

# The influence of Japanese Ukiyo-e on Western painting art in the 19th Century

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**Abstract.** Ukiyo had a profound influence on western painting in the 19th century. It can be seen from the works of Artists such as Monet and Van Gogh that they extensively used, imitated and improved Japanese Ukiyo techniques such as brushwork, composition and color. In addition, under the historical background and social environment at that time, the expression of thoughts and emotions was also greatly influenced by Ukiyo. This paper, starting from the origin and characteristics of Japanese Ukiyo, explains in detail the influence of Japanese Ukiyo-e on western painting in the 19th century, explores the way of expression of Impressionist and post-Impressionist works, analyzes the process of its absorption and re-innovation of Ukiyo-e, in order to provide some reference for modern painting creation. This paper explores the influence of Japanese Ukiyo on western painting in the 19th century in two chapters. First of all, from the origin of Japanese Ukiyo, style, techniques, representatives of the detailed interpretation of Japanese Ukiyo artistic characteristics; Secondly, based on the background of the introduction and integration of Ukiyo in western painting art, the paintings of Monet and Van Gogh, the representative painters of Impressionism and post-Impressionism, are extracted respectively, so as to explore the influence of Japanese Ukiyo on western painting art in the 19th century in terms of style, techniques and ideas.

**Keywords:** Ukiyo; Impressionism; Post-impressionism.

## 1. Lead it

Ukiyo-e, or Japanese genre painting, print. It is a kind of ethnic art that arose during the Edo period (1603-1867 Tokugawa Shogunate period), and it is also a typical secular art. The word "floating world" originated from a Buddhist term and originally referred to the cycle of life and death. And when the word "ukiyoshi" appeared in Japan, it implied secular kitsch. As a result, most Ukiyo-e paintings in the narrow sense are mainly based on prostitute paintings and kabuki paintings, including a large number of Chungu pictures, and erotic elements in them.

In the second half of the 19th century, European painting and art were in a critical period of transformation from traditional to modern, and the intervention of Ukiyo-e promoted European artists to use a novel art form as a theoretical and practical basis to fight against the academic art tradition. As a unique Oriental art, Japanese Ukiyo-E not only provides European artists with new ideas from a macro perspective, but also wins the favor of European artists from its unique artistic expression, and exerts a profound influence on artists' creation from the aspects of theme, composition, color and line.

## 2. An overview of Ukiyo-e in Japan

### 2.1 The origin of Japanese Ukiyo-e

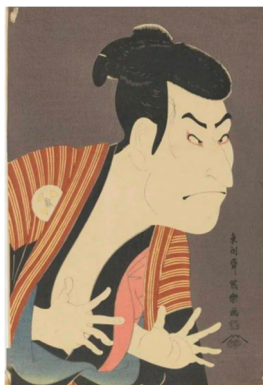
Japanese Ukiyo-e is derived from Japanese Yamato painting. Yamato painting is a kind of Japanese folk painting that depicts natural scenery and historical sites with the daily life of Japanese aristocrats as the main subject. Similar to the Renaissance, at first from the standpoint of the upper class, reflecting the artistic image of the upper class. The artistic works created by artists in this period showed the demands and ideals of the emerging bourgeoisie and aristocrats, shaped the characters of the aristocrats and upper class, and depicted the arrogant and extravagant life of the aristocrats in the upper society at that time. The folk interest depicted in Ukiyo-e art is inherited from Yamato painting.

In the first half of the 18th century, with the germination of Japanese capitalism, rapid economic growth and the promotion of the status of merchants, Ukiyo-e, which depicts the characters and

customs of the market, came into being. At the beginning of its development, Ukiyo-e works were mainly divided into two categories, namely "bijin-ga" (Figure 1) and "yakusha-e" (Figure 2) (theatrical performers engaged in kabuki performances). Later, works depicting natural scenery, flowers, birds and animals, and historical stories gradually emerged. Unlike Yamato paintings, these paintings reflect the daily lives of ordinary citizens rather than the imperial aristocracy.



**Figure 1.** Toji san bijin (Three Beauties of the Present Day)



**Figure 2.** Busteportret van Otani Oniji

By the middle of the 18th century, Bijin-ga and Yakusha-e gradually declined, and Ukiyo-e developed into the late period. In 1853, with the outbreak of the Black Ship incident, Japan was forced to open its door to trade with Europe. Naturally, there were also exchanges and collisions in cultural exchanges, which promoted the birth of Ukiyo-e landscape painting. Among them, the most famous painting Thirty- Six Views of Mount Fuji-The Great Wave Off Kanagawa (Figure 3) is not only the best Ukiyo-E painting, but also the representative work of Japan in the long history of world art.



**Figure 3.** Thirty- Six Views of Mount Fuji-The Great Wave Off Kanagawa

Suikoden Paintings (Figure 4), on the subject of samurai paintings in legends and historical novels, were particularly popular after the craze of legends. It is based on the samurai in legends and literature. Many of Suikoden's samurai images are not his own creations, but real classical characters. Through the wonderful plot and strong color atmosphere, people are personally involved, as if you can really feel the emotions of the warriors, even breathing.



Figure 4. Imperial Bodyguard Watanabe no Tsuna

## 2.2 Japanese Ukiyo-e Style

The style of Ukiyo-e as a whole tends to be simple in composition, mainly in bright colors, and lyrical in expression, with obvious lines and strokes. Painters often use planar line segmentation to achieve a high degree of harmony between the lines of the picture and the color. The picture has a visual authenticity, but also the pursuit of content and artistic integrity. At the same time, Ukiyo-e attaches great importance to the decorative effect, which makes its picture background mostly presented as a simple plane. The unique picture style of Ukiyo-e had a profound influence on the later Western Impressionist painting style.

## 2.3 Representative figures of Ukiyo-e in Japan

There are four representative figures in the history of Japanese Ukiyo-e, Katsushika Hokusai, Utagawa Hiroshige and Utamaro, who are later called Ukiyo-e Sanjie, while Toshusai Sharaku is as mysterious as a warrior, no one knows who he is, he suddenly appears, after just ten months of painting, he quickly disappeared.

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) was a Japanese Ukiyo painter of the Edo period. His painting style had a deep influence on the European painting scene. Many impressionist masters, such as Degas, Manet, Van Gogh and Gauguin, copied his works. Ukiyo-e's most famous work The Great Wave Off Kanagawa is one of Katsushika Hokusai's representative works Thirty- Six Views of Mount Fuji. It is characterized by movement seen from a still picture.

Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) was a great Ukiyo-E painter. He is good at using beautiful brush strokes and harmonious colors to express the quiet atmosphere of nature, freehand and lyrical are his characteristics. The natural scenes depicted by him are always closely related to the characters and full of poetic charm. Among them, Tokaido Fifty-three Times (Figure 5) is the most famous and one of the most representative works. Through the extraction and introduction of western classical painting elements and Oriental unique has been combined to render the landscape atmosphere.



Figure 5. One Hundred Famous Views of Edo

Utamaro (1753-1806) was born to a peasant family in Edo. As a Ukiyo-e beauty painter, he pursued beauty in accordance with the ideal and social fashion, and sympathized with kabuki and even prostitutes of low social status. His paintings depict the physical beauty and inner activities of women with accurate lines and simple color blocks. His representative work, *Three Beauties in the Reign of Edo Kosei*, is one of the examples of "big head painting" created by Utamaro, which combines "flesh-colored line drawing" with "line-less style" of clothing.

Toshusai Sharaku is known as *Yakusha-e*, a gifted and mysterious artist whose birth and life are unknown. Starting in 1794, he created about 140 paintings in just ten months. One of them, "*Three Generations of Mogu Otani*," is widely known. It can be regarded as a famous Ukiyo-e masterpiece.

### 3. The influence of Japanese Ukiyo-e on Western painting art

From the Edo Period to the Meiji period, Ukiyo-e art occupied a dominant position in the Japanese painting circle. After the Meiji Restoration, the development of Ukiyo-e gradually declined in Japan due to various reasons. However, he was brought to Europe by merchants and given new value and significance by European artists, leaving a brilliant mark in the history of world art.

After that, Japanese Ukiyo-e entered the West and influenced the Western impressionism and post-impressionism in the 19th century, which triggered the worship of Eastern culture in the West. Most famously, Van Gogh and Monet copied many Ukiyo-e works, and Monet directly married a Japanese wife and built a Japanese-style courtyard in his later years to raise water lilies and paint water lilies. Manet was introduced to Japanese Ukiyo-e works by his friend Brackmon. Later, he drew inspiration from Ukiyo-e and improved and innovated the style, composition and space of previous paintings.

Ukiyo-e was popular in the European folk and art circles at that time for the following reasons: first, because of the replicability of ukiyo-e prints, it had great advantages in cost and price; Secondly, Ukiyo-e was mostly a scene of market life in the mysterious East, which had a sense of curiosity and mystery for the European people at that time. Thirdly, the painting form of Ukiyo-e was very decorative, which was very different from the European painting style at that time, so it attracted the attention of Europeans. Finally, from the perspective of artistic aesthetics, Ukiyo-e is of high artistic value because of its "ingenious composition, unique originality, bright and bright color, strong and slender lines and varied lines" [1].

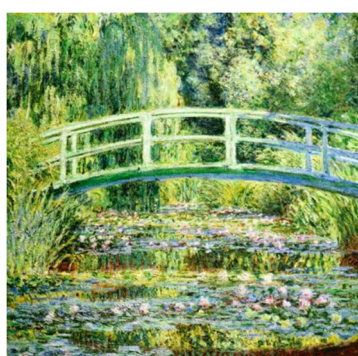
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#### 3.1 Influence of Japanese Ukiyo-e on Impressionist paintings

It is well known that Impressionist painting is closely related to Japanese Ukiyo-e. Impressionist figures such as Manet, Monet, Degas and Van Gogh all drew inspiration from Japanese Shie E. German scholar Adriani clearly pointed out: "Most impressionist painters studied East Asian art under the inspiration of a Japanese fashion promoted by the Goncourt brothers." [2] East Asian art here mainly refers to Japanese Ukiyo-e. Gombrich also said: "Japanese art provided enlightenment to the whole impressionist innovation." [3] The exoticism in Impressionist works is mainly composed of two aspects: image or subject matter on the one hand, and formal techniques on the other. In terms of specific images or subject matter, images with Japanese cultural elements often appear in Impressionist works. In Manet's 1868 portrait of Zola, for example, there is a Japanese wrestling (sumo) hand Ukiyo-e on the wall in front of Zola (upper right corner). Monet's "*Kamei in a Japanese Kimono*" (Figure 6), painted in 1875, shows Japan more directly. In addition, Monet's "*Water Lily Pond and Nihonbashi*" (Figure 7) series in his later years showed the Oriental elements vividly and vividly. These eastern elements appeared repeatedly in the works of different Impressionist painters, making the Eastern elements one of the direct sources of the exotic mood in Impressionist paintings.



**Figure 6.** Camille Monet in Japanese Costume



**Figure 7.** The Waterlily Pond with the Japanese Bridge

In terms of formal techniques, the new techniques created by Impressionist paintings inspired by East Asian art are the more hidden aspects that constitute the exotic mood.

The first is the planarization caused by the dilution of depth of field. In the western traditional painting, space is an indispensable element in the painting art. The whole picture is a three-dimensional space, and each object also expresses a three-dimensional sense in the corresponding space. But Impressionist paintings changed this tradition by diluting or even abolishing the depth of field, making the scene in the picture more planar. These methods of diluting the depth of field and moving toward planarity by Impressionist painters are the common expression methods in Ukiyo-E, Japan, which had a direct impact on Impressionism. In fact, these techniques are also very common in traditional Chinese paintings, which are almost the iconic features of East Asian art. Desalination techniques of depth of field is referred to as the "natural perspective", the poet Mallarmé, he see from Manet's works, this new technique, and points out its source: "natural perspective is not the sort of fully human, make our eyes by the civilization education cheat objects of classical science, but we are from the far east, such as to unfold the perspective of art." [4] It can be seen that the dilution of depth of field in Impressionist paintings is an important representation of exoticism.

Secondly, in the use of color, the main feature of Impressionist painting is that there is no excessive use of color, the use of contrasting and strong different colors to directly paint, creating a strong, bright, impactive picture. The application of these colors makes the traditional western painting in the color concept has changed, out of the western traditional color concept.

### **3.2 The influence of Japanese Ukiyo-e on Post-Impressionist painting**

The influence of Ukiyo-e on the paintings of Van Gogh, a representative of post-Impressionism, is profound, and traces of his influence can be seen in his flower works. Van Gogh's floral works are different from traditional floral works in that they already have the planar effect and certain composition effect of Ukiyo-e, such as flat painted background and painting bottle, flower body with emphasis on outline design, and almost invisible light and shadow effect.

Van Gogh was always actively in touch with the latest ideas of painting, and when the Japanese style of painting, which admired nature, was introduced to Europe, it coincided with his ideas. Since Ukiyo-e mostly focused on natural scenery, Van Gogh changed his choice of painting objects and began to paint a lot of nature. The simple colors and generalized images of Ukiyo-e also coincided with Van Gogh's pursuit of the true character, and he always showed strong personal feelings in his paintings. In "Sunflowers", the sunflowers stretch upward like flames. Such contour may not be the real appearance of the sunflowers at that time, but Van Gogh added his own emotion and summarized the image of the sunflower. "Sunflower" does not have bright parts and shadow of gray, only yellow painted sunflower color, such a simple and warm color is one of Ukiyo-e monochromatic painting techniques.

Influenced by Ukiyo-e, Van Gogh arranged his compositions more carefully. From "Lemon Blossom in a Glass", the viewer can see a completely different way of composition: The glass with the flower branches is not placed in the middle of the canvas, but on the left. In order to balance the picture, the lemon branches are stretched to the right, and a horizontal red line is added to the background to balance the whole picture. This asymmetric but balanced picture composition is also a common composition method in Ukiyo-e.

Another sign of Ukiyo-e's influence can be seen in his 1890 painting "Apricot Tree in Full Bloom" (Figure 8). The work uses pure blue as the background, the picture has no depth of field, and the point of view seems to be in the position of looking up at the flower branches, which are integrated with the flowers growing in the upper right of the picture, and they are in the same picture. This is a common way of composition in Oriental flower-and-bird paintings, and Van Gogh's composition adds an Oriental connotation to the picture.

Van Gogh was inspired by the electromotive lines in Ukiyo-e, as in his copy of Hiroshige Utagawa's "Bridge Shower." It is often difficult to show the continuity of raindrops using traditional oil painting techniques, but Utagawa Hiroshige used long thin lines to show the dynamics of raindrops. After copying several Ukiyo-e works and mastering the use of lines, Van Gogh began to use a variety of lines with different kinetic forces to express the spiritual connotations of different things. In his famous work Sunflower (Figure 9), the background is a vertical line, the table is a horizontal line, the heart of the sunflower is a firm and short line, and the petals are a short and powerful curved line stretching outward. Traditional oil painting often uses block surface to express objects, while using lines to express objects is often used in Oriental paintings. The decorative lines of Ukiyo-e form the skeleton of the picture. It can be said that Ukiyo-e is the art of thread. Van Gogh, under the influence of Ukiyo-e, usually used dark colors to outline the main body of the painting. On the one hand, this further limits the shape of the object, making it more consistent with the emotion the painter wants to express; On the other hand, it limits the volume of the object and restricts the three-dimensional object to two dimensions, which enhances the decorative and planar nature of the picture. "He immersed himself so intensely in these sunflowers that it seemed to us that he had never studied flowers carefully -- but had studied them -- but seemed to talk to them." [5]



Figure 8. Almond Tree in Blossom



Figure 9. Sunflowers

#### 4. Conclusion

The realism of Japanese Ukiyo-e exerted a great influence on European artists during this period, both in terms of themes and techniques. These artistic features had an impact on European artists, especially on Impressionist painters who pursued and emphasized the effect of light and shadow. Ukiyo-e taught them that composition can be done without perspective, without shadows, with lines and large flat patches of color. Therefore, in many Impressionist paintings, one can find the shadow of Japanese Ukiyo-e. It is worth emphasizing that European painters, represented by Impressionism, did not completely copy the study of Japanese art. They often sought inspiration from Ukiyo-E, innovated and transformed it according to their own experiences, and then integrated it into their own creations.

The unique artistic charm and expression form of Japanese Ukiyo-E provided theoretical basis and realistic possibility for painters and promoted the modernization process of European painting art.

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