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Emma Wise
Parkland College

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Japanese Influence on Western Impressionists: The reciprocal exchange of artistic techniques

During the nineteenth century, Paris was at the heart of modern art movements. It was during this time the Impressionist painters began to display their work in salons. Occurring at the same time was the influx of Japanese goods into Europe, including the artistic products. In Paris there was a large exhibition of Japanese ukiyo-e prints at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts during the spring of 1890 (Ives). The Japanese woodblock prints had an impact on western art and is visible in the work of the Impressionists. This can be seen through the painting and printmaking produced during the nineteenth century. The Impressionist movement paralleled Japan during the Edo period. During the two time periods, there was an increase of leisure time which led to the creation of art. In Japan, the creation of this art created a growing industry of accessible art. The increased leisure time in Paris fueled the art community.

During the Edo period in Japan, there was an increase in economic growth that strengthened the middle class. This economic growth led to the consumption and pursuit of entertainment. Ukiyo-e means “the floating world,” which is reference to practicing a hedonistic lifestyle. The prints produced during this time showed the enjoyable activities in the pleasure districts that were common. The subjects of these prints were often courtesans and actors who would be dressed in the contemporary fashions. The other style of the time focused on the natural landscapes of Japan. The rise of the middle class also led to tourism, which fueled the market for woodblock prints.

Japanese ukiyo-e prints were woodblock prints made during the Edo period. Before the Edo period, woodblock printing had been used in Japan by Buddhists as early as the eighth century. Buddhist texts had been produced using woodblock printing techniques (Department of Asian Art). Woodblock printing is done by carving into a wooden block to create an image in negative. The raised areas are the parts of the block that hold the color. However, with time the process became more advanced and specialized. Ukiyo-e prints were often polychrome, which required separate carved blocks for each color. Each print required the collaboration of four individuals. There would be a designer, engraver, printer, and publisher (Department of Asian Art).

Many Japanese artists focused on the entertainment districts of the time. As previously mentioned, these prints would feature “seductive” courtesans and actors (Department of Asian Art). Harunobu’s print *Evening Bell at the Clock* (FIG.1), is an example of the prints produced to showcase the entertainment districts. Two women are shown getting ready in a room, where a clock implies, they are preparing for an event at a dictated time. These women could be either a courtesan getting ready for the night or a woman getting ready to enjoy the night’s entertainment. People in Japan during the Edo period would collect prints as souvenirs. The other common style of prints that focused on the natural landscape were often produced in a series about a similar subject. For example, the printmaker Hokusai produced a series called *36 views of Mt. Fuji* the most well-known being *Under the Wave off Kanagawa (The Great Wave)* (FIG. 2) (Harris). Thousands of prints were produced and sold at the time of its creation. Hokusai had discovered Dutch prints that came to Japan through trade. He studied linear perspective and used that perspective in his own prints. *Clump of Trees with a Vista* (FIG. 3) by Rembrandt shows the low horizon line that was common in Western art. Rembrandt’s print, while not a seascape, shows the

types of Western prints that influenced Hokusai. *Under the Wave off Kanagawa (The Great Wave)* has a low horizon line which is characteristic of Western art. Another artist, who focused on nature, was Utagawa Hiroshige. Hiroshige created prints focused on a natural setting. His print *Night View of Saruwaka Street* (FIG. 4) shows everyday life in Japan during the Edo period.

In 1853, Commodore Perry reopened Japanese ports to the rest of the world. Japanese products made their way into Western markets (Ives). Products like fans, kimonos, lacquers, and other products became popular. This created the movement of Japonism, which is characterized by the influence of Japanese culture. For artists, there was a focus on Japanese art. Western artists looked at the techniques, compositional methods, and subject matter common in woodblock prints. Woodblock prints, from the Edo period, became an influence for the Impressionist movement in Paris during the nineteenth century.

The Impressionist movement began after a group exhibition in 1874 (Samu). The Impressionist artists moved away from the traditional salons to form their own group exhibitions open to the public. The Impressionist style is characterized by the short brushstrokes as well as the focus on color and light. The works of these artists focused on the depiction of everyday modern life and leisure activities. Artworks would often exhibit city streets, cafés, and public gardens (Samu). It also showcased the nightlife in Paris, with a focus on singers and dancers, as well as the places they would frequent.

Edouard Manet directly references Japonism in his piece *Portrait of Emile Zola* (FIG. 5). In the piece, Manet paints Zola in the foreground, positioned in a typical pose for portraiture. However, in the background, there is a Japanese screen and a Japanese print (Courthion 76). Manet's piece contains the Japanese print *Sumo Wrestler Onaruto Nadermon of Awa Province*

(not pictured) by Utagawa Kuniaki II. This demonstrates people were buying and collecting Japanese products to decorate their homes.

Edgar Degas became one of the first artists to begin collecting Japanese prints in France (Ives). He replicated aesthetic properties from the prints in his own work. In his piece *The Tub* (FIG. 6), Degas shows the subject bathing in a tub. The piece has sharp angles, which show both the figure as well as the table next to them. Like Japanese prints, the space is shallow and compressed within the piece, making the subject appear very flat. The form of the woman is still able to be read, but there is less depth to her than what was considered traditional. Degas also uses pastels as his medium for this piece. The colors of the piece are not created by blending but by layering colors upon each other to create the desired effect. The subject is viewed from above, as she bathes unbothered by the possibility of being seen. The voyeuristic perspective implemented is characteristic of Japanese prints. *Two Women at the Bath* by Torii Kiyonaga (FIG. 7) uses the same perspective that Degas used in his piece. The subject matter is also very similar, in that the viewer is witness to a woman bathing unaware of being watched. Like Japanese prints, Degas uses strong diagonal lines to break up the composition of the piece. In *The Rehearsal* (FIG. 8), Degas uses strong diverging lines to create space in his piece which is common of Japanese prints. The placement of the figures leaves the center open drawing the viewers eye into that space. The strong diagonals of the floor boards separate the two groups of people. Just like in *The Tub*, the forms of the dancers and other people are flat. The piece fits into the style of the Impressionists by focusing on the people associated with leisure activities. People would go to the ballet to watch the performances in their free time. Like Japanese prints, the subject matter is focused on the people associated with entertainment industries.

Like Degas, Mary Cassatt drew direct inspiration from Japanese woodblock prints. Cassatt was an American painter who relocated to Paris. She was introduced to Japanese prints through the show held at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1890. *The Bath* (FIG. 9), depicts a woman giving a young child a bath. The depiction of women and children was common in her work. Unlike her male contemporaries, she was not allowed to frequent places deemed unsuitable for women of her status. Like Degas' *The Tub*, the viewer is looking down on a moment in time from a voyeuristic perspective. Once again, the perspective of the piece shows the influence from Japanese prints. Cassatt's figures are flat creating a shallow space within her piece. Cassatt uses strong patterns within her piece, like the woman's dress, as well as the couch seen behind the two figures. Cassatt created her own prints, she was strongly influenced by the woodblock printing process, but she used technology traditionally associated with Western prints. Cassatt implemented the use of etchings and aquatint. Etchings are created by first applying a resin on a metal plate. The artist exposes areas of the plate and places the plate in an acid bath. The acid etches the surface of the uncovered plate to create the groove to hold the ink. The etched areas create the desired image (Thompson). Cassatt also used aquatint to create her prints. Aquatint is used to create prints with an effect similar to watercolors or ink painting. Acid is used to create lines around resin dusted onto the printing plate. The amount of time the acid is left on the printing plate creates a variation in the tones produced when ink is applied (Ives). Cassatt also used dry point etching where no acid was used.

Cassatt's print *Interior of a Tramway Passing a Bridge* (FIG. 10) uses dry point and aquatint to emulate woodblock printing. This print was part of a group of 10 prints she displayed in a solo exhibition in Paris (Art Institute of Chicago 129). She used copper plates for both the black outlines, and the color portions. The subject matter of the print fits with topics appropriate

for her to pursue as a woman during her time. The print shows two women and a young child inside of the tram. Like the Japanese prints from which she drew influence, Cassatt's print has flat figures in a compressed space. Like the Japanese artists, Cassatt uses lines to define the space in which she places her figures. Cassatt's *The Coiffure* (FIG. 11) is another dry point etching, this print shows a woman adjusting her hair. The viewer sees the woman from two different angles. The first is a view of the woman's back, as she fixes her hair in front of the mirror. The second view is the reflection from the mirror. Through this view, the woman is seen topless and absorbed in her task. While the woman is nude, she is not a sexualized form (Khalid). Her nudity is natural for the scene taking place and relates to the intimate subject matter. Similarly, Cassatt's print *Woman Bathing* (FIG. 12) also appears bare chested as she grooms herself in front of a mirror. Once again, the vantage point allows the viewer to observe the scene as a voyeur. The subject is either unbothered or is unaware she is being watched. These prints showcase a private moment in everyday life. The subject matter is a common theme between Western and Japanese art. Kitagawa Utamaro produced several prints depicting women in various states of grooming. The print *Takashima Ohisa Using Two Mirrors to Observe her Coiffure* (FIG. 13) depict similar moments Cassatt portrayed in her own work. The woman uses mirrors to observe her hair. Activities that occurred behind closed doors were a popular subject matter.

The influence of Japanese prints extended beyond the Impressionists. The Post-Impressionists that followed continued to draw inspiration from Japanese woodblock prints. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec adopted the exaggerated colors and dark contours common in Japanese prints. Lautrec studied Kabuki theater actors' facial expressions. Like the Japanese prints, Lautrec created areas of flat color in contrast with the dark outlines. Lautrec was known for

producing both paintings and prints. He created posters as advertisements for famous performers around Paris. Lautrec depicted famous actors and performers similarly to how Edo period artists represented actors and courtesans. Lautrec used lithography to create his prints and posters. Lithography used limestone slabs and grease pencil to create an image on the stone. Ink was then rolled onto the slab to create the print (Ives). Like the Japanese printmakers, Lautrec was able to create multiple copies of the same image. *Divan Japonais* (FIG. 14) is a print that shows how popular night activities around Paris were. In the print a man and woman are nicely dressed for a concert. The orchestra pit and the lower half of the entertainment is visible. Cropping the view within an image was used in both Western art and Japanese prints. It suggests the brief time in which the subject occurred, creating a candid image. The Japanese print *Woman Dancer* (FIG. 15), attributed to artist Torii Kiyonobu, has similar themes to *Divan Japonais*. Both prints have a subdued color palette emphasizing the heavy black lines. *Divan Japonais* reveals the entertainment that was available to citizens of Paris. *Woman Dancer* had the same effect for the Japanese by showcasing a time-appropriate dancer's outfit. Lautrec's print *May Belfort* (FIG. 16) follows the same theme as those previous, showcasing the nightlife of Paris. The theme of depicting the nightlife in Paris also extended to his paintings. *Woman before a Mirror* (FIG. 17) is a painting of a prostitute. The depiction of prostitutes and courtesans was a common theme in Japanese prints. Lautrec created several pieces around the Moulin Rouge in both painting and print. The Moulin Rouge was located in the Montmartre, a red-light district outside of Paris (Michael). Lautrec was fascinated by the "ambiguous nature" of the Montmartre entertainment and spent much of his career exploring it (Druick and Groom 145). In his painting *At the Moulin Rouge* (FIG. 18), Lautrec focuses on the night life that occurred in places of entertainment. There is a large contrast of colors within the piece which creates a haunting atmosphere. Similar to his

prints, Lautrec implements the use of strong lines on the floor. These lines create strong diagonal angles in the piece.

The creation of art during the nineteenth century was different during the Edo period. Paintings during the Impressionist movement were made large scale for salon and exhibition viewing. With the creation of posters and prints during that time, there were more opportunities for them to be seen. The production of posters fueled the new advertising industry. These posters were made in mass and intentionally spread around to increase exposure. Japanese prints during the Edo period were marketed for public consumption. This market was fueled by the growth of the middle class within Japan. The size of print made them mobile and handheld. The woodblock printing process allowed for multiple copies to be made until the woodblock wore down. This created an industry within Japan.

There was a reciprocal influence between Japan and Western Europe. Western artists were fascinated by the subject matter and techniques that Japanese printmakers used in their work. With Japanese influence, artists in Europe focused on different mediums. Printmaking in Europe allowed for art to be more accessible. Previously, art was often restricted to salon and exhibition space. Printmakers like Lautrec and Cassatt created pieces available to the general public. Lautrec's posters would have been scattered around being seen by a diverse audience. Cassatt believed that people regardless of income or social position should be able to view art. With the rise of industry in the nineteenth and twentieth century, people had more income and opportunity to experience art. Western artists also blended Japanese techniques with those already in place.

Unlike Western Europe, Japan had a much more homogenous culture. The Japanese wanted to prevent outside influences from changing their culture. Prior to the opening of trade

there was selective borrowing from Western art. As previously mentioned, Hokusai's *Under the Wave off Kanagawa (The Great Wave)* uses a low horizon line characteristic of Western art. The piece also uses Prussian blue a color not native to Japan. The influence of western art on Japanese printing occurred before the Impressionist movement began.

The Japanese and the Impressionists were making art for different reasons. There was economic growth in both places which led to more opportunities. However, during the Edo period the woodblock prints were collected as souvenirs and were not created for public showing. They were collected by individuals and admired in private. Comparatively, the Impressionists were making large scale pieces for public showing. The posters and prints made in the west were not made to be lasting but made these forms of art more accessible to the public.

Two cultures responded differently through an exchange of ideas. In both art movements there was the idea of selective influence. Impressionist (as well as Post-Impressionist) artists latched onto specific techniques used by the Japanese that blended with their desired aesthetic. For the Japanese, prior to the opening of trade with the west, there was limited contact with Dutch traders. The Japanese selectively chose techniques to implement in their own work. The influence of the Japanese woodblock prints on the Impressionists is an example of looking to the past for inspiration. It was unique because many art movements will look back to the previous ideas, but not venture outside of the continent. Like the Impressionists contemporary artists obtain inspiration from the past.



Figure 1. Suzuki Harunobu. *Even Bell of the Clock*, Series titled *Eight Interior Scenes*. Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, Japan. 1725-70. Woodblock print.



Figure 2. Katsushika Hokusai. *Under the Wave off Kanagawa (The Great Wave)*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 1830-32. 10 x 15 in. (24.5 x 38.1 cm). Polychrome woodblock print; ink and color on paper.



Figure 3. Rembrandt van Rijn. *Clump of Trees with a Vista*. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 1652. Drypoint.



Figure 4. Hiroshige. Night View of Saruwaka Street, Series titled One Hundred Views of Famous Places in Edo. Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. 1856. 34.2 x 22.2 cm. Color woodcut.



Figure 5. Edouard Manet. *Portrait of Emile Zola*. Musée du jeu de paume, France. 1867-68. 146 x 115 cm. Oil on canvas.



Figure 6. Edgar Degas. *The Tub*. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. 1886. 63.5 x 81.3 cm. Pastel.



Figure 7. Torii Kiyonaga. *Two Women at the Bath*. 1779-81. Print.



Figure 8. Edgar Degas. *The Rehearsal*. 1877. 66 x 100 cm. Oil on canvas.



Figure 9. Mary Cassatt. *The Bath*. Art Institute of Chicago. 1891-92. 99.06 x 66.04 cm. Oil on Canvas



Figure 10. Mary Cassatt. *Interior of a Tramway Passing a Bridge*. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas. 1891. 36.5 x 26.7 cm. Drypoint and Aquatint.



Figure 11. Mary Cassatt. *The Coiffure*. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 1890. Plate: 36.5 x 26.7 cm (14 3/8 x 10 1/2 in.); sheet: 43.2 x 30.7 cm (17 x 12 1/6 in.). Drypoint and Aquatint.



Figure 12. Mary Cassatt. Woman Bathing. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 1890. Drypoint and Aquatint.



Figure 13. Kitagawa Utamaro. Takashima Ohisa Using Two Mirrors to Observe Her Coiffure. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 1795. 13 3/4 x 9 7/8 in. (34.9 x 25.1 cm). Polychrome Woodblock Print.



Figure 14. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. *Divan Japonais*. Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. 1893. 79.9 x 61.9 cm. Color Lithograph poster.



Figure 15. Torii Kiyonobu. *Woman Dancer*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.



Figure 16. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. *May Belfort*. 1895. 80 x 61.5 cm (31 1/2 x 24 3/16 in.). Lithograph poster.

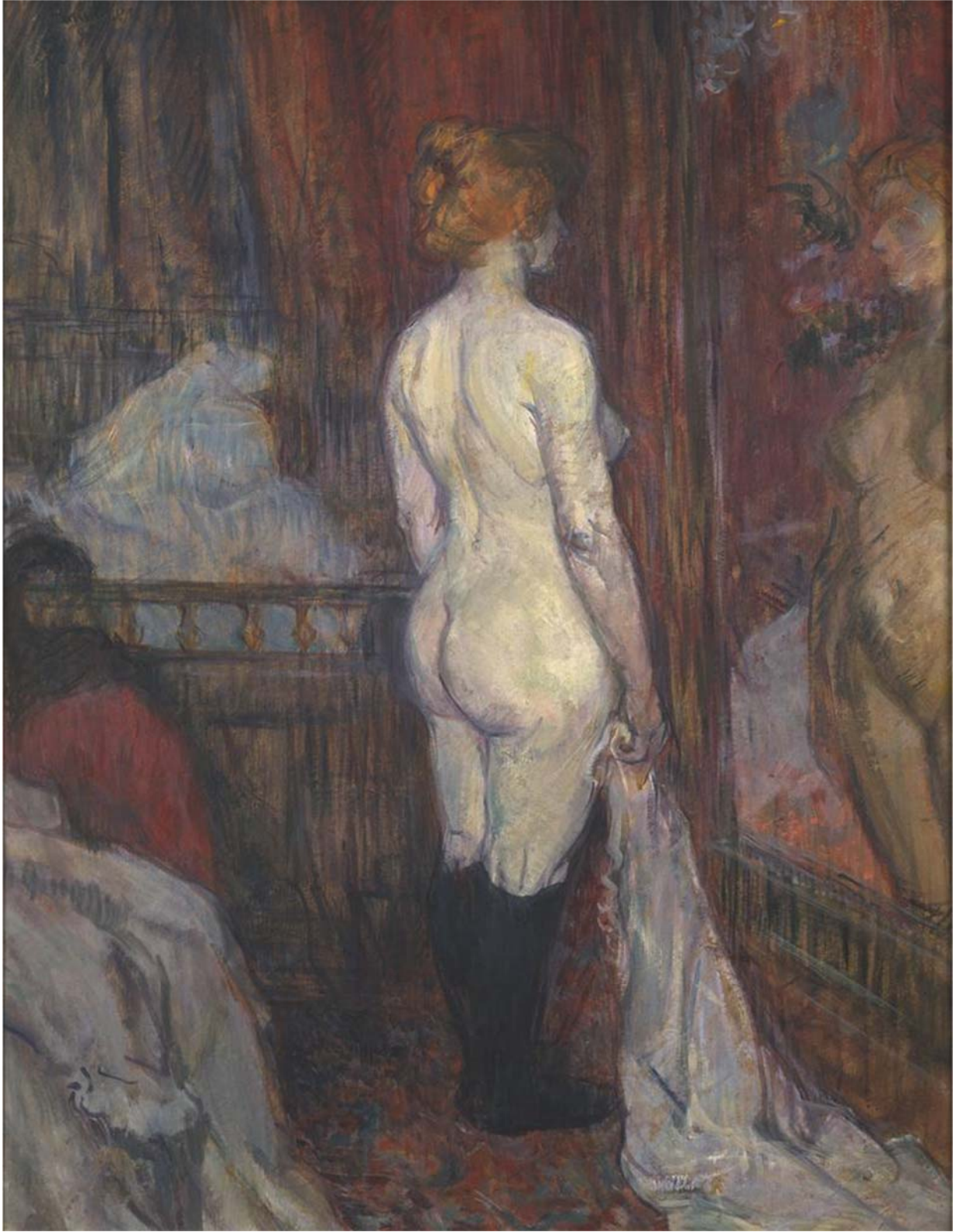


Figure 17. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. *Woman Before a Mirror*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 1897. 24 ½ x 18 ½ in. (62.2 x 47 cm). Oil on board.



Figure 18. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. *At the Moulin Rouge*. Art Institute of Chicago. 1892.

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