

The background of the entire page is a reproduction of the painting 'The Starry Night' by Vincent van Gogh. The painting depicts a turbulent, swirling night sky with a bright yellow sun or moon in the upper left corner. The sky is filled with vibrant blue and green hues, and the stars are rendered as glowing, circular patterns. In the foreground, there are dark, silhouetted hills and a small village with a church spire visible on the right side.

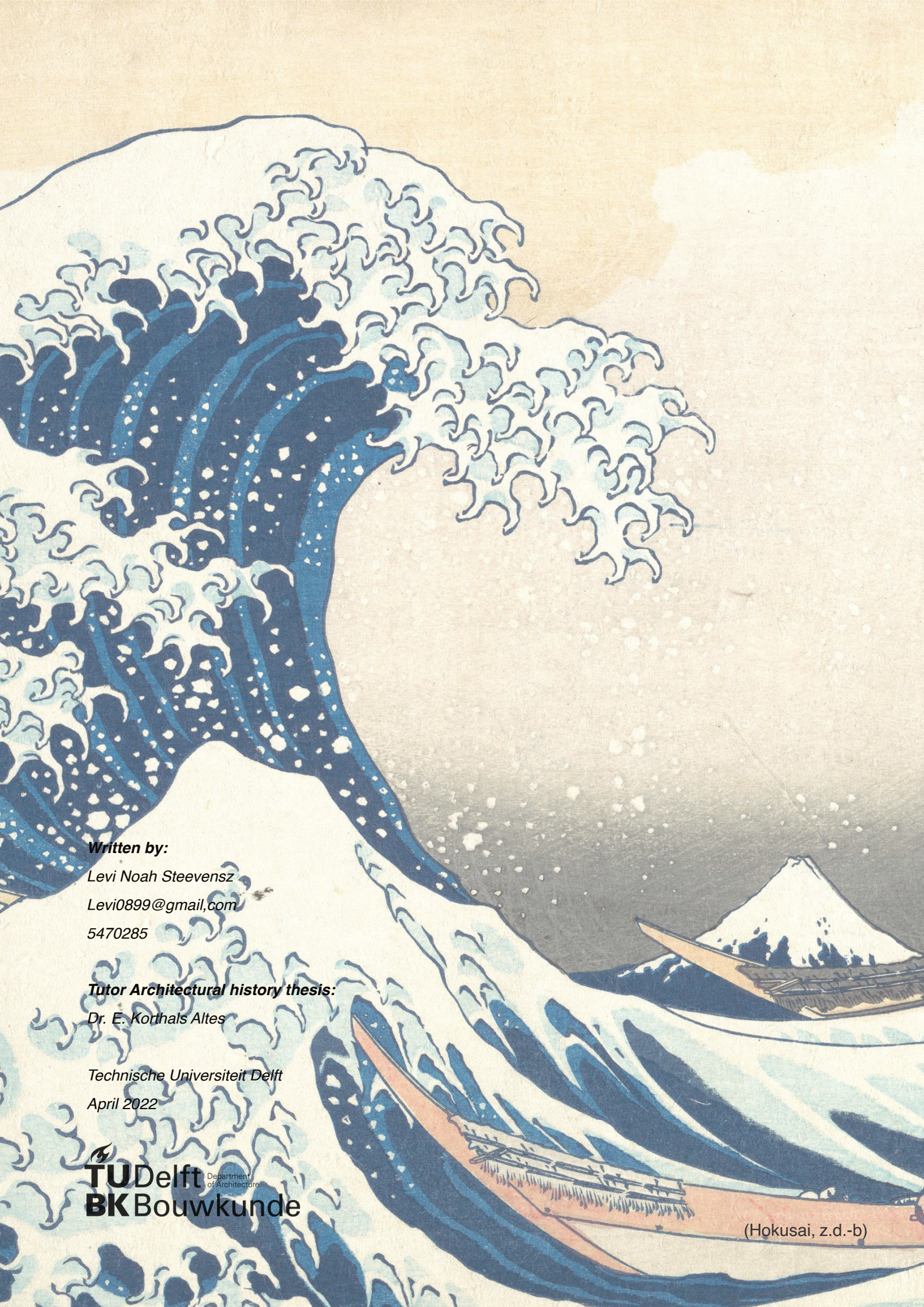
Drifting into a Night Sky

An Investigation of Ukiyo-E's
influence on Van Gogh's craft

Architectural History Thesis - AR2A011

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(Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-d)



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Abstract

Levi Noah Steevensz

The dissertation *Drifting into a night sky* explores the influence of the Japanese woodcut art Ukiyo-E on the latter part of Van Gogh's artistry, specifically his time at the Saint-Paul asylum. The thesis begins by examining the key characteristics of the Ukiyo-E movement and follows by exploring Van Gogh's Japonism, to explain what principles of the art style fascinated and influenced Van Gogh. Afterward, the effects of his Japanese muse on his artistry are analysed. The visual and mostly literary analysis used during this part of the research shows how the Japanese influence might have changed his craft or view up until his stay at Saint-Paul. The thesis finalizes the research by comparing paintings of Van Gogh from the asylum period with Ukiyo-E prints through literary and visual analysis, supported by the context created by earlier chapters. Finally, the exploration done during each of the chapters and most of all the final visual research will result in the formulation of a conclusion.



Figure 1 - *Amandelbloessem* from Vincent van Gogh - (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-c)

Introduction

Drifting into a Night Sky

“All my work is somewhat based on Japonaiseries...”

- Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, Arles, 15th of July 1888 (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.)

No artwork, artist, or artistic movement exists in a vacuum, as they are products of both the artist himself and the historical milieu in which they reside. Sometimes they are inspired by individual influences or several simultaneously (McAfee & Opatowsky, 2019). This is especially true for Vincent van Gogh, an Impressionist and world-renowned painter known for his signature brushstrokes and colourful paintings (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-b). Yet, unknown to most is the significant role of Ukiyo-E (the Japanese woodcut prints) in the development and configuration of his art. Specifically, looking at the pieces he painted later in his career at the Saint-Paul asylum, such as *Sterrennacht*, *Amandelbloessem*, *Korenveld*, etc. The landscapes, garden settings, and depictions of nature painted by Van Gogh during this period show little to no traces or references to the Japanese arts, or so it seems.

This historical dissertation aims to distil the influence of Ukiyo-E on Van Gogh's craft during the final years of his artistry, by answering the

research question: ***How has the Japanese wood print movement Ukiyo-E influenced Vincent van Gogh's work during his residence at the Saint-Paul Asylum?*** The dissertation seeks to provide an answer by exploring several sub-themes, such as the key principles of Ukiyo-E, the role of the Japanese prints in the overall development of Van Gogh's craft, and his time in Saint-Remy.

Several books and articles have been written about Van Gogh's artistry and the inspiration he found in Japanese arts and culture. Such as L.Tilborgh's book *Van Gogh en Japan* exploring the artist's infatuation with Japanese arts and how it affected his craft (Tilborgh, 2019). E. Darley and R.Suijver's book *Meesterwerken in het Van Gogh Museum* provides an exploration of Van Gogh's artistry and how his craft changed over the years (Darley & Suijver, 2020). While both books and other articles like M.A. McAfee and A.O. Opatowky's *Van Gogh: Japonaiserie* provide a comprehensive analysis, information on Ukiyo-E's influence on the final years of Van Gogh's craft is missing. L.Tilborgh only describes 1885 till 1888 (Van Gogh moved to the asylum in 1889) and E. Darley and R.Suijver's analysis stays very broad. The research within this dissertation hopes to fill this gap.

The research is posed throughout several periods in Van Gogh's artistry, such as his artistry from 1881 until 1890, his time in Paris and Arles from 1886 till 1888, and most significant to the research his stay at the Saint-Paul asylum in 1889 (Darley & Suijver, 2020). The study is mainly conducted through literary research of books and scientific articles, supported by visual analysis of Van Gogh's paintings and several Ukiyo-E prints. Most significant is the final part of the study, comparing Ukiyo-E prints with pieces from Van Gogh during his stay at the asylum through visual and literary research.

The dissertation consists of five chapters, with two supporting chapters and three main chapters. The supporting chapters provide an overview of Van Gogh's life and a description of the main principles of the Ukiyo-E movement. The main chapters discuss van Gogh's Japonism, how Ukiyo-E influenced the development of his craft, and what Ukiyo-E principles can be distinguished within his work from his time in Saint-Remy. This is the most crucial chapter, as the combination of visual and literary research provides most of the answer to the research question. At the end of the thesis, the conclusion of the research is formulated as an answer to the posed research question.



Figure 2 - *Sterrennacht* from Vincent van Gogh - (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-d)



Figure 3 - *The Great wave* from Hokusai - (Hokusai, z.d.-b)

Who is Vincent van Gogh?

Part 1.1 - Who is Vincent van Gogh?

Vincent Willem van Gogh was born on March 30th, 1853, in the Netherlands, in the small city of Zundert, Brabant. He was the third son of Father Theodorus van Gogh, a Dutch pastor, and his wife Anna Cornelia van Gogh, behind firstborn Theo and second child (also named) Vincent who sadly passed away at birth a year earlier. After Vincent Willem van Gogh, three sisters and two brothers followed (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-a). Yet, most notable is older brother Theo, with whom Vincent would share a lifelong closeness, exchanging over 600 letters with each other during their lifetime (McAfee & Opotowsky, 2019). In Zundert, the Van Gogh family would often walk-through nature, laying the foundation for Vincent's appreciation of nature in his art later in his life. He had no discernible formal education in artmaking, only following an education at a boarding school in Zevenbergen and the HBS in Tilburg (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-a), but his passion for the arts can be traced back to young age. At sixteen years of age, Vincent started working at a branch of the international art dealership Goupil & Cie in The Hague with his brother Theo (McAfee & Opotowsky, 2019). September 1872, when Theo went to the Brussels branch of the art dealership, marked the start of the letter exchange between the brothers. One year later in 1873, Vincent was sent to the London branch of Goupil & Cie (Van

Gogh Museum, z.d.-a). After moving to London, he travelled throughout continental Europe through the latter half of his twenties, following theological studies. His journey ended in a Belgium coal mining village where he was a missionary, before returning to live with his parents in 1881 (McAfee & Opotowsky, 2019).

After finding a new calling in 1880 during his stay at the village in Belgium, art, Van Gogh started his artistry in 1881, when he moved to his parents in Etten. The start of his artistry also marks the beginning of Theo's (almost lifelong) financial support, so Vincent could focus on his art. (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-a). During the early years, he would mostly paint Dutch landscapes and depict the everyday lives of working people, such as his famous work *Aardappeleters* (McAfee & Opotowsky, 2019). From 1881 to 1885 Vincent would move through the Netherlands and work on his Craft. Yet, in 1885 he moved to Antwerp where he bought his first Japanese print and hoped to enter the art world, meet other artists, and learn. Unfortunately, disappointed by the old-fashioned and outdated education, he quickly left for Paris in 1886 to pursue the same dream (Darley & Suijver, 2020). In Paris, Vincent developed his signature colourful style and passion for the Japanese arts (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-b). He started copying



Figure 4 - A portrait of Vincent van Gogh - (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.)

and experimenting with Japanese prints to master the modern arts (Tilborgh, 2019). Yet, despite the inspiration he drew from the hectic city life, it became too much after two years (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-b). So, in 1888, he left for Arles, to move closer to "his" Japan and develop a new Modern, and more primitive art (Darley & Suijver, 2020).

While in Arles, imagining that he was in Japan, Van Gogh worked on his art and experimented with principles found in Japanese art (Tilborgh, 2019). Resulting in iconic paintings such as *De roze perzikboom* and *De slaapkamer*. Unfortunately, his time in Arles did not end as hoped, as during his thirties struggled with mental illness and was hospitalized multiple times (McAfee & Opotowsky, 2019). His struggles were represented most notably when he cut off his ear. Vincent's mental instability eventually led him to the asylum of Saint-Remy, where he painted over 150 pieces

(Bailey, 2018). He voluntarily stayed at the asylum for a year, painting as much as he could, as, during these difficult times, painting consoled him. Vincent even accomplished painting some of his most iconic pieces, like *Sterrennacht*, while coping with his illness at Saint-Paul (McAfee & Opotowsky, 2019). He unsubscribed from the asylum on May 16th, 1890, whereafter he went to Auvers-Sur-Oise (Darley & Suijver, 2020), where he painted *Korenveld met kraaien*, depicting his desire for freedom from his illness. Later that month, in July of 1890, Van Gogh shot himself in the chest, sadly passing away two days later at the age of 37 (McAfee & Opotowsky, 2019).

Ukiyo-E & Impressionism

Part 2.2 - What is Ukiyo-E ?

Part 2.3 - Influence of Ukiyo-E on Impressionism

2.2 – What is Ukiyo-E?

Vincent van Gogh's infatuation and passion for the Japanese arts and culture played a significant part in his life and craft. Yet, before discussing the Japanese influence, what is Ukiyo-E in the first place? Ukiyo-E, or literally, "Pictures of the floating world" are Japanese paintings and mostly prints originating from the Edo period in Japan (1615-1868) (Coman, 2021). The Woodcut prints, known for their bright colors and unusual use of composition and perspective (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.), depict subjects of everyday life, such as the theater and pleasure quarters of Edo, nature, and working people (Coman, 2021). The prints, depicting the commoners' everyday life, exploded in popularity with the emergence of a middle class in ancient Edo (Yonemura, 1995). The mass-produced prints were sold to the common people of Japan by street vendors and shopkeepers for pennies (Coman, 2021).

The prints were a market drive art form, which meant that styles changed often. The earliest Ukiyo-E pieces were colored black and white, with alternative colors being added by hand later (Coman, 2021). Yet, due to the growing demand coloring by hand was replaced by printing techniques around 1765. The addition of color made the prints more realistic. As the prints were made together by artists, woodcutters, and printers, they would work together to make the prints

even more realistic with subtle color nuances, reflection, and transparency (Coman, 2021). Also, helping the prints to communicate the stories they tell better. During the final part of the Edo era (around the 1810s), the subject matter of the prints moved away from the pleasure quarters of Edo to representing more landscapes and details of nature. Artists inspired by the Dutch landscape paintings, such as Hokusai, portrayed nature in all its colorful glory, creating some of the most wanted and renowned pieces until today, such as *The Great Wave* and Hokusai's series "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji" (Coman, 2021).

As mentioned earlier Ukiyo-E is known most for its bright and cheerful use of color, perspective, and composition. The prints use many (indigo) blue tones (a Japanese blue (Clarke, 2017)), green tones, and yellow-brownish tones, which are composed in large and plain color areas (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.), which is visible in pieces such as *Hokusai's Red Fuji*. Furthermore, the Ukiyo-E artists make daring compositions by abruptly cutting off image elements at the edge of the prints, enlarging unimportant objects in the foreground, and adding diagonals (Tilborgh, 2019). Not to forget, of course, the floating perspective found in the prints. By removing the middle plan (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.) and showing not a single view of the subject, but several at once, a flat and floating perspective



Figure 5 - The different styles of Ukiyo-E through the years, (*Lovers Walking in the Snow*, *Visiting Komachi (Kayoi Komachi)*, and *Red Fuji*)

arises (Coleman, 2013). These principles of Ukiyo-E made it the interesting and inspiring art form it is to many artists such as Vincent van Gogh.

2.3 – Influence of Ukiyo-E on Impressionism

Aside from the Japanese influences in Van Gogh's craft, he is inspired by, and is, an Impressionist. So, some of the overlapping principles of Ukiyo-E and Impressionism could have inspired him both, or it makes it harder to differentiate which art style influenced what aspect of his art. However, just like van Gogh, Impressionism itself is influenced by Japanese woodcut prints (Ives, 2013), but how? Until 1854, Japan was closed off from the world, only trading with the Dutch according to their exclusive trade agreement (explaining the Dutch influence on Hokusai). While there was a small number of prints circulating in the west, people were interested, especially the French. So, when in 1854 the Americans forced Japan to open its borders, an influx of Japanese culture into the west followed (Yonemura, 1995). As a result, from 1855 till about 1875, Japanese culture was displayed in international exhibitions and portrayed in more and more artworks (Ives, 2013), and a craze for

Japanese exotica arose in Europe (Yonemura, 1995). This marked the start of Japonism in the west, Europe, and above all France.

In 1874, a group of artists, including Monet, Degas, and Pissarro, while Japanese culture was already consistently exported to the west, launched the Impressionist movement (Samu, 2004). The importation of Japanese culture was also very influential on the Impressionists. In their rebellion against the oppression of the French academy, the newfound colors in the wood prints inspired them to work with bright colors (Ives, 2013). In addition to the inspirational colors found in the prints, the Impressionists also made use of a Japanese-inspired composition, radically cropping and cutting on the edges of their pieces (Samu, 2004). Furthermore, visibly depicting actual Ukiyo-E prints or Japanese references in their works, such as Monet painting his wife in a kimono (Ives, 2013). So, while Van Gogh himself was passionate about Japan, this was partly the rule for most Impressionists (Tilborgh, 2019), showing that some of his impressionist influences were also inspired by Japanese culture.

Van Gogh's japonism

Part 3.4 - How did Ukiyo-E reach Van Gogh?

Part 3.5 - What aspects of Ukiyo-E inspired Van Gogh?

Part 3.6 - Influence of Ukiyo-E on the evolution of Van Gogh's work

3.4 – How did Ukiyo-E reach Van Gogh?

“And I don't think you can study Japanese art without becoming much happier and happier and it makes us return to nature, despite our upbringing and our work in a world full of conventions”

- Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo,
23rd or 24th of September 1888
(Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.)

Similar to most Impressionists Vincent van Gogh's work was hugely inspired and influenced by the Japanese wood print art Ukiyo-E. Unlike most artists, however, Van Gogh extremely romanticized the idea of Japan. In letter contact between Vincent and his brother Theo, he often described Japan and its culture as a utopia. His idealistic view of Japan did not only inspire Vincent's craft, but it ultimately influenced the way he saw life itself. (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.) (Tilborgh, 2019)

While a rare number of Japanese prints were already present in Europe by 1812 and Japanese culture was actively being portrayed in exhibitions and impressionist paintings around the 1870s (Ives, 2013). Van Gogh only got fascinated by the art form in 1885 (Tilborgh, 2019), several years

after he started his artistry in 1880-81 (Darley & Suijver, 2020). He was aware of the Japanese prints before 1885 since this can be derived from his letters to his brother Theo (see quote below), yet he was not intrigued by the art before 1885. This was not unusual as the artform was appreciated later in the Netherlands than in other European countries. (Tilborgh, 2019)

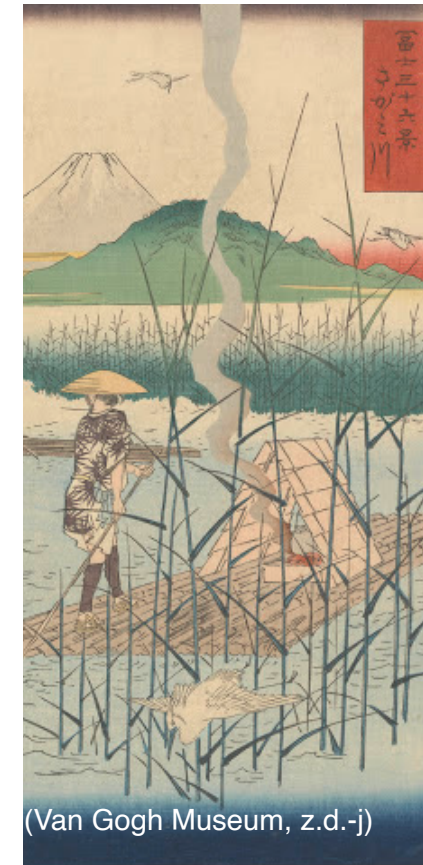
“My workplace is still bearable. especially because I have pinned a batch of Japanese pictures on the walls which amuse me a lot. You know, those female figures in gardens or on the beach, horsemen, flowers, gnarled thorns.”

- Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, Antwerp,
28th of November 1885
(Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.)

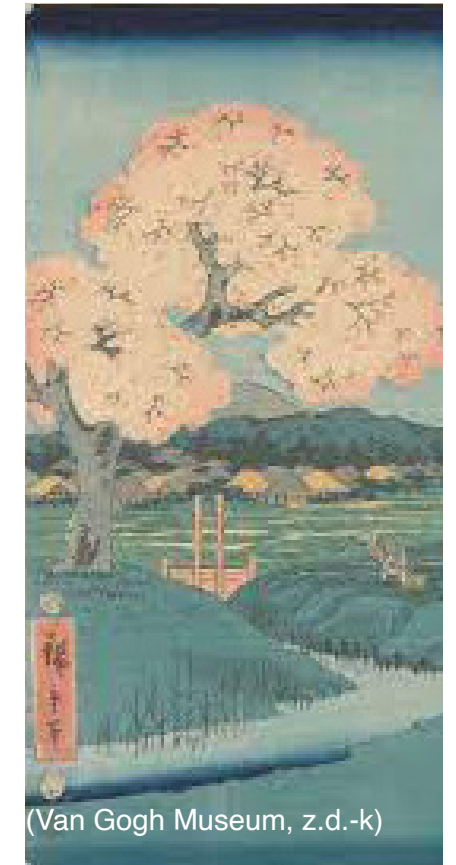
Van Gogh bought his first Japanese prints in Antwerp in 1885, the port city which had access to exotic goods, like the Japanese prints. He hung the woodcut prints on the wall of his new room. He mentioned the pieces in a letter to his brother (see quote above) (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.). Vincent moved to Antwerp to enter the art world, meet other artists, develop his craft, discuss, and exhibit art, and above all, make art. Despite his wishes, he quickly came to



(Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-i)



(Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-j)



(Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-k)

Figure 6 - Some of the prints Van Gogh bought during his time in Paris, (Iwai Kumesaburō (III) - Utagawa Kunisada, The Sagami River, and The Yoshitsune Cherry Tree - Utagawa Hiroshige)

the same conclusion as in the Netherlands. The education at the art academy in Antwerp was too old-fashioned and outdated (Darley & Suijver, 2020). So, shortly after his move to Antwerp, he continued his journey to the centre of the Japan craze, Paris (McAfee & Opatowsky, 2019).

In Paris, the centre of the art world, Vincent van Gogh became acquainted with modern art and infatuated with Japanese art, which would change his craft forever (Darley & Suijver, 2020). He moved in with his brother Theo in 1886 (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.), who worked as an art dealer in Paris, and supported Vincent financially and mentally. This made both the move and his entry into the art world easier, as his brother formed an important link with other painters. Vincent's growing interest in the Japanese arts showed in his expanding collection of woodcut prints (Darley & Suijver, 2020). He was possibly tempted by the low prices of the pieces (Tilborgh, 2019), as

he hoped to sell them at a profit. But he was undoubtedly fascinated by the Japanese prints, as the influence of the art gradually influenced his work more and more (Darley & Suijver, 2020). The size of his collection was unknown, in the letters to Theo he spoke about hundred of prints, but we at least know it was big enough to host an exhibition in 1887. Vincent held this exhibition at Agostina Segatori's cafe Cabaret Le Tambourin, his lover at the time. Where he bought his prints in Paris is not precisely known, it could be Kiryu Kosho Kaisha or Delarebeyrette. At least it is known he acquired some at Siegfried Bing (Tilborgh, 2019). After his two tiring years in Paris, angry since he had not sold any of his work. Vincent van Gogh moved to Arles, freshly inspired, and influenced by his Japanese muse (Darley & Suijver, 2020).



(Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-h)

Figure 7 - Agostina Segatori in Le Tambourin by Vincent van Gogh - (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.)

3.5 – What aspects of Ukiyo-E inspired Vincent van Gogh?

“...look, we love Japanese painting, we’re influenced by it – and then we wouldn’t [go] to [...] which is equivalent to Japan, the South [of France]? So I believe that the future of new art lies in the South.”

- Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, Arles, 5th of June 1888 (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.)

While fatigue and the disappointing sales of Van Gogh’s works mainly marked his departure from Paris, the choice for Arles had nothing to do with the search for new sales opportunities. His

move to the south of France was encouraged by the search for his own Japan (Darley & Suijver, 2020). In Arles, Van Gogh hoped to find inner peace, the brightness of the atmosphere and the “cheerful colour effects” of the Oriental prints (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.), and the future of art, which he believed to be in the South (Darley & Suijver, 2020). Yet, before exploring the reasoning behind his choice for Arles more, why his exploration of Japan? What about the Japanese prints and culture inspired him?

To most impressionists, the admiration of Japan was like a rule, so to Van Gogh, who at first learned from Monet and Degas, this was no different. Similar to other impressionists, Van Gogh was inspired by the floating perspective and unusual

composition found in Ukiyo-E prints (Tilborgh, 2019). Van Gogh learned that paintings do not always follow a traditional layout, from near to far, like a diorama (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.). Yet, the most notable inspiration to Van Gogh was the Japanese appreciation of nature, everyday subjects (McAfee & Opatowsky, 2019), and exotic, vibrant, and cheerful use of colour. The combination of these elements in the Japanese prints formed a great inspiration in his search for a new, more primitive, and modern art (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.).

“Over time, your view changes, you look more Japanese, you experience the color differently. I am therefore convinced that my personality will develop if I stay here for a long time.”

- Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, Arles, 5th of June 1888 (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.)

However, with Van Gogh, the Japanese influence went further than an inspiration to his views towards his craft. He found a piece of himself in the art, as he took nature as a starting point for his art (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.). So, he embraced what he saw as the Japanese mindset, a simple life living harmoniously alongside nature (McAfee & Opatowsky, 2019). The inspiration he found from the Japanese arts and his view of the Japanese mindset, is also what eventually led him to Arles, where he sought the clear division of the surface and bright colours, which characterize the Ukiyo-E prints. And what was a better place than Arles, where these colours were up for grabs (Darley & Suijver, 2020)? During Van Gogh’s train ride to Arles, he had even been watching out the window to see if it already looked like Japan (Tilborgh, 2019). His childlike enthusiasm shows not only the great inspiration he found in the Japanese arts but most of all Van Gogh’s love for the Japanese culture.

3.6 – Influence of Ukiyo-E on the evolution of Van Gogh’s work

“All my work is somewhat based on Japonaiseries...”

- Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, Arles, 15th of July 1888 (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.)

Aside from being a significant inspiration to Vincent van Gogh, the Japanese woodcut prints were logically also of substantial influence on the development of his craft. Yet, as mentioned earlier, Van Gogh only became fascinated with the art form four years after starting his artistry in 1880-81 (Darley & Suijver, 2020). So, before finding his muse in Antwerp and becoming infatuated with the Japanese arts and culture in Paris, he had already painted several works in Antwerp and the Netherlands. Of course, after he found the Japanese prints, he made an abundance of pieces in Paris, Arles, where he moved because of his newfound love, and later in the Saint-Remy asylum. Van Gogh’s introduction to Ukiyo-E signifies a split or significant moment in his artistry and provides insight into the development of his craft. The progress of Van Gogh’s career can be separated into five parts: his early years in the Netherlands, his short stay in Antwerp, Paris, Arles, and his stay at the saint-Remy asylum (Darley & Suijver, 2020). To further understand the influence of the Japanese arts on his work, paintings from these periods are analysed and mirrored with Ukiyo-E pieces from his collection. The pieces chosen are up until his at Saint-Remy, since the masterpieces he painted there are mentioned later.

Paintings by van Gogh during his time in the Netherlands, 1881-1885

At the start of his Artistry, Van Gogh moved through the Netherlands living with his parents in Etten and Neunen and on his own in Den Haag (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-a), following drawing and painting lessons to master the craft (Darley & Suijver, 2020). During this period, he worked notoriously, drawing cityscapes, painting landscapes, and copying example sheets from drawing lessons (Darley & Suijver, 2020). Finding his inspiration in nature, the intricacies of daily life, and people's everyday lives (McAfee & Opotowsky, 2019), the subjects of his works were solely depictions of landscapes and portraits. Especially when living in Neunen from 1883 till 1885, painting mostly Farmers, resulting in pieces such as *Aardappeleters* (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-e). The works he made during his time in the Netherlands, are characterized by their dark colours, using many browns, grey, earth tints, only using brighter colours to depict the sky or greenery. Besides the dark tone, His paintings had a feeling for the dramatic and were a bit more traditional, since he had not mastered his signature brushstrokes yet and was following the dutch example during his classes (Darley & Suijver, 2020). Showing in the paintings he produced in this period, such as the lonely and withering tree in *Knotwilg*, the depiction of nature in *Zeegezicht bij Scheveningen*, and his fascination for daily life in *Aardappeleters*.

Paintings by van Gogh during his time in Antwerp, Belgium, 1885

Moving to Antwerp, Vincent hoped to enter the art world, meet other artists, and learn (Darley & Suijver, 2020), while following classes at the art academy. Antwerp had a lot to offer Van Gogh, an abundance of art, galleries, drawing clubs, and access to models (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-e). Unfortunately, he was left feeling disappointed due to the education at the art academy being



Figure 8 - By Vincent van Gogh, *Knotwilg*, *Zeegezicht bij Scheveningen*, and *Aardappeleters*



Figure 9 - By Vincent van Gogh, *Skelet met een brandende sigaret* and *Kop van een prostituee*

too old-fashioned and outdated (Darley & Suijver, 2020). Resulting in him cutting his stay in Antwerp short. At first glance, Van Gogh's art did not change dramatically while in Antwerp, despite him being several years into his artistry and buying his first Japanese prints. The same dark colour tones were still present in his work, the subjects changed from landscapes and people to mostly models, probably due to his time at the academy. Yet most striking, are the first shimmers of Van Gogh's signature paint strokes, showing the first steps of him mastering his eventual world-renowned craft, as is visible in works such as *Kop van een skelet met een brandende sigaret* and *Kop van een prostituee*.

Paintings by van Gogh during his time in Paris, France, 1886-1887

Van Gogh's time in Paris and the birth of his infatuation for Japan mark a significant turning point in his career, as during this period he developed his signature colourful style and fully embraced his thin brushstrokes, changing his art forever (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-b). The Japanese arts played a significant role in the sudden change in his craft. Inspired by the bright and cheerful colours, the unusual composition, and the perspective found in the Japanese prints, he started experimenting with these principles (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.). From the start of 1887, he practiced cutting off image elements on the edges, adding diagonals, and placing large and unimportant objects on the front of the pieces. In pieces such as *IJsvogel*, these experiments become visible, as he took these principles quite literally with diagonal reed stalks, cutting off the sides, and even leaving the horizon out of the painting, making it more realistic (Tilborgh, 2019). With Van Gogh becoming more and more fascinated with the prints, more experiments followed, as he started prioritizing flatness over depth in his paintings, changing the character and



Figure 10 - *Flowering plum tree* by (left) Utagawa Hiroshige and (right) Vincent van Gogh

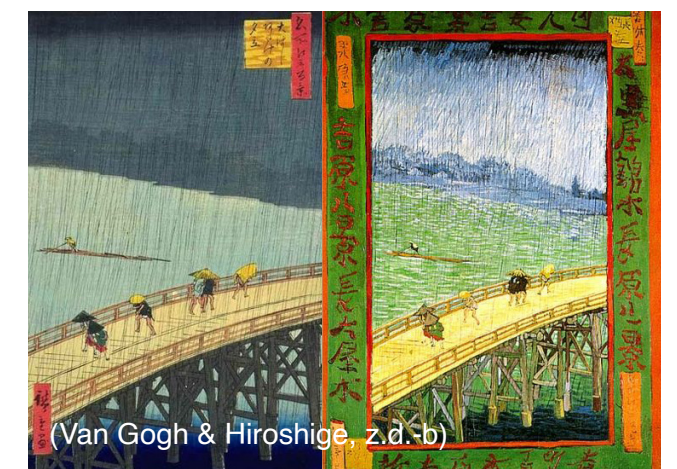


Figure 11 - *Bridge in the rain* by (left) Utagawa Hiroshige and (right) Vincent van Gogh

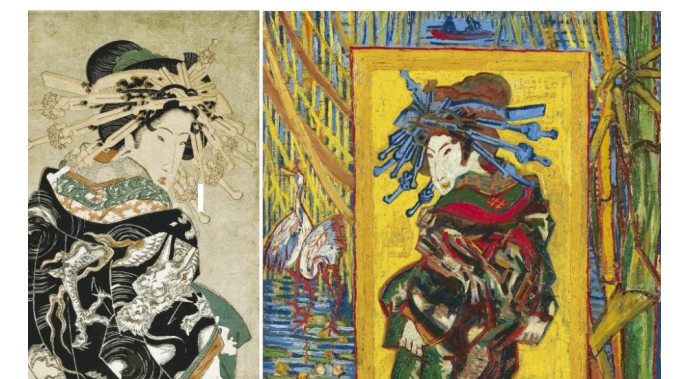


Figure 12 - Cover paris illustre and *Eisen* by Vincent van Gogh - (Van Gogh, 2018)

perspective in his works (Tilborgh, 2019). The Ukiyo-E principles became even more embedded in his craft when he started copying prints from Hiroshige like *Flowering plum tree* and *Bridge in the rain*, only making slight changes in colour and adding some Japanese writing (Tilborgh, 2019). While nature and daily life remained the subjects in his paintings, as those are also the main subjects in the Japanese prints. Almost everything else did change, starting with the transition from dark colour tones, to embracing every bright colour on the spectrum. The changes in composition and perspective, however, are more significant. Switching from a Dutch perspective to striving for flatness and using Japanese composition principles. This, of course, is visible in his copies of Ukiyo-prints, but also in pieces such as *IJsvogel*, *Stilleven met kolen en uien*, and *Tuin met geliefden*.

Paintings by van Gogh during his time in Arles, (south of) France, 1888-1889

After being led to Arles by his Japonism, Van Gogh's appreciation of Japan and incorporation of the Ukiyo-E principles reached new heights. In his search for the brightness of the atmosphere and the "cheerful colour effects" of the Oriental prints (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.), he committed even more to the Japanese principles, trying to define his new more primitive art following the Japanese examples. Even portraying himself as Japanese in one of his portraits. During this time, he started paying more attention to the small details in nature and refining the principles he had been practicing in Paris (Tilborgh, 2019). He found equivalent subjects to the Japanese prints like crabs or meaningless features of nature to paint. Furthermore, he progressed in practicing more with the placement of unimportant elements in the foreground of his pieces and framing his shapes in strong contours (Tilborgh, 2019). His craft did not change significantly in Arles but became more



Figure 13 - Vincent van Gogh, *IJsvogel*, *Stilleven met kolen en uien*, and *Tuin met geliefden*

refined, using even brighter and flatter colours, playing more with colour areas like the Japanese, and embedding the principles he practiced even deeper in his art. In paintings such as *Two crabs*, *De Oogst*, *De Voren*, and *The Pink Peachtree* his practice comes into fruition and is portrayed with his signature bright colours and brushstrokes.

Altogether, Ukiyo-e had a significant influence on Van Gogh's craft. Especially in introducing the bright colours, composition principles, and flat perspective in his work. The influence is most notable when looking at his work before and after Paris, showing drastic changes. It changed Van Gogh's dark-toned and more traditional work, to the bright coloured and signature work known to most. Showing that his admiration and love for the Japanese arts had a drastic influence on the development and refining of his craft.



Figure 14 - Vincent van Gogh, *Two crabs*, *De Oogst*, *De Voren*, and *The Pink Peachtree*

Ukiyo-E's influence on Van Gogh's stay at St. Paul

Part 4.7 - Van Gogh's works during his stay at St. Paul

Part 4.8 - Influence of Ukiyo-E on Van Gogh's work at St. Paul -

4.7 – Van Gogh's works from his stay at St. Paul

Towards the end of Vincent van Gogh's stay in Arles, during the early months of 1889, he stayed intermittently in the Arles Hospital. Due to his fear that his illness would return. Despite this fear, there was only one thing on his mind, work. At the start of the spring, he would paint the flowering trees and flowers in the hospital garden (Darley & Suijver, 2020). However, on the 8th of May, his stay in Arles concluded. His deteriorating mental state made staying in the Hospital of Arles impossible and returning to his yellow house was not an option either. After several of Van Gogh's mental episodes, most notably the one on the 23rd of December 1888, he cut off his ear and brought the gruesome package to a lady in a local brothel. The residents of Arles were left angry and demanded Vincent to leave the village through a signed petition. Unable to say in Arles, his doctors advised him to move to an asylum, which eventually led Vincent to the asylum of Saint-Remy, where he hoped to find rest (Bailey, 2018).

In the Saint-Paul asylum of Saint-Remy, where Vincent voluntarily stayed for a year, he continued painting as much as he could, as, during these difficult times, painting consoled him. The asylum provided him a room and studio to work on his craft and the communal garden where he often worked during the day. He had the freedom to furnish an

empty room in the north wing of the asylum, which became his studio. The only known illustration of his workplace in Saint-Paul is Van Gogh's famous piece "Raam in het atelier" (Darley & Suijver, 2020). The asylum grounds were a source of inspiration, as Vincent could not always leave the asylum. He illustrated the trees, view over the monastery wall, flowers, and circular fountain. Such as in the first week of his stay, when he made a large drawing of the garden. Despite his difficult time at the asylum, he did seem cheerful from time to time. As is written in the letters to his brother Theo, who he kept in contact with (Mullins, 2015).

"I want to tell you that I think I've done well to come here,"

- Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, Saint-Remy, 1889 (Mullins, 2015)

During his time at Saint-Remy, Vincent van Gogh worked endlessly to cope with the indignities of daily life, which resulted in a total of 174 paintings of which 150 survived (Bailey, 2018). While it seems unlikely, considering the difficult circumstances at the asylum, Van Gogh made his greatest masterpieces at Saint Paul. Afraid that his illness would make painting impossible, he worked as much as possible (Darley & Suijver, 2020). Remarkable, however, is that during this period he



Figure 15 - Vincent van Gogh, Yellow house - (Van Gogh, z.d.-g)

lost faith in himself, his Japanese muse, and his desire for a new art form inspired by the oriental prints, as he found his wish too ambitious (Tilborgh, 2019). Especially when in contradiction to this loss of faith, he started experimenting even more with daring compositions, color, cuts in the composition, and magnified details of nature (Darley & Suijver, 2020). Meaning some of his experiments consist of principles present in the Japanese woodcut prints. His experimenting and consequent sending of his pieces to his brother Theo resulted in an unexpected appreciation for his work in Paris and some of Vincent's most celebrated pieces to date. Such as *Amandelbloesem* that he painted for Theo's newborn, *Korenveld bij zonsopgang*, *Irissen*, *Raam in het Atelier* and above all *Sterrennacht* (Darley & Suijver, 2020). Illustrating how his time in Saint-Remy was a difficult but fruitful one.

4.8 – Influence of Ukiyo-E on Van Gogh's work at St. Paul

While Van Gogh's unpleasant circumstances and loss of faith in both himself and his wish for a Japanese-inspired new art had pushed his Japanese muse to the background of his life (Tilborgh, 2019). It certainly had not diminished the strong influence of the Japanese prints in his craft during his stay at the Saint-Paul asylum. As the Japanese prints played a significant part in Van Gogh mastering his craft, with him even copying pieces from his collection (Tilborgh, 2019), some of the principles of Ukiyo-E had become embedded in his style. Especially after his years of experimenting with his craft in Arles. Not to mention that he was an impressionist and that the impressionist movement itself was influenced by the Japanese woodcut prints (Yonemura, 1995). Yet Van Gogh's change of

mind did make the influence less upfront, marking a new stage in his career with a more refined Japanese influence. Raising the question of how the principles of Ukiyo-E show in the masterpieces he painted during his stay at Saint Paul? This will be explored by analysing the concepts of the Japanese arts within his works and mirroring the pieces he made during his stay at the asylum with Japanese prints.

Colour

The first, and most obvious similarity between Van Gogh's works and the Japanese prints is the vibrant and bright use of colours. He found inspiration in the exotic, vibrant, and cheerful colours of the Ukiyo-E prints (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.), and the influence of his fascination goes back to his stay in Paris. There he mastered his signature colourful style (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-b) after he started collecting, copying, and experimenting with the prints in Paris, further developing the use of colour during his stay in Arles (Tilborgh, 2019). So, when he eventually moved to the Saint-Paul asylum, the bright and vibrant colours had become a staple of his art, as is visible in *A Starry Night*, *Amandelbloessem*, and many other pieces. Of course, Van Gogh was an impressionist which could also explain the origin of his use of colour. Yet even the Impressionists were influenced by the Japanese prints. The newfound colours in the wood prints provided the impressionist with a way of fighting the oppression of the French academy. (Ives, 2013) The striking influence of the Japanese prints is also directly visible in Van Gogh's work, looking at the use of many (indigo) blue tones (a Japanese blue (Clarke, 2017)), green tones, and yellow-brownish tones, which can all be found in the Japanese wood prints.



Figure 16 - Hokusai, *The Great Wave* & *Two trees*



Figure 17 - Vincent van Gogh, *Sterrenacht* and *amandelbloessem*

Besides the actual colours used in his paintings, the composition of the colour areas in his work also shows a strong resemblance to the Japanese prints. He was fascinated by the large colour areas found in the wood prints (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.). Visible in his experimental copies of works from Hiroshige (Tilborgh, 2019), and later, continuing the development of his craft by experimenting with compositions and colour during his time in Saint-Remy (Darley & Suijver, 2020). When analysing Van Gogh's works from his time at the asylum, the use of these large color areas especially shows in his depictions of nature. The large green plane in *Korenveld bij zonsondergang*, the green tree in *Starry Night*, or the blue sky in *Starry Night* shows similarities with the waves seen in Hokusai's *The Great Wave*. Even in *Raam in het Atelier* and *Amandelbloessem*, the large colour areas play a significant role in the composition of the paintings. They all show Vincent's fascination with the use of colour areas within the Ukiyo-E prints.

Subjects

Secondly, as mentioned in earlier chapters, there is a strong resemblance between the subjects for Van Gogh's paintings and those depicted in most Ukiyo-E prints. From a young age, he developed an appreciation for nature (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-a), and during the early years of his artistry, he would mostly paint Dutch landscapes and depict the everyday lives of working people (McAfee & Opatowsky, 2019). This explains why he recognized himself in the Japanese arts and what he saw as the Japanese mindset, a simple life living harmoniously alongside nature (McAfee & Opatowsky, 2019). As the Ukiyo-E prints represent matters of daily life, enjoyable worlds of pleasure quarters, and scenes of nature (Coman, 2021). So, in the subjects of his paintings, there has always



The Great Wave, Hokusai



yoshitsune cherry

Korenveld bij zonsopgang, Van Gogh



Sterrennacht, Van Gogh

Figure 18 - Use of color areas within paintings from Van Gogh and Japanese prints - own work, yet the core image is from the source mentioned on the diagrams.

been a similarity with the Japanese prints. Ukiyo-E might not have directly inspired Van Gogh's choice of subjects, but it did encourage the direction he chose as an artist. Especially when looking at the pieces he made during his spell at the asylum, *Starry Night*, *Amandelbloessem*, *Korenveld met Zonsondergang*, and all the paintings of the asylum garden, all depictions of nature or his daily life.

Shadows

Within both impressionism and Ukiyo-E, the representation of shadows is a significant subject. The depiction of shadows was also a subject that required Van Gogh to compromise, as he had to choose between following the Japanese or the Impressionist ideologies (Tilborgh, 2019). The Impressionists always search for realistic colours, no shadow is black, nature is full of colour, and black and white are not colours (Boddy-Evans, 2019). Monet always observes colours as they are, not as objects, but as the shape of colours. Through colours and shapes, as he observes them, he creates an impression of the scene before him (Van Gogh Alive, z.d.). He captures the subtlety of a realistic shadow with simply a square of blue, a streak of pink, and green and purple to portray the deepest shadows (Boddy-Evans, 2019). In the Ukiyo-E prints, there are no shadows, because, in Japanese folklore, shadows and reflection identify the supernatural, the demon, or the witch. This idea contradicts the western arts, where shadows function as a tool for rooting subjects to the ground. Furthermore, Japanese prints are visualizations of ideas, which are strengthened by the lack of shadow (Toshidama, 2021). The significant differences between both ideologies led to Van Gogh's compromise.

The pieces he made during his stay at Saint Paul, arguably the peak of his artistry, show the compromise between ideologies. Van Gogh did not

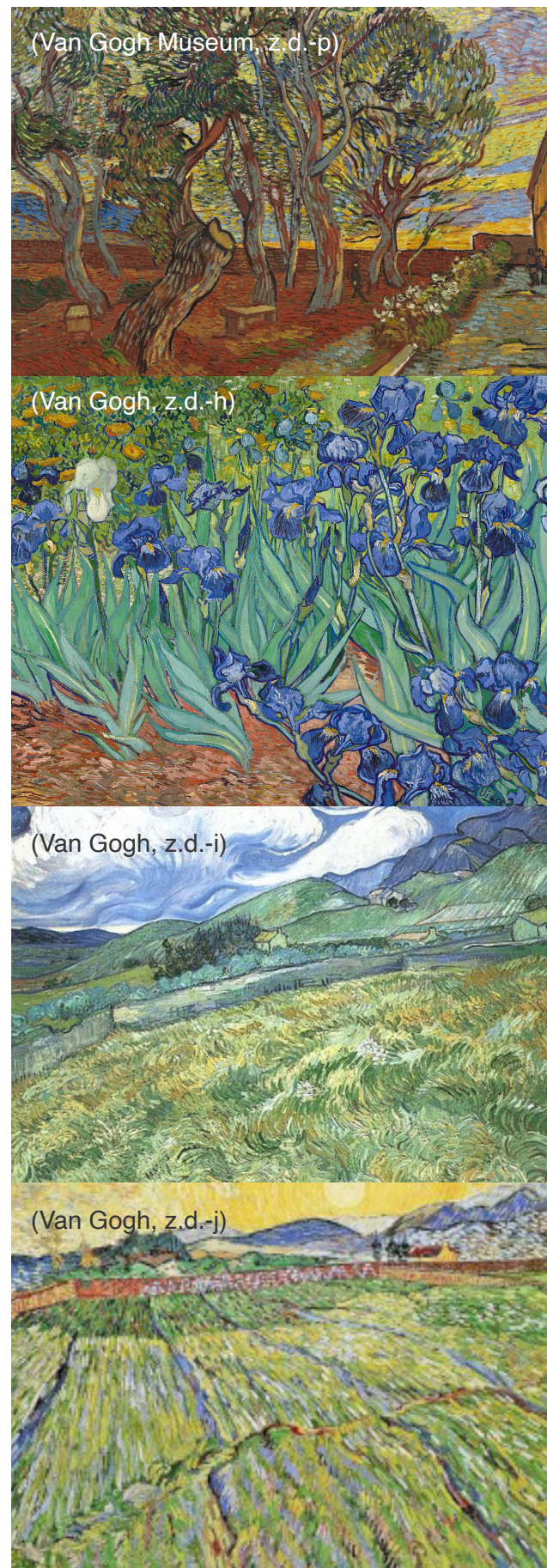


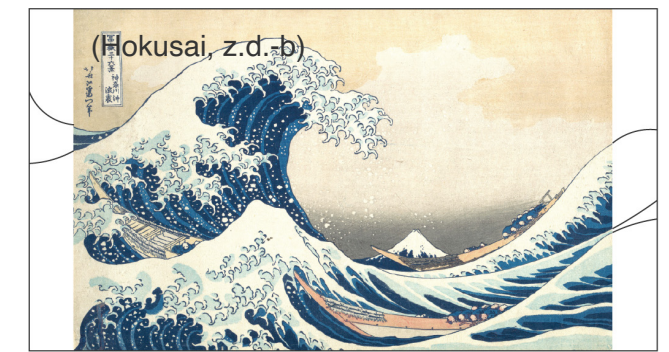
Figure 19 - Vincent van Gogh, *Garden of the asylum*, *Irissen*, *Korenveld na een storm*, and *Korenveld bij zonopgang*

want to lose the Impressionist ideas about lighting (Tilborgh, 2019). Yet, in paintings such as *Irissen*, *Korenveld na een storm*, and *Amandelbloessem* clear use of shadows is missing. However, he does stay true to the Impressionist ideas, as all the paintings clearly show colouring differences that insinuate the idea of lighting or shadows. So, while the presentation of shadows is minimal or subtle, Van Gogh does deviate from the Japanese ideology. Of course, there are also paintings where shadows are directly visible like *Korenveld met Zonsondergang*. But in most cases, the incorporation of shadows remains subtle in his works from his time in Saint-Remy.

Composition

However, the most impactful on Van Gogh's craft was the composition specific to Ukiyo-E prints. (Tilborgh, 2019). Ukiyo-E artists, and their Pictures of the floating world, often leave out the middle plan, make abrupt cut-offs of the image elements at the edge, enlarge objects, and regularly leave the horizon out of the picture (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.). Fascinated by these perspective interventions and the unusual compositions, Van Gogh experimented by making cut-offs of the image elements at the edge, enlarging unimportant elements on the foreground, and adding diagonals in his paintings (Tilborgh, 2019). The experimenting he did in Paris and most of all Arles, had a lasting effect on his craft, showing in the pieces he made in Saint-Remy.

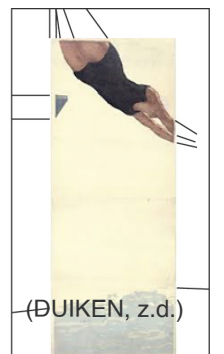
During his time in Arles, Van Gogh experimented with cutting off significant image elements at the edge of the painting, as the Japanese would (Tilborgh, 2019). Cutting off the edges creates a picture-like image, which made his paintings win in realism. The unusual composition these cut-offs helped provide can also be recognized in Van Gogh's works from his time at Saint Paul. In *Amandelbloessem*, the branches from the tree



The Great Wave, Hokusai



Two Trees, Hokusai



Duiken



Sterrennacht, Van Gogh



Asylum garden, Van Gogh



Amandelbloessem, Van Gogh

Figure 20 - *Cut-offs within paintings from Van Gogh and Japanese prints* - own work, yet the core image is from the source mentioned on the diagrams.

are cut-off on the side, Raam in het Atelier shows cutting off the prints on his wall and his furniture, and in his depictions of the asylum garden, the trees are always cut-off. While these cut-offs are already quite subtle, even more, subtle cuts are visible in *A Starry Night* where the tree is cut-off on the bottom, the glow from the moon is not a full circle, and the view of the city that is cut short on the bottom of the painting. While the cuts in composition are subtle, a lot more than in Ukiyo-E pieces such as *Two Trees*, *Yoshitsune cherry blossom*, *The Great Wave*, or a modern print *DUIKEN*. The cuts in composition are visible in Van Gogh's works from the asylum period.

In Arles, he would also test placing unimportant subjects in the foreground of his pieces and enlarging them. A principle practiced in many Japanese prints (Tilborgh, 2019). In *The Great Wave*, the wave is much larger than in reality, to make it look like it is swallowing Mt. Fuji, or in Mimisha the tree, which had nothing to do with Mt. Fuji is placed in front of the mountain. De Voren by Van Gogh provides an excellent example of these experiments (Tilborgh, 2019). Yet, during his stay at the asylum, this principle is still vividly present in some works. *Within A Starry Night*, *De Stratenmaker* and his paintings of the asylum garden enormous trees or branches are positioned in the centre of the piece or field of vision.

Furthermore, Van Gogh would practice placing diagonal shapes in his compositions, like how the Japanese prints would use plants and trees to create strong diagonal elements within the composition (Tilborgh, 2019). As is shown in *Two trees*, *Seven bridges*, and *Yoshitsune cherry blossom*. It is a subtle principle, but it is visible in many of Vincent's works. In the mountain line of *A Starry Night*, *Korenveld*, and *Korenveld met Maaier* provide a diagonal element. The same counts for the windowsill and furniture of *Raam in het Atelier*. Showing a subtle influence of the Japanese prints on Van Gogh.

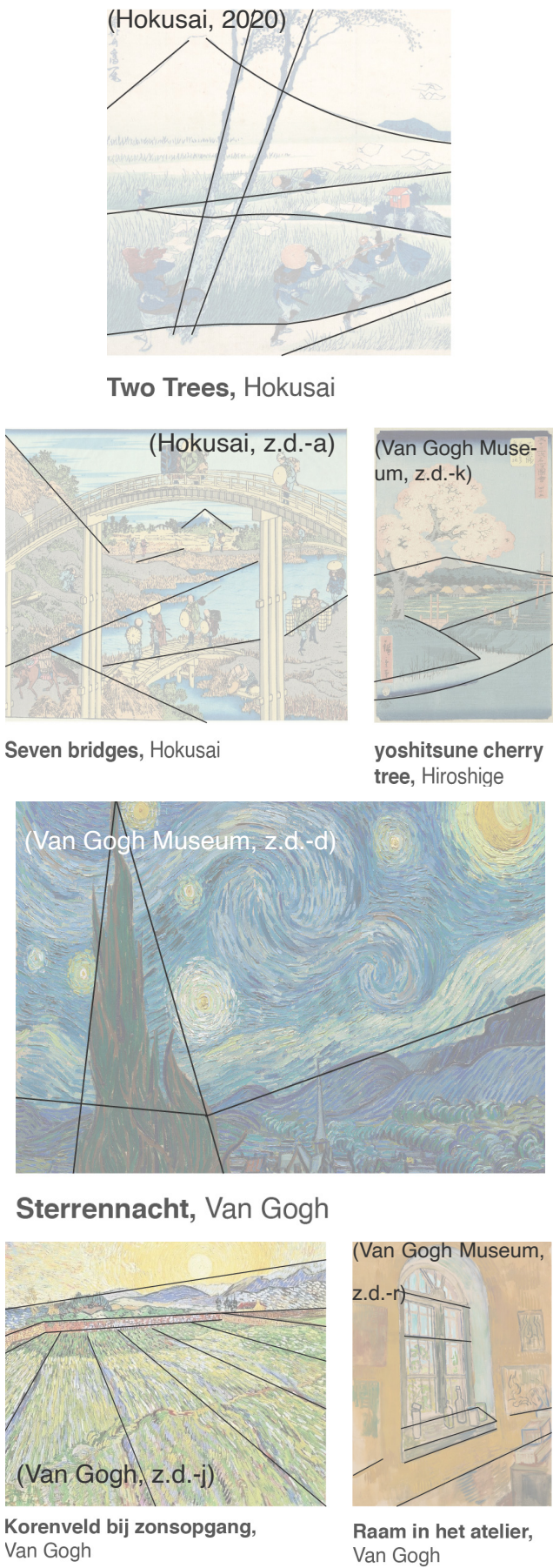


Figure 21 - *Diagonals within paintings from Van Gogh and Japanese prints* - own work, yet the core image is from the source mentioned on the diagrams.



Figure 22 - *Placement of horizon within paintings from Van Gogh and Japanese prints* - own work, yet the core image is from the source mentioned on the diagrams.

Perspective

In combination with the removal of the middle plan within the composition (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.) and the perspective interventions found in the Japanese prints, an unusual depth effect arises (Tilborgh, 2019). The Floating perspective specific to Ukiyo-E shows not a single view of the subject, but several at a time, producing this floating effect (Coleman, 2013). Van Gogh's interest in the Japanese perspective translates into his striving for flatness in his works, making the depth subordinate to the flat surface (Tilborgh, 2019). This shows in the intriguing depth effect in his works and the stretching depths in pieces like *Korenveld* and the flatness of *Starry Night* and *Amandelbloessem*.

Horizon

Van Gogh was also intrigued by the placement of the Horizon, as Japanese printmakers would leave it out of their prints or use just a minor part of the canvas (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.). He would practice with the placement of the Horizon, by taking the examples quite literally and leaving the Horizon out (Tilborgh, 2019). The effects of his experiments

are still found in his later works from his time at the asylum. Apart from *A Starry Night*, just like in most Ukiyo-E pieces, the placement of the Horizon is high on the canvas, using about 1/3 for his different iterations of the asylum garden and *Korenveld*. Interesting, however, is that he also breaks away from this with pieces like *A Starry Night*, showing just about only the horizon, just as Hokusai did with the *Great Wave* and his 36 views of Mt. Fuji. Revealing that he was very conscious about the placement of horizon, possibly due to his experimenting with the Japanese principles.

Altogether, Van Gogh's admiration and interest in the Japanese arts are an active part of his craft. Showing his mastery of both his style and the principles of Ukiyo-E in his works from the asylum period. The influence of the Japanese arts is mostly subtle, yet integral to the development and expression of the masterpieces he made at the asylum. So, despite his difficult circumstances and losing faith in himself finding a new art according to the Japanese example (Tilborgh, 2019). His Japonism remains significant in his art during his time at Saint-Remy.

Conclusion

Drifting into a Night Sky

This dissertation aimed to distil the influence of the Japanese wood print movement Ukiyo-E on Van Gogh's craft during his time at the Saint-Paul asylum. Through analysing his Japonism, the influence of his Japanese muse on his artistry, and researching the Ukiyo-E principles present in his work from the asylum period. The effect of his infatuation was explored, supported by a study into Ukiyo-E itself and a visual analysis of both Van Gogh's work and the Japanese prints. Especially during the final part of the thesis, wherewith visual and literary research, the traces of Ukiyo-E principles in his paintings from the Saint-Paul period were explored.

Before Van Gogh even started his artistry, Ukiyo-E had already found its way into the west and inspired many artists and art movements. After Japan had been closed off until 1854 (apart from trading with the Dutch), an explosive influx of Japanese culture into the west followed, and it marked the start of Japonism (Yonemura, 1995). The explosion also influenced a group of artists, including Monet, Degas, and Pissarro, who launched the Impressionist movement (Samu, 2004). As the Impressionists implemented several Ukiyo-E principles in their style such as bright colours (Ives, 2013), composition techniques, and depiction (Samu, 2004) of Japanese culture.

Despite Japanese culture already being actively exported to the west (Ives, 2013), Van Gogh only got fascinated by the art form in 1885 (Tilborgh, 2019), several years after he started his artistry in 1880-81 (Darley & Suijver, 2020). Buying his first print in the harbor city of Antwerp (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, z.d.). Like many others, he was inspired by vibrant colours, the floating perspective, and the unusual composition found in Ukiyo-E prints (Tilborgh, 2019). However, his infatuation with the Japanese arts went further than just inspiring his work, as he found a piece of himself in what he saw as the Japanese mindset, a simple life living harmoniously alongside nature (McAfee & Opotowsky, 2019). Van Gogh's Japanese muse influenced his craft significantly, as, before his introduction to woodcut prints, his works were characterized by dark colour tones, a feeling for the drama, use of the traditional Dutch landscape perspective, and the absence of his signature brushstrokes (Darley & Suijver, 2020). Whereas after 1885, freshly inspired by the Japanese arts (and impressionism which followed the same example), he started experimenting and copying the Ukiyo-E prints, changing his craft drastically. The influence on the development of his craft shows in the introduction of bright colours, composition principles, and flat perspective in his work. Even changing the

subjects, he chose in his paintings, the admiration for nature and daily life stayed, yet he started paying more attention to unimportant features of nature (Tilborgh, 2019). After 1885 his signature brushstrokes also became part of his craft (Van Gogh Museum, z.d.-b). However, when moving to the Saint-Paul asylum the active incorporation of his Japanese muse in his craft disappeared. Van Gogh's wish for a new and more primitive modern art inspired by the Japanese example seemed out of his reach, losing faith in himself (Tilborgh, 2019). Despite renouncing his belief in finding new art, due to his loss of faith, he continued experimenting with even more daring compositions, colour, cuts in the composition, and magnified details of nature (Darley & Suijver, 2020). This shows a contradiction with his loss of belief as some of his experiments consist of principles present in the Japanese woodcut prints. During his time at the asylum, he painted around 174 paintings (Bailey, 2018) and entered a new stage in his artistry, where possibly unconsciously, the principles of Ukiyo-E had become embedded in his craft, in spite of renouncing his Japanese muse. When looking at the paintings he made during this period, also taking into consideration masterpieces such as Sterrennacht, Amandelbloessem, and Korenveld, almost all his works show principles of Ukiyo-E. The compositions, use of perspective, colour, placement of horizon, and subjects chosen for the paintings all reference or show Van Gogh's interpretations of the Ukiyo-E principles. This becomes even clearer when comparing his paintings with prints such as The Great Wave, Two Trees, Seven Bridges, and Yoshitsune cherry tree.

So, how did Ukiyo-E influence Van Gogh's craft during his time at the Saint-Paul asylum? Since Van Gogh had been practicing by applying the

principles of Ukiyo-E and copying Japanese prints to master and develop his craft through a large part of his artistry (between 1886-1888) (Tilborgh, 2019), these principles became part of his craft. Especially since his belief of what the Japanese mindset is, resonates very close with Van Gogh's own beliefs about art and life. His works from the asylum period embody these beliefs and his years of practicing and studying, even after renouncing his faith. This is shown most visibly in the subjects (landscapes, nature, and scenes of daily life) he painted, the choice of bright and vibrant colors, and the composition of large color areas, in works such as Sterrennacht, Korenveld met zonsondergang and Amandelbloessem. Other aspects are less upfront, but when looking closer, paintings like Sterrennacht, Stratenmaker, and Raam in het atelier capture the unusual composition and flat perspective which characterize the Japanese prints. Furthermore, Van Gogh shows his interpretation of the Japanese techniques when portraying shadows and consciously placing his horizon. So, even after his loss of faith in his Japanese muse and himself during the latter parts of his artistry, Vincent van Gogh was not copying or studying Ukiyo-E prints anymore. In a way, he was painting his own Japonaiserie.

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