

La vague du
japonisme: the effects
of japanese art on
french art in the late
19th...



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“ It is in general the unexplored that attracts us...” – Lady Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji*. (Lambourne 2005, 10).

A preoccupation with “ the other” has always been of interest to the French. In Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes*, written in the early 18th century, the French nearly fall over one another in order to gaze upon an Arab traveler in their country. One observer even exclaims, “ Ah! Ah! Monsieur est Persan! C’est une chose bien extraordinaire! Comment peut-on etre Persan! (Hirsch and Thompson 2006, 97). In the second half of the 19th century after the ports of Japan opened, this is exactly what the primary French artists were exclaiming to themselves about the Japanese, “ How can one be Japanese! ” and in this quandary, they manifested Japonisme, an interest for things Japanese. Various Japanese artists’ works found their way into the hands and minds of French artists to forever change the course of art history and made a heavy impact upon their art from subject to form. Through the pictures of kimonos, illustrations of stereotypical samurai, or artistic styles derived from Japan’s art, Japanese inspiration had seeped into the brains of French artists, from Degas to Manet, in the late 19th century and early 20th century, just after Commodore Perry opened up the ports of Japan to the West in 1854 and impacted their artistic movements and compositions.

From the 1630’s to the 1850’s the ports of Japan were shut off from any Western invader, with the exception of the Dutch, until American Commodore Perry untied those binds. Between the years of 1633 and 1639 Iemitsu, the second shogun of the Tokugawa Era, launched an expulsion of Western people, ideas and products from Japan – an embrace of sakoku (Lambourne 2005, 7). He prohibited his Japanese citizens from traveling

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West of Korea or south of the Ryukyu Islands, restricted the export of weapons, and banned the spread of Christianity and travel of Catholics to Japan. Then, lemitsu forbade Portuguese traders on Japanese soil, and the last of their ships sailed away from Nagasaki in 1639.

The gates of Japan remained closed for just over 200 years (Gordon 2003, 17). However, in 1852 the United States Government challenged Commodore Matthew Perry to negotiate and sign commercial treaties with Japan. On November 24, 1852 the commodore and his naval crew sailed onward to Japan and arrived on the shores of the Bay of Edo in July 1853 to make his proposals and give his ultimatum of trade peacefully or suffer violently in war. One year later Perry returned to a granted proposal and the relationship of the West and Japan began to rapidly change from that point on (ibid, 49). As international trade was opened in 1858 to the great maritime nations, a love for things Japanese began to erupt. La Porte Chinoise, a tearoom dedicated to Japanese art on 36 rue Vivienne in Paris (Wichmann 1999, 9), opened in 1862 by Madame Desoye and attracted consumers like Manet, Monet, and Degas, who would be heavily influenced by Japanese art.

Edmond de Goncourt, a French art critic and connoisseur of Japonisme, wrote on 31 March 1875, enthroned in her jewels like a Japanese idol, sits the fat Madame Desoye; almost a historic figure in our own time, for this shop has been the place, the school as it were, from which this great Japanese movement has evolved which today extends from painting to fashion”

(Lambourne 2005, 37). One could purchase Japanese woodblock prints,

traditional kimonos, and blue china at La Porte Chinois. In other comparable <https://assignbuster.com/la-vague-du-japonisme-the-effects-of-japanese-art-on-french-art-in-the-late-19th-century/>

shops, other Japanese items began flowing into Paris such as fans, lacquers, bronzes, and silks (Ives 2004). At the first Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867, the Japanese Government exhibited objets d'art and sold one hundred prints to the public (Yoko et al. 1998).

One of the more important works to be shown at the Exposition was the woodblock print collection of *The Manga*, fifteen volumes of flower, plant, and animal motifs in woodblock prints, by the prominent early 19th century Japanese artist Hokusai. This collection would be the primary inspiration of a majority of French artists who developed a love for Japanese art (Flynn 2007, Yale). Paris quickly became known as the center of Japonisme as more people fell in love with Japanese art culture (Yoko et al. 1998). French artists began gaining influences from Japanese art, and Japonisme infiltrated their works.

The term Japonisme was initially conceived by French art critic Philippe Burty in 1872 to describe the newly found interest of Japanese culture and to “ designate a new field of study-artistic, historic, and ethnographic. ” It freed Western artists from the restrictions within their own art culture and stylistic tradition by opening up a new array of ideas and outlet for inspiration (ibid). It gave artists a whole new array of subject matter, techniques, and devices such as “ the representation of depth and surfaces, the treatment of light and shade, and format and division of the picture plane... the symbolic role of real objects...[and], new poses captured through new means of representation...” (Wichmann 1999, 10). James Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902) was among the first artists to purchase Japanese items and in large quantities throughout the 1860's; one of his more prized possessions was his <https://assignbuster.com/la-vague-du-japonisme-the-effects-of-japanese-art-on-french-art-in-the-late-19th-century/>

kimono. At least five of his paintings have Japanese subjects from this time period.

While these works do not focus on adopting a Japanese form, they are heavily doused in Japanese content (Janis 1968, JSTOR). In *La Japonaise au bain*, 1864, a young woman with long black hair and fair skin of Western descent wearing a kimono, slightly open to reveal her nudity, is posing on the porch of a Japanese traditional house, surrounded by flowers. At her feet an iris lays, which was heavily used by Japanese designers (Wichmann 1999, 87). In the background of the painting, one can spot a Japanese cherry tree and a Japanese lantern hanging from the ceiling. Tissot's painting seems to be a metaphor for himself, a westerner saturated in Japanese culture (Lambourne 2005, 38).

In another work, though last seen on the New York art market, *Lady in Japanese Costume* (1867) further portrays Tissot's interest in Japonisme (Berger 1980, 70). Holding a piece of porcelain in each hand, the model is dressed in two embroidered kimonos with a fan in her belt. Her features are of Japanese origin with slanted eyes and a thick, short nose. The figure even has the mouth of a Japanese doll, "where the lips are often parted to show the little individual teeth and even the tongue" (Janis 1968, JSTOR).

Last, *Two Ladies Admiring Japanese Objects* (1869) depicts two Western women gazing upon various Japanese objects within Tissot's home (Art Fact). This work really captures the general curiosity that the French public had in Japan. Edward Degas (1834-1917) focused on the form of Japanese compositions perhaps more so than any other artist of his time (Lambourne

2005, 39). Instead of using Japanese props and paraphernalia, Degas sympathized with Japanese aesthetics (Ives 2004). *Woman with Chrysanthemums* (1865) portrays a woman sitting on the right side of the table with her hand resting against her chin, looking out from the picture. Not only the placement of the woman to one side and the cropping of her body are Japanese, but also the woman is looking away from the picture.

These Japanese effects create an emphasis on the flower arrangement and a slighter focus on the woman, which is not traditionally found in a portrait from the West (Berger 1980, 50). The motif of having an upright, standing figure started to decline from the effects of Japonisme, and Degas embraced the idea of painting various postures of the body in his works (Wichmann 1999, 26). Degas' renowned paintings *Dancers with double-bass* (1887), *Dancer Tying Her Ribbons* (1880), and *Nude Woman, Standing, back view* (1886) have exact forms, from the position of the feet to the direction they are facing, as the figures in Katsushika Hokusai's woodblock prints, *Sparrow Dance* (1814-1878) and *Sumo Wrestler* (1814-1878) (ibid. 31). He wanted to provide a relief from the ideal "female form divine" that was so prominent in Western art and create a sense of movement within his own pieces, and he achieved that with the help of Hokusai (Lambourne 2005, 39). In several of his pieces, he portrays a woman, turned away from the point of view, combing her hair in order to portray a different perspective on the female form in relation to space.

After the Bath presents a woman preparing herself after a bath; the slight forward bend of her upper body is a style foreign to Western conventions of art but commonly present in Japanese compositions (Wichmann 1999, 26). In <https://assignbuster.com/la-vague-du-japonisme-the-effects-of-japanese-art-on-french-art-in-the-late-19th-century/>

the pastel *The Tub* of 1886, the bathtub, the steep downward angle of view past the dressing table, and the contrast between the background and foreground are Japanese themes and techniques. *The Tub* is a pastel that similar in terms of theme and posture to Torii Kiyonaga's *Women's Bath* (1780), which Degas owned himself. *Women's Bath* presents the female form in a various ways as the women in the picture are bathing, drying themselves, or engaging in conversation that would influence Degas to create women holding awkward postures (Berger 1980, 62-63). " We needed the arrival of Japanese albums in our midst, before anyone dared to sit down on a river bank, and juxtapose on canvas a roof which was bright red, a wall which was white, a green poplar, a yellow road and blue water. Before the example given by the Japanese, the was impossible, the painter always lied... all one ever saw on a canvas were subdued colours, drowning in a half-tone.

" - Claude Monet, 1878 (Lambourne 2005, 48) It is rumored that the French artist Claude Monet stumbled upon his love for Japanese art in an Amsterdam food shop while trying to escape the Prussian siege of Paris. In that little shop the history of Western art would be changed forever as Monet's eye caught some Japanese prints being used as wrapping paper and immediately bought one. He ended up collecting 231 Japanese prints and creating his own Japanese garden (Morrison 2007, TIME). Claude Monet (1840-1926) used Japanese influence to compose his impressions of Nature in art (Lambourne 2005, 72). After examining Japanese woodblock prints, his goal in his artistic career was to accurately capture nature by abandoning European conventions of composition, color, and perspective, which would

later influence the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist movements. Monet brought brightness to his work by using unmediated colors, including a range of tones in his shadows, and replacing dark-colored primers in his backgrounds for light-colored primers.

He, furthermore, employed a style of asymmetrical arrangements of forms that “ emphasized their two-dimensional surfaces by eliminating linear perspective and abandoning three-dimensional modeling” (Aurricchio 2004, MET). In Monet’s many representations of haystacks, poplars, facades of the Rouen Cathedral, and Westminster Bridge were inspired by Hokusai’s Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji, where the Japanese artist painted Mount Fuji in different weather conditions and at different times of the day. In Monet’s twenty-three paintings of haystacks, he did exactly what Hokusai did – he painted the haystacks at different times of the day in different weather conditions (Lambourne 2005, 50-51). In a letter he wrote about the volcano signifies his connection with it: “ I have here a delicious motif, little islands at water level covered by snow, and a mountain in the background.

One would say Japan... I did a mountain which is seen everywhere and which makes me think of Fuji-yama” (ibid. 49). Additionally, in his painting *La Japonaise* (1876), his wife is adorned in a beautiful red kimono, embroidered with a samurai seemingly trying to fight his way out of her body, as Japanese fans surround her body (ibid. 11). The tilt of her head, the long curve of her back, and the bell shape curve of her hem are drawn from Japanese woodblock prints (Wichmann 1999, 19). *Camille on the Canape* (1872)

portrays a strong silhouette, an asymmetrical construction, with the verticals of curtain and window placed to the right, a cropped sofa on the left, a <https://assignbuster.com/la-vague-du-japonisme-the-effects-of-japanese-art-on-french-art-in-the-late-19th-century/>

horizontal format, and decorative coloring are all features that boast of Japonisme (Berger 1980, 77-78).

From the time he set foot into that little Dutch shop up until his death, Monet created an impression on the art world because of his love affair with Japanese art. Another Japanese-inspired French artist is Edouard Manet (1823-83); however, his inspirations are less apparent than other French artists (ibid. 20). In terms of subject and content, his interest in Japanese art is evident in his *Portrait of Emile Zola* (1867-8) where Emile Zola is posing in a room adorned with a Japanese print to the left of the painting and the Japanese woodcut of *The Sumo Wrestler Onaruto Nadaemon of Awa Province* by Kuniyaki II (1835-88) (Lambourne 2005, 132-133). Additionally in his piece *Boating at Argenteuil*, Manet presents his viewers a painting of a couple in a boat that is cut off in the frame of the work.

This style of cut-off rowboats is found in numerous Japanese works such as Suzuki Harunobu's *Women in a Boat, Picking Lotus Flowers* (1765). Even the location and use of umbrellas, a subject used often in Japanese prints, in his work *Queue in Front of the Butcher's Shop* (1870-1) bears a striking resemblance to Hokusai's *Group with Umbrellas* (1812-14) (ibid. 118). In terms of form, Manet's previous mentioned work portrays an artistic style found in Japanese art, the use of diagonal composition.

Moving away from predictable landscape portrayals, this method “ avoids the rectangle principal by shifting the spatial boundaries outside the picture surface” in order to open up the composition's space (Wichmann 1999, 218).

Manet uses this technique again in his 1878 painting *The Rue Mosnier with*

Flags Out by depicting a well-defined angle of vision with open pictures around the composition (ibid. 220). He, furthermore, utilizes another Japanese technique of grille motif, the use of sliding walls and fences, observed in woodcuts. In his piece *The Railway* (1874), Manet used this technique to structure his composition with the dominant gate behind the subjects (ibid.

233-234). Within Japanese art, Manet found all the stylistic sources that mattered to him: lively outline, rhythmic structure, respect for flatness, harmonious color, and stationary movement that would subtly appear in his works (Berger 1980, 25). Finally, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) is another connoisseur in Japonisme. In a photograph by Maurice Guilbet in 1892, Lautrec is posed wearing a ceremonial Japanese samurai costume while holding a fan and a china doll, signifying his love for Japanese culture and things. He admired Japanese works of art so ardently that he was willing to exchange one of his own works for a print.

Some of his works with his favorite subject matter such as popular entertainers, dancers, restaurants, and prostitutes provide themes often seen in Japanese prints. The lithograph *Debauchery* (1894) shares a theme with Kitagawa Utamaro's *Lovers* (1788). In many of his works, he uses a Japanese technique of posing single figures in color against a black silhouette or neutral background as seen in the famous poster *Moulin Rouge: La Goulue* (1891). One critic observed: "the imaginative and total integration of image and lettering into one decorative and instructive whole in his posters also owes much to Japanese prototypes" (Lambourne 2005, 61). Like Manet, Lautrec employs the use of diagonal composition in his <https://assignbuster.com/la-vague-du-japonisme-the-effects-of-japanese-art-on-french-art-in-the-late-19th-century/>

piece *Jane Avril au Jardin* (1893) by the kick of her leg and the frame of the musician holding his instrument in right corner (Wichmann 1999, 248).

This particular piece is highly comparable to Utagawa Hiroshige's woodblock *The Benten Ford Across the Oi River* (1858) because both pieces use the human leg to employ the diagonal line. As his works progressed, he would acquire various Japanese styles from bold outlines to flat color (Lambourne 2005, 63). As Lady Murasaki beautifully put it, it really is the unexplored that attracts people. French artists in the latter half of the 19th century developed a taste for a Japanese pallet, which would influence their art because it provided a relief from their traditional styles of Western form. From Tissot to Monet and Manet, from Degas to Lautrec, these artists would enthusiastically embrace the new craze of Japonisme by purchasing Japanese prints, painting women in kimonos, or using Japanese art techniques.

Their interest would change the course of art history forever because, as a result, they influenced other artists and art movements with their Japanese adaptations. After the opening of Japan in 1854, the influences Japan would have on art world would become " a basic element in the substructure of Western culture" (Yoko et al. 1998). Bibliography Aurricchio, Laura. Claude Monet (1840-1926).

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