

Vincent Van Gogh

Meiji Art from the Khalili Collection

by Kris Schiermeier

The artist Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) had a great regard for Japanese prints: ukiyoe colour woodcuts. Indeed, he wrote to his brother, Theo, that looking at them made him feel “much gayer and happier.” Van Gogh’s early paintings were predominately dark and sombre scenes of peasant life, but when he moved to Paris to live with Theo in 1886, he discovered how much he loved the delightful rich colors of Japanese prints. In his late Paris period Van Gogh admired this graphic art so much that he made three paintings in the style known as japonaiserie, based on prints of Keisai Eisen (1790–1848) and Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) (Figs. 1 and 2). In 1888 he moved to Arles, from where, on 15 July, he wrote to Theo “All my work is based to some extent on Japanese art.” Van Gogh’s admiration for Japanese art became something of a religion for him. As he saw it, if modern art were to have a future, it must look toward, and indeed, be totally inspired by, the art of Japan. “For my part I don’t need Japanese pictures here, for I am always telling myself *that here I am in Japan*,” he wrote from Arles. He observed everything around him as if it were “through Japanese eyes,” and in this way noticed the tiniest details in the natural setting.

While living in Paris, Van Gogh had only collected Japanese graphic works. He admitted to being a collector of a minimal sort, not a large-scale buyer like the De Goncourt brothers. From Arles he wrote to Theo in 1888, saying that he seemed to have missed out on the fact that there ‘was something else besides’ the “ordinary print.” However, this would not seem to

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Fig. 1: Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *The Bridge in the Rain* (after Hiroshige), 1887. Oil on canvas, 73 x 54 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

◀ While living in Antwerp Van Gogh had decorated his room with Japanese prints. When he came to Paris japonaiserie was all around in books and in magazines, and real works were in the houses of friends and in shops. Transferring such images into paintings gave Van Gogh the chance to study Japanese art and experiment with strong and contrasting colors. Figure 1 was based on a print *Sudden shower on the Great Bridge near Atake* (*Ôhashi no yûdachi*) by the celebrated ukiyo-e artist Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858). In it, people walking on a bridge in the rain cross the Sumida river on which, in the distance, a log raft is being poled. Vincent intensified the colors of the original work and added a border with random characters that he copied from prints like Hiroshige's *The Flowering Plum Tree*.



Fig. 2: Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *The Flowering Plum Tree (after Hiroshige)*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 55 x 46 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

In this painting Van Gogh freely follows a print “The plum tree teahouse at Kameido (Kameido Umeyashiki)” by the Japanese print artist Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858). The teahouse at the Kameido shrine in Tokyo was famous for its plum tree blossoms and attracted many

people. Van Gogh was probably fascinated by the contrast between the gnarled plum tree in the foreground and the visitors to the garden seen in the distance. He enlarged the image by tracing the original work and transferring it to canvas by means of a grid. By using starker

colors and a style typical of his work from this period, the picture becomes more an interpretation of Hiroshige's print than a real copy. The border contains a mixture of calligraphy taken from four other Japanese prints. The text has no coherent meaning, it is primarily decorative.



Fig. 4: Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *Almond Blossom*, 1890. Oil on canvas. 73.5 x 92 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

On January 31, 1890, Theo wrote to Vincent announcing the birth of his son, whom he had named Vincent Willem. The artist, who was extremely close to his younger brother, immediately set about making him a painting of his favorite subject: blossoming branches against a blue sky. The gift was given a place of honor above the piano in Theo's living room. As a symbol of the new life, Vincent chose an almond tree, which blooms early in southern France, announcing the coming spring as early as February. Van Gogh borrowed this theme from Japanese art. More than once during his time in Paris, he had painted blossoming trees based on Japanese prints.



Fig. 5: Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *Kingfisher*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 19 x 26 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

The kingfisher in this small painting appears to have been copied from nature or inspired by a Japanese print but in fact Van Gogh used a stuffed bird. It is part of a series of paintings that include an owl and a green parrot for which Van Gogh used stuffed birds to get an understanding of the anatomy of animals.



Fig. 7: Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *Still Life with Quinces and Lemons*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 48.5 x 65 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Van Gogh clearly associated this painting with Japanese prints. It appears along with several Japanese woodcuts in the background of one of his portraits of Père Tanguy, the color grinder who supplied paints to Van Gogh, Cezanne, Sisley, and many of the Impressionists when they were poor and unknown. Inspired by Japanese prints on crinkled paper Van Gogh was here trying to imitate the effects by means of rough brushstrokes. The decoration of the frame is probably based on Van Gogh's calligraphy on the border of *The Flowering Plum Tree* (after Hiroshige). It is the only original frame by Van Gogh in existence.

"I envy the Japanese the extreme clearness which everything has in their work. It is never tedious, and never seems to be done too hurriedly. Their work is as simple as breathing, and they do a figure in a few sure strokes with the same ease as if it were as simple as buttoning your coat."

(Letter from Van Gogh to his brother, Theo, September 1888.)

Fig. 3: Andô Jûbei (dates unknown), Vase (plum blossom), ca. 1900. Cloisonné enamel, 43 cm. EX393 Khalili Collection.

In the traditional Japanese calendar, spring began on New Year's Day, which — according to the lunar calendar adhered to until 1872 — fell at the beginning of February. In the south of Japan it was the month when plum trees blossomed, hence plum blossoms were often used as a symbol of spring. On this vase Andô Jûbei shows them in full bloom.



Fig. 6: Miyagawa Kôzan (1842–1916), Jar (with kingfisher on a lotus), ca. 1881. Stoneware with underglaze decoration in various colors and gold. 24.6 cm. P102 Khalili Collection.

The kingfisher and lotus are two of the Japanese symbols of summer. When portraying the bird waiting to snatch a fish, the artist strove to capture the tension of the split-second of intense concentration before seizing its prey.

"Come now, isn't it almost a true religion which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers? And you cannot study Japanese art, it seems to me, without becoming much happier and more cheerful, and we must return to nature in spite of our education and our work in a world of rules and regulations."

(Letter to Theo, September 1888.)

Fig. 8: Yamamoto Kōichi (dates unknown), Sugiura Yukinari (dates unknown), and the Kiryū Kōshō Kaisha company, Vase (with basket with dates and grapes), early 1880s. Gold, silver, and *shakudō* on bronze, 28.6 cm. M101 Khalili Collection.

Deep red Japanese persimmons and grapevines with grapes in silver and gold are seen behind what seems to be a plaited bamboo basket. Both the opening and the foot of the vase display a curved line in gold with stylized flowers, and beneath the opening and above the foot, a wider band of eight petaled flowers. The persimmons and the grapes allude to the season of autumn and, indeed, some of the leaves also display autumnal coloring. This vase is a collaborative piece signed by the designer and the metal artist,



and by the Kiryū Kōshō Kaisha company. In 1874, in order to coordinate the production of decorative works and enable Japan's artists to exhibit abroad, Emperor Meiji's government set up the commercial enterprise Kiryū Kōshō Kaisha. This semigovernmental company commissioned prominent artists to develop designs in their particular craft, in this case, metalwork.

Fig. 9: Andō Jūbei (dates unknown), Imperial presentation document chest (with wisteria), ca. 1905. *Musen*, cloisonné enamel, and silver, 14.2 x 26.1 x 21.7 cm. E 023 Khalili Collection.



The box, a rare example of enamelware in the traditional shape of lacquer document boxes, has trailing purple and blue wisteria, symbols of spring on a pale gray ground. The chrysanthemum crest indicates that this was an imperial presentation piece.

be an entirely accurate report; possibly he was less interested in other genres, for he certainly must have seen other types of Japanese art. In the Parisian shops such as Siegfried Bing's where Japanese woodcuts were on sale, so too were oriental ceramics, enamels, metalwork, and lacquer. Japanese decorative art had designs and motifs encapsulating the emotions inspired by nature and the four seasons; themes that had a profound influence on Van Gogh (Figs. 3–8).

Wonders of Imperial Japan: Meiji Art from the Khalili Collection, an exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, and accompanying catalogue, present a selection from almost 2,000 treasures made during the reign of the Emperor Meiji (1868–1912) the largest and most varied private collection of Meiji art in the world—and, according to experts, the most significant. The Meiji works of art are complemented and thematically connected by twelve works from the Van Gogh Museum collection, including eight paintings, prints, and albums.

Many imperial artists (*teishitsu gigeiin*) are represented in the Khalili collection: among them the ceramicists Seifu Yohei III (1851–1914) and Miyagawa Kōzan (1842–1916), cloisonné enamel artists Namikawa Sōsuke (1847–1910) and Namikawa Yasuyuki (1845–1927), the most famous from this period, and also the greatest innovators, who were, incidentally, unrelated; lacquer artists Shibata Zeshin (1807–1891) and Ikeda Taishin (1825–1903), and outstanding metalworkers such as Suzuki Chōkichi (1848–1919) and Unno Shōmin (1844–1915). The work of these artists was commissioned by the imperial family but also by the Japanese well-to-do and Western collectors. The Khalili collection comprises no fewer than twenty-eight pieces commissioned by the emperor, identifiable by the family coat of arms: a stylised chrysanthemum with sixteen petals (Fig. 9). The glory of the Khalili collection lies chiefly in the superb craftsmanship and technical virtuosity of these truly wonderful objects (Fig. 10). @



Fig. 10: Bonbonnière (*okashibako*) with seal of the Ōzeki company) (Shōki the demon queller pursuing three demons) ca. 1885. Silver, gold, *shakudō*, and cloisonné enamel. 44 cm. M058 Khalili Collection.

The oval bonbonnière (*okashibako*), covered in openwork wisteria, is made of silver and decorated with phoenixes and butterflies in cloisonné enamel. Its motif was originally Chinese. On top of the lid is the demon queller Shōki with his double-edged sword in his hand. His face, arms, and legs are made of *shakudō* (an alloy of copper and a little gold), his clothing is made of silver. Shōki, it was told, had once appeared before the Chinese emperor Tang Xuanzong (r. 712–756; Japanese Meikō) in a nightmare. Court painter Wu T'ao-tsze made a likeness of him, which led to his effigy becoming well-known in China and subsequently very popular in Japan. But in Japan Shōki was mainly the subject of humor, as he is on this sweet box. Here he is searching for three imps—one in silver, the second two in *shakudō*—who have hidden themselves under the sweet box, and in that concealed position serve as handy supports.

Wonders of Imperial Japan. Arts of the Meiji Period from the Khalili Collection runs at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, July 7–October 22, 2006, and the Kunsthalle Krems, Austria, February 25–June 3, 2007. The accompanying catalogue by Kris Schiermeier and Matthi Forrer (Van Gogh Museum / Waanders Publishers) is available in English, Dutch and German. Van Gogh Museum, Paulus Potterstraat 7, Amsterdam, daily 10.00 to 6.00 pm, Friday 10.00 to 10.00 pm. Tel. (031)20.570.5200 or visit www.vangoghmuseum.nl

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