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# An Analysis of the Status of Japanese Zen Art Aesthetics in Ukiyo-e from Katsushika Hokusai to Van Gogh

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**Abstract:** Japanese Zen aesthetics extends empty aesthetics to non-literature and art, using painting as an art form to express the unique Japanese aesthetics and the embodiment of Japanese Zen aesthetics in the artist's life experience. By combining traditional Japanese aesthetics with Zen aesthetics, the creators of Ukiyo-e have a god-like perspective that allows them to see everything in the world. The integration of Japanese Zen culture with Chinese Zen, history, and art directly influenced the development of Japanese Ukiyo-e art. This influence, and even a deep monopoly, has influenced the work of two hundred and sixty years of Ukiyo-e artists, from content to effects. These even affected the western art field across the ocean; for example, Van Gogh was keen on such an expression with the concepts of "mono no aware", "wabi-sabi", and "yugen". Through the development history of Ukiyo-e and the specific analysis of Katsushika Hokusai's Ukiyo-e paintings and his influences on Van Gogh, this paper has a detailed understanding, that is to say, all signs indicate the inestimable role of Japanese Zen aesthetics. In Ukiyo-e, the art of the Japanese Zen aesthetic appears in front of the world, along the following path: half-awake self-discipline, as in China's Song dynasty, painting white space aesthetics, thinking of extremely pure appeal, and harmony between man and nature, man and man, and nature and nature.

**Keywords:** Ukiyo-e, Zen, Aesthetics, Hokusai

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## 1. Introduction

Ukiyo-e is one of the most perfect and classical representative of Japanese Zen aesthetics in Japan and world art history. Its artistic value is inestimable, which is entirely due to the deep-rooted influence of the Zen core ideology. Japanese Zen was composed of two main schools which are all learned in China during the Kamakura period: Linji school and Caodong School. Before that, the first monk in Japanese Zen culture was Daiichi Noren, who founded the Dharma School during the reign of Eisei, and his disciple Eisei Meian, who came back from studying in China, founded Japan's Linji School. This kind of Rongxi Linji School, no matter in the way of cultivation, interest, or meditation, is not inherited from the Chinese Tang Dynasty Mazu Daoyi's "mind is Buddha" and Linji's "heart to heart, heart to heart" claims. This kind of traditional bloodline can be traced back to the Matsu awarded by the Imperial Court in the Song Dynasty, which refers to Poseidon in Chinese traditional mystery.

In the course of its development, Japanese Zen was promoted to the important status of an ideal warrior and civic elite symbol because of the control and love of Japanese samurai. The Zen represented by Linji school gradually formed a branch of Samurai Zen in Japan. The core of Samurai Zen is to use Zen thoughts to help Samurai practice basic skills in the fields of swordsmanship and design solidly and to achieve a clear and focused state in order to achieve a high level of the state. Samurai gained a self-conscious way of coping with the daily fear of death through Zen practice. During the Muromachi period (1336-1573), when Zen samurai, a combination of killing and Buddhism, ruled, monks of the Linji sect were even hired by the shogun to run the country and effectively controlled Japan with the Five Mountains system. At the same time, every aspect of national life, from the government to business to education to the arts, has been affected. For example, Emperor Uda Tenn's ninth grandson, Muso-Soseki was not only a famous calligrapher, poet, and garden designer, but also one of the representatives of Linji monks. Since the Muromachi period, all kinds of art

-- painting, architecture, literature, noh opera, poetry, tea ceremony, garden, flower arrangement -- have been associated with Zen Buddhism, and gradually formed the mainstream aesthetic style known as the master. And the Edo Period in 1603, when Ukiyo-e, which borrowed from traditional Chinese prints, emerged. In the very beginning, this form of painting was popular in Kyoto and Osaka with architectural murals and interior decoration.

Therefore, Ukiyo-e had a long period of time in its formation, and its painters' paintings were mostly based on the life scenes of the samurai class. This kind of work was initially considered Yamato-E, a kind of painting that copied the daily life of a Japanese aristocrat from Tang Dynasty painting in China as the subject matter, and expressed his thoughts and feelings as well as the natural scenery and scenic spots in Japan, so as to meet the aesthetic requirements of Japanese people. This Yamato-e style of painting survived until the Heian period, and it changed significantly during the Muromachi period. Early, Toshio Miyagawa founded the Shunshō and Katsukawa schools, which were mainly portraits. The painters of these schools were mainly Kano school and Tosa school, but because most of these clan schools were very prominent, some of the expelled and excluded artists turned to the development of Ukiyo-e. Perhaps as a result of their expulsion, Ukiyo-e, unlike Yamato-e, which usually served only generals and warriors, no longer chose conservative subjects based on Confucian ethics. On the other hand, take Katsushika Hokusai's paintings in his middle age as an example. From the perspective of purchase and collection, these paintings show the Zen art aesthetics of the samurai class from the inside out. One hundred years later, through the southern Song dynasty style aesthetic cultural influence of the Antu Momoyama era, the advent of the townsmen aesthetic era formed the town people's Zen aesthetic art. It is mainly embodied in the depiction of people's daily life and landscape in Hokusai's paintings. This kind of Zen in Chonin's (Japanese Townsmen) eyes promotes the continuous evolution and presentation of Japanese Zen aesthetics in artists' works.

## 2. Literature Review

Most of the existing research focuses on the process of Ukiyo-e itself and the history of painting as well as the meaning of prints. The *Colours and Colorants used in late Ukiyo-e Art Works* [1]. Another common research type is the influence of Ukiyo-e, but this influence does not simply represent aesthetics or Japanese aesthetics but is about the influence of this craft on western human art forms, such as in *The Artistic Expression of European Paintings of the 19th Century and Kosode Design in Edo Era* [2] and *Impact of Ukiyo-e on Van Gogh* [3]. The few articles that mention Ukiyo-e when studying the influence of Zen on Japanese art also focus on some simple statements. For example, in Hasumi's (1963) analysis of the role of Zen in Japanese art, he said that most of the Ukiyo-e's favorite themes come from pictures of women and girls in market stalls and actors,

which are the reproduction of spiritual experiences [4]. In *The Reflection Of Landscape In Ukiyo-e*, Nasri Amir (2011) did not elaborate on the influence of aesthetic concepts under the guidance of Zen Buddhism on Ukiyo-e [5]. Instead, it points to the attitude toward nature guided by Zen and Buddhist thought, and the reflection of this reliance on natural movement in Japanese landscape paintings of Ukiyo-e [6]. Till today, there is no article has discussed in depth the specific relationship between Ukiyo-e and Japanese Zen-guided aesthetics. So, we will mainly from the perspectives of Hokusai and western art (quite impressed by Hokusai Van Gogh as the core perspective) of the two directions to explore the gap, and further through exploring the typicality Hokusai float world draw illustrations for the environment under the guidance of thought Japanese Zen aesthetics of the painting in Japan and around the world. This paper will show the understanding of this issue from a new perspective, and reveal a fact: As a derivative of Japanese Ukiyo-e, just like its Zen and Chinese culture, the whole formation process and even the development process are the same trends. This prompted the Japanese Zen in the contemporary art form to have a decisive unshakable position.

## 3. Research Method

The research method mainly focuses on the theoretical research of the literature survey method, which restores the theoretical part through the method of topic selection, thinking policy, and specific literature analysis. On the other hand, through observation and development, we can expand our perception and inspire our thinking to obtain new findings with the case study of specific objects. Through extensive research, starting from the basic information from the classroom and teachers' lectures, relevant books, articles, networks, and specific paintings are consulted to demonstrate and support the existing research results and relevant information. The main research content of this paper is to investigate and analyze the development history of Ukiyo-e and Hokusai's paintings. In this paper, the method of multidisciplinary comprehensive research is integrated with religion, politics, sociology, art history, and other disciplines of art. In the scientific development of the movement of the law under the high degree of integration to form a unified whole in language, method, and concept of the formation of a unified and closely linked trend analysis. The application of this method from thinking to systematic analysis to a large extent promotes the research on the status of Japanese Zen art aesthetics in Ukiyo-e prints.

## 4. Results

The idea of Zen plays a foundational role in Japanese art aesthetics and Japanese culture, which enables the creators of Ukiyo-e to have a perspective of God's-eye view and all the forms of the world. Zen plays a decisive role in elevating traditional Japanese values into concrete artistic and aesthetic forms. It is a universal export of traditional Japanese values by means of doing in Rome as the Romans do. It not only

influenced the local social activities and the national mainstream aesthetic, but also exported this idea to the West in the form of Ukiyo-e prints. It extends Zen aesthetics into Japanese Zen aesthetics by spreading and applying Zen to the art field, expressing a feeling of people, thoughts, and experiences in the form of Ukiyo-e. The doctrines of gods and religions from all over the world are presented to the world in Ukiyo-e in the following ways: Through the semi-self-disciplined sobriety; To the same space aesthetic feeling as the white space of Chinese Song Dynasty paintings; To the extreme purity of thoughts; And in the way of harmony to seek common ground on major issues while reserving differences on minor ones between man and nature, nature and nature, and between people [7]. This presentation shows and through the charm and influence of the Zen aesthetic. Through such works of art, the world is self-aware of *mono no aware*, *yugen*, and *wabi-sabi*.

## 5. A Case Study of Katsushika Hokusai and Van Gogh

### 5.1. *Zen in Eyes Is Just Zen in Eyes*

Katsushika Hokusai was born in an ordinary house in Edo Honsoo in the 10th year of the Japanese calendar. His father was the shogunate's official mirror maker, but his family was not rich. Like many children born in the slums, Hokusai had a simple but happy childhood. Later, his apprenticeship as an apprentice in a book rental shop and a printing shop in his youth also gives us a clear label of his town's identity. Katsukawa Shunshō introduced the Kabuki actor prints of Yakusha-e and taught Hokusai the Katsukawa style of painting as his teacher. Lenient for 4 years, he left the Shunshō studio and soon inherited the "Tawaraya Sōri" name, with a crazy songbook and beauty painting. The Most important of his many first paintings is "Young Women Looking Through a Telescope", which depicts a long face and a slightly open mouth with slender brushstrokes. In this period, his paintings are still presented simply to a large extent, which is relatively simple in terms of skills, techniques, and personal understanding. His paintings of this period are still mixed with "religious style". This religious style is reflected in the selection of materials. There are still many figures in his beauty pictures, such as noble ladies or mysterious mythological figures, which still cater to the aesthetic concept of the Japanese samurai class. In other words, Hokusai's paintings during this period were still less reflective and more about drawing what was seen, demonstrating the monotonous illustration techniques taught to him by Katsukawa, such as paintings for *binjin-ga* and *yakusya-e*. Katagawa Morhamella, who came from a farming family in Edo, focused his paintings on busts with close-ups of faces. Perhaps because of his own social underclass, he sympathized with kabuki and the poor prostitutes of Osaka and tried to convey in delicate and elegant strokes the functionalist beauty that characterized beauty paintings. Therefore, the first milestone of Katsushika Hokusai is

realism, especially in beauty paintings, which simply record the time of each person's existence, examine the moment of existence and extinction, and also show the instant beauty of women.

### 5.2. *Zen in Mind Is just Zen in Mind*

After Katsushika Hokusai's Ukiyo-e opened the mode of landscape painting, it can be said to be a monumental masterpiece with strong lines and vivid colors, which has received much praise [8]. His paintings made a breakthrough in the stage of landscape painting, breaking the decorative effect of Ukiyo painting. "Under the wave off Kanagawa", for example, is one of Katsushika Hokusai's most outstanding works, and it uses a partial close-up technique to depict the huge waves in the sky with extremely rhythmic lines [9]. Two wooden ships can be seen between the waves, and the waves themselves look like a monster with its mouth open, ready to devour the life on the deck. There is a distant view of Mount Fuji and snow on the volcano, but it is not difficult to show a sense of dormant crisis. The contrast between motion and stillness is portrayed in the picture by the close-up and the distant view, or a contrast between instantaneous and permanent danger. However, in either case, Katsushika Hokusai has created a sense of Kiyo decoration of Chiron, which contains a lot of emotions, generating a sublime nature and the beauty of "material sorrow" unique to the Japanese consciousness [10]. In addition, in the work, the presence of human beings, unlike the other authors' Meisho-painting and flower and bird painting, Katsushika Hokusai likes to show the townspeople and the citizens of Yamashita in the picture as well. In this work, for example, there is no sense of danger or fear or escape from the dark-colored crew members, who are all rocking the boat in an orderly manner, as if they are just facing the ordinary waves of the sea. Of course, this way of placing the fishermen and the boat between the waves are the result of Katsushika Hokusai's low point of view, which places the waves at the center of the picture and dominates it, thus presenting a very competitive sense of competition [11]. This arrangement reveals to some extent the mood of Hokusai, as he places the sense of stability and danger that he is used to, creating a sense of humor that is cheerful and lighthearted alongside the seriousness and tension. This reflects Hokusai's view of life and death. He does not want to be a wave that swallows the lives of people, but a wave that can send fishermen home. There are many details in the painting that show Hokusai's warmth, as well as his ideas of resistance, such as against a boat with huge waves and against an erupting volcano. In addition, it shows a choice of "living to death", expressing his personal value orientation and attitude, that is, man is just a drop in the ocean between heaven and earth.

In "Gaifu Kaisei" (South Wind at Clear Dawn), for example, the point of view is in the country of Kofei [12]. At the bottom of the image is a sea of trees of Mount Fuji. There is nothing but Mount Fuji, the red Mount Fuji with the remnants of a snow stream, and the blue sky and white clouds in the background. The composition of the picture is

rather datsuzoku. Although the painting is supposed to be a summer morning, the colors of momijigari, which symbolizes autumn leaves, and fuyu-gaki, which is only in winter persimmon, are used extensively in the picture. This arrangement of colors and structure is all in a version of fukinsei. Even the whiteness of the snow stream is also a kind of destruction and imperfection of the monochrome picture of the mountain. In addition, the woods and clouds are painted in the same way, and the colors are divided into blue and red, so the whole picture is simple with a sense of wabi-sabi beauty. This kind of beauty is no longer as intuitive as beauty painting and has turned into a relatively abstract idea. This kind of abstraction is not only the abstraction of painting skills but also a serious abstraction attracting viewers. This is just like the triple realm of Zen proposed by Song Dynasty master Yoshimi Aokahara. At the beginning of meditation, look at mountains as mountains and water as water. When coming to the Zen enlightenment period, we just see mountains are not mountains and water is not water. As in the third state of Zen, see mountains all the same and water all the same. It is a process of retreating into the void and seeking Zen ideas. The so-called Buddhism is about being born, entering the world, and then seeing the whole world and understanding the true meaning of Buddhism. Here, Hokusai had already forced him to reach the second level, according to his middle-aged at that time, his ability in painting skills, and the length of time he spent practicing and meditating on Zen. Thus, he did not paint Mount Fuji in a simple sense, nor clouds in a simple sense. Besides, there is no three-dimensional sense in the picture, it is two-dimensional and fuzzy. Without the sense of reality, it shows the landscape behind the mask, showing confusion, hesitation, pain, and even struggle. At the same time, his paintings incorporate the Japanese dry landscape art form, which is used as a meditation aid by Japanese Zen monks [13]. He presents mountains and water on paper, forming static elements and effects like dry landscapes, and miniature gardens and landscapes on paper in the way of "changing heaven for earth". This makes the viewer a Zen practitioner because it largely engages everyone who looks at his paintings and interprets what he understands and achieves at this moment: a certain degree of asceticism and self-discipline.

### 5.3. Zen in Eyes Is Zen in Mind

In his later years, Katsushika Hokusai lost his luster and honor to the rising star Hiroshige Utagawa. His paintings shifted from traditional customs and landscapes to flora and fauna, and he gradually lost the market. In *The First Edition of 100 Views of Fuyuke*, Hokusai said: "To be honest, nothing I painted before I was seventy was good or worth mentioning. I think I'm going to have to keep working on it to be able to draw something quite remarkable at 100 [14]." Even before he died, he said, "I wish I had five more years to live, that I might have time to try to become a real painter [15]." On the one hand, in the face of death, his disapproval of himself is to tell him that he knows he is not and not enough to accept

himself. At the same time, it is also a display of fighting with himself. When there is no better or comparable opponent in the world, he, himself, and even his past self becomes his opponent. On the other hand, it shows the few thoughts and reflections he has left after a lifetime of individualization between Zen thought and his experience. It is like the localization process that Zen went through when it was brought to Japan from China. With these experiences, Hokusai abandoned his past achievements and presented a concept of impermanence. Just like the last painting he painted before his death, "The Dragon of Smoke Escaping from Mt Fuji", with exquisite brushwork, simple picture, dark and cold texture of strong ink color to express his understanding of the world's fickleness. At that time, Hokusai was already deeply influenced by Zen philosophy, and Ukiyo-e and even Western art were also remembered with his Hokusai style of painting. This mature Hokusai style, like the mature Japanese art aesthetic, guides the creation and expression in various industries and fields. Even 260 years later, when Ukiyo-e is no longer as influential as it was at its peak, it still plays an important role in various industries and artistic expressions in Japan. This influence is irreversible, as is the influence of Zen on Japanese aesthetics and Japanese art forms such as ikebana, porcelain, noh, geido, manga, tea ceremony, architecture, yundo, etc., which exists as a subconscious. Therefore, even though the art form of Ukiyo-e, which expresses the essence of Japanese art aesthetic, is gradually declining, the Japanese Zen art aesthetic already exists and can only continue to develop rather than destroy regeneration.

### 5.4. The Reappearance of Zen Aesthetics in the West

Hokusai's words were fully displayed by westerners because of their pure representativeness of the aesthetic charm of Japanese Zen art, together with a rare and unique attraction to Van Gogh [16]. Hokusai's experience growing up in Japan and his transition from a young painter to the last of Ukiyo-e's generation. Lasting for nearly 70 years, the painting experience almost spans the whole process of the development and formation of Japanese Ukiyo-e. The aesthetic consciousness formed by the experience of growing up in Japanese vernacular is what he has been practicing all his life. Although Van Gogh was deeply influenced by Ukiyo-e works and painters, he could only imitate their forms, pictures, contents, styles, colors, and artistic means, but could not learn their essence [17]. Van Gogh's avarice made it impossible for him to explore the aesthetic core of Japanese Zen art, and to make his own artistic breakthrough in accordance with the natural law of "keeping break, and leaving (Shu-ha-ri: In the most elementary stage to follow the teacher's teachings, to the basic proficiency stage after trying to break through the original norms to allow themselves to reach a higher level of the economy, in the higher level of the economy to get a new understanding and summary to create a new realm.)" and other Zen teachings. This is largely due to the differences between Van Gogh's original belief and Zen Buddhism in the living soil when he lived and created.

Van Gogh's "Starry Night" painting was often borrowed from Hokusai's "Under the Wave Off Kanagawa", and the two are very similar in shape, brushwork, color scheme, and mood. [18] Many critics say this is Van Gogh's imitation of Hokusai, which is so prevalent in Van Gogh's paintings. Take Van Gogh's last painting, *Crows in the Rye*, for example, which shows that Van Gogh was deeply influenced by Ukiyo-e [19]. It also shows that Van Gogh, because of his appreciation of Ukiyo-e works, kept copying and integrating wabi-sabi and yugen, which he understood and could imitate, into his works. "Crows in the Rye", painted in 1890, is one of Van Gogh's most powerful and controversial paintings [18]. The picture is extremely restless, showing a sense of extreme movement, through the unusually wide painting, the wheat field extends extremely wide, forming three roads. The black crow forms a sign of death and auspiciousness in the sky. There is no horizon or even a clear sense of structure. Instead, there were rolling clouds in the sky and a sense of an impending storm. This eerie and intense conflict of fear and hope is what yugen is all about [20]. Van Gogh committed suicide at the end of his life two weeks after he finished this painting. He also showed his understanding of distorted and deranged emotions with reality and even showed the impermanence of the beauty of "object sorrow" to all people with his short life [21]. Van Gogh explained this sentiment to his younger brother, saying that, "It is a picture of a wheat field stretching out under a turbulent sky. I do not need to deliberately express the feeling of desolation and extreme loneliness [22]." [23] Both his own interpretation and the color scheme and form of his paintings imitate Hokusai's death work ("The Dragon of Smoke Escaping from Mt Fuji") to a great extent. However, Van Gogh's imitation was not so thorough, because most of his understanding of Zen aesthetics came from the Ukiyo-e he had seen, and even from the works of Hokusai with Zen meditation and practice that he had seen [24]. Therefore, his paintings are more like the piecing together of elements. He would show a sense of crisis and disaster on the screen, but it is too simple, piecing together crows, blackness, scenery without people, a relatively two-dimensional printmaking effect, and a short and single painting method. This combination not only stems from his understanding of the aesthetics of Japanese Zen, or his imitation of Hokusai's paintings but more from the simplicity of the elements he can see. For example, wheat fields are mostly in the same direction and in the color, it is relatively single. The sense of crisis and disaster drawn by him is not simply yugen's opinion, but more a kind of incomprehension. His father and grandfather were priests, his family was Christian, and even religious elements appear in many of his paintings. However, the two religions are in conflict. Especially based on the cultural differences between the East and the West, there are many similarities and differences. The fear in his paintings comes from the conflict between the "reality" sought by the Western world and the "emptiness" sought by the Japanese Zen.

Moreover, it can also be seen that a large number of Western artists have praised and appreciated the Japanese

Zen art aesthetics conveyed and presented by Ukiyo-e. This inspired imitation and study shows the deified status of Japanese Zen aesthetic art in Ukiyo-e. Gauguin's "Jacob fights with Angels" has a pair of angels fighting in sumo style in the upper right corner of his copy of Hokusai's official figure from Hokusai manga. Degas imitated Hokusai's half-beauty paintings in both postures and white space when painting ballerinas, and Monet's "Woman in Kimono" directly put the clothes of Japanese geisha and their usual fans on a Western woman. All this shows the western aesthetic appreciation of the Japanese Zen aesthetic. It's just that this appreciation has largely deviated from Zen, and from Japanese aesthetics as well because there is a huge gap between them due to environmental and cognitive differences.

## 6. Conclusion

In 1810, Hokusai published a series of model books to guide Japanese painting, such as *The Early Guide to Japanese Painting* (1812), *The Early Learn to Japanese painting* (1814), *the Three-Body Painting* (1816), etc., to guide the students to learn painting. Among them, *Hokusai Cartoon* is the most famous. In that book, various forms are depicted, including people's happiness, sadness, birds, animals, insects and fish, mountains, rivers, vegetation and even living utensils. This standardized creative template has a dominant influence on Japanese art. By standardizing style, painting form, painting content, line and composition, and even the use of color, Hokusai's status in Ukiyo-e, Japanese art, and world art have been further deified. This position is similar to that of Zen in Ukiyo-e.

In China, there is a big bird called the phoenix. We often say that a phoenix picks wood for its perch. It is because it is a very special and noble bird, and that nobility comes from its choice. If there is not a sycamore tree phoenix doesn't perch. It will not eat fruit if that is not bamboo. It even will not be drunk but from sweet springs. It is regarded as a divine being in Chinese thought because it is of a high standard and conditional. So, even today, Chinese people still believe in the existence of a phoenix even though they can't find its physical form or even have never seen its appearance. Thus, when an aesthetic standard exists in people's cognition like a phoenix, imagine what kind of status it has. Japanese Zen aesthetics is equivalent to such a position in Ukiyo-e.

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