

The Influences of Eastern Art on Western Art from the 19th Century to Early 20th Century

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Abstract: *Eastern art has multifaceted influences on Western artistic developments from the 19th century onward. Beginning with the Western fascination with the “Orient”, explores how Western artists often created exotic and romantic images based on their own ideas, which sometimes led to stereotypes in painting. The second section focuses on Japonisme, analyzing how the visual language of Japanese ukiyo-e prints, with their asymmetrical compositions, flat color planes, and decorative motifs, inspired Impressionist artists such as Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh. The third part investigates how the simplified forms, floating perspectives, and conceptual spatial frameworks derived from East Asian visual traditions contributed to the radical rethinking of pictorial space in early 20th-century Cubism. By tracing these cross-cultural encounters, the essay argues that Oriental art not only served as a source of aesthetic novelty but also catalyzed major paradigm shifts in how the Western world conceptualized and represented reality in art.*

Keywords: *Eastern Art, Orientalism, Oriental Art, Edward Said, Modern Art, Impressionism, Ukiyo-E, Cubism*

1. Introduction

Before the 19th century, the Orient was distant and mysterious to the West, and Europeans could only get a glimpse of it through the limited number of vessels and paintings brought back by emissaries and merchants from Arabia and East Asia. In the 19th century, the further development of transportation technology and international cultural exchanges made the Oriental culture better-known to the West. The Unique oriental aesthetic concepts of the Orient greatly inspired Western artists and movements such as Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism.

In this paper, I will discuss how Oriental Art brought exotic innovations to modern Western art in the 19th and 20th century based upon the definition of “the Orient” and “the Occident” in Edward Said’s usage from the following three perspectives: “1. Picturing the Orient: Exoticism and Influence in Western Painting”, “2. The Depictive Language of Japonisme: The Inspiration of Ukiyo-e to Impressionism”, and “3. The Simplified Geometry and Floating Perspectives from East Asia: Cubism’s Revolution of Representing the World”.

In the first section I will look at how the renewed contact between Europe and the Middle East influenced the painting language of the West. European fascination with the exotic reality they encountered in the Arab world, and the stylistic elements that influenced European artists will be considered through a selection of artworks from Neoclassicism, Romanticism and the Modernist movement. The second section will explore tangible lines of reference and similarities between the works of the Impressionists and the Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints. Lastly, the third section will look at the lesser known influences of Chinese painting on Cubist geometry and perspective.

2. Picturing the Orient: Exoticism and Influence in Western Painting

Orientalism was beyond an idea to the Occident in the 18th and 19th century. In Edward Said’s Orientalism[1], “the Orient” is not a geographic fact but a textual and ideological construct produced by the West — “the Occident” — as part of a broader system of cultural hegemony and imperial power.

Though trade between Europe and the Middle East could be dated back to thousands of years ago, European fascination with the Orient did not come alive until the 19th century; Napoleon’s invasion of

Egypt from 1798 to 1801 was decisive to the set off of the wave of Orientalism in Europe. Colonialism was the very wave that brought the Orient into European artists' eyes. The dynamic of these two cultural forces however, was not one on equal terms, rather, as Edward Said puts it in *Orientalism*: "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony"(5).

The mysterious Middle East not only provided exotic subject matters for European artists, but also inspired them to concretize the beauty of Orientalism on the basis of travelogues, literature, and photographs. In the 18th and 19th century, the content and use of color in paintings by many artists were influenced by Orientalism. For example, Paul Klee suggest he took inspiration from his stay in Tunisia and enhanced the use of color as his primary subject of research. While Paul Klee is noted for prioritizing color, Delacroix's Moroccan sketches are linked to a new poetic and chromatic richness inspired by the North African light and environment. [2]



Fig.1 The Fanatics of Tangier



Fig.2 The Grand Odalisque

Orientalism is characterized by exoticism and eroticism. Delacroix painted *The Fanatics of Tangier* (Fig. 1) from his memories when he travelled to North Africa in 1832: he witnessed the pious activities of a fanatical sect of Muslim and created this piece with the excitement of visiting a culture completely different from his[3]. Artists depicted the female body with exotic decorative details such as necklaces and headwear, which were overt in *The Grand Odalisque* (Fig. 2) by Ingres and *Odalisque Couchée aux Magnolias* (Fig. 3) by Matisse. Voluptuous odalisques were often seen in Oriental paintings as well. In these two paintings, the erotic gaze of the odalisques is crucial to the oriental mystery that artists tried to convey in the paintings. Indeed, the eroticism of Orientalism mostly comes from the way artists depicted scenes in their paintings. Paintings of this subject in this period extended beyond mere objectification and sexualization; it also reflected a broader failure to represent its cultures, societies, and women with authenticity or nuance.

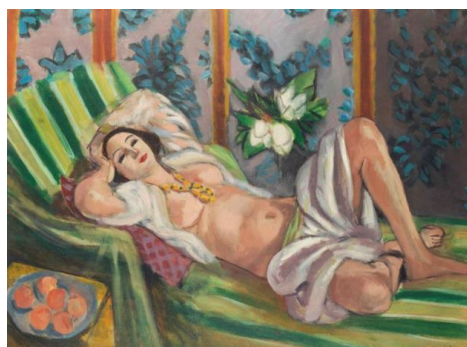


Fig.3 Odalisque Couchée aux Magnolias

Depictions of Eastern women in European paintings during this period of time revealed the power-fantasy of European male painters over their bodies. Male painters were prohibited from entering harems[4], therefore harem scenes in paintings came mainly from the artists' imagination and often indicated a voyeuristic vision[5]; The Turkish Bath (Fig. 4) by Ingres and The Bath (Fig. 5) by Gerome were typical imaginary paintings of this theme. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) never traveled to the East, but used the harem setting to conjure an erotic ideal in his voluptuous odalisques. Beyond their implicit eroticism, harem scenes evoked a sense of cultivated beauty and pampered isolation to which many Westerners aspired. [6]The remoteness of the Orient and harems, shrouded works these male artists in an enigmatic haze during their era. In the numerous odalisque and harem paintings produced by Orientalist artists, the women often share such uniform features that they seem to represent a single, idealized figure; they “appear to be cloned from one model, as if depictions of one woman in an endless variety of poses.” [7]



Fig. 4 The Turkish Bath

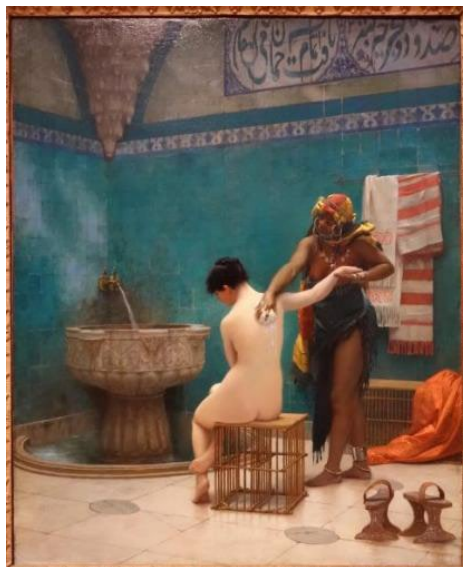


Fig.5 The Bath

Rich colors were frequently infused in paintings of Orientalism, with mainly blues, oranges, red, and golds, often forming a visual stimulation that contrasts the cool and warm tones. In *The Grand Odalisque* (Fig. 2), Ingres painted an Ottoman odalisque with a Turkish headscarf, holding a blue peacock feather fan, a blue pillow and a blue curtain in the background, contrasting the beige bed cloth underneath her body, a yellowish blanket in the left corner of the painting and her warm skin tone. In *A Joke* (Fig. 6) by Gerome, there is also the classical Oriental color language: the background is decorated with delicate blue wallpaper; the pillows in the middle ground are highlighted in red in the center; in the foreground, a Turkish man in red robe is having a playful moment with his dog; while the cool tone in the back and the warm tone in the front naturally build depth in the painting. The vivid colors add more exoticism to the Oriental paintings.



Fig.6 A Joke

The use of clear curved lines and bright flat colors in Gauguin's[8] and Matisse's[9] paintings came from Orientalism as well. Gauguin, fascinated with ancient Egyptian art and modern Polynesian art, started to use curved lines to outline elements and pursue the mystery of Orientalism with his use of colors red, blue, and yellow. Initially dissatisfied with the relationship between line and color in his *Luxury, Serenity and Pleasure* (Fig. 7), Matisse drew inspiration from the decorative style of Paul Gauguin; the use of outlines continued in Matisse's subsequent work and gradually shifted from colorful intermittent curved lines to more decisive and thicker lines in solid color, which is obvious in his *Dance*.



Fig.7 Luxury, Serenity, Pleasure

Ultimately, the idea of the Orient as we know it was shaped less by geography and more by the 19th-century imperial imagination of Europe—especially Britain and France. Orientalism became a way for the West to define itself through contrast, projecting its fantasies onto the landscapes and cultures of North Africa and the Middle East. For many European artists, the Orient offered not so much a subject to observe, but a space to imagine—rich with color, sensation, and symbolism.

Art was mostly not about what the artist saw first hand, with or without the Orient it was all about distant realities and imagination. But one thing that did change around this time is the idea that art needs to represent a picture of reality. So we discover in Modernism that a painting doesn't have to be a mirror of reality, and that it can, instead, be a representation of the phenomenological experience of reality.

3. The Depictive Language of Japonisme: The Inspiration of Ukiyo-e to Impressionism

In 1854, Japan was forced to open to Europe and North America due to the Commodore Perry incident. Since then, Japanese goods started to be sold in large quantities to Europe and the United States; as a result, Japanese arts and crafts (ukiyo-e printed on wrapping paper and etc.) were widely disseminated in the West, setting off a wave of huge admiration for all kinds of things from Japan, a fascination which came to be known as Japonisme in the second half of the 19th century. The aesthetic innovations brought to Western artists greatly changed the way they would paint, among which Impressionism was the most representative group.

Japanese ukiyo-e has three remarkable traits: subject matter, use of color, and composition. Ukiyo-e is a kind of popular woodblock prints that thrived in the Edo period with the main theme being daily life and folks; unlike paintings and drawings in the past, ukiyo-e did not have a focus on figure painting

but started to present joyful activities in a landscape[10]. Because of the low cost of production, ukiyo-e was widely distributed and favored by the public.

Landscapes had become an independent genre in art creation at this time. Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji by Katsushika Hokusai was one of the most notable ukiyo-e print series. It is a series of landscape prints showing the view of Mount Fuji from different places in the Kanto region of Japan at different times and under different weather condition[11]. Similar to the Ukiyo-e printmakers, Impressionists such as Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh also took daily life as their inspiration sources: Monet's Bridge over a Pool of Water Lilies, Van Gogh's Starry Night and Sunflowers, and Manet's A Bar at the Folies-bergère, all reflect Impressionists' attention to daily life. Landscapes including cityscapes were also a popular genre to Ukiyo-e printmakers and Impressionists; Sesshū ajigawaguchi tenpōsan (Fig. 8) by Hokusai and The Rue Saint-Denis 30th of June by Monet are representative examples of this genre. Ukiyo-e and Both Impressionism paintings depicted much about landscapes brought art down to earth for everybody, regardless of class.



Fig.8 Sesshū ajigawaguchi tenpōsan

The use of colors of Ukiyo-e was wide-ranged, which also inspired Impressionism artists, especially Van Gogh.

“All my work is based to some extent on Japanese art” (Van Gogh, Vincent. Letter to Theo van Gogh. 15 July 1888).

Van Gogh moved to Arles, the south of France. There, he painted Irises, Almond Blossoms, The Starry Night, and many other vibrantly colorful paintings. The striking color contrasts and daring compositions of ukiyo-e prints influenced Van Gogh. The swirling shape of the nebula in Van Gogh's The Starry Night was similar to the curve of the wave in Hokusai's Great Wave, both sharing the swirling dynamic and the blue. The way Van Gogh saw colors had changed; his paintings had developed vitality through a wide range of colors and his agile brush strokes. Moreover, the painting language of Impressionism was different from traditional painting as well: Impressionists started using color to build the shapes and abandoned chiaroscuro, the traditional method of creating volume with lightness and darkness. This change is visible in Monet's paintings: he uses complimentary colors to highlight paintings; he avoids using black because he believed that there was no black in nature and that it would interrupt the smooth change in the hue which could reduce the hazy effects in his landscape painting[12] such as Impression Sunrise and Women with a Parasol.



Fig.9 The Waterfall of Amida Behind the Kiso Road



Fig.10 Beauty and Dog

In Ukiyo-e prints, the background ground were often reduced and the foreground were often enlarged; therefore, the background and the foreground were visually compressed into two-dimensional plane, losing the depth. Sometimes, the horizon line was taken away. Great Wave and The Waterfall of Amida Behind the Kiso Road (Fig. 9) by Hokusai are great example of this characteristic. Cropping elements at the edge was often seen in ukiyo-e as well[13]. Many figures are sharp around the edges; for instance, Kitagawa Utamaro cropped figures sharply at the edge in his Beauty and Dog(Fig. 10) and Lovers - Osomeand Hisamatsu (Fig. 11). Distant View of Kinryusan from Azuma Bridge by Utagawa Hiroshige is another example in which the foreground was pushed extremely forward through the way of cropping the boat and the passengers. [14] In Edgar Degas' The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage, two figures on the left are also sharply cropped at the edge. Cropping elements provided prints and paintings with a clear emphasis on the center and added dynamic to the scene. The flatness and absence of the horizon line of ukiyo-e is also notable in Edouard Manet's The Fifer. Manet outlined the contour line of the boy in black alone, using solid color to distinguish the figure from the background, which compressed the three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional plane. The way ukiyo-e arranged elements inspired Western artists to compose objects in painting in an unconventional way, breaking the formality in traditional Western painting.



Fig.11 Lovers - Osomeand Hisamatsu

Ukiyo-e profoundly inspired the Impressionists:

“Japanese art, in decline in its own country, is taking new roots among French Impressionist artists”(Van Gogh, Vincent. Letter to Theo van Gogh. 15 July 1888).

Many French artists started to create based upon daily subjects, to redefine light and color in painting, to arrange their elements in an unorthodox way, and paved the way for the birth of later art schools such as Post-Impressionism. The unique visual language of Japanese prints not only changed the way Western artists approached composition, but also helped them break away from traditional Western artistic norms.

4. The Simplified Geometry and Floating Perspectives from East Asia: Cubism's Revolution of Representing the World

In the West, before Modernism, art used to be defined by how well it could represent reality; yet, modern art pursued new ways of seeing the world. Different from how artists from Renaissance, Realism, Classicalism, and even Romanticism vividly depicted characters and settings, artists since the second half of the 19th century were not a fan of figurative painting; inspired by Hokusai's drawing theory, Paul Cézanne used simplified geometry such as squares, circles and cylinders to represent elements in his paintings. Furthermore, traditional single-point perspective, or linear perspective, invented during the Renaissance had dominated Western painting for more than five hundred years till the late 19th century; Pablo Picasso abandoned the traditional single-point perspective and began to explore the multiple perspective which was commonly used in Chinese landscape painting. These two changes started a new trend in Western painting and catalyzed the birth of Cubism.

Reducing the world into its most essential form was one of the revolutionary changes that Cubism introduced to modern art[15]. By doing so, reality was fragmented and simplified; nature was reconstructed and abstract art started to take over figurative art. Same as Impressionists, Cezanne also drew inspiration from Japonisme: he was influenced by the geometry simplification in *A Quick Guide to Drawing* (Fig. 12) written by Hosukai and started to simplify things into square and circles[16]; such simplification later passed down to Picasso, leading him to a sensory way of seeing nature. Cezanne's *Still Life with Apples* indicates his early exploration in such reduction: all of them were oval shapes, too perfect to not be conceptual. However, what is more important and innovative in this painting is the combination of different perspectives in the same plane: there is a side view of the tall vase, a front view of the pot and some apples, and a top view of other apples and the plate; in addition, the green vase on the left was painted in front view at the bottom but top view at the opening.

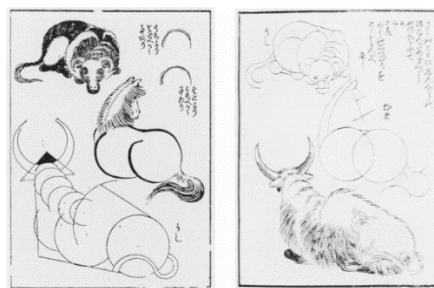


Fig.12 A Quick Guide to Drawing

The use of multiple perspective in painting opened the door to modern art in the West. In traditional Chinese landscape paintings, floating perspective was the dominant method for artist to represent nature when they came back from nature to indoor space. For instance, Wang Ximeng's *One Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* (Fig. 13) integrates views of mountains under different perspectives in a single painting, thus truly achieving the constantly changing visual effect as if viewers were walking around in the mountains themselves. The empathy that Chinese landscape painting was capable of raising among viewers caught Picasso's eyes; his admiration towards such an ability of Chinese art stimulated him to create art outside the realm of traditional Western realism painting. With the impulse generated by the empathy in Chinese painting, Picasso further explored integration of different perspectives started by Cezanne. He once explained the reason why he started to create in the way of Cubism, 'We were realists, but in the sense of the Chinese saying, "I do not imitate nature, I work like her".'[17] In *The Young Ladies of Avignon*, Picasso completely abandoned traditional linear perspective and used fragments to depict characters, full of ingenuity. In this way, his paintings are visually radical and dynamic, showing apparent characteristics of Cubism.



Fig.13 One Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains

Different methods of painting brought by the simplification of geometry from Ukiyo-e and the floating perspectives from Chinese landscape painting inspired Cezanne and Picasso to redefine what they saw and to reconstruct nature themselves. Reducing elements into basic geometry allowed movements in paintings more obvious; together with the integration of multiple perspectives in the same plane, their paintings became increasingly dynamic. Since then, Western art was no longer static, no longer a momentary cessation. Cubism was able to show continuous extension in time through a two-dimensional space. The birth of Cubism facilitated the maturity of modern art in the West, which was inseparable with inspirations from the East. The East's simplified geometry and new ways of thinking about space played a crucial role in the evolution of Cubism, marking a major shift in how artists represented the world.

5. Conclusions

The influence of Eastern art on Western art has been both deep and transformative, shaping artistic movements and pushing the boundaries of how reality was depicted. Eastern art provided a rich diversity of inspiration for Western modern art and profoundly influenced Western art on content, color, composition, and more importantly, the impulse to create. Orientalism revealed European artists' curiosity and fascination towards the exotic Orient. Impressionism learned from Ukiyo-e to capture fleeting moments with vivid colors. Cubism started to reconstruct nature and invited viewers to immerse into the dynamic on canvas. These exchanges highlight how cross-cultural influences can be both a source of inspiration and a catalyst for innovation.

The connection between Eastern and Western art is a reminder that art is never created in isolation. No one is an island, neither is art. Their connection thrives through dialogue and the sharing of ideas across time and cultures. It is the interweaving of art from different cultures that powers the progress of our civilization.

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