poets. It contains rare surimono prints made by such famous contemporary ukiyo-e designers as Kitao Masanobu, Kubo Shunman, Torii Kiyonaga, Kitagawa Utamaro and (especially) Hokusai. This album was rediscovered by Kondô Eiko and has been studied in detail by Asano Shûgô, but I am responsible for the hypothesis that it had been seen by Van Gogh.

Van Gogh might have seen this set of albums while he was in Paris, because it
belonged to Théodore Duret, who purportedly had his collection deposited with
Maurice Joyant. Joyant was to take over the direction of the Montmartre branch of the
Société Goupil after the death of Théodore Van Gogh. It is difficult to imagine that
Vincent would have missed the chance to view this collection while he was in Paris. The
Van Gogh brothers would also have had the chance to examine similar specimens at
Bing's shop, to which they had free access. One glimpse at such an album might well
have been enough to convince Vincent that the Japanese exchanged work with each oth-
er, as many prints of different sizes by several artists were assembled on the cover and in
the leaves of the albums (ill.32). Van Gogh expressed his desire to realize such an album
in his letter to Théo: "The albums of six or ten or twelve pen sketches, are like the
Japanese albums of original sketches. I really want to make one like this for Gauguin,
and another for Bernard" (492) (ill.29).

Here we can see two related reasons why Vincent repeatedly declared that "the future
of new art (‘art nouveau’) is in the Midi." On the one hand, the climate and light effects
in Arles were said to be comparable to that of Japan; on the other hand, the ideal com-
munity of artists was now under construction in Arles at Vincent's own initiative, follow-
ing what he thought to be the Japanese model. From this conjunction—possibly suggest-
ed by Duret's writing—Arles was finally identified with
Japan. "Here in Arles, I am in Japan" (letter to Wilhelmina W.7). Was Vincent dreaming of becoming a Dutch
"Hókousai" in Arles, disguising himself as a Buddhist
monk?

VI

In 1896, Edmond de Goncourt published his last book,
Hókousai, as a series of "biographies des impressionnistes
japonais." It must be noted that shortly before, S. Bing had
publicly protested in La Revue blanche that his project of
publishing a translation of a life of Hókousai had been
hijacked by Hayashi Tadamasa (ill.34) and Edmond de
Goncourt.30 That a controversy arose over precedence in
publishing such a book suggests two things. First, Hókousai
was of considerable importance in the fin de siècle
European art market. Second, the biography of Hókousai,
initiated by Kobayashi Bunshichi and completed by
Kyoshin Iijima Hanjūrō, published in Japanese in 1893,
was central to this dispute from the outset.31 It turns out
from these circumstances that the first serious historical
research on the life of Hókousai in Japan had been under-

(34) Portrait of Hayashi Tadamasa, 1900, reproduced in Bulletin de la Société fran-
cô-japonaise à Paris, 1903.
taken at the instigation of French requests.

In the same year, 1896, Michel Revon published the doctoral dissertation he had presented to the Faculty of Letters of l'Université Sorbonne as Étude sur Hokousai. While Edmond de Goncourt’s biography of Hokusai represented the end of Japonisant interpretation, the latter signaled a change in perspective. Goncourt had enthusiastically compared Hokusai’s erotica, identified as Kinoyé no Komatsou, to a sketch of a hand attributed to Michelangelo, using such emotional expressions as “cette force...cette énergie de la linéature qui fait du dessin d’un verge un dessin égal à la main du Musée du Louvre, attribuée à Michel Ange.” In contrast, Michel Revon sought to rectify French Japonisants’ excessive praise of Hokusai, saying in his conclusion that cultivated Japanese were no less astonished by French admiration of Hokusai than the French would be if informed that the Japanese put Gavarni at the summit of French Art.

The world’s fair held in Paris in 1900 contributed to relativizing the Japonisant interpretations of Hokusai. L’Histoire de l’Art du Japon, the first “official” version of Japanese art history, published by the Japan Imperial Commission for the Universal Exhibition in Paris, listed forty or so ukiyo-e designers. Hokusai was treated much as the others, in a short biographical summary of twelve lines illustrated by a single plate. There was no discussion at all of his significance in Japanese art history. The gap between this “official” survey of Japanese art, which gave pride of place to “national treasures” transmitted from antiquity, and the European Japonisant amateurs’ view, which privileged “vulgar” ukiyo-e and applied arts, was made decisively clear, even for the European public.

In 1914, Henri Focillon (ill. 35) published his Hokousai, and in the introduction he recapitulated the debate over evaluations of the artist’s place. Focillon was not satisfied with maintaining a neutral position between the European view and Japanese view. Nor did he agree with German scholar Woldemar von Seidlitz’s view, which he criticized as a deviation from “historical sense” attributable to a confusion of “outdated Japonisant principles” with a German “idealist preference.” Instead, Focillon proposed to rehabilitate Hokusai by reaffirming his value as an artisan, thereby refusing to yield to the “literary culture” of Japan’s most sophisticated connoisseurs.

In the second edition of Hokousai, published in 1925, Focillon added a new preface. In order to justify his view of Hokusai, in the midst of these oscillating estimations, Focillon refers to Okakura Tenshin. At first glance, the choice is surprising, for Okakura had been largely responsible for the conception of L’Histoire de l’Art du Japon, which conspicuously ignored Hokusai and denied the appropriateness of the high esteem he
enjoyed in Europe. But Focillon believed that Okakura had, in his book *The Ideals of the East,* “rescued a probably fictive but nonetheless specific ("génial") continuity— as a structure— of an organic thinking” of the idea of Asia “as a common heritage, constituting the patriotism of the continent” (pp. i-ii). In this context, Focillon attempted to portray Hokusai as the genius, representative of all Asian peoples, who made “Asian virtue communicable to all human beings.” The words of this cosmopolitan art historian of the interwar period stand as a testimony of the heyday of “world art history.”

In the midst of our oscillating preferences, Hokusai remains intact. That is, he conserves in himself some of the permanent and profound traits of Asiatic soul, takes them up to the highest degree of their expressive power, and makes them communicable to the whole of humanity. Hokusai is not only one of the greatest creators of the living forms in history, but he belongs to the heroic order, he is one of the artists who, being visible from all the points of the horizon, lets us know simultaneously his own singular genius, and the genius of his race, as well as something of the eternal man.35

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Van Gogh 1990

NOTES
An earlier version of this article was presented at the Third International Hokusai Conference, Obuse, Nagano Prefecture, 19-22 April 1998.

1 The basic article on the subject remains Giovanni Peternolli 1978, pp. 3-18.
2 Burty 1866, p.209.
3 Chesneau 1868, pp. 421-422.
5 Duret 1882, pp. 113-131; pp. 300-318.
7 Duret 1885. For the precise analysis, see Inaga 1996, vol. i, pp. 307-319. A part of this paper is repeated hereafter.
8 Lafarge 1870; Jarves 1876.
9 Ōshima 1996 (this book includes a commentary by Inaga Shigemi).
11 Inaga 1983.
12 Duret 1882, p. 125; Duret 1885, p. 197.
13 Ibid., p. 167.
15 Duret 1906, p. 211.
16 Duret 1885, p. 67.
17 Mantz 1863, p. 383; Duret 1885, p. 17.
18 Huysmans 1975, pp. 103-104.
20 Francastel 1951; cf. Inaga 1983.
22 Petri 1976.
23 Van Gogh 1990. Lettre à Théo, 542 (September 1888). The following letters by Vincent Van Gogh are from the same edition (referred to by the number of the letter.)
The message “life is too short to do everything” was picked up by Kurosawa Akira in the episodes on the life of Vincent Van Gogh included in his film Dreams.

B. 17 September 1888 (letter to Émile Bernard).

Kōdera 1990, p. 54.


Inaga 1993, pp. 16-19.


Iijima 1893.


“Et je parlais alors de la peinture érotique de l’Extrême-Orient, de ces copulations comme encolérées, du culbutis de ces ruts renversant les paravents d’une chambre, de ces emmêlements des corps fondu ensemble, de ces nervosité jouissives des bras, à la fois attirant et repoussant le coït, de ces bouillonnements de ventres féminins, de l’épilepsie de ces pieds aux doigts tordus battant l’air, de ces baisers bouche-à-bouche dévorateurs, de ces pamoisons de femmes, la tête renversée à terre, la petite mort sur leur visage, aux yeux clos, sous leurs paupières fardées, enfin de cette force, de cette énergie de la linéature qui fait du dessin d’une verge un dessin égal à la main du Musée du Louvre, attribuée à Michel-Ange.”

The paragraph including the quoted passage has been omitted in the pre-war period Japanese translations independently made by Yone Noguchi and Nagai Kafū, probably to avoid censorship for the sake of “bon moeurs.” The erotica in question was first attributed to Utamaro, then de Goncourt rectified the error and attributed it to Hokusai.


Focillon 1914; 1925, pp. 29-42.

Focillon 1925, pp. ii-iv. The following is the original:

A travers ces oscillations de nos préférences, Hokusai demeure intact. C’est qu’il conserve en lui, c’est qu’il porte à leur plus haut degré de puissance expressive, c’est qu’il rend communicables à toute l’humanité quelques-uns des traits permanents et profonds de l’âme asiatique. Il n’est pas seulement un des plus grands créateurs de formes vivantes qui furent jamais, il appartient à l’ordre héroïque, il est au nombre de ces artistes, qui, visibles de tous les points de l’horizon, nous font connaître, en même temps qu’un génie singulier, celui de leur race et quelque chose de l’homme éternel.
要旨

北斎とジャポニズム

稲賀繁美

北斎の評価は疑う余地のないものだが、彼の人気は歴史的産物である。学者の中には、彼が日本美術史上最高位の大家だと認めることを躊躇する向きもある。とはいえ北斎は、とりわけ西洋諸国において、間違いなく最も著名な日本人画家である。数多くの北斎研究によって彼の評価が正当化され確固たるものとされてきた。ところがその一方でそれぞれの研究は、なぜ北斎が日本美術の最も傑出したヒーローとして評価されたのかに関する社会的、歴史的なコンテクストをきちんと把握せずにすまなかった。十九世紀後半にヨーロッパに「ジャポニズム」が流行する状況で、なぜ北斎が神格化されたのかを問うことによって、いかなる条件が北斎の栄光を可能にしたのかを解明したい。即ち、如何にして一介の浮世絵師人が、西洋のミケランジェロ、ルーベンス、レンブラントの如き巨匠にも匹敵するような東洋きっての大家として理想化されたのか？あるいは何故に、マネやゴッホのような西洋近代美術を代表するような人物までもが、北斎をあれほどまでに賞賛したのか？