

# Ukiyo-e Inspiring It All

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Someone could argue that all art movements before the early 1900s flowed toward what we know as Cubism, and from there, all newly created art movements were born. What could have been the launching pad, the crux for such a significant movement as Cubism and thus late modern and contemporary art? What was a key catalyst for all the art we see and know today? The answer is Japonisme, specifically the art form *Ukiyo-e*, otherwise known as Japanese Woodblock Printing. Without the influence of the Japanese art of *Ukiyo-e*, much of the art and the artists who built 20th-century art history would be widely different.

*Ukiyo-e* is a type of woodblock print, a major form of mass entertainment established during Japan's Edo period (1603-1868).<sup>1</sup> *Ukiyo-e* art devices consisted of key elements such as bold and obvious line work, strong shapes, flat colour (no shading), bold tones and asymmetry, resulting in a very two-dimensional print.<sup>2</sup> The creation of a *Ukiyo-e* print was not a matter of a single artist but rather a team which consisted of an *enshi* - the artist who drew the print, *horishi* - the artist who carved the printing block, *surishi* - the artist who added colours to the print by printing blocks and the *hanmoto* the publisher who paid for the creation and distribution of the prints.<sup>3</sup> In 1615, after a time of war and hardship, Japan was finally unified, and to protect this unification, it closed itself off from the world. The people of Japan were not allowed to leave the country, and aside from a few Dutch and Chinese traders, nobody was allowed to enter the country either. Japan was enjoying a time of peace and success, and within this newfound peace and success, a middle class was born. Japan's new middle class, which mainly consisted of merchants, began seeking "amusements: theatrical performances, visits to the brothel district, (and) ephemeral fads and fashions."<sup>4</sup> This transient lifestyle consisting of fleeting pleasures became known as '*ukiyo*,' or the 'floating world.'<sup>5</sup> Depictions of the easygoing, frivolous lifestyle of the Japanese

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<sup>1</sup> "The History of Ukiyo-e and Its Expansion around the World," Kumon-ukiyo.jp, Kumon Museum of Children's Ukiyo-e.

<sup>2</sup> Hailey Spinks, "Ukiyo-e: its artwork and influence on contemporary design," 99designs.com, Vista, March 5th 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Kumon, "The History of Ukiyo-e and Its Expansion around the World."

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Thompson, "The World of Japanese Prints," Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin 82, no.349/350 (1986): 3.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, 3.

became known as *Ukiyo-e*, which translates to “pictures of the Floating World.”<sup>6</sup> These art prints often showcased the Kubuki theatre, *bijin* (beautiful women), ordinary daily life, birds, animals, or landscapes.

In 1853, Commodore Perry of the US Navy sailed to Japan and demanded that Japan open up its trading to the world.<sup>7</sup> As foreigners flooded into Japan, the *Ukiyo-e* became a popular souvenir, representing Japanese culture's “exoticism”; these prints were foreign and mysterious and never before seen elsewhere. Additionally, as Japanese art, kitsch, and other items were exported to the West, the Western world's desires and interests in these items increased.<sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup> Japan experienced industrialization and Westernization, and many of the *Ukiyo-e* artists began to question their abilities and the art style they were executing;<sup>10</sup> it is even suggested that true *Ukiyo-e* died around 1910 as Japanese artists turned to more international styles.<sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup> But alas, *Ukiyo-e* would not die out, and between 1915-40, “*Shin Hanga*” or “New Prints” flourished. Unlike the original *Ukiyo-e*, which were often printed by the thousands, *Shin Hanga* were produced in small batches and limited in sales, creating an air of exclusivity. Not only was the *Shin Hanga* more exclusive, but these prints were of the highest quality, done on thick mulberry paper with rich mineral pigments and included special features like embossing and the use of the baren tool to create the appearance of swirls within the pigments.<sup>13</sup> These New Prints revived the *Ukiyo-e*, and they continued to inspire around the world.

Japonisme is categorized as the influence of Japanese art and culture on European artists throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s.<sup>14</sup> We can see *Ukiyo-e*'s effects on many great artists of the late 1800s and early 1900s, as Japonisme significantly touched the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist movements. Claude Monet, Mary Cassatt, Edgar Degas (of the Impressionists), Paul

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<sup>6</sup> Thompson, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Smith, *The Japanese Print Since 1900: Old Dreams and New Visions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Katherine Whatley, "How Japan Has Inspired Western Artists, from the Impressionists to Today," artsy.net, Artsy Editorial, August 10th 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Colta Ives, “Japonisme,” metmuseum.org, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Smith, *The Japanese Print Since 1900*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Smith, *The Japanese Print Since 1900*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Thompson, “The World of Japanese Prints.” Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Andreas Marks, ed, *Seven Masters 20th-Century Japanese Woodblock Prints from The Wells Collection* (Minnetonka: Jim Bindas, Books and Projects LLC, 2015), 12.

<sup>14</sup> Kumon, "The History of Ukiyo-e and Its Expansion around the World."

Cezanne, Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh (of the Post-Impressionists) were all inspired by *Ukiyo-e*. Western artists, such as those mentioned, pulled different aspects from the *Ukiyo-e* art form, influencing them to make changes and try new techniques with their backgrounds, layout, colour choices, design, and more.

Claude Monet's first interaction with Japanese print was through wrapping paper he saw in a spice shop in Holland.<sup>15</sup> When looking at Claude Monet's *The Water Lily Pond* 1899, we only need to compare it to Katsushika Hokusai's *Under Mannen Bridge at Fukagawa* 1830-32 to note the compositional inspiration of the bridge as well as the vibrant colours and unconventional perspective, all things which come from *Ukiyo-e*.<sup>16</sup> Mary Cassatt was interested in the Japanese woodblock prints and their depiction of women in everyday life. In the pieces *The Bath* 1890-91 and *The Letter* 1991, Cassatt's clear use of flat planes, simple lines, and bold colours evoke the *Ukiyo-e* style. These images are painted from a higher vantage point, with minimal shadows, and the planes are only created by transitioning bold colours.<sup>18</sup> All of the devices Cassatt used in *The Bath & The Letter* were pulled from concepts used in traditional *Ukiyo-e*. We can see Cassatt's love for the traditional imagery used in *Ukiyo-e*, depicting women in indoor scenes in *Afternoon Tea Party* 1891 and while getting ready in *The Coiffure* 1890-91. Cassatt used flat sections of colour, patterns (as on the curtains) and bold lines pulled from *Ukiyo-e*.<sup>19</sup> Cassatt enjoyed prints by Kitagawa Utamaro, and his print *Takashina Ohisa using two mirrors to observe her Coiffure* 1795, seems to be a direct inspiration for her own *Coiffure* painting; the theme is the same, and again there is the flat colour and "indicating dimensionality through line rather than tone."<sup>20</sup> Edgar Degas collected Japanese art and was deeply inspired by *Ukiyo-e*. A unique aspect of Degas's use of *Ukiyo-e* is his subtly. Degas used the birds-eye perspective, asymmetry of the canvas, flattening of forms and intense cropping of seemingly essential aspects, which are all inspired; he made great use of these devices without directly copying the art style and Japanese motifs.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ives, "Japonisme."

<sup>16</sup> "How Did Ukiyo-e Influence Western Art Movements?" Ukiyoeshoes.Com. Ukiyoeshoes, December 27, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> "The Influence of Japanese Art on Western Artists," artsper.com, Artsper Magazine, July 15th, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Whatley, "How Japan Has Inspired Western Artists, from the Impressionists to Today."

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Wier, "Edgar Degas in the Era of Japonisme," Slam.Org, Saint Louis Art Museum, May 24th 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Artsper, "The Influence of Japanese Art on Western Artists."

<sup>21</sup> Wier, "Edgar Degas in the Era of Japonisme."

The Impressionist artists were all about capturing the impression of the fleeting moment. It only makes sense that the Impressionists would be intrigued, impressed, and inspired by *Ukiyo-e*, which was all about the relaxed everyday life and transient moments of the Japanese. Cassatt, Degas, and Monet were only some of the highly influential artists behind the Impressionist movement who became inspired by Japonisme. They helped push art forward and inspired generations of artists, which they did with the help of *Ukiyo-e* and those Japanese artists who influenced them.

The Post-Impressionists were also extremely influenced by Japonisme and *Ukiyo-e*. Both Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin used the bold colours and flattened perspectives of *Ukiyo-e* as they moved away from Impressionism.<sup>22</sup> You can see Vincent Van Gogh's use of extreme cropping, unusual vantage points, lack of depth, and nature motifs in many of his works after he discovered *Ukiyo-e*. *Ukiyo-e* changed the direction of Vincent Van Gogh's work, and his admiration for nature and the landscapes portrayed in *Ukiyo-e* prints motivated him to relocate to Arles in southern France, seeking inspiration to faithfully recreate the Japanese painting style he had grown to appreciate.<sup>23</sup> Examples of these artistic devices can be seen in *Japonaiserie: Flower Plum Tree* 1887 and *Madame Roulin Rocking the Cradle* 1889.<sup>24</sup> Vincent's inspiration for his plum tree painting can be seen in Utagawa Hiroshige's *Plum Garden at Kameido* 1857.

Paul Cezanne was influenced by Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai, the famous printmaker responsible for *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, which includes the iconic print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. Cezanne painted *Thirty-Six Views of Mont Sainte-Victoire*, which seems like a direct response to Kanagawa.<sup>25</sup> He used compositional devices Hokusai used in many of his pieces, such as trees splitting the canvas, and it is even possible that Cezanne's idea to break images down into cylinders, spheres, and cones was directly taken from Hokusai's book "*Ryakuga hayaoshi*" (A quick drawing guide). Hokusai's book "represents animals in the third dimension by means of circular lines and houses by means of triangles."<sup>26</sup> It's important to note that Cezanne often had negative remarks about Japonisme and its influences on art; he even claimed, "I do not know anything about those people. I have never seen any of their pictures," in regards to *Ukiyo-*

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<sup>22</sup> Ukiyoeshoes, "How Did Ukiyo-e Influence Western Art Movements?"

<sup>23</sup> Artspier, "The Influence of Japanese Art on Western Artists."

<sup>24</sup> Whatley, "How Japan Has Inspired Western Artists, from the Impressionists to Today."

<sup>25</sup> Tanaka Hidemichi, "Cezanne & Japonism.", *Artibus et Historiae* 22, no.44 (2001): 215.

<sup>26</sup> Hidemichi, 215.

e.<sup>27</sup> which we know is not possible given the compositions and devices of his work and who he ran in circles with.

Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, the founders of the art movement Cubism, were greatly influenced by artists like Van Gogh, Cezanne, and Gauguin. Braque and Picasso were informed by Cezanne's "emphasis on the underlying architectural form"<sup>28</sup>, using it to develop the fractured images they created. In pieces like *Houses at L'Estaque* 1908, Braque "adapted the uni-directional, uniform brushwork, and flat spacing" of Cezanne, as well as the use of basic shapes and lack of detail.<sup>29</sup> Cubists explored open form, blending background into foreground and showing objects from various angles; they used non-art materials and emphasized unity between scene and canvas surface.<sup>30</sup> Cubism paved the way for non-representational art, and it was vital to the advancement of art in the 20th century.<sup>31</sup> The fact that *Ukiyo-e* is so linked to this movement cannot be understated. Katsushika Hokusai, a prominent *Ukiyo-e* artist, could be considered the "father" of modern Western art due to the fact that Tonalism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Art Nouveau, and the Aesthetic movement were informed by the broad planes of colour, asymmetrical compositions, rectilinear forms, unconventional poses, and everyday subjects of his prints.<sup>32</sup> In essence, *Ukiyo-e* served as a catalyst for artistic innovation, shaping the trajectory of late modern and contemporary art. Without its influence, the art landscape of the 20th century would undoubtedly be vastly different.

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<sup>27</sup> Hidemichi, 219.

<sup>28</sup> "Cubism Movement Overview and Analysis," TheArtStory.Org, Content compiled and written by The Art Story Contributors, Edited and published by The Art Story Contributors, January 21st, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> The Art Story, "Cubism Movement."

<sup>30</sup> The Art Story, "Cubism Movement."

<sup>31</sup> The Art Story, "Cubism Movement."

<sup>32</sup> Jeanette, "Japanese Woodblock Ukiyo-e Prints & Its Influence on Impressionism," iTravelWithArt.com, March 5th 2024.

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