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# The Making of Hokusai's Reputation in the Context of Japonisme

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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 pre-eminent 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?<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI, LOUIS GONSE, WILLIAM ANDERSON, THÉODORE DURET, ERNEST FENOLLOSA, EDMOND DE GONCOURT, HISTORIOGRAPHY, ART EVALUATION, AUTHENTICITY, CANON FORMATION

## I

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 Hokousai." 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.<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

Probably the most comprehensible exam-



(1) Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi, "Neko no hyakumensō" (One Hundred Portraits of Cats), Tempō era (1830-1844). From Suzuki Jūzō, *Kuniyoshi* (Heibonsha, 1992), Pl. 369.



(2) Champfleury, "Portrait de l'auteur," *Les Chats*, 1869, p. 326; Confusing Hokusai with Kuniyoshi, Champfleury had himself depicted himself as a cat "in Hokusai's fashion." Reproduced from *Champfleury, l'art pour le peuple*, Les Dossiers du Musée d'Orsay, 39, 1990.



(3) Édouard Manet, "Le Rendez-vous des chats," lithograph, 1868, 55x44 cm (with Champfleury's "portrait-charge" on the left in a "medaillon." Reproduced from *Champfleury, l'art pour le peuple*, Les Dossiers du Musée d'Orsay, 39, 1990

ple 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 Edouard 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.

## II

During the Franco-Prussian War and the days of the Paris Commune that followed, Edouard 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, Hokousai,” 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.”<sup>5</sup>

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



(4) Édouard Manet, “Portrait de Théodore Duret,” oil on canvas, 1867, 43x35 cm, Musée du Petit Palais, Paris



(5) Théodore Duret, “L’Art japonais,” title page, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1882, 2ème période, p. 45.

“Rembrandt, Corot, Goya, and Daumier at the same time (ill.7).”<sup>6</sup>

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



(6) Louis Gonse, *L'Art japonais*. Paris: A. Quantin, 1883.



(7) Louis Gonse, frontispiece for the chapter on Hokusai, *L'Art japonais*

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 Chō Densu, Sesshū (ill.9), or Shūbun 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.



(8) William Anderson, *The Pictorial Arts of Japan*. London: S. Low, 1886

(iv) While the “conservative” Anglo-Saxon specialists disdained the “vulgarity” of Hokusai's art, French avant-garde



(9) Unkoku Tōeki, "Portrait of Sesshū," Jōeiji 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 Tadamas, 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.)

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.<sup>7</sup>



(11) Fra Angelico, "Annunciation," Convento di San Marco, Florence, ca.1440-45



(12) John Leech called "Mr. Punch," "Mr. George and the Dragonflies."

## III

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).<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.



(13) Katsushika Hokusai, "*Kanagawa oki Namiura*" (Mount Fuji off the Coast of Kanagawa), *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, 1830-31.

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,<sup>10</sup> 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 Tsudzumi Tsuneyoshi would call the *Rahmenlosigkeit* (“framelessness”) 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.”<sup>11</sup>



(14) Katsushika Hokusai, frontispiece, *Ryakuga hayashinan* (The Secret of Drawings), vol. 2, 1814.

The free arrangement of the pictorial plane, clearly deviating from the principle of linear perspective, is commonly 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 economy that each of them retains its movement and characteristics of its own line and position.”<sup>12</sup> 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 ranging 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 brushstrokes 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, gracefulness, 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.”<sup>13</sup>

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 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" execution.<sup>14</sup>

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.



(15) Édouard Manet, "Raven, Portrait of Tama, and Imitation of Oriental Signatures," 1875, brush and pen with ink, transposed as lithograph, British Museum, London.

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 singled 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*.<sup>15</sup>

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 other 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

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.<sup>16</sup>

“*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



(17) Édouard Manet, “L’Argenteuille,” oil on canvas, 149x115 cm, Musée Tournay, Tournay. (An example of what Joris-Karl Huysmans labeled “*indigomanie*.”)



(16) Édouard Manet, “Laura de Valence,” 1862, oil on canvas, 125x92 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris. (An example of “*bariolage*” as that was criticized by Paul Mantz.)

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.”<sup>17</sup>

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 “*indigomanie*,” or an indigo-maniac disease.<sup>18</sup> 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 experienced 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 aesthetics, 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 coloration—French Japonisant interpretations of Hokusai proved to be strongly biased. Yet it cannot 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 Sèmeur* (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.



(19) Katsushika Hokusai, "Sumō Wrestlers," *Manga*, vol.1, 1814.



(20) Paul Gauguin, "La Vision après le sermon," oil on canvas, 73x92 cm, Scottish National Museum, Edinburgh.



(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.

terpreted Western linear perspective. Even Paul Cézanne, who seems to have ostentatiously 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.<sup>20</sup>

As for the juxtaposition of primary colors, it is evident that Van Gogh also succumbed 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-



(23) Katsushika Hokusai, "Hodogaya," *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, ca. 1834.



(24) Paul Cézanne, "Les Maronniers au Jas de Bouffan," 1885-86, oil on canvas, 73x92 cm, Art Institute, Minneapolis.



(26) Vincent Van Gogh, "Le Pont de Langlois," oil on canvas, 54x65 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.



(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, 73x54cm, Vincent Van Gogh Fondation, 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.<sup>21</sup>

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 Perucchi Petri has observed, these expressive brushstrokes were tactfully transposed into lithographs by Toulouse Lautrec, Edouard Vuillard, and Pierre Bonnard.<sup>22</sup> 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.”



(27) *Le Japon artistique*, vol. 1 cover (May 1888).

## 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.



(28) Unknown Japanese artist, “Un brin d’herbe,” reproduced in *Le Japon artistique* (May 1888).

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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup>

The exchange of works that Van Gogh believed Japanese artists to have



(29) Vincent Van Gogh, album of drawings, sketch in letter 492, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, Amsterdam.



(30) Utagawa Hiroshige II, *Shinsen kachō no kei* (Glimpses of Newly Selected Flowers and Birds), 1850s (copy owned by Vincent Van Gogh, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, Amsterdam).

practiced remains a mystery among Japanese specialists. Dr. Kōdera mentioned one copy of *Shinsen kachō no kei* in Vincent's possession as a possible source of inspiration<sup>27</sup>(ill.29-30). 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 (ill.33). This example, comprising three albums (*Ten* [Heaven], *Chi* [Earth], and *Jin* [Man]) assembled by the satirical *kyōka* 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 (ill.31). This album was rediscovered by Kondō Eiko and has been studied in detail by Asano Shūgō, but I am responsible for the hypothesis that it had been seen by Van Gogh.<sup>28</sup>

Van Gogh might have seen this set of albums while he was in Paris, because it



(31) Katsushika Hokusai, "Billing for a Kabuki Play," 19.6x13.7 cm, 1804, contained in the album assembled by Nagashima Masahide (see ill. 32).



(32) Surimono Album assembled and composed by Nagashima Masahide. Ancient Collection of Théodore Duret, Od. 171, Cabinet des estampes, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.



(33) Santō Kyōden, alias Kitao Masanobu, "Crossing the Sumida River," 40.2x50.9 cm with original calligraphy by Yomo no Utagaki on the upper part. Ancient Collection of Théodore Duret, Od.171, Cabinet des estampes, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.



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 other, 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) <sup>29</sup>(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 community of artists was now under construction in Arles at Vincent's own initiative, following what he thought to be the Japanese model. From this conjunction—possibly suggested 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 "Hokousai" in Arles, disguising himself as a Buddhist monk?

## VI

In 1896, Edmond de Goncourt published his last book, *Hokousai*, 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 Hokusai had been hijacked by Hayashi Tadamasa (ill.34) and Edmond de Goncourt.<sup>30</sup> That a controversy arose over precedence in publishing such a book suggests two things. First, Hokusai was of considerable importance in the *fin de siècle* European art market. Second, the biography of Hokusai, initiated by Kobayashi Bunshichi and completed by Kyoshin Iijima Hanjūrō, published in Japanese in 1893, was central to this dispute from the outset.<sup>31</sup> It turns out from these circumstances that the first serious historical research on the life of Hokusai in Japan had been under-



(34) Portrait of Hayashi Tadamasa, 1900, reproduced in *Bulletin de la Société franco-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 Hokusai*. 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 a Michel Ange."<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>

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



(35) Portrait of Henri Focillon, ca. 1935, reproduced in *Relire Focillon*, École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1998

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.<sup>35</sup>

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## NOTES

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

- <sup>1</sup> The basic article on the subject remains Giovanni Peternolli 1978, pp. 3-18.
- <sup>2</sup> Burty 1866, p.209.
- <sup>3</sup> Chesneau 1868, pp. 421-422.
- <sup>4</sup> Inaga 1997, p. 277 ff.
- <sup>5</sup> Duret 1882, pp. 113-131; pp. 300-318.
- <sup>6</sup> Gonse 1883, pp. 289-290, 269-270.
- <sup>7</sup> Duret 1885. For the precise analysis, see Inaga 1996, vo1. i, pp. 307-319. A part of this paper is repeated hereafter.
- <sup>8</sup> Lafarge 1870; Jarves 1876.
- <sup>9</sup> Ōshima 1996 (this book includes a commentary by Inaga Shigemi).
- <sup>10</sup> Naruse 1977, pp. 86-115.
- <sup>11</sup> Inaga 1983.
- <sup>12</sup> Duret 1882, p. 125; Duret 1885, p. 197.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 167.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Juliet-Bareau and Mitchell 1989, pp. 258-307.
- <sup>15</sup> Duret 1906, p. 211.
- <sup>16</sup> Duret 1885, p. 67.
- <sup>17</sup> Mantz 1863, p. 383; Duret 1885, p. 17.
- <sup>18</sup> Huysmans 1975, pp. 103-104.
- <sup>19</sup> Smith 1998. An English version is to appear as Henry D. Smith II, “Hokusai’s *Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji* and the ‘Blue Revolution’ in Edo Prints,” in Gian Carlo Calza and John T. Carpenter, eds., *Hokusai and His Age* (Venice: International Hokusai Research Center, University of Venice, forthcoming).
- <sup>20</sup> Francastel 1951; cf. Inaga 1983.
- <sup>21</sup> Duret 1885, pp. 63-67.
- <sup>22</sup> Petri 1976.
- <sup>23</sup> 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.)

- <sup>24</sup> Bing 1888.
- <sup>25</sup> 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*.
- <sup>26</sup> B. 17 September 1888 (letter to Émile Bernard).
- <sup>27</sup> Kōdera 1990, p. 54.
- <sup>28</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Cabinet des estampes, cote Od. 171-173. Kondō 1990, pp. 300-334.
- <sup>29</sup> Inaga 1993, pp. 16-19.
- <sup>30</sup> Goncourt 1896; Goncourt 1986 reprints the body of the text but omits the preface and catalogue of the original edition. Bing 1896, pp. 97-101. On this dispute, see Peternolli 1979/1980, which gives transcriptions of Hayashi's letters to de Goncourt, preserved at the Département des manuscrits at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris.
- <sup>31</sup> Iijima 1893.
- <sup>32</sup> Goncourt 1986, pp. 100-101, 240.  
 “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 fondus ensemble, de ces nervosités jouisseuses 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.
- <sup>33</sup> See Inaga 2002, pp. 115-126.
- <sup>34</sup> Focillon 1914; 1925, pp. 29-42.
- <sup>35</sup> Focillon 1925, pp. ii-iv. The following is the original:  
 A travers ces oscillations de nos préférences, Hokousai 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**

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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は、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らの研究は、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せてきた。十九世紀後半にヨーロッパに「ジャポニズム」が流行する状況下で、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職人が、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？