'Japonaiserie forever'

Vincent van Gogh and Japan

There are few artists in whose life and work Japonism played such an important role as in that of Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). In the latter half of the nineteenth century Japonism was what we would nowadays call a 'hype', a craze that left its mark on the fine arts and applied arts alike. Few artists, however, were so taken by it that it not only altered their work but also their whole vision of life. '*All my work is more or less based on Japanese art*', Van Gogh wrote to his younger brother Theo in 1888. Both of them were enchanted by the Japanese woodcuts that were going for a song at the time. This interest in exotic art work did not come out of the blue.

The then recent phenomenon of international exhibitions being regularly organised in a number of European capitals stimulated an interest in objects from other cultures. The flood of Japanese prints on the European market made them relatively cheap, which was a godsend for impecunious painters like Vincent van Gogh and the young Claude Monet, who soon began to build up a collection of Japanese prints. They are said to have arrived in Europe as wrapping for porcelain and other goods and thus been discovered by collectors. During his stay in Zaandam in 1871 Monet is said to have discovered a pile of Japanese prints being used as wrapping paper by the local grocer and to have rushed home delighted with his find.

Van Gogh was probably already aware of Japanese art before he decided to become an artist himself. Within a short distance of each other, in Leiden and The Hague, there were three collections of Japanese art that were open to the public. One of these, property of the Rijks Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden in The Hague, was situated close to the art dealer's shop where Van Gogh worked as an assistant in 1869. The Netherlands' very long-standing trade relations with Japan gave it a head-start over the rest of Europe. This not only benefitted the economy, it was also a source of interesting material from another cultural tradition. Nevertheless, it was not Dutch but French artists who were the first to be influenced by Japanese features in their own stylistic artistic development. Poets and other writers were also inspired by Japanese culture. From Paris Japonism spread rapidly over the rest of the world.

Edmond and Jules de Goncourt

But to return to Van Gogh and the start of his career. Having largely taught himself to draw and paint, he had had little contact with colleagues, and living in a remote village in Brabant did not improve his prospects of interesting encounters either. Thus Vincent's life was a fairly isolated one. It was a stroke of luck that he was familiar with the latest developments in Paris. Theo van Gogh was working there as an art dealer and sent magazines and the latest books, such as those of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, to Brabant. These two brothers, whose reputation rests especially on their diaries, considered themselves the discoverers of the Japanese art of printmaking. The visit they made in 1861 to the Von Siebold collection in the Rijks Japansch Museum in Leiden is proof of their serious interest. In their novels Japanese art is often mentioned and Van Gogh, who was an avid reader, often referred to these authors whom he admired. The Goncourts' enthusiasm for Japanese prints undoubtedly aroused his interest.

The first mention of Japanese art in his letters was in November 1885, when Vincent, writing from Antwerp where he had just arrived, told Theo that he felt at home in his small room because he had hung some Japanese prints there: '*You know those little women's figures in gardens, or on the beach, horsemen, flowers, knotty thorn branches*'. In the same letter Vincent quotes a well-known motto of the Goncourt brothers: '*Japonaiserie forever*'. Little did he then know how much those words would apply to himself.

The three months that Van Gogh spent in Antwerp served as a bridge between the Brabant countryside and Paris. In the Netherlands his subject matter had been scenes from the hard lives of peasants and weavers. When he arrived in the French capital in February 1886, he was immediately confronted by the innovative ideas of the avant-garde. Theo, of course, was a familiar figure in the art world and Vincent soon came to know a number of the youngest group of Impressionists. They were experimenting with new techniques like pointillism. Anyone who calls *The Potato Eaters* to mind, painted as Van Gogh himself declared in the tones of a '*dirty potato*', can imagine how challenging he must have found the colourful canvasses of Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro and Alfred Sisley. But the painter of drab peasant life was to make the colourful technique of the Impressionists his own in an astonishingly short time.

With the enthusiasm so characteristic of him Vincent studied the stylistic innovations of the Japanese printmakers. Together with Theo he accumulated a large collection of Japanese prints and even organised an exhibition of them in the café Du Tambourin, a Montmartre venue for artists that was popular with the younger generation.

In 1885 the discerning critic Théodore Duret wrote: '*Prior to the discovery of the Japanese albums no one had had the nerve to go and sit on the riverbank and allow a bright red roof, a white wall, a green poplar, a yellow road and blue water to contrast with each other on a canvas.*' Duret was especially delighted by the daring way in which nature was represented in Japanese art. For the Impressionists, who were out to rejuvenate the art of landscape painting, the Japanese print was an inspiring example. Their revolutionary work was characterised not only by a striking use of colour but also by other non-European features such as figures abruptly cut off by the margin or an emphatic contrast between what was in the foreground and the background.

Vincent van Gogh (after Kesai Eisen), *Japonaiserie: Oiran*. 1887. 105 x 61 cm. Vincent van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Van Gogh familiarised himself with this idiom in his own way. In the winter of 1887 he produced three 'Japonaiseries': copies in oil of Japanese prints. The most ambitious of the three was based on a reproduction on a cover of the magazine *Paris Illustré*. The issue was devoted to Japan and the print depicting an '*oiran*' (a Japanese courtesan) has been identified as by Kesai Eisen. Van Gogh carefully traced the figure on tracing paper, enlarged it and placed it in an idyllic water landscape with bamboo and water lilies. He derived the two frogs and cranes from two other Japanese prints. It is no accident that the cranes are there. Vincent was indulging in some visual word play: '*grue*', the French word for 'crane', also means 'tart', thus alluding to the courtisane.

Another painting dating from the same period is the striking *Portrait of Père Tanguy*. This dealer in artist's materials and art sympathised with the Impressionists, who found it hard to exhibit their work. Père Tanguy allowed them the use of his shop window and was also generous about offering artists credit. Van Gogh was very fond of this Socialist Utopian, and Tanguy's kind-heartedness shines through in the painting.

As was frequently the case, Van Gogh made several versions of this portrait; the Musée Rodin version shown here is the most elaborate. Its relevance to this article is further enhanced by the presence in the lower right corner of Van Gogh's own 'Japonaiserie' of the *oiran*.

Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of Père Tanguy*. 1887-1888. Canvas, 92 x 75 cm. Musée Rodin, Paris.

By now 'Japonism' had come to mean more to Van Gogh than the obvious stylistic influences in his own work. His image of Japan, and especially of the way in which he believed that Japanese artists behaved towards each other, had assumed the form of a Utopia. The disappointingly competitive climate of the Parisian art world was no doubt also a factor. Van Gogh imagined that instead of vying with each other Japanese artists worked together fraternally. Someone like Père Tanguy, who was modest and strove for a better society, fitted into that picture. This was a valid reason for placing him against a background of Japanese prints.

Worn out and unwell after two taxing years in Paris, Van Gogh left for Arles in the Spring of 1888. It was a wise decision, as the enthusiastic letters he wrote after his arrival in the South of France show. To his colleague Emile Bernard he wrote: '*Having promised to write to you I want to begin by telling you that this countryside seems to me as beautiful as Japan for clarity of atmosphere and gay colour effect.*' He also wrote to Theo and his sister Wil that he felt as if he were in Japan.

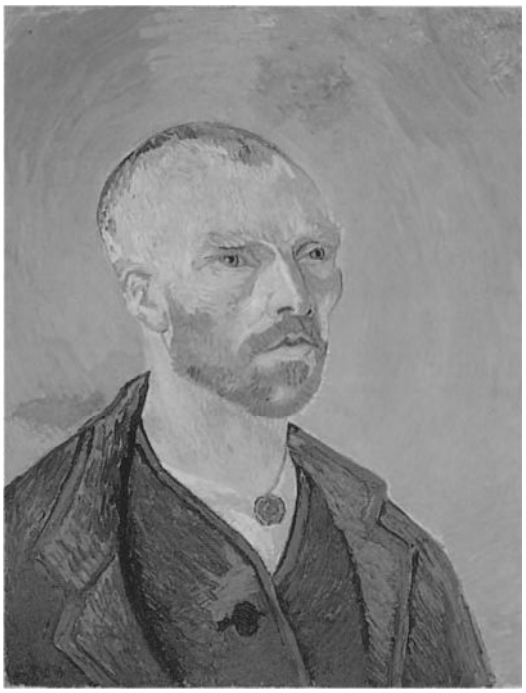
A bonze in Arles

Among the first subjects Vincent took up in the Midi were the orchards in bloom. He set up his easel and paint box in the midst of the fruit trees in order to capture the atmosphere as directly as possible on the canvas. Working outdoors was not without discomfort. In a number of letters he complains of the cold and of being bothered by the wind. But his zest for work was unflagging; a total of fourteen paintings of orchards in bloom are on record. Of particular interest is *Pear Tree in Blossom*. The high viewpoint and the prominence of the little dwarf tree in the foreground give this small painting a decidedly Japanese quality. The yellow butterfly that can be discerned among the flowers accentuates the Japanese character of this subtle painting.

Van Gogh undoubtedly had Hiroshige Utagawa's woodcut of a plum tree in flower in mind when he painted this picture. In Paris he had made a careful copy in oil of this print, which he had in his own collection.

Vincent had an ambitious plan with '*the orchards in flower*'. He wanted the motif of the trees in bloom to form a decorative unity in a series of three related paintings. The vertical canvas of the *Pear Tree in Blossom* was to be the central panel, flanked by two horizontal panels. He explained what he had in mind in a letter to Theo and illustrated his intentions with a sketch of the *Pear Tree in Blossom*.

Vincent van Gogh, *Pear Tree in Blossom*. 1888. Canvas, 73 x 46 cm. Vincent van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait as a Bonze*. 1888. Canvas, 62 x 52 cm. Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge (MA).

In the summer of 1888, when the orchards had finished flowering, Van Gogh began to paint landscapes and views of the countryside around Arles. The brilliant light in the South of France overwhelmed him and brought home to him the great contrast with his native land where '*the colours of the prism are veiled in the mist of the North*' as he put it so vividly in one of his letters.

A fascinating self-portrait dates from September of the same year. It is obvious from the stylisation of his features that Van Gogh wished to give it a special significance. The painting bears the title *Self-Portrait as a Bonze*. Van Gogh probably derived the idea from a novel by Pierre Loti, a writer he much admired. Bonzes or Japanese priests occur in Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* (1885), a novel set in Japan. Van Gogh owned an edition with a number of illustrations of these Japanese priests with their shaved heads. What motivated Van Gogh to assume such a pose? As so often his letters provide a clue to its genesis. He intended to give the portrait to Paul Gauguin, with whom he had become friendly in Paris. '*I have a portrait of myself, all ash-coloured. The ashen-gray colour is the result of mixing malachite green with an orange hue, on pale malachite ground, all in harmony with the reddish-brown clothes. But as I also exaggerate my personality, I have in the first place aimed at the character of a simple bonze worshipping the Eternal Buddha*', he wrote to Gauguin. His sister Wil received a briefer description, he simply told her that he had depicted himself as a Japanese.

The *Self-Portrait as a Bonze* may be considered as a reaction on canvas to a self-portrait that he had recently received from Gauguin. Emile Bernard also took part in this exchange of self-portraits and likewise sent one to Arles.

From a letter to Bernard we come to learn more about Van Gogh's sentiments during this period: '*I have long been impressed by the way the Japanese artists have often exchanged work with each other. It shows that they admired each other and supported each other and that there was a certain harmony among them, that it was natural for them to lead a brotherly life, and not a life full of intrigues. The more we resemble them in this respect, the better we shall fare.*' This passage is especially revealing of what Van Gogh missed in Arles: collaboration with other artists, friendship and harmony. The *Self-Portrait as a Bonze* is the embodiment of Van Gogh's Japanese dream and shows him at the height of his powers.

In the *Yellow House* where he had now found a home for himself, Van Gogh hoped to set up an artists' colony akin to a Japanese monastery. Both Paul Gauguin and Emile Bernard were urged to come to Arles. Failing his friends' physical presence, the self-portraits were a tangible substitute. Van Gogh harboured the notion that they would work together in unison, while Theo would act as their dealer.

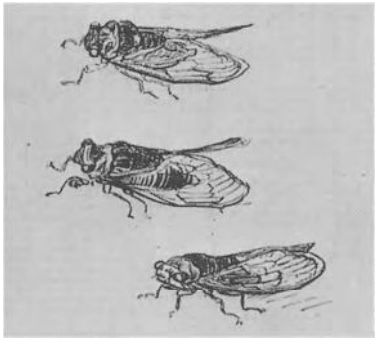
Things were to turn out differently, even though they looked hopeful at first. When Gauguin finally arrived in Arles he was impressed by Vincent's work, admiring especially the sunflower still-lifes. Van Gogh had gone to the trouble of hanging two versions in his guest's room.

Sunflowers

The tragic outcome to Paul Gauguin's stay in Arles is a familiar story; after only two months, tension between the two artists ran so high that Gauguin left without warning for Paris and Vincent van Gogh had to be admitted to a mental hospital at Saint-Rémy.

It is noteworthy that after these dramatic events Van Gogh scarcely ever referred again to Japan in his letters. The ideal of an artistic community along Japanese lines had proved to be an illusion and was no doubt too painful to be dwelt on.

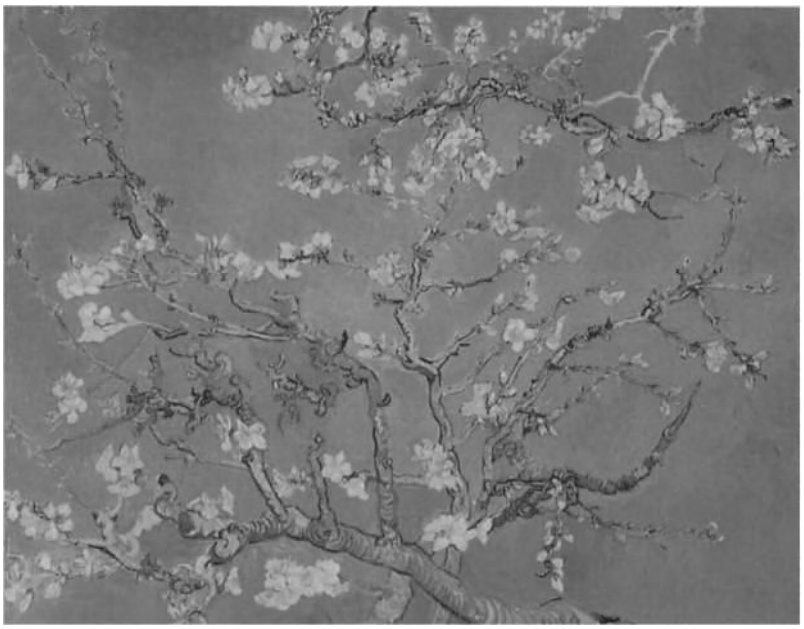
Japonistic motives did not, however, disappear from his work. Quite the contrary, they even proved to be a godsend when his enforced isolation obliged Van Gogh to look for subject matter close at hand. A good example is the drawing of beautifully observed crickets.



Vincent van Gogh, *Three Crickets*. 1889. Ink drawing, 20.5 x 18 cm. Vincent van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Nature was still a source of inspiration, but the blind alley of life in the mental hospital was a torment, and moreover Van Gogh was homesick for the North. Despite the fact that he spent a large part of the day indoors and was sporadically laid low by epileptic fits, magnificent still-lifes of flowers were produced in this period, among them the celebrated *Irises*. The painting *Branches with Almond Blossom* which he made on the occasion of the birth of his nephew, Vincent Willem, is evidence of what he was capable of despite his unhappy situation. He sent the canvas to Paris and the proud parents hung this delightful scene in their bedroom.

The motif of the branches of almond blossom should have been the beginning of a new series, but once again Van Gogh fell victim to his disease and by the time he had recovered spring was over. In May 1890 Vincent left Saint-Rémy. After a brief stop in Paris to admire his little nephew, he continued on to nearby Auvers-sur-Oise. There he worked intensively for over two months on views of the village and the surroundings of Auvers. His depressed state of mind finally became so serious that he saw no other way out



Vincent van Gogh, *Branches with Almond Blossom*. 1890. Canvas, 73 x 92 cm. Vincent van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

and on 29 July Vincent van Gogh died from the effects of the pistol shot with which he had wounded himself two days before.

Van Gogh's death was not the end of his relationship with Japan. To begin with, the Japanese public was fascinated by his tragic life. From 1910 on various publications about his life and reproductions of his work increased his fame in that country. Numerous travelling exhibitions followed and finally Van Gogh became one of the most revered Western artists.

It is common knowledge that in the last decades Japanese collectors have paid fortunes for the few paintings that have appeared at auctions. The fact that the pavilion built to enlarge the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam has been designed by a Japanese architect, Kisho Kurokawa, underlines the special relation between Van Gogh and Japan yet again. The pavilion is ellipse-shaped and bounded by an asymmetric Japanese water garden. This new wing, which was opened to the public in July 1999, embodies a symbiosis between European and Japanese cultures. The financing of the project was in the hands of a big Japanese insurance company. Since 1987 this firm has owned a version of the *Sunflowers*, the authenticity of which has become the subject of some controversy. The composition of this still-life of fourteen sunflowers is similar to that of the *Sunflowers* in the National Gallery in London. The Van Gogh Museum plans to carry out a close examination of the painting in the coming years; the result of its inquiry is expected in 2001. The relationship between Van Gogh and Japan remains surprising and intriguing.

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Translated by Elizabeth Mollison.

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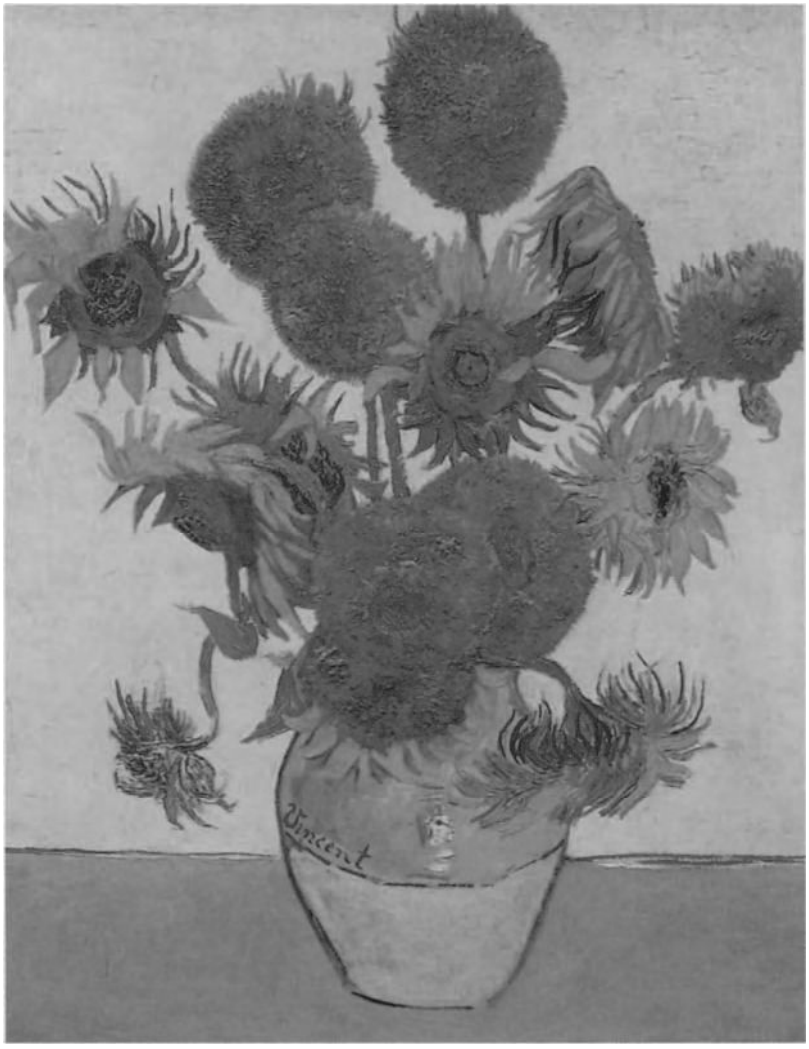

Vincent van Gogh, *Sunflowers*. 1888. Canvas, 93 x 73 cm. National Gallery, London.