

Japanese Influences on Vincent van Gogh

In much the same way the media influences people today, the Japanese Pavilion at the 1867 World Exposition in Paris, France, provoked cosmopolitan society to adopt new ideas about fashion and the decorative arts. Fascinated by the contrast in western and eastern cultures, European women began to emulate Japanese customs by carrying fans and wearing silk kimonos. Furniture, ceramic pottery from the Orient, and Japanese gardens became commonplace in many bourgeois homes.

Because Japan was not open to the West until the 1850s, Japanese culture remained a mystery to most Europeans and consequently, authentic Japanese goods were difficult to acquire in Europe prior to 1860. After the World Exposition sparked interest, however, several of the larger Parisian stores introduced Japanese departments within their businesses. In turn, these specialty departments provided Japanese goods for a broader range of clientele. A wide variety of art prints were made available to the public, some expensive originals, others cheap copies. Nonetheless, by the close of the 1860s, Japanese prints were admired and collected by many Europeans.

Quite a few western artists succumbed to the allure of the Japanese aesthetic. One such artist was Vincent van Gogh who wrote from Antwerp to his brother, Theo, that "My studio is not so bad, especially as I have pinned a lot of little Japanese prints on the wall, which amuse me very much." Van Gogh, intrigued with the color and decorative flatness of Japanese art, is known to have made three copies of Japanese woodcut prints as late as 1887. Two of these prints, *Japonaiserie: Plum Tree in Bloom* and *Japonaiserie: Bridge in the Rain*, were based upon works by the Japanese master artist, Hiroshige. Van Gogh's prints did not attain the smooth colors and textures of the Hiroshige originals; however, they did indicate the artist's attempt to Europeanize Japanese art while incorporating its concepts into van Gogh's distinctive style.

Besides duplicating Japanese woodcuts, van Gogh painted several portraits that include references to some of the approximately 400 Japanese prints he owned. Two similar portraits of Pere Tanguy, an art materials supplier who promoted artists, show the sitter placed before a wall of decorative, colorful woodcuts of Japanese dancers. The genre figures in the Japanese prints create a complicated, visually busy background that seems to push against a simplified figure of Tanguy. Both portraits are characterized by a flat picture plane that lacks any attempt to create an illusion of realism.

Van Gogh's fascination with Japanese art extended beyond collecting prints and duplicating Japanese images. The artist also owned Japanese boxes. One red lacquered box was used to store woolens. Lids of several other "rough" boxes were used by van Gogh to paint images of renewal such as scenes of sprouting bulbs. Artist tools from Japan captured van Gogh's imagination, and he used reed pens to imitate woodcuts or calligraphy within his paintings. Additionally, Vincent once requested that Theo use the Japanese method of paper folding to construct a foldout album of the artist's drawings. In demonstrating his undeniable admiration for Japonisme, van Gogh painted a self-portrait as a Buddhist priest.

Other Impressionist artists were influenced by Japanese art as well. Matisse, Monet, Pissaro, and other artists of the Impressionist school created works of art infused with Japonism: a sense of dramatic color, large areas of open space, and lines that define shapes, volume, and texture.

Vocabulary

Japonaiserie: the art of copying Japanese woodcut prints

Japonism and Japonisme: the influences of Japanese culture upon Western art

Quote of Interest by van Gogh:

"I envy the Japanese artists for the incredible neat clarity which all their works have. It is never boring and you never get the impression that they work in a hurry. It is as simple as breathing; they draw a figure with a couple of strokes with such unfailing easiness as if it were as easy as buttoning one's waist coat."

References:

Hellwege, P. (1993). *Vincent van Gogh: Visiting near Arles*. School Arts, 93(1), p.31-32.

Walther, I.F. (1990). *Vincent van Gogh: 1853 - 1890, vision and reality*. Köln, Germany: Benedikt Taschen Verlag & Co.

compiled by Pam Stephens