

Symposium Van Gogh & Japan

Summary and insights (June 2018)

To accompany its exhibition *Van Gogh & Japan*, the Van Gogh Museum organized a symposium at which various experts presented their research and exchanged ideas. It proved to be an inspiring meeting between experts on nineteenth-century Western art and specialists in Japanese art.

Van Gogh's admiration for Japanese prints

The morning programme was devoted to primitivism and began with an introductory lecture by Louis van Tilborgh, Senior Researcher at the Van Gogh Museum and Professor of Art History at the University of Amsterdam. He discussed Van Gogh's claim in his letters that to some extent all of his work was based on Japanese art. This assertion is problematic, since many works appear to have other dominant influences, such as those of Monticelli and Ruisdael. Van Gogh pursued the flat and decorative without abandoning the mimetic, all of which he found in the Japanese prints he admired so deeply. Van Tilborgh concluded that even when Van Gogh used a wilder brushstroke, he continued to lean on the guiding principles of norm and form offered by Japanese prints. It is this that explains why Van Gogh considered all of his art to be based on the Japanese model.

Was Van Gogh inspired by Gauguin's ceramics?

In her lecture on Gauguin's ceramics and Japan, Ophélie Ferlier-Bouat, Curator of Sculpture at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, opened up some new avenues that may be applied to the analysis of Van Gogh paintings. She considered the possibility that Gauguin's ceramics influenced Van Gogh's art, especially his pronounced, textured paint surface. Ferlier-Bouat singled out several aspects of the ceramics that might have been of interest to Van Gogh: the rough texture, the variations of surface, and the irregularity of some of the marks. This opened up a whole number of perspectives, particularly in terms of the materiality of the works and the mutual influence of different mediums and techniques.

The aesthetics of flatness

Jeroen Stumpel, Emeritus Professor of Art History at Utrecht University, obliged us to re-evaluate and reconsider what an easel painting actually is and the implications of working with this medium. The aesthetics of flatness originated in the early nineteenth century but came to the fore most clearly during Van Gogh's time. The existence of the easel painting or *tableau* seems to be the essence of the longing for flatness. Decorative arts have different rules than those applying to painting. Within these media, colour has to be applied piece by piece, respecting the laws of chromatic harmony.

Oil paintings, by contrast, use chiaroscuro and blend different colours to create seamless transitions. When the decorative aesthetic was shifted to easel painting, it resulted in new styles.

Ornament and arabesque

Frances Connelly, Professor of Art History at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, talked about the ornament and the arabesque – both characterized as deriving from primitive styles that take human form as object of inspiration. An ornament is something that enhances the argument, the organizing idea or the meaning of the work. The arabesque has a long tradition in Western art and refers to a sinuous organic line, often linked to the feminine form and the poetic thought.

Why did Van Gogh collect Japanese prints?

The afternoon programme dedicated to Japanese art and *japonisme* kicked off with Chris Uhlenbeck, print expert and curator of Nihon no Hanga in Amsterdam. He discussed Van Gogh's Japanese print collection in detail, especially the problems that have been solved and the mysteries that remain. One persistent question is how Van Gogh selected the 660 prints that he bought from the art dealer Siegfried Bing. He preferred certain subjects, such as trees, which are represented in over 200 prints in the collection. Yet it remains unclear whether or not the collection was the result of careful selection. Another problem is the presence of many incomplete triptychs and diptychs, as it is hard to tell whether Van Gogh was aware of these structures. Uhlenbeck suggested new research on the typology of pinholes, which might allow the period to be identified in which he pinned particular prints to his wall.

The print collection of Paul Signac and other neo-impressionists

Marina Ferretti, Director of Exhibitions and Research at the Musée des Impressionismes in Giverny, gave a talk about *japonisme* and print collecting by Paul Signac and other neo-impressionists. The impressionists and neo-impressionists were strongly influenced by Japanese prints, of which they were important collectors. An example is Theo Van Rysselberghe, who thoroughly analysed the prints in his collection. It is not certain whether Georges Seurat also collected prints, but paintings such as *La Grande Jatte* show a clear Japanese influence in their flatness and colour planes, even if the latter were composed of countless tiny dots of colour. Camille Pissarro's *Travaux de la ferme*, meanwhile, reveals the influence of Hokusai's manga. Ferretti raised an interesting problem in Signac's case: we cannot tell if the Japanese influence we detect in his work is due to Signac having carefully studied the paintings of Monet, who of course collected and was deeply inspired by Japanese prints, or whether he studied such prints himself.

Colourful prints of the Edo- and Meiji-period

Monika Hinkel, Senior Teaching Fellow at the Department of Art and Archaeology at London University and Research Associate of the Japan Research Centre, presented an interesting overview of the Late Edo and Meiji period prints in Van Gogh's collection. The Meiji period (1868-1912) was shaped by the restoration of imperial rule, but most significantly by the process of modernization and westernization, which is clearly reflected in the prints. Aniline dyes were imported into Japan at this time, resulting in intense yellows, greens, purples and reds. The inclusion of many of these later, sometime rare prints in Van Gogh's collection is striking. The application of aniline dyes deeply influenced Van Gogh's use of colour.

Drawingstyles of Hokusai and Van Gogh

'Why does one make sketches?' was the primary question that Matthi Forrer, Senior Researcher Japan Collection, at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, considered in his lecture on Van Gogh and Japanese practice. A key factor we need to address is the extent to which Van Gogh actually understood how Japanese prints were made. Japanese artists worked closely with copyists, woodcutters and publishers to achieve their works. Forrer views the drawing styles of Hokusai and Van Gogh as quite distinct, especially when we consider drawings by Hokusai that were not intended as the basis of woodblock prints. Hokusai used fewer lines and strokes to indicate and suggest forms and nature, whereas Van Gogh tended to employ the entire surface.

Japan's reputation in the West

The closing lecture was given by Timon Screech, Professor of Art and Archaeology at the University of London, on Japan's reputation in the West during the Meiji period. Japan began to participate in world fairs during the late nineteenth century and was not restricted by colonial powers deciding how countries were to be represented. The highest form of art in Western societies was history painting –something the Japanese didn't have but began to produce in order to compete with Western countries. Screech offered a fascinating survey of the way the Japanese modelled themselves on European traditions and customs, but also showed how Japanese artists incorporated new styles such as impressionism after visiting Europe. In sum, the interaction between Japan and Europe was a two-way street and the experts agreed that in all the cases discussed, Western art developed and thrived greatly under the influence of Japanese art.