CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPANESE ART AND ITS INFLUENCE ON IMPRESSIONISM AND POST-IMPRESSIONISM

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Abstract: Our work focuses on art styles typical for Asia, specifically Japan and how it influenced many important western artists. We begin our work by characterising the typical aspects of Asian art. We discuss art styles such as origami and most importantly, ukiyo-e which is typical Japanese woodblock printing. Next, we very briefly characterize impressionism and how Japanese art found its way to the artists of this time. Lastly, we explore how the connection between Asian art and impressionism created very unique pieces of art. In the end, we offer a conclusion to our findings.

Keywords: Japanese art, ukiyo-e, woodblock printing, impressionism

Introduction

Since the beginning of recorded human history, art has always been present to help humans express their inner desires and thoughts in an aesthetic form. Art enables a person to project their feelings onto others through the use of paintings, statues or even film and literature. And even though it is a powerful tool for expressing oneself, others may also find their own hidden meanings within it and see their own inner world, although their perception might be different from that of the author. Art, in the most basic sense, is a very unique form of human communication using colours, shapes or stories. Throughout history there were many different artistic movements and styles and from the artistic point of view, we often divide history into periods based on what art style was widely used at the time. While finding common elements in different popular works and linking them together to form a certain pattern is useful in most cases, there were always those who did not quite fit into the established mainstream art style of the era in which they lived.

There are many different levels of just how much this “other art” can be different from what is the most popular trend at the time. The most extreme form of this being “alternative art” which is usually opposed to the dominant style in many aspects. There is also a term called “outsider art” which usually deals with topics that most people are not overly comfortable with or could even be offensive to certain groups. And there is also “peripheral art” which is an art form usually bearing resemblance to some established style, but is still different enough to be considered outside of the trend. Another important thing to note about peripheral art is that many of the most famous and well-known art styles of history started out as peripheral, until they gained dominance over the previous style.

And finally, the aspect which is most important for our work is connected with the geographical restrictions that mainstream art has brought onto the world. Almost everything
which we consider to be mainstream art comes from either Europe or North America, making almost the entirety of Asian, Arabic and African art fit, in a sense, into the category of peripheral art when compared to the most well-known works coming from the western world. We have chosen this as the focus of our article, because we believe that it is important to address these artists and works of art as they are just as much a valuable part of our world’s aesthetic heritage as any work by a western artist.

It is safe to assume that many talented artists come from other parts of the world as well. Asian and Arabic art has had a tradition which stretches back for centuries, yet is usually looked over by the broader artistic community. However, in our article, we shall take a closer look at the artistic tendencies of only one non-European country: Japan. In our work, we shall analyse the characteristics of Japanese art and how it influenced it has European and American counterparts. To be more precise, we shall focus on impressionism and post-impressionism as these are the movements which were most affected by Japanese artists. Therefore, we also include a brief summary of these movements in our work as well. We hope to provide a brief yet fresh and interesting outlook on how people in different parts of the world perceive the aesthetic and how their culture is similar or different in expressing feelings, stories and inspirations in the non-direct form.

Characteristic of Japanese Art

When regarding the art in Asian countries, it is important to note that Asia is a very large continent and is the home of many very diverse cultures. Civilizations which stretch back for thousands of years. Countries such as India and China have had trading contacts with European countries and this relationship has also brought pieces of Asian art to Europe. However, other countries, such as Japan, had a very isolated way of life and until the 19th century had practically almost no contact with the “western world”. Even the countries that have had contact with the rest of world are still considered exotic because of how different they are from what we consider “regular” art in the western world and there are a few common aspects between the art of different Asian countries.

According to Brown and Hutton (2011) the main common aspect of Asian art is its spiritual nature, especially after the rise of Buddhism. They go on to state that even in the modern post-world war II era spiritualism still plays a vital part in Asian art. At the same time, the authors regret that most materials on Asian culture and art focus mainly on the historical parts of Asian art and tend to overlook modern approaches in the field. And even regarding historical pieces of art, it is usually oriented at only the art of certain parts of India, China and Japan. We believe that this shows us that even within art that we, in the “western world”, see as unusual and maybe even peripheral to our mainstream art, there exist regions, movements and pieces of art which are considered even more outside of the norm and overlooked.

As we mentioned above, Asia is vast. There were differences in language, religion, politics and many other aspects of day-to-day life, therefore their art is very varied. Because of this it is
impossible to create one generalized definition of “Asian Art”. One could even argue that the whole term of “Asian Art” serves only to give an outline, a contrast and maybe even an alternative to what we perceive as Western Art, even though in today’s globalized world such distinctions are becoming redundant (Brown and Hutton 2011).

Another problem which is connected to the issue of the terminology is the fact that, for example, by the term “Chinese art” we usually mean every piece of Chinese art whether it comes from ancient history or contemporary times. It sets a geographical border for the art style, while not taking into consideration the time period. All of Asian art has been heavily influenced by either the ruling dynasty or the social changes that took place in that time period.

The country that we shall focus on here is Japan. Out of all major Asian cultures, it was the most secluded in its historical development, especially under the rule of the Tokugawa shoguns. Because of this, many art forms indigenous for Japan were able to develop.

We would like to address origami, which emerged in Japan around the 17th century and could invoke a debate on whether to consider it a true “art” in the general sense. Origami is the art of bending a piece of paper so that it becomes a paper sculpture of an animal, or different objects. Origami has one very distinctive trait, which is that the artist should not cut, glue or in any other way alter the piece of (usually) square paper. A very similar art, but which allows the cutting of the paper is called kirigami.

According to Engel (1994), it is difficult to assess origami as an exact art form. The author states that at times it feels more like a science, bending and twisting geometrical shapes so that they become three dimensional sculptures in patterns that need to be discovered by observation of nature, rather than found within the artist’s inner self.

However, we could argue that many of the most famous paintings and sculptures in the world are based on real models (people, landmarks or even landscapes) and they are most definitely considered art, so at least in this regard, we should not dismiss origami as an art form.

But the same author also states that after the truly careful study of nature, one has to realize that geometric shapes are essential in it. He states that even the galaxies themselves form into clusters (Engel 1994). This is a very strong reason to believe that even the mere bending of paper, in order to give it the form of something else might be considered art.

And the most important argument as to why we should consider origami an art form is the fact that we create these small paper sculptures in order to create an aesthetically pleasing object. The main function of art is to create something aesthetic using one’s skill and imagination. While many origami pieces follow a strict pattern on how to create them, therefore do not rely on the maker’s imagination, they are still created in order to create an aesthetic feeling. Nature is one of the main inspirations for artists in every field and the imitation of nature has been very common within art throughout the entire world and we believe that origami (and kirigami as well) should be considered viable art forms on their own.

Another form of art which originated in the Far East is called woodblock-printing. It involves the process of carving an image into a block of wood, to create a relief (and also painting
it if a coloured woodblock print is desired), then a piece of paper, or fabric is pressed onto the block, transferring the image from the wooden relief onto the surface. There were many different techniques, also called schools, on how to achieve this. Some schools placed the relief on top of the paper and leave it there for a long period of time, while others would do the opposite and use different tools to press the paper to the surface of the relief. One of the most distinguishing features of woodblock printing is the fact that the image on the paper is mirrored to the relief, which the artist had to remember while carving the relief, especially if he or she wanted to include text to the work.

According to Salter (2001) it is a form of art which appears very exotic and “fresh” even to modern art critics as the materials used in traditional woodblock printing are found abundantly on the Japanese isles. The author also states that the main reason for this is that pigments in Japanese printing are mixed with water not with oil as is traditional in western cultures, which require different materials, therefore changing the process drastically.

The technique of woodblock printing originated in China. However, the most popular and most wide-spread form of Asian woodblock printing is from feudal Japan and is known as Ukiyo-e. Salter (2001) also says that woodblock printing had a very different development once it came to Japan. While in China, the technique was mainly used for the mass reproduction of paintings, while in Japan it was used more by individual artists to express their inner feelings and the images in their minds.

When regarding materials, the wood from wild mountain cherries (or yamazakura in Japanese) was widely considered to be the best possible wood for woodblocks as it was firm but did not splinter easily. Other substitutes were also acceptable, such as plywood. Salter (2001) explains that in order to get the best quality wood for woodblock printing, the timber had to be stored in dark places for several years, making the truly highest quality block extremely expensive, so most contemporary artists tend to use cheaper wood.

The word Ukiyo-e means “a picture of the floating world” and it’s basis is within Buddhist art. According to Flynn (1982) several differences between ukiyo-e and western art from the same period can be found. For example, woodblock printing created an illusion of depth which was practically non-existent in European works of the time. The same author also suggests that ukiyo-e had a much stronger emphasis on creating dark outlines in the works. This is due to the fact that the Japanese consider fine handwriting an important skill by itself and the art of writing is irrevocably connected with Japanese art.

When it comes to performed arts, Japan had theatre plays known as Kabuki. Kabuki often dealt with the topics of heroism, in contrast to the everyday life which ukiyo-e focused on (even though Japanese woodblock printing did very often depict scenes from Kabuki plays). These plays were also extremely long from today’s stand-point, sometimes stretching from dawn to dusk.

To conclude, Japanese art is very specific and different from European or American art. The geographical and historical isolation of the Japanese islands have prepared a fertile ground for
Japanese art to develop in a unique way, not being affected by the art of other civilizations to such a degree as other countries. Whether it be the art of origami, ukiyo-e, or traditional theatre, Japan is a country which offers a very distinct and very one of a kind type of art.

**Characteristics of Impressionism and Post-impressionism**

Before continuing in our work, we believe that we must briefly define what impressionism was. It was an artistic movement which emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century and despite initial mocking reactions from critics of the time, it gained immense popularity and is today remembered as one of the most important artistic movements in history. The term “impressionism” comes from Claude Monet’s “Impression, soleil levant”. Monet is regarded to be one of the key artists to emerge from the impressionist movement.

Impressionism according to Lewis (2007) was not only about the specific colours and art based on empirical analysis and the senses, but mainly about freedom and rather than a specified movement, it is a collection of artists who rebelled against conventional art forms and each of them had their own unique style, their “freedom” being the most common factor which bound them together. The same author also states that impressionism, while considered mainly a movement for visual artists, was not restricted to painters and sculptors. Impressionism brought about several musical talents as well, the most notable being Claude Debussy.

One of the principles in which impressionism differed from previous styles was the lack of lines. Impressionist artists preferred to use natural strokes of the brush, without any lines to border their creative vision. Often these strokes appeared to be “broken” to the unaccustomed eye. These artists also enjoyed painting outside of studios, which is sometimes referred to as en plein air. Impressionists were known to strive for a more general representation of emotions rather than to focus on details of their paintings.

Another interesting aspect of impressionist art was that the subject of the painting and the background usually had a less distinct separation. We believe that this was to give the viewer an opportunity to take in the entire reality of the painting instead of simply the person or object which was the subject of painting.

Another opinion that we came across was that some believe impressionism to be artists’ answer to the challenge the emergence of photography represented. Photographs, while still in their earliest forms, were able to accurately capture an image from life without any mistakes a painter might make. Many artists might have felt threatened by this new technology. It is possible that impressionists were attempting to challenge photography by revolutionizing and reinventing the commonly used techniques of paintings, but of course, that is merely speculation on our part.

The movement which naturally followed impressionism was post-impressionism. According to Lewis (2007) it was mainly a natural answer to impressionism with a higher focus on experimenting with colours in order to achieve a very personal and sacred image. The two most
prominent painters of the post-impressionist movement were Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, both of whom were, at least to some degree, also influenced by Japanese art.

To sum up, impressionism was a movement which was mocked by critics at the time, but gained the favour of the masses. Today it is considered to be one of the most important and influential artistic movements, with many young art students specialising in the study of impressionist works. Its follower, post-impressionism gave way to more experimenting, but is still considered tightly connected to the impressionist movement.

The Influence of Japanese Art on Western Artists

In the second half of the nineteenth century, trade routes from Japan were open for the first time in two hundred years. Along with many other goods, Japanese art was one of the main things which were imported into the western world. The art from a country that has been secluded for such a long time was fascinating to many Europeans as well as Americans. The dark outlines, the interesting colours and the unique techniques began inspiring artists from the west, who began to slowly implement inspirations gained from Japanese art into their own works. The French gave this new semi-movement the name “Japonism”. It is quite ironic that at the time when Japanese woodblock printing came to a decline because of the threat of civil war in Japan, it had found its way to inspire many European artists, especially of the impressionist movement.

According to Honour and Fleming (2005), the influence of Japan on European art was very different from the influence of other oriental art forms from earlier periods. The authors claim that previous art pieces from China and other countries were seen as a sort of “fancy” or fantasy for collectors, not having any true impact on European artists of the time. On the other hand, Japan was secluded for centuries and the appearance of its art caused a new wave of excitement, but not only that. Artists tried to understand what made Japanese art so unique and were inspired by the works of great Japanese artists such as Hokusai. We shall now name just a few impressionist artist whose works have traces of Japanese influence in them.

For example, the influence of Japanese art can be seen even within the works of such a popular painter as Vincent Van Gogh. According to the website, the Van Gogh Gallery (2013), he was introduced to ukiyo-e by his brother when he moved to Paris. It is believed that Van Gogh became a collector of Japanese Woodblock prints and he copied two pieces of eastern woodblock prints, adding his own touch to them. His famous work called “The Courtesan” is also inspired by Japanese art. The painting bears resemblance to the style of woodblock printers, yet it also has Van Gogh’s typical touch.

One of the most important ukiyo-e artists of Japan was Hokusai Katsushika who created several volumes of woodblock prints called “Manga”. While the term manga today refers to a type of Japanese comic books, there is no evidence pointing to a connection between Hokusai’s manga and today’s comic book art (although the first mangas are said to have surfaced in the late nineteenth century, some time after Hokusai’s manga was published posthumously) and it is
more widely accepted that manga as a comic book form came from American influence which was adapted into the Japanese culture.

To return to what we indicated above, Hokusai’s manga series had a wide influence on many French Impressionists. According to Flynn (1982) Hokusai’s influence was mainly seen on the prestigious French printmaker Felix Bracquemond (husband to one of the most well-known female artists of impressionism – Marie Bracquemond), who was intrigued by the representation of nature and especially flowers, and encouraged many other artists to study the art of Japan.

One of the founders of the impressionist movement was Edgar Degas, who also happened to collect Hokusai’s manga and was inspired by them. It is said that Degas was fascinated by the depiction of women in the manga, as he himself focused very often on dancers, ballerinas and other women in movement.

Based on the work of Growe (2001), while Degas’ work shared similarities with Japanese woodblock prints in the theme of women in day-to-day situations, this was not the main element in which Japanese art helped Degas create some of his own work. The asymmetrical composition, the strange posture of people depicted on woodblock prints and the relating levels in the prints fascinated Degas and sparked a true interest within him towards the eastern arts. This is reflected within Degas’ own interest in unusual composure in art.

One of Degas’s close associates was Mary Cassatt, an American painter living in Paris who attempted to introduce impressionism to the United States. She was so intrigued by Japanese woodblock prints that she created her own set of prints, showing mainly women in everyday tasks, one of the most prominent works from this series being “Woman Bathing”.

Based on Streissguth (1998) Cassatt had ordered and collected many pieces of ukiyo-e and, like many of her contemporary colleagues, was intrigued by them. The author states that among the things that fascinated Cassatt were the non-complex compositions from unusual standpoints, the blank spaces between the colours and the simple lines that were able to speak to the observer. Cassatt created several prints using the woodblock printing technique common in Japan. She even undertook to adding colour to these prints by using several different block of wood with different colours spread onto them. She used these prints to make her own experiments with the effects colour combinations could have. Another example of her prints would be “The Fitting” in which she attempted to show a complex scene using a non-complex technique.

When talking about impressionism, we cannot omit one of the most prominent artists of history: Claude Monet. His painting “Madame Monet en costume Japonais” depicts a European woman in traditional Japanese clothing surrounded by fans. Whether this painting could be considered his celebration of Asian art or, on the contrary, a mocking image of Paris’ obsession with Japanese art at the time remains a question of debate. According to the C. Monet Gallery website (n.d.) Monet was an avid admirer of Hokusai and had many of his prints in his possession. There is even speculation that Hokusai’s focus on flowers may have inspired Monet to use water lilies as a model for painting.
Another notable artist whose works are placed within impressionism is Paul Gauguin. He was also known for his vast travels and he eventually settled on the Marquesas Islands, where he died after defending natives against European settlers. According to Flynn (1982), the influence of ukiyo-e is most notable in the absence of shadows, which is a trait that the Japanese woodblocks also share.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is also considered to be inspired by Japanese art to some degree. Lautrec was known to create commercial form of art, such as posters, just as frequently as finer works. The influence of ukiyo-e is notable mainly in these commercial works. Based on Flynn (1982), he borrowed the style of such prominent Japanese artists as Hokusai, Utamaro and Harunobu, successfully recreating the “flatness”, yet dynamicity of their woodblock prints. Lautrec died at the same age as Van Gogh, as a result of his decadent lifestyle, but he changed the way people viewed poster printing and is often considered a revolutionist of this craft.

Conclusion

Japan has been a subject of fascination ever since its harbours opened to the rest of the world. Since the second half of the 19th century, people in the “western world” have been fascinated by everything this unique country has to offer. While it could be argued that the end of Japan’s isolation was violent and almost plummeted the country into civil war, it also showed the world the wonders of Japanese art. In return, many of the most impressive pieces of European and American art were created only because the artists were inspired by what their Japanese counterparts had to offer. Even, today, more than one and a half century later, we are still perplexed by what Japan has to offer. People enjoy the exotic feel of Japanese art and even their modern artists are often sought out by western consumers. Many people in these modern times enjoy Japanese music, cinematography and their unique form of animated films called Anime. Japanese culture and art have integrated themselves into today’s cultural consciousness, but they still retain such a degree of exoticism that they fascinate even today’s youth who are, often mistakenly, considered by their elders to be ignorant in the ways of art. And it is left to wonder how many people who enjoy the works of impressionist and post-impressionist artists have no idea how their favourite artists were inspired by the art of a secluded and uncommon country.

List of Resources


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