Early French Appreciation of Hokusai and Its Socio-historical background

1. Early French Appreciation of Hokusai

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Reception of Hokusai in the West:
from Philippe Burty to Henri Focillon (1862-1925)
with special focus on “Manga Jasienski”

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Hokusai’s reputation is beyond question, but his popularity is an historical product. Many Hokusai studies have contributed to justify and consolidate his reputation while leaving behind a social and historical context which required Hokusai as the most eminent hero of Japanese art.

By questioning the apotheosis of Hokusai in the context of the 19th Century Western Japonisme, the paper tries to elucidate some of the underlying conditions which enabled and prepared Hokusai’s glorification.

How was a simple Japanese ukiyo-e craftsman transfigured into the ultimate icon of Oriental master, compatible to such giants as Michelangelo, Rubens and Rembrandt? And why was he so highly admired by such champions of modern art as Édouard Manet and Vincent van Gogh?


2. Early French Appreciation of Hokusai

and Its Socio-historical background

« twenty-eight (sic) books by famous Fou-kou-say » or Oksaye (sic) is comparable to Watteau pour élégance, Daumier pour l’énergie, Goya pour la fantaisie et Delacroix pour le mouvement. Hokusai’s richness in subject matter and dexterity in brush strokes are comparable only to Peter Paul Rubens.

Philippe Burty, Chef d’œuvres des arts industriels, 1866.

Philippe Burty (1830-1890)
From the coverpage of The Independent Critic, by Gabriel P. Weisberg.

Ganbettist idea of subverting the Western academic hierarchy of Beaux-Arts by the intrusion of an Oriental craftsman so as to promote Arts industriels:

Cette lecture est retenue par Inaga Shigemi qui interprète la position de Philippe Burty comme une position républicaine, « défiant les visions orthodoxes de la hiérarchie établie dans la France du Second Empire. (…) Les contributions de Burty en tant que critique d’art à la presse (La Presse, La Liberté, La République française) ne peuvent que corroborer cette analyse ».


“le plus libre et le plus sincère des maîtres japonais”

1) Illustrated encyclopedia of Japan
2) Common people depicted with some irony
3) Sketches with caricature and spontaneity
4) Simple but skillful reproduction


Original text à retrouver...
Katsushika Hokusai, *Chûshingura, A Hundred Cats’ Physiognomies* Ca. 1842
Champfleury in the guise of a cat in company with Kuniyoshi’s human-cats

Édouard Manet «Rendez-vous des chats» 1868, lithographie, 43,5x33,2cm.
エドゥアール・マネ 《猫のランデヴー》 1868年
石版画 パリ 国立図書館

Edouard Manet advertizing Les Chats by Champfleury by his lithographic poster in 1869

Édouard Manet, *La queue devant la boucherie* 1870-71, 23.9x14.8cm,eau-forte.
エドゥアール・マネ 1870-71年
《肉屋の前の行列 傘》腐食銅板画

Lettre d’E. Manet asking Th. Duret to keep his main paintings (L’Olympia, L’Enfant à l’épée… le Balcon) in safety, Jeudi 16, Sep., 1870
マネ『テオドール・デュレの肖像』キャンヴァスに油彩 43x35cm 1868
パリ プテイ・パレ美術館

The Japanese spaniel which Duret brought back from Japan became a favorite pet and model among Manet and painters of the so-called Batignolles School, which constitutes the core of the Impressionists, in 1874.

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The Japanese spaniel which Duret brought back from Japan became a favorite pet and model among Manet and painters of the so-called Batignolles School, which constitutes the core of the Impressionists, in 1874.
Manet intentionally copies the Japanese dog by imitating the brush stroke of the Japanese ink painting following the model book brought back from Japan by Théodore Duret, *Hokusai Manga*, to begin with.

By taking Tama as a model, Manet tried to practice the brush stroke *à la japonaise*. This experience was directly connected with his lithography of *Le Corbeau* he was going to realize in collaboration with the poet, Stéphane Mallarmé.

Manet is “exhibiting” here his knowledge of Oriental Art.

Judging from Manet’s copies, his intention to compete with Hokusai in showing his spontaneity and dexterity of brush-stroke is quite obvious.

Using exclusively the brush contained by the hand, the Japanese artist is known to reach to such a boldness, gracefulness and confidence that even the most talented European artist cannot attain.

Edouard Manet, copie d'une page
De Mangwa de Hokousai, Musée du Louvre
マネによる『北斎漫画』の模写、制作年代不明
ルーヴル美術館

The drawing by Manet generally remains in the state of a sketch or a croquis. These drawings were done so as to grasp a fleeting aspect, a movement or an eminent detail. (...) 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 his Mangoua.
Th. Duret, L'histoire d'Édouard Manet et de son œuvre, 1906, p. 211.

Duret's theory of the Japanese « prime saut » (first attack without retouch) was baseless. In reality, Hokusai and other ukiyoe masters made repetitive retouches and modifications in their preparatory drawings to be handed over to engravers.

This observation leads to another hypothesis: It may be possible that French belief in the Japanese spontaneity in execution brought them to a hasty execution, to their refusal of « fini » for the benefit of direct catching of the vivid impressions with a single and instantaneous brush stroke.

2. Japanese Aesthetics
As it was understood in France
Through Hokusai’s Vision
in the Second Half of the 19th Century

« le beau dessin de cavalier que M. Veverse plaît à appeler le Saint Georges, l'esquisse du Rapt, œuvres pleines d'une admirable vie interne, ne laissaient pas écumer, ni crépiter au-dehors. Elles la ramassent et la contractent avec énergie. On dirait le dessin d’un statuaire, quelque groupe puissamment pétri, tout prêt pour la fondre ». Henri Focillon, Hokousai, 1917, p. 129.

Kamisui Hokusai
Champion na na-ten-ya sahibi
ca. 1830, Musée Guimet, 2002

Enfin arrivent les plantes, les fleurs, et sont à faire en dernier, les choses immobiles, brunes, noires, géométriques et bâties du polygone, têtes et rochers. C'est-à-dire que, dans le premier volume de la Mangoua, on a un résumé du monde visible japonais.


The essential Japanese-ness in Hokusai detected by French critics turns out to be Hokusai’s application of Western savoir-faire.

Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)  
Gérard de Leiris (1640-1661)  
Morishima Chûryô (1754-1803)  
Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)

C’est ainsi que nous avons Fouj va à travers les mailles de fil de un pêcheur...

Th. Duret, « L’art japonais, (...) Hokusai », 1882

In reality the view à travers was also Hokusai’s own re-interpretation of the Western linear perspective.

« Japanese eccentricities » to be compared with Grandville, Une Promenade dans le ciel, 1847

Ernest F. Fenollosa, Professor of Political economy at the Imperial University of Tokyo (1853-1908)

E. Fenollosa’s sarcastic remark in his book review of “The Chapter of painting of Mr. Gonse’s L’Art japonais (1883)” denying opinions of L. Gonse and Th. Duret, is published in Japan Weekly Mail, 1884.
In their ignorance of all else, they look at everything Japanese, and especially Japanese art, only through the eyes of Hokusai (...). The artisan artist (...), was indeed an innately aesthetic phenomenon. (…) Hokusai's painting is true, not because it deals with lofty conceptions, not because Hokusai was not a man of rank, but because it is in its manner, and almost always in its conception. (…) Hardly a Japanese of culture have been really converted to the foreign view. Critics here (in Japan) regard with amazement or amusement European estimates. It is hardly to be expected, to be sure, that those genial Japanese gentlemen, who make a business of selling Hokusai's, ... the admiration of his earnest, but too generous European critics, than from the neglect of his countrymen. To regard him as the greatest artist of Japan, and as the crowning representative of all that is excellent in Japanese art, is unjust to the art, and may react unfavorably against the reputation of the man who has suddenly been elevated to a position far above his own ambition. (…) we have no more right to compare him with a Chô Densu, a Sesshû or a Shûbun, than to draw a parallel between John Leech and Fra Angelico.

For both Fenollosa and Anderson it was out of the question to compare Hokusai to the fifteenth-century Zen Buddhist Master painters. Right: Sesshû, Scroll of Mountain and Water (ca. 1437-46) San Marco, Firenze. For both Fenollosa and Anderson it was out of the question to compare A simple pair contrasts John Hokusai to the fifteenth-century Zen Buddhist Master painters. Right: Sesshû, Scroll of Mountain and Water (ca. 1437-46) San Marco, Firenze. John Leech, Mr. George and Dragonfly. To put Hokusai side by side with Inouet, Shûbun or a Sesshû was no less outrageous for a William Anderson to discuss John Leech, surnamed Mr. Punch, together with the venerable Fra Angelico.
Ironically enough, William Anderson was one of the best collectors of Hokusai in the West. Despite his high esteem of Sesshū, the Oriental Quattrocento Zen Buddhist painting master, Dr. Anderson had little access to the 15th century masterpieces, and could illustrate his book, The Pictorial Arts of Japan only with some modest reproductions of low quality wood block copies made after Sesshū's death. The nobility of Hokusai's art went unappreciated.

William Anderson

Hokusai, Mount Fuji with the Demon of Oiwa, 1811. With the inscription by Kyokutei Bakin (1867-1848) in commemoration of the completion of Chinsetsu Yumiharizuki, Strange Tales of the Crescent Moon. The British Museum, Former Collection of William Anderson donated to the Museum.

Kakuzô Okakura

The wooden structure is said to be modeled after the Golden Hall of Hōryū-ji temple, Ikaruga, Nara, to exhibit the ancient Fine Arts, mainly consisting of the relics of the Buddhist Art, from the antiquity of Nara, which the West has never seen.


L’Histoire de l’Art du Japon (1900) highlights the Buddhist Antiquity (7-9th Century) as a classical alternative—compatible with the Greco-Roman canon, and the Anglo-Saxon scholars belief in the absolute superiority of the Zen Buddhist painting of the Japanese Quattrocento (14-16th Century).

Hokusai poorly estimated by the Japanese. L’Histoire de l’Art du Japon (1900) ignores the Hokusai school. The first official version of Japanese Art History reduces the Hokusai school into no more than 15 lines with only one illustration, leaving room for transcription in the form of “Hokusai-Hokusai-Hokusai”.

1. How does the Japanese Art through Hokusai contribute to the subversion of the Western Academic canon? A deep analysis of the Hokusai controversies.
2. Composition decomposed
   « destruction de l’espace » Pierre Francastel, Peinture et Société (1951)
3. Croquis and Drawing as expression of spontaneity
   Free brush stroke put an end to the academic « fini »
4. Colors elaborated from the norm of chiaroscuro and shading
   The « Blue Revolution » (Henry Smith II) in Edo causes « indigomanie » of Impressionism in France
New Composition, or the decomposition of the linear perspective:

Manet scatters human figures on the pictorial plane without any visible order or hierarchy just like Hokusai practices it in his Manga.

Manet's intentional deviation from the rule of the linear perspective happen to concur with Hokusai's "Method of triple division" separating the horizontal line from the limit of the earth line.

Mallarmé sees in Manet's seascape the Oriental impact leading to a new perspective which is more truthful than the artificial Western science. The latter has mythified our eyes by the civilized education. - S. Mallarmé, "The Impressionism and Ed. Manet" Art Monthly Review, I, 1876.

* The comparison proposed by Pierre Francastel in his Peinture et Société (1951), note 72; Ed. 1977, p. 329.
The sacred mountains are looked through the alley of trees both in Hokusai and in Paul Cézanne. While Hokusai emphasizes the contrast of far-near in what he taught to be a Western fashion of perspective, Cézanne comes to the same superposition in his effort to liberate himself from conventions.

*The comparison was proposed by Hidemichi Tanaka in 1978, and shortly later by Shigemi Inaga in 1979.

Katsushika Hokusai, Hodogaya on the Tōkaido highway, from the series Thirty-six views of Mt. Fuji, c.1832, Kanagawa Prefectural Museum of Cultural History
Édouard Manet, Laura de Valence, (detail) 1862, 123x92cm, Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

Édouard Manet, "Laura de Valence" 1863, eau-forte and aquatint, 26.6x18.5cm.

Édouard Manet, LeGrand Canal à Venise, (detail) 1875, 58x71cm, Shelburne, Shelburne Museum.

The "indigomania" which J.K. Huysmans diagnosed in Manet and Impressionists (1879) was the result of a secondary contagion and a side-effect of the "Blue Revolution" (effect of the Prussian blue) which Henry Smith II recognizes among the late Ukiyo-e, including The Thirty-Six View of Fuji.
Édouard Manet, *En bateau*, 1874, 92.7x130.2cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Manet 983:140).


Édouard Manet, *Portrait d’Émile Zola*, 1868, 146x114cm, Paris, Musée d’Orsay (détail).

Not only the eccentric composition (découpage) but also the contagion with the Prussian blue in Japanese Ukiyo-e affects the French Impressionists.


5. Toward a New Pictorial Plane

Assemblage, A-plat

And Multi-layered Reality

In the Fin de siècle
Paul Gauguin, *La Vision après le sermon*, 1888, 72x92cm
Dynamic contrast between the oversized foreground and minuscule background is stressed by the truncation of a tree subdividing the composition rendered in red.


Émile Bernard, *Baigneuses à la vache rouge*, 1888, Private Collection, E.B. No. 21

Émile Bernard complains that his invention of a new pictorial place has been stolen by P. Gauguin.

Hokusai’s sumō wrestler gives a witty pretext for P. Gauguin to ridicule in his political satire the Tahitian Protestant governor.

Hokusai thus fuels aesthetic as well as political controversies in France.

Paul Gauguin, *Etude de force*, 1899-1900, Caricature inédite signée Paul Gauguin, collection particulière

Top left: “Crowns in the Moonlight,” Gashi kaiyô, after Korin, ed. 1754; Reproduced in Duret’s article, *Hokusai* (G.B.A.), 1882

Top Right: P. Gauguin, *La Vision après le sermon*, 1888

Left: Vincent van Gogh, *Semeur*, 1888

Paris illustré, Le Japon, mai 1886, No. 45-46.
Vincent van Gogh
Crabe, couché sur le dos
Arles, janvier 1889, 38x46,5cm (F.605, W.475)

Hokusai's crab may have inspired Van Gogh in whose immobilized Crab biographers have tried to read Vincent's struggle with the tragic destiny.

Anonymous, Camellia
Reproduced in Le Japon artistique, No.3 July, 1888. Théo sent a copy of the issue to Vincent in Arles.

Vincent van Gogh
« Roses sauvage et scarabée »
Saint-Rémy, avril-mai 1890, 33,5x24,5cm (F.749, W.622)

Vincent van Gogh
« Coquelicot et papillon »
Saint-Rémy, avril-mai 1890, 34,5x24,5cm (F.748, W.622)

Vincent van Gogh
« Poirier en fleurs »
Arles, avril 1888, 73x46cm (F.405, W.322)

The meticulous depiction of flora by Vincent van Gogh was an intentional imitation (imitatio) of the encyclopedic view of Nature as the French critics have observed in Hokusa's Manga.

From microscopic observations of a plant to the panoramic view of the whole univers—Vincent follows the « true religion that these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers. »  Lettre to Theo 542, Sep. 1888

There is nothing in creation, not even the smallest blade of grass (un seul brin d'herbe) which does not deserve a place in the elevated conception of art. S. Bing, « Programme », Le Japon artistique, May 1888.

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. Vincent Van Gogh, lettre to Émile Bernard, B-17, Sep. 1888

Vincent van Gogh, Album of drawings conceived by Vincent Van Gogh, Sketch in letter 492, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh.

Bunpô, Hinageshi, Dianthus
Reproduced in Le Japon artistique, No.2, July, 1888. 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.
Vincent van Gogh, Album of drawings conceived by Vincent Van Gogh, Sketch in letter 492, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh.

二代歌川広重
(1826-2869)
「新撰花鳥尽」（8枚の花鳥画からなる画帖）
各23.5x17.5cm 1950年代
Utagawa Hiroshige II, Glimpses of newly selected flowers and birds (Shinsen Kacho-zukushi) (8 prints of flowers and birds mounted as a folding album) 23.5x17.5cm(each). (van Gogh 1992, No.III-30) 1950s

Édouard Manet « Portrait de Théodore Duret » 1868, 43x35cm, Paris, Musée du Petit Palais

Kitao Misanobu
北尾政寅
alias Santô Kyôden
山東京傳
(1761-1816)
Crossing the Sumida River
山東京傳（北尾政演）『隅田川の渡』

Surimono Album in 3 Volumes
Spring-Summer
Bird
Man
Human

Kitao Misanobu
北尾政寅
alias Santô Kyôden
山東京傳
(1761-1816)
Crossing the Sumida River, kyôka poets disguised in Seven Auspicious Divinities, inscription by Yomo no Utagaki

四方歌垣
Ancienne collection Th. Duret, Cabinet des estampes, Od 171, Bibliothèque national de France.

The rare surimono prints testifies to the fact that the pieces were not destined for a massive commercial diffusion but was specially ordered to famous ukiyo-e masters for a limited circulation within a friendly circle for a specific purposes-exchanging their seasonal greetings, or publishing their collection of satirical poems, kyôka…
Katsushika Hokusai,

Surimono of calendar depicting a poster for a kabuki theater, 19.6 × 13.7cm, the unique piece to be known, found in the Duret album mentioned above, Fig. No. 8.

One glimpse at such an album of Surimono might well have been enough to convince Vincent that the Japanese exchanged works with each other, as many prints of different size by several artists were assembled on the leaves composing the album.

Vincent van Gogh could have seen such albums of surimono while he was in Paris. The Duret collection was then deposited with Maurice Joyant, Théo’s close colleague of the Société Goupil in Paris.

On lui doit (à Hokusai) encore une foule de petites compositions en couleurs*, figures ou scènes détachées, faites en partie en son temps, en temps des devoirs qu’ils se distribuaient entre eux.

* Surimono, 折り物交換のこと

It is partly inspired by the exchange of works practiced by the Japanese, that Vincent dreams of establishing an Artistic Community in Arles.

Vincent van Gogh dreaming to become a Dutch ‘Hokusai’ in Arles, disguising himself in a Buddhist monk. Hokusai being synonymous with aloha...
Priority dispute over Hokusai: In Search of the authentic self-portraits of Hokusai

From 1882 to 1887 Feliks Jasieński studied in Paris and in Berlin, before returning to Poland. In 1901 he unacquiescently attempted to exhibit his collection of Japanese art. His epicentre collection includes previous collections of Edmond de Goncourt. Sumamed Manggha, after Hokusai, Jasieński published A Guide to the Japanese Section of the National Museum in Cracow in 1902. His collection was donated to the state in 1920.

It was not until 1978 that the existence of a huge collection of Japanese art in Cracow was known to Japan. The collection contains over 5,000 shunga, 2,000 woodcuts, 500 paintings and panels, 500 ceramics, 70 netsuke, 150 costume and obi-s, many of which came from former Jasieński collection. The first return-home exhibit was held in Kyoto in 1980, with Sadao Kikuchi, specialist in ukiyo-e, serving as the commissioner.


French experts for the sake of commercial profit and the struggle to appropriate primary data for the establishment of the authoritative Hokusai biography.

--Forced expertise for the sake of commercial profit and the struggle to appropriate primary data for the establishment of the authoritative Hokusai biography.

"Auto-portrait" of Hokusai, Ed. 1977

Forced expertise for the sake of commercial profit and the struggle to appropriate primary data for the establishment of the authoritative Hokusai biography.

Letter de Hayashi Tadamasa addressed to Ed. de Goncourt, authenticating the self-portrait of Hokusai. Paris, 15 mars 1894. Envelope by Henri Vever

A preparatory drawing in the possession of S. Bing was claimed to be Hokusai's autography of his own self-portrait, by comparison with a print brought to Paris from Japan by Bunshichi Koyama on Oct. 1900. S. Bing offered the original to Hayashi, who donated it to the Musée du Louvre at his departure from Paris.

Lin Tadamasa Hayashi Tadamasa (1856-1906) photo taken in Paris in 1900 before his departure.

Kyoshin, Iijima Hanjirō (1841-1911), Katsushika Hokusai den, A Biography of Katsushika Hokusai (1893).

In his postscript Koyama Bunshichi quotes from Ph. Burty his eloquent praise of the master, so as to show Hokusai’s high reputation in Europe and America. The quote includes Burty’s comparison of Hokusai with Peter Paul Rubens in his inventiveness and dexterity in brush manipulation. The phrase had been translated into Japanese by Tadamasa Hayashi for the Ukiyoe exhibition held by Koyama in Tokyo in 1902. It turns out that the first serious historical research on the life of Hokusai in Japan was undertaken at the instigation of French request – accelerating heated quest for priority.

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Katsushika Hokusai, Programme of the concert Sword and Bunches of Iris Leaves, ca. 1800-1808, 38.9 x 52.6 cm, surimono, format shikishi-ban
Limited printing for the distribution within the friendly circle.

Katsushika Hokusai – Kustoszewski/Narzanka – Trybunalska Est de Mont Fuji.
In the Great Wave: a proper metaphor to account for the dimension of the controversies provoked by Hokusai in terms of his recognition as an Oriental master? The politics of aesthetic judgment being at issue.


A modest addendum to the Great Wave

Hokusai’s industry at work!

A través de estas oscilaciones de nuestras preferencias, Hokusai demuestra que si con los años el azul oscuro de sus olas ha perdido su fuerza y su brillo, su encanto es que en su tiempo perfeccionó un nuevo efecto pictórico, más intenso y más persistente. Su imagen, impregnada de color y de movimiento, enlaza con otros aspectos de la historia del arte, que se manifestaron en el periodo de los Genroku. En un sentido, Hokusai se convirtió en el maestro de la estampa japonesa, pero también en el maestro del arte occidental. En el siglo XIX, el arte japonés influyó en el arte occidental, y en el arte occidental influyeron los temas y técnicas japoneses. Hokusai es un ejemplo de cómo el arte puede cruzar fronteras y compartir su influencia en diferentes culturas.
Emile Gallé
Vase, 1878
Paris, Musée des décoratifs

鯉魚文花瓶 1878年

宮川香山 《褐釉蟹貼付台付鉢》 明治14年(1881年) 東京国立博物館

Miyagawa Kozan I, Footed bowl with Crabs in Brown Glaze, 1881, Tokyo National Museum

ポール・ゴーガン《水浴する少女のある椀》 1887‐8年 コペンハーゲン個人蔵

Paul Gauguin, Detail of bowl with Bathing Girl, Collection Baillin-Bredholt, Copenhagen

カミーユ・クローデル 波(浴女たち) 1897-1903年 個人蔵

Camile Claudel La Vague ou Les baigneuses 1897-1903

Victor Prouvé (1858-1943)
La Nuit, 1894

泉屋博古館 『幻の京焼京都瓢池園』 2009年 p.17

信天翁の大鉢 ジョージー・ロワ社 フランス・1900年

新居浜市広瀬歴史記念館、愛媛

Large bowl in shape of an albatross in flightLa manufacture de CHOISY-LE-ROI France 1900 Hirose Memorial Museum, Niihama, Ehime.