

“All my work is based to some extent on Japanese art . . . ”

—*Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, July 15, 1888*

In 1859, following threats from the US, Japan ended its isolationist policies and began opening its doors to the West. Trade ensued, as did profound changes in Japan’s cultural, political, ideological, and economic systems. The fascination with difference went both ways; Japanese were intensely curious about all things Western, and Westerners were equally eager to learn about the Japanese.

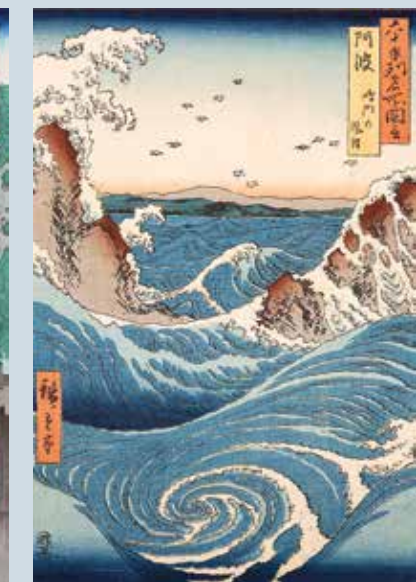
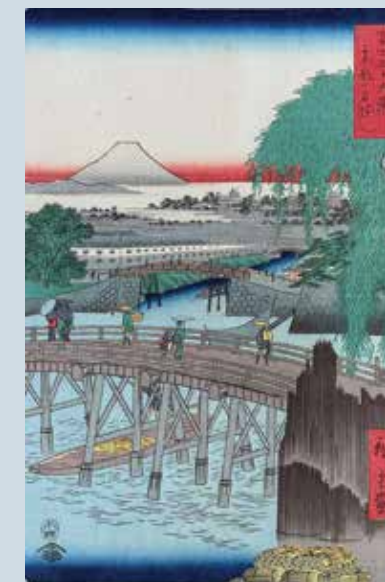
The popularity of Japanese art in the West exploded, leading to new perspectives in Western art that ultimately led to the rise of Impressionism. Among artists most clearly influenced by Japanese art are **Vincent van Gogh**, **Claude Monet**, and **Mary Cassatt**.

In the 1880s, van Gogh began collecting Japanese woodblock prints. He and his brother Theo eventually owned hundreds of prints. While much of Europe was enthralled with Japanese objects, Vincent came to see the prints as equal to the classical masterpieces of European art history. They taught him a new way of looking at the world that very much affected his own art. Vincent’s Japanese print collection eventually found its way into the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

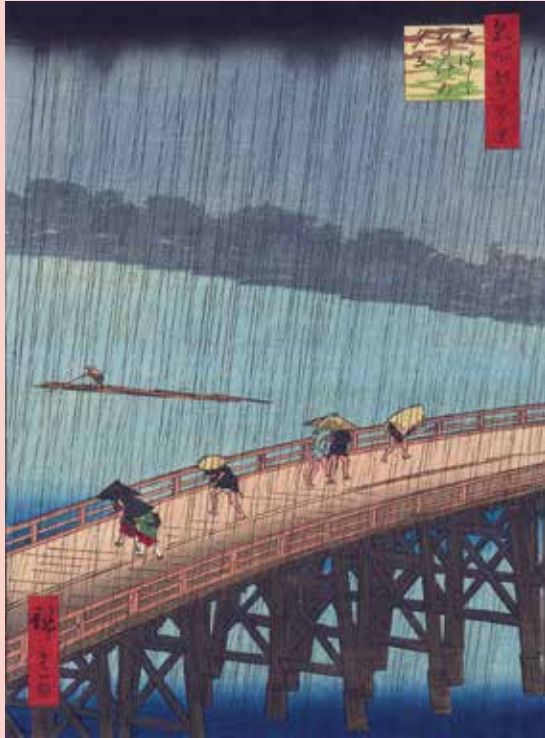


Utagawa Kunisada, c. 1854

[Utagawa Kunisada](#) (1786–1865) is considered to be the most popular, prolific, and commercially successful creator of woodblock prints in nineteenth-century Japan. It is believed that Kunisada produced over 20,000 prints during his lifetime. He was known to develop his style continually, always expanding the possibilities of his craft. While Kunisada favored subjects related to popular culture, urban pleasure, and leisure, another successful print artist, [Utagawa Hiroshige](#) (1797–1858), focused on landscapes. He is said to have been influenced by the popular series [Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji](#) by Katsushika Hokusai. Van Gogh’s print collection includes work by each of these three popular Japanese artists.



Utagawa Hiroshige, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, 1858, 1855



Utagawa Hiroshige, *Evening Shower at Atake and the Great Bridge*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, 1857



Vincent van Gogh, *Bridge in the Rain (after Hiroshige)*, 1887

Van Gogh tacked his Japanese prints to the walls of his studio. At first, he would copy the works in sketches and paintings (two examples at left). Later he incorporated style elements from Japanese prints into his work. The effect was subtle but obvious—a regular use of bright, flat areas of color, often separated by strong outlines; a focus on nature, the incorporation of decorative elements in his compositions; and the use of asymmetry, dramatic cropping, and close-up subjects, especially in portraits.



Vincent van Gogh, *Almond Blossom*, 1890



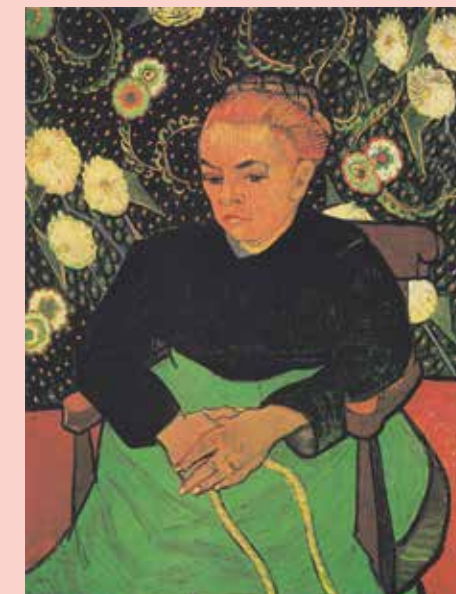
Vincent van Gogh, *Self-portrait (dedicated to Gauguin)*, 1888



Utagawa Hiroshige, *The Residence with Plum Trees at Kameido*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, 1857



Vincent van Gogh, *Flowering Plum Tree (after Hiroshige)*, 1887

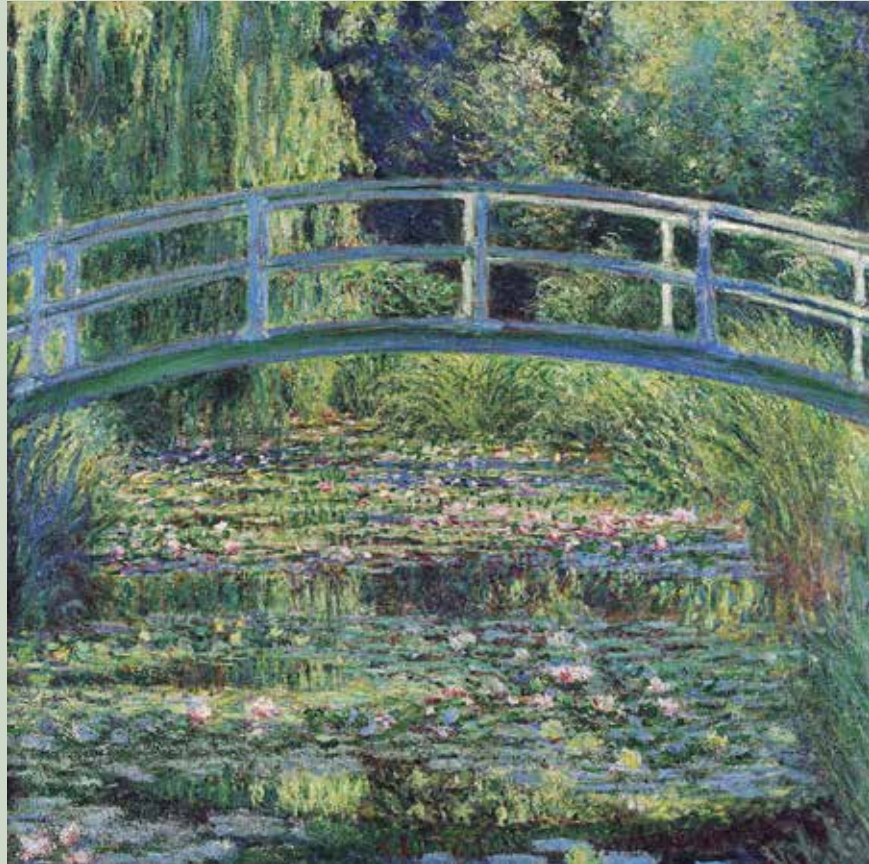


Vincent van Gogh, *Madame Roulin Rocking the Cradle*, 1889

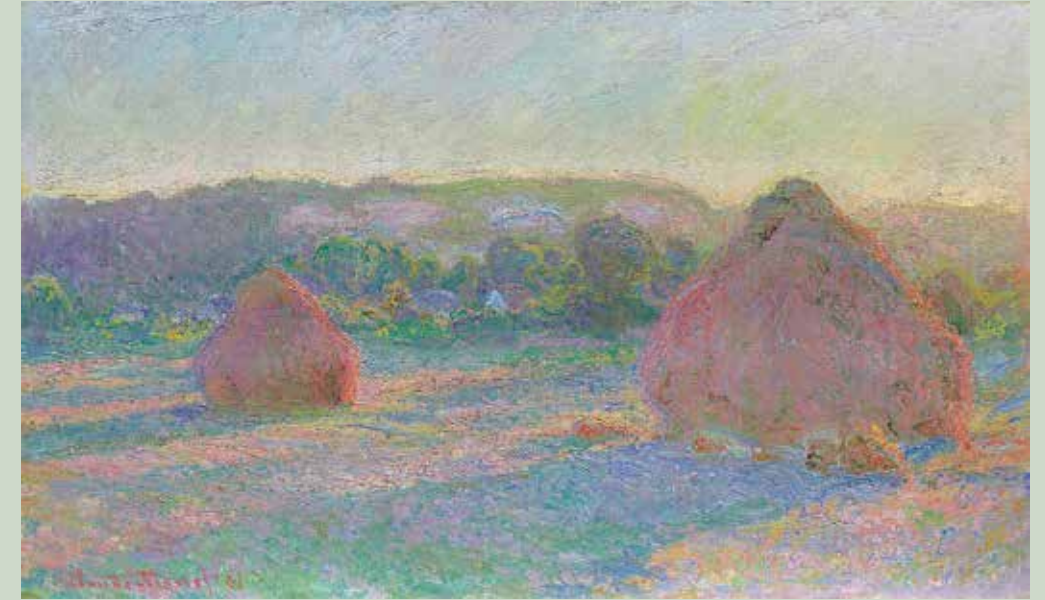


Vincent van Gogh, *Bedroom in Arles*, 1889

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Claude Monet, *The Water Lily Pond*, 1899



Claude Monet, *Stacks of Wheat (End of Day, Autumn)*, 1890



Claude Monet, *Water-Lily Pond and Weeping Willow*, 1916



Claude Monet, *Madame Monet Wearing a Kimono*, 1876

Like van Gogh, Claude Monet also had an extensive collection of Japanese prints, and on his frequent trips to Paris, Monet undoubtedly studied Japanese scroll and screen paintings, and the unique brushwork in Japanese ink paintings. Japanese art conveys the interconnectedness and harmony of the natural world, and Monet's own connection with nature was clearly expressed in his work. In 1883 Monet moved to an [old farmhouse in Giverny](#) where he designed flower gardens and a water garden with waterlilies and a Japanese-style bridge. His gardens appeared in dozens of paintings, forming a series similar to Katsushika Hokusai's *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, of which Monet owned nine prints.

In 1914 Monet began work on several monumental paintings that depicted the surface of his pond in nearly abstract form. The [trptyche](#) that he began at this time and worked on until his death in 1926 is an impressive forty-one feet in width. The influence of Japanese scroll and screen paintings is obvious in both its size and composition, which shows an appreciation for the ephemeral through the depiction of reflection, changing light, and a flat perspective.



Mary Cassatt, *The Bath*, 1890-91



Mary Cassatt, *The Fitting*, 1890-91



Mary Cassatt, *Woman Bathing*, 1890-91



Mary Cassatt, *Feeding the Ducks*, 1895



Mary Cassatt, *The Letter*, 1890-91

Following an 1890 exhibition of Japanese woodblock prints at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Mary Cassatt adopted an entirely different style, one characterized by flat, two-dimensional perspectives; strong linear outlines; and muted color palettes. Known for her intimate scenes of domestic life, she continued featuring these subjects in her work in this entirely new way. She often incorporated detailed patterns on textiles, clothing, and wallpaper, another characteristic of her work that echoed Japanese art. 🌸