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# Impressionist Aesthetics and Japanese Aesthetics: around A Controversy and about its Historical Meaning as An Example of Creative Misunderstanding

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In this paper, I analyse at first how and why Hokusai became the most famous Japanese artist — at least from the occidental point of view. This occidental representation of a Japanese artisan greatly differs from the one formulated in Japan. However the gap between the two does not necessarily suggest that there is a bias of misunderstanding in the occidental view of Hokusai. On the contrary the current Japanese opinion on Hokusai itself is a historical product mainly resulting from the need of establishing an official version of “Japanese Art History” suitable to European criteria of Fine Arts around the turn of the century.

As we shall see, this Japanese “official” criteria does not come to terms with the “Japonism” way of understanding Japanese art which rationalized and encouraged the French impressionist painters’ choice. How this “mutual misconception” of Hokusai was conjugated and fostered in the East-West cross-cultural exchange is my second question.

And finally, this gap between European “Japonisme” understanding and the Japanese official conception of Fine Art leads to a reexamination of the canonicity of judgement passed upon the Japanese Art in international context. To whom belongs this canonicity? Is there any a-historical “true” master-representation of Japanese Art? What is the status of “false” interpretations? Such are the questions I want to ask in this paper.

## I

“Hokusai is the greatest artist that Japan has produced”. Here is the statement made by Théodore Duret (1838-1927) in his article on Japanese art published in the prestigious art magazine *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1882. This view is directly echoed in *Art japonais*, published by Louis Gonse (1841-1926) next year. Théodore Duret puts together his essays on art including the *G.B.A.* article and publishes *La Critique d'avant garde* in 1885, dedicated to the memory of his friend Édouard Manet (1832-1883) on whom he is to publish the first biography and catalogue raisonné in 1902. *La Critique d'avant-garde* was welcomed by a republican art critic Philippe Burty (1830-90), famous for his Japanese art collection, who suggested that the “pittoresque” details on Hokusai’s life in Duret’s book would compel the professors of aesthetics who dominated then the educational method in Occident to re-think

about many things. By this Burty was making allusion to the Impressionist aesthetics he defended with Duret and other friends in their activities as art critics<sup>1</sup>.

In 1896, shortly before his death, Édmond de Goncourt (1822-1896) published his *Hokusai* as one of the "series of Impressionist artists in Japan". It is worth mentioning that one of the main Japanese source books, *The Biography of Hokusai* had been prepared by Kyoshin Hanjûrô Iijima with the support of S. Bing (1838-1905), famous merchant of Japanese Art objects in Paris. In the *Revue blanche*, S. Bing publicly protested that his project of translating Hokusai's biography in French was smuggled into the hand of de Goncourt via Japanese merchant Tadamas Hayashi (1853-1906). This controversy of priority between S. Bing and É. de Goncourt indicates the importance of Hokusai as a cultural phenomenon at the *fin du siècle* France art market.

The fame of Hokusai as a key figure in the appreciation of Japanese art is to be consolidated by such scholars like Michel Revon (*Étude sur Hokusai* in 1896) and especially Henri Focillon (1881-1943), authority in Art history in Europe *d'entre deux guerres*. Focillon's love in Japanese art finds its final form in *Hokisai, l'art japonais au XVIIIe siècle* (1925).

Nowadays the importance and preponderance of Hokusai as the most famous Japanese artist in Occident is easily recognizable. Not only the frequent publications and important exhibitions as was realized by Matthi Forrer recently, but also the detailed and illustrated entry of Hokusai in the standard home encyclopedia, like *Petit Robert II*, are significant.

## 1-2

Curiously enough, this kind of enthusiastic appreciation of Hokusai was not necessarily shared by the Anglo-Saxon art critics and historians of the 19th Century. Just take two eminent examples. First, the author the *The Pictorial Art of Japan*, (1886), Dr. William Anderson (1851-1903), English surgeon with long experience in Japan as officer. Anderson did agree with the French critics on these facts that the Japanese art is essentially impressionistic, that the effect of the void and the arrangement of an apparently unfinished brushstroke as well as the apparent lack of harmony and symmetry in vitruvian sense of the words and the lack of linear perspective and chiaroscuro are, far from being its defect, the very essential merits of Japanese art. Nonetheless, Anderson did not hesitate to demonstrate violently his opposition towards the French "Japonisant" art critics once it came to the aesthetic status Hokusai could and should assume in the hierarchy of Japanese Art History itself.

"Hokusai's memory is perhaps exposed to a greater danger from the admiration of his earnest, but too generous European critics than from the neglect of his countrymen. To regard him as the greatest artist of Japan and as the crowning representation of all that is excellent in Japanese art is unjust to this art, and may react unfavorably against the representation of the man who has suddenly been elevated to a position far above his own ambition (. . .). we have no more right to compare him with a Chô Densu [1352-1431], a Sesshû [1420-1506] or a Shûbun [1414-1467?] than to draw a parallel between John Leech [1817-1864: caricaturist surnamed "Mr. Punchi"] and Fra Angelico [ca.1400-1455]"<sup>2</sup>.

Criticized here are two French authors already mentioned, i.e. Théodore Duret and Louis Gonse. A more direct criticism on these two French scholars had been cast by nobody else than Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908). His review article on Gonse's monumental 2 volumes book was published in *The Japan Weekly Mail* (July 12, 1884). Here, Fenollosa developed a fierce and sarcastic criticism on the so-called authorities on the matter in the French speaking country.

At first Fenollosa criticizes the lack of balance in Gonse's book. While Gonse gives one hundred pages on Edo period, "a single page is enough for the giants of the fifteenth century!", "[a]ll those rank far above any artist whatsoever of the last two hundred and fifty years". Pointing out numerous factual errors, such as misidentifications and mispronunciations of signatures in Gonse's book, Fenollosa concludes: "M. Gonse neglects the old masters, not because he is unable to understand them, but because he does not really know them".

This ignorance, or rather this "blind"-ness, according to Fenollosa, leads to the French misconception of Hokusai. Fenollosa wonders: "how far he [Gonse] has been biased by the extraordinary over-estimates prevailing among other foreign writers, due to the fact that, in their ignorance of all else, they look at everything Japanese, and especially Japanese art, only through the eyes of Hokusai." For Fenollosa, Hokusai, "the artisan artist" is at best "an interesting sociological phenomenon". Contrary to Gonse's opinion, "supposing that Hokusai's influence brought to the highest perfection the whole series of the decorative arts" in Japan, Fenollosa declares that "we cannot to much enforce the fact that the prevailing vulgarity" of [Hokusai] 'lowered' the tone of [Japanese decorative arts]".

Fenollosa's reserve to Hokusai is double: first Hokusai cannot be counted among master painters in Japanese art history. Second, even in the lower level of decorative arts, Hokusai did more harm than good. Thus Fenollosa's last word on Hokusai is merciless: "as a designer whether for engraving or painting, his work cannot be compared for a moment with the grand serious conceptions of the masters of either Europe or the East. Hokusai falls very low indeed"<sup>3</sup>.

### 1-3

In this conflict of interpretations between French critics and Anglo-Saxon scholars, the key concept is "vulgarity". Fenollosa, in reaction to French critics, gives this definition: "Hokusai's painting is vulgar, not because it deals with vulgar subjects, nor because Hokusai was not a man of rank, but because it is vulgar in its manner, and almost always in its conception". Fenollosa "grants readily" Hokusai's "great originality and vigor", "marvelous of technical skill", formidable "range of subject" and its "human" nature. And yet, Fenollosa rejects the idea of highly estimating Hokusai merely by his attachment to human life of common people. "A painting is not a good or great painting merely because it deals with the doings of common people, and mimics, however cleverly and laughably, points which are interesting to common minds". Fenollosa does recognize the pathos of a Millet. "The greatest works of the classical Italian period hardly surpass [Millet's] delineation of peasant, for nobility, spirituality and depth". But beside Millet, who is a "rare soul", "Hokusai, on the

contrary, was a coarse grain, and became at best a caricaturist”.

By this definition, Fenollosa reveals two implicit criteria he relies on in his aesthetic judgement. Firstly, by referring to the “greatest works of classical Italian period” in his estimation of a Millet, Fenollosa confesses his fidelity to the classical aesthetic judgement. The reason why Fenollosa demonstrated his indignation toward Gonse’s ignorance of the Japanese Quattrocento Masters becomes also clear: It is by establishing and imposing a due historical parallel between the Italian Renaissance and the Japanese Zen buddhist paintings that Fenollosa tried to manifest and convince the importance of Japanese Art on the World-wide scale.

Sccondly, the distinction between nobility and vulgarity by Anglo-Saxon scholars is also dependent on this view of artistic hierarchy based on their idea of the Italian Renaissance as the Canon. For Fenollosa or William Anderson, caracatures can by no means belong to a high and spiritual art. The parallel of John Leech and Hokusai Anderson instinctively made clearly reveals the implicit value judgement they never put into doubt.

This “classical” value judgement as such was hardly acceptable for the French “avant-garde” critics. From the beginning, their purpose was to clear away with so conservative a notion of “vulgarity” itself. Let’s have a closer look at the issue: The contrast between the examples chosen by Fenollosa and Anderson and by the French critics clearly demonstrates the irreconcilable congnition gap between them, in terms of quality as well as quantity of Hokusai’s artistic production.

The enormous quantity of production by Hokusai itself can hardly be a good measure to estimate the artist. To show this, Fenollosa hints Gustave Dor (1832-1883)’s case: “The wide range of subject has done less than nothing in giving Gustave Doré high rank”. The choice is purposeful, for Doré was famous for having done “huge art (l’art grand)” of enormous quantities instead of realizing, as he wished, the “great art (le grand art)”, which would have satisfied his avidity for official honor. But in his comparison with Hokusai, Théodore Duret has instead evoked Daumier and Gavarni. The former was certainly “caricaturist”, but was highly redeemed by his harsh insight into the political figures, by his sympathy toward the common people and by his refusal of accepting the L gion d’honneur from the Emperor, Napoléon III. The latter was celebrated, not without reserve, by Baudelaire as one of the “peintres de la vie moderne”. The reason why Fenollosa evoked Doré instead of a Daumier or a Gavarni becomes much clearer now: it is true that art of Daumier and Gavarni can be “good or great” “because it deals with the doings of common people”, but this fact alone does no more testify to the greatness of a Hokusai’s achievement as that of a Gustave Doré.

#### 1-4

Contrary to the Anglo-Saxon assumption, the “vulgarité” of the ukiyo-e school was regarded as positive among French critics. For them, the inferiority of the Ukiyo-e school itself in its social status as well as in its artistic appreciation in Japan raised no problem at all. On the contrary, this disadvantage ukiyoe suffered from was a heuristic lesson they could

give to the French artistic world they were dealing with.

“Homme du peuple, au début sorte d’artiste industriel, s’adonnant à reproduire les types et les scènes de la vie populaire, [Hokusai] a occupé vis-à-vis des artistes, ses contemporains, cultivant ‘le grand art’ de la tradition chinoise, une position inférieure, analogue à celle des Lenain à l’égard des Lebrun et des Mignard ou des Daumier et des Gavarni en face des lauréats de l’École de Rome”<sup>4</sup>.

By making comparison between court academic painters and the “vulgar” painters of peasant life in the reign of Louis XIV and by superposing (if not abusively but at least with clear political intention) this contrast in French Classicism upon the opposition between popular illustrators and the “Laureats de l’École de Rome” in contemporary French art scene, Duret clearly manifests his preference to the vulgar school dealing with popular everyday life (to which he wanted to recognize the real superiority in his personal value judgement). By analogy, he argues: “[o]n comprend que les artistes aristocratiques aient consid r avec hauteur la classe de ces dessinateurs, homme du peuple, à moitié ouvriers, à laquelle appartenait Hokousa “ (*ibid.*, p.238).

The aristocratic taste, manifested by an Anderson or a Fenollosa was precisely the value judgement Duret wanted to do away with. Just as “Louis XIV dans *les buveurs* de Ténies, n’êût probablement vu que des magot” (*ibid.*), Duret supposed that also in Japan the artists of the noble race did never take care of the life of the common people “prise sur le vif”. “Ils illustraient les romans que lisaient les belles dames, où ce n’étaient que princes courtisant des princesses, héros pourfendant des monstres et des géants” (*ibid.*, p.239). This is not so much an anachronistic and oversimplified summary of genre distinctions in Japanese art made by a French critic who knew too little about Japanese Art (as Fenollosa pointed out), as his disguised critical assessment of the French academic Salon paintings. The latter was still dominated — at least according to Duret— by the outmoded history paintings full of idealized human and superhuman figures taken from Greek Mythology or Roman History.

The apparent “blindness” and dislike of a Duret toward the Japanese classical works was no more a result of his lack of knowledge than a reflection (reflex as well as blame) upon the dominant “professeurs de l’École des Beaux-Arts et académiciens” who looked down upon realists painters, naturalist landscape painters and, last but not least, the impressionist painters. Hokusai was called upon by Duret as a heroic figure who, despite his “position considérée comme inférieure dans la hierarchie de l’art” (*ibid.*, p.237) in Japon, surpassed the “grand style” by grasping the scenes of “vulgaire” everyday life of common people with the immediate rendering “prise sur le vif”. Defender of Impressionist painters, Duret saw in Hokusai the ideal predecessor of the French Impressionists not only in his artistic achievement but also in the analogy of an unfavorable social status: Both Ukiyoe-print makers and Impressionist painters were confined in unfavorable conditions vis-à-vis privileged official painters. In Duret’s representation, Hokusai was the anti-academic popular artist *par excellence*.

Between the French interpretation and the Anglo-saxon one, which one is to be the authentic image of Hokusai and why, on what condition?

“C’est seulement depuis que le jugement des Européens (l’) a placé [Hokusai] en tête des artistes de sa nation, que les Japonais ont universellement reconnu en lui un de leurs grands hommes” (*Critique d’Avant-garde*, p.208). This statement by Théodore Duret, quoted and subscribed to by Louis Gonse caused to Fenollosa a sarcastic reaction:

“Hardly a Japanese of culture has been really converted to the foreign view. Critics here regard with amazement or amusement European estimates. It is hardly be expected, to be sure, that those genial Japanese gentlemen, who make a business of selling Hokusais, and other ukiyoe, in the capitals of Europe, should take great pains to oppose the opinions of enthusiasts who pay them such high prices; but their real tastes are shown by what they buy for their own keeping” (*art.cit.* p.45).”

To put it another way, Fenollosa found it miserable that the French art critics had been amazingly and amusingly duped by Japanese merchants’s condescending flattery toward them.

Three remarks must be done on this cognition-gap. First, the alluded Japanese art merchant in question, Tadamas Hayshi, was going to expose what he had reserved “for their own keeping”. General Commissioner of Japan in the “Exposition universelle de Paris” in 1900, Hayashi took charge of the painstaking job of transporting and mounting Japanese classical and historical treasures to the exhibit for the European public. Second, the selection of these masterpieces had been put forward by the instigation of Fenollosa himself. It was through the research project of establishing the inventories of “Old art treasures” of Japan promoted by the Ministry — in which Fenollosa took active part —, that the masterpieces were sorted out to be mentioned in the official version of the Japanese Art History, compiled by Ryūzō Kuki under the direction of Hayashi for the 1900 Paris World Fair<sup>5</sup>. The official version of the Japanese Art was thus elaborated by Japanese authorities to satisfy the Occidental criteria which they badly needed.

The third problem, therefore, is concerning the authenticity. It would be true, as Fenollosa mentioned, that the “Japanese of culture” rather disdained ukiyoe. The massive exodus of ukiyoe prints is otherwise difficult to explain. And yet the lack of respect toward Hokusai in his native country does not necessarily deprive the European critics of the right to claim that their high regard toward Hokusai could have influenced Japanese judgement on him. The fact remains that Hokusai’s first biography was published under the influence of French appreciation, as is suggested by the quotation from Philippe Burty at the postscript of Kyoshin Iijima’s book. Edmond de Goncourt, in his biography on Hokusai in 1896, proudly declared the French contribution to the celebration of Hokusai in world context:

“ce mépris [toward Hokusai], dont m’entretenait encore hier le peintre américain La Farge, à la suite des conversations qu’il avait eues autrefois au Japon avec les peintres

idéalistes du pays, a continué jusqu'à ces derniers jours, où nous les Européens, mais les Français en premier ligne, nous avons révélé à la patrie d'Hokusai le grand artiste qu'elle a perdu il y a un demi-siècle"<sup>6</sup>.

Even if this promotion "may react unfavorably against the representation of the man who has suddenly elevated to a position far above his own ambition" (W. Anderson), who is authorized, in final analysis, to judge if this promotion were unfavorable or favorable? And for whom is it favorable or unfavorable at all?

This is indeed a triple question. (1) The native Japanese are by no means the ultimate holder of the authentic interpretation of things Japanese by his mere belongings to Japan. If professor of art history Fujikake demonstrated his studies into ukiyoe only at his ceremonial final lecture at the University of Tokyo, the fact clearly shows that his conception of art history was strictly preconditioned by and restricted to the occidental academic framework of the high art, where there was no room for such a popular culture like ukiyoe to be studied openly. (2) In the same token, however, it is also misleading to suppose that the anglo-saxon orientalist study, which implicitly referred to the value judgement based on their understanding of the Italian Renaissance, should reveal the final and unique truth of Japanese art. (3) Finally, the gap between the popularity of Hokusai which stems from the French "japonisant" interpretation and the academic despise toward him, based on the Anglo-saxon classical scholarly researches, is itself a cultural and historical product.

Underneath the Truth in History, lies the historical making of the truth. The conflict of interpretations around Hokusai is no exception. Instead of reducing the amplitude of interpretations about Hokusai (in and out of Japan, or between specialists and laymen), to an a-historical true or false problem, let us recognize there the historical importance of Hokusai as a "sociological phenomenon" (Fenollosa) in international context.

Ernest Fenollosa himself changes his mind at the end of his life, and devotes himself to the establishment of a Hokusai catalogue. Instead of unfavorably estimating ukiyoe's influence on Western contemporary art, he rather finds there a global historical consequence in the current of world art history since the Italian Renaissance. In memory of James McNeill Whistler, one of Duret's intimate friends, Fenollosa formulates the following interpretation: "The Oriental influence was no accident, no ephemeral ripple on the world's art stream, but a second main current of human achievement sweeping around into the ancient European channel, and thus isolating the three-hundred-years-long island of academic extravagance".<sup>7</sup>

### 3

What was, then, the contribution of Japanese art to Europe? Let's have a brief look at the remarks by Théodore Duret. Three points must be retained, namely (1) composition or a lack of composition, (2) drawing technique and (3) color. Although Duret's text is not the best among literatures on Japanese art of the epoch, as far as the quality is concerned, it has



nonetheless a special merit: The originality of Japanese art as was indicated by Duret shows a particular affinity with the Impressionist aesthetics he defended.

### 3-1

On the composition Duret remarks: "On dirait [. . .] que le balancement et la répétition symétrique leur répugnent [les Japonais] et qu'ils les évitent le plus possible. Ils suivent leur caprice, s'abandonnent à la fantaisie, jetant de-ci de-là les motifs du décor, sans système apparent, mais avec un instinct secret des proportions qui fait que le résultat satisfait pleinement le goût" (*op.cit.*, p.169). Similar remarks have already been made by an art critic Ernest Chesneau (1830-1890). The idea of "dysymétrie", according to Chesneau's neologism (1869), is clearly referred to by such American painter and writer as John Lafarge (in his "Notes on Japanese Art" (1873)) and Edmond Jarves. August Renoir's manifest of "irregularist" aesthetics (1884) can also be understood as the outcome of this conception<sup>8</sup>.

The most striking example of this "dysymétrie" or "irregularist" approach would be "Mt. Fuji off the coast of Kanagawa" of Hokusai known as the "Great Wave". The view of Mt. Fuji at the sun rise was a famous scenery for foreign navigators (the best example being probably the description given by Lafcadio Hearn in his "A Conservative"), and Duret himself described it in his *Voyage en Asie* with unusual emotion. But he probably did not notice that this dynamic contrast between the great wave in the foreground and the small corn figure in the background was a result of the Japanese interpretation (if not misunderstanding) of the European linear perspective<sup>9</sup>.

The technique of manipulating the three dimensions by reducing it to the two dimensions by a series of purely geometrical operation had been transformed in Japan into an aesthetic device of exaggerating the effect of supernatural contrast between the near and the far. Far from being the introduction of the Occidental rationalism, the introduction of the linear perspective among Japanese artists contributed to the elaboration of the sense of "editing" pictorial plane — assemblage, montage, découpage — which is clearly indicated by the Japanese translation of the word "perspective": "degree of far/near" (Shozan Satake: in 1778), "principle of far/near" (K kan Shiba: in 1799). This sense of arrangement "without apparent system" (Duret), the so-called "Rahmenlosigkeit" of Japanese aesthetics (Tsuneyoshi Tsuzumi) finds its typical expression in Hokusai's *Manga*.

"Dans le premier volume de la *Mangoua*, on a un résumé du monde visible japonais. Les personnages et les objets figurés n'ont que trois ou quatre centimètres et sont jetés, comme pêle-mêle, du haut en bas des pages, sans terrain pour les porter, sans fond pour les repousser, mais ils sont si bien dans la pose qui leur convient, ayant chacun le mouvement et la caractéristique de son rang et de son état" (Duret, *op.cit.*, p.197).

This description shows what was the astonishment of an European observing a page of *Manga*. At the same time, it must be pointed out that the same strangeness of assemblage and montage was what the contemporary critics blamed Manet for. Quoting freely from diverse sources ranging from such classics like Titian, Velasquez, Goya, to graphic illustrations and reproduction prints, Manet used to make up a combined images, where the public noticed

apparent lack of composition, queer perspective and disproportioned figures.

### 3-2

Similar lack of perfection in Manet is also observed in his brush stroke and uncertain drawing technique. Once again, Théodore Duret's remark on Japanese art justifies this apparent shortcomings and converts them into Manet's merit. "employant exclusivement le pinceau manié à main levée, l'artiste japonais, auquel nul retour sur la première touche n'est possible, fixe sa vision sur le papier de prime saut, avec une hardiesse, une légèreté, une sûreté, que les artistes européens les mieux doués, habitués à d'autres pratiques, ne sauraient atteindre. C'est à ce procédé, autant qu'à la particularité de leur goût, que les Japonais ont dû avoir été les premiers et les plus parfaits des Impressionnistes". (Duret, *ibid.*, p.167)

Already in 1874, shortly after the return of Th. Duret from Japan, Manet has imitated the oriental brushstroke. A drawing conserved in the British Museum is a typical example, as it gives on the same sheet, the head of a raven, some awkward imitations of Japanese painters seals and the head of Tama, the Japanese spaniel which Duret has brought from Japan. The "tache hardie" of The Raven, famous lithographic series by Manet, was also applauded by Chesneau in his article "Le Japon Paris", published in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1878, as a remarkable example of Japonisant aesthetics. It is therefore no surprise that Duret, in his biography on Manet, tried to convince his readers of Manet's "unfinishedness" as his merit rather than defect, by comparing him with Hokusai:

"Les dessins, chez Manet, demeurent généralement à l'état d'esquisses ou de croquis. Ils ont été faits pour saisir un aspect fugitif, un mouvement, un trait ou détail saillant (. . .) Le moindre objet ou détail d'un objet, qui intéressait ses regards, était immédiatement fixé sur le papier. Ces croquis, ces légers dessins qu'on peut appeler des instantanés, montrent avec quelle sûreté il saisissait le trait caractéristique, le mouvement décisif à dégager. Je ne trouve à lui comparer, dans cet ordre, qu'Hokusai qui, dans les dessins de premier jet de sa *Mangoua*, a su associer la simplification à un parfait déterminisme du caractère"<sup>10</sup>.

Manet's "unfinished" brush stroke is justified as a instantaneous fixation of the fugitive aspects. His "impressionistic" manner is also explained by "de premier jet" de Hokusai. However, this explanation would have easily lost its ground if the fact had been known that Hokusai and other ukiyoe drawers did not made their drawing either "de prime saut" or "saisi sur le vif" but that their drawing technique depended much more on "de chic", or a "memory of the hand" as Baudelaire despisngly defined. The apparently improvised "dessin d'après nature" of a *Manga* was in reality more based on the physical skill of the habituated hand trained by the repetitive copying of the master's model, than the direct observation of the nature and spontaneous fixation of its effect, which Duret called "impressionniste".

### 3-3

The third problem is relative to color. Duret observes: "Lorsqu'on a eu sous les yeux des images japonaise, sur lesquelles s'étaient côte à côte les tons les plus tranchés et les plus aigus, on a enfin compris qu'il y avait, pour reproduire certains effets de la nature qu'on avait négligés ou crus impossibles rendre jusqu'à ce jour, des procédés nouveaux qu'il était bon

d'essayer. Car ces images japonaises que tant de gens n'avaient d'abord voulu prendre que pour un bariolage, sont d'une fidélité frappante." (Th. Duret, "Les Peintres impressionniste", [1882], *ibid.*, p.67)

"Baliolage" was the term chosen by a conservative art critic Paul Mantz when he criticized in 1863 the violent ton of colors which Édouard Manet employed in his «Laura de Valence». Here Duret tries to justify this "baliorage" by referring to the "fidélité" of the Japanese prints. As a privileged eyewitness, Duret, who had stayed several months in Japan, could maintain that "[à] chaque instant, pour ma part, il m'arrive de retrouver, sur un éventail ou dans un album [japonais] la sensation exacte des scènes et du paysage que j'ai vus au Japon (*idem.*), where "les verts, les bleus, les rouges, aux tons les plus aigus, sont juxtaposés sans demi-teintes et sans transition" ("l'art japonais", *ibid.*, p.229).

Partly influenced by his statement, not only Monet but also Manet went to Argenteuil to paint the landscape by juxtaposing "côte à côte (. . .) sans atténuation, les tons les plus tranchés" just as the Japanese saw the nature "colorée et pleine de clarté" ("Claude Monet", *ibid.*, p.99). The effect being so "criard" that even a friendly critic like J.-K. Huysmans ironically called it "indigomanie". According to him the Impressionist painters were suffering from a sort of "daltonisme"<sup>11</sup>. It was against such an ill-natured criticism that Duret proposed the above mentioned comparison of Monet and the Japanese. According to him, it is not that their eyes are ill but that the European's eye is too weak and lazy to resist the true light effect of the "plein air". . .

"Claude Monet, parmi nos paysagistes, a eu le premier la hardiesse d'aller aussi loin qu'eux [Les Japonais] dans ses colorations. Et c'est par là qu'il a le plus excité les railleries, car l'oeil paresseux de l'Européen en est encore à prendre pour du bariolage la gamme de tons, pourtant si vraie et si délicate, des artistes du Japon (*ibid.*, p.100). It is difficult to do fully justice to Th. Duret's fantasy. The categorical judgement that the gamut of tons in Japanese art is "vraie" is at most irresponsible because it lies simply beyond verification or refutation.

Yet one must be at least reminded of the fact that the blue of "indigomanie" or the red of "anilinmanie" of the late ukiyo-e was by no means the proof of fidelity of Japanese eye toward its nature: far from being proper color in Japan, these chemical pigments were a newly imported materials from Europe. The primary colors proper to Japan, according to Duret's interpretation, was nothing but an influence from the Occident, by which the Impressionist painters were to be enlightend and influenced.

#### 4

Throughout the three points we have examined so far, i.e. (1) composition (2) drawing technique and (3) coloration in the writing of Th. Duret on Japanese art, it is already clear that his theory is strongly biased, excessively accentuating the affinity between Japanese art and Impressionist aesthetics (as Duret defines it). Yet it cannot be denied that this "distorted"

view of Japanese aesthetics did contribute to encourage the Impressionist painters to venture in their unprecedented experiences. What is, in final analysis, the status of this “false” interpretation?

Here lies a double misunderstanding: As a matter of fact, it was — despite Théodore Duret’s assertion — not until the production of “*kôsenga*” (“illuminated prints: 1876) by Kiyochika Kobayashi, the so-called “last print master of Ukiyo-e”, that the ukiyo-e makers finally realized the effect of light. Earlier ukiyoe prints, in which Duret found the argument in favor of the *pleine-air* light effect, were realized precisely because the Japanese still did not care about such things like transparency and limpidity of the atmosphere. The splendid light effect realized by Kiyochika, often qualified as “impressionistic” was, in reality, a result of his diligent learning of European academic technique of *chiaroscuro*. And the visible imitation of European wood engraving technique in Kiyochika’s prints also suggests that he intentionally tried to make profit of his similarities with the European prints in order to facilitate exportation of his own prints (in vain, for the European customers did not appreciate such kind of “European imitations” fabricated in contemporary Japan). The last innovation by the “last ukiyoe artisan” at the end of ukiyoe-print’s history, Kiyochika’s exportation goods could, in due consequence, hardly obtain popularity either in Japan or abroad.

However, a young art critic, Mokutarō Kinoshita (1885-1945), who has just been enlightened by and initiated into the impressionist aesthetics in Japan, rediscovers in 1913, almost at the same time, this series of “*kôsenga*” prints, shortly before the death of Kiyochika. Just as Duret’s irresponsible claim for the limpid color of Japan as is rendered in ukiyoe prints guaranteed the adventure of Impressionism, it was only by the introduction of this Impressionistic aesthetics in Japan that the forgotten “*kôsenga*” could be exhumed from oblivion and re-estimated.

Is it legitimate, then, to call Kiyochika Impressionist? It would be true that the luminous vision of Japan fancifully dreamed by a Duret was consciously realized in Japan with the “*kôsenga*”, but its inventor, Kiyochika, did not know anything about the Impressionism in question, if not the academic technique it repudiated. It would also be true that Kiyochika’s experiment was only “recuperated” *après-coup* by a young Japanese art critic whose rediscovery of ukiyoe would not have occurred without Duret’s misconception of ukiyoe. With this interweaved double negation by which only Kiyochika’s invention can be connected with the Impressionism, we can certainly conclude that the claimed recognition of an a-historical legitimation as for their mutual affinity finally gives way to the historical recognition of their legitimacy as an example of creative process in cultural exchange between East and West<sup>12</sup>.

#### Notes

- 1 Théodore Duret, “L’art japonais, les livres illustrés, les albums imprimés, Hokousai”, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 2ème période, 1883, pp.113-131; 300-318; *Critique d’Avant-garde*, Paris: Charpentier, 1885.

- Philippe Burty, "Critique d'Avant-garde par Théodore Duret", *Republique française*, 11 mai 1885.
- 2 William Anderson, *The Pictorial Art of Japan*, London: Sampson Law, 1886, pp.98-99.
  - 3 Ernest Fenollosa, "Review of The Chapter on Painting, In *L'Art japonais* by L. Gonse", *The Japan Weekly Mail*, July 12, 1884, pp.37-46.
  - 4 Théodore Duret, "Hokousai", in *Critique d'avant-garde*, 1885, p.208.
  - 5 Tadamas Hayashi (dir.), Rûichi Kuki (éd.). *Histoire de l'Art du Japon*, traduit en français par Emmanuel Tronquois, Commission impériale pour l'Exposition universelle de 1900.
  - 6 Edmond de Goncourt, *Hokousai*, 1896, préface. In the footnote of the text here quoted, de Goncourt mentions the name of Burty and Duret.
  - 7 Ernest Fenollosa, "The Place in History of Mr. Whistler's Art", *Lotus*, Dec. 1903, p.16.
  - 8 Seiji Oshima, *Le Japonisme*, [in Japanese] 1980; Tokyo, Kôdansha gakujutsubunko ed. 1992, p.116, p.191.
  - 9 Shigemi Inaga, "la réinterprétation de la perspective linéaire au Japon (1760-1810) et son retour en France (1860-1910)", *Actes de la recherches en sciences sociales*, N°49, 1983, pp. 29-45.
  - 10 Théodore Duret, *L'Histoire de Édouard Manet et de son oeuvre*, [1902], 1906, p.211.
  - 11 Joris-Karl Huysmans, "Les Expositions des Indépendants en 1880", *L'art moderne/Certain*, Paris, Union générale d'éditions, 10/ 18, 1975, pp.103-04. See also Shigemi Inaga, "A la marge de la réprimande de Baudelaire: Édouard Manet en 1884" [in Japanese], *Eureka*, avril 1994, pp.212-26.
  - 12 On further complications, see Shigemi Inaga, "Une esthétique de recontre", *Word and Image Conference Proceedings*, Vol.4, N° 1, 1988, pp.139-145, a part of which is repeated here.

#### List of illustrations

- fig. 1 *Dragon*, attributed to Sesshû by William Anderson in his *The Pictorial Art of Japan*, 1886.
- fig. 2 Katsushika Hokusai "The Sumô Wrestlers", from *Hokusai Manga*. Book 3, fol. 6/7.
- fig. 3 Edouard Manet *Raven's Head with Studies of Tama and Japanese Signatures*, dated January 1875, brush and pen transfer lithographe (London, British Museum).
- fig. 4 Edouard Manet *Portrait of Claude Monet* 1874(?) (Paris, Marmottan Museum).
- fig. 5 Katsushika Hokusai *Kanagawaaki namiura, The Great Wave off the Coast of Kanagawa* 1831.
- fig. 6 Kobayashi kiyochika *The First National Bank at the Kaiunbashi Bridge in the Snow*, 1878-9.
- fig. 7 Kobayashi kiyochika *The Great Fire at The Asakusa Bashi Bridge, Ryôgoku of January 26 1881* 1881.



fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4

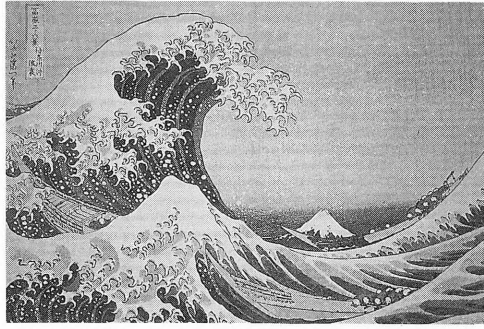


fig. 5

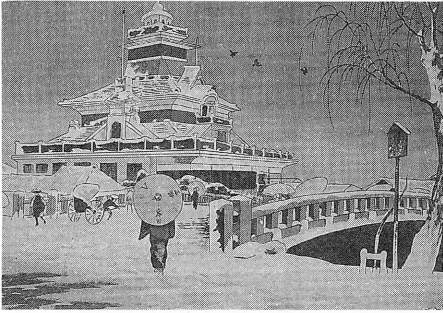


fig. 6

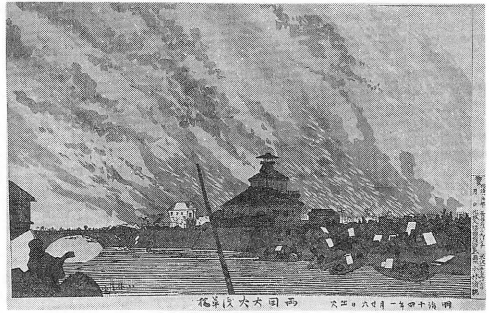


fig. 7