

## Van Gogh, Collector of “Japan”

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Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) was one of the many European and American artists working in the context of Japonisme—the movement that, beginning in the early 1870s and running its course by around 1900, encouraged the appreciation and systematic study of Japanese art. These artists were influenced, some of them profoundly, by Japanese subject matter as well as by Japanese aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> Van Gogh was one of the most avid lovers and students of Japanese woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*, or pictures of the floating world), as well as of Japanese albums created for export. His appropriation of techniques and images from Japanese art in the process of his evolution of an aesthetics has been well studied and evaluated.<sup>2</sup> My goal in this exploration is, therefore, not to revisit the question of the influence of Japanese prints on the Dutch artist but, rather, to examine van Gogh’s imaginative relationship to Japan. I will explore that relationship through the artist—both as a student who was objectively interested in Japanese aesthetics and Japanese culture, and as a person and artist who, like his contemporaries, constellated his projections and longings around Japan, a then little-known country and culture, to create a dreamed Japan, a *japon rêvé*, to use Brigitte Koyama-Richard’s suggestive term.

I will consider van Gogh in the framework of two cultural practices: collecting and painting. Van Gogh, as a collector of Japanese prints, engaged in nineteenth-century practices of material collecting in the context of imperialism; through his material collecting, and along with other Europeans of his time, he also collected, in a metaphorical manner, images of the exotic—in van Gogh’s case, images of what I shall call “Japan” to emphasize the imaginative and idealizing nature of the artist’s construction of Japan. From the mid-1880s onward van Gogh formulated an image of Japan, and an image of an ideal self in relation to Japan, that were based on his collecting of Japanese prints and influenced by his reading of magazine articles on Japan and novels that constructed idealized images of Japan as a primitive land whose people, and artists, still lived close to nature. Second, as a painter in Arles in the spring of 1888, the artist constructed an image of “Japan” as nature through a collection of paintings of flowering trees. In that series of paintings he expressed his idea of “Japan” through a natural image that he had come to value as a specifically Japanese image from perusing Japanese woodblock and album prints in his and his brother Theo’s collection. I view the image of the flowering tree as the site of the coming together of the artist’s practices of collecting Japanese prints and

images of “Japan” and of painting with the goal of collecting “Japan” and expressing “Japan” as a personal symbol under the aegis of Symbolism.

VAN GOGH’S COLLECTING OF JAPANESE  
PRINTS AND IMAGES OF JAPAN

Van Gogh practiced what one might call metaphorical collecting. He carried out his collecting in ways that were “at once psychological and social” (Elsner and Cardinal 5),<sup>3</sup> expressing personal and professional ideals and desires that were grounded in a specific time and place. Van Gogh became a systematic collector of Japanese woodblock prints in the mid-1880s in Paris. His position as both a citizen of one imperialist nation, The Netherlands, and a resident of another, France, allowed him to become acquainted with, appreciate, and appropriate the non-Western world—whether in the form of material objects, images, or aesthetic productions. By the time van Gogh and his brother Theo (Theodorus, 1857–1891) began their systematic collecting of Japanese prints, the earlier European curiosity about exotic objects of every kind and quality from the non-Western world had developed into a keen interest in non-Western, and specifically in Japanese art. A large number of Japanese woodblock prints had been brought to Europe from 1854 onward. The demand for Japanese prints at this time can be gauged by the fact that Tadamas Hayashi (1856?–1906), connoisseur of and dealer in Japanese art in Paris after 1878, imported over an eleven-year period 156,487 Japanese prints into France in 218 deliveries from Yokohama (Aitken and Delafond 16). Moreover, a series of exhibitions held in major European cities, beginning with the Exposition Universelle held at Paris in 1867, made Japanese art more widely available to European artists. But it was not until Théodore Duret and Henri Cernuschi (the latter the founder of a noted museum of Asian art in Paris) returned from a tour of the Orient (1871–1873) “laden with art,” that Japonisme became a major movement in the European art world (Ives 13). The major founders of modern European art, including Manet, Monet, Degas, Whistler, Rodin, Bonnard, van Gogh, Gauguin, Cassatt, and Toulouse-Lautrec, were all involved with Japonisme, and they all purchased and studied Japanese prints at some point during the last forty years of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Around the beginning of March 1886, van Gogh traveled from The Netherlands to Paris, where he moved in with his younger brother Theo in an apartment in Montmartre. Although he already had purchased a few Japanese prints while living in Antwerp in the winter of 1885–86, it was during the winter of 1886–87 that Vincent, along with Theo, began to systematically collect Japanese prints; Theo, as an art-dealer, influenced Vincent considerably on which prints to buy (Wichmann 12). The brothers found a large supply of prints in a boutique that had been opened in 1875 at 19, rue Chauchat, by Siegfried (born Samuel) Bing (1838–1905), a

German from Hamburg who had taken out French citizenship in 1871 (Koyama-Richard 15).<sup>5</sup> The shop was located conveniently just “a short walk” from the van Gogh brothers’ apartment at 54, rue Lepic (Walther and Metzger 286). The brothers were also allowed to visit Bing’s residence, where, in his attic, he had, as Vincent noted, surely exaggerating, “millions of prints piled up: landscape and figures, and old prints too” (Letter #510; *Letters* II, 611). Van Gogh went frequently to Bing’s attic “to study, acquire, or take on commission Japanese prints” (Welsh-Ovcharov, “Chronologie” 30 [my translation]); particularly during the last quarter of 1887, he went often to both Bing’s shop and home to study and collect Japanese prints (Welsh-Ovcharov, “Chronologie” 33). It is estimated that Vincent and Theo collected “some four hundred Japanese prints” during four or five visits to Bing’s attic (Welsh-Ovcharov, “Introduction” 18 [my translation]). This collection is now in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

Van Gogh and his contemporaries collected Japanese prints because, as artists of their time, they wished to learn from them new forms, techniques, and ideas. It is generally agreed that “by the middle of the century the principles of Greco-Roman art which underlay European art had lost most of their vitality” and that European art was ripe for a change (Needham 115). European artists of the time, denigrating the “complex lighting and illusionistic devices” of Renaissance art and the “virtuosity and finesse of the salon styles” favored by the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, looked backward to their own pre-Renaissance traditions, praising the art of the “fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italians and Flemings” for its “vigor and expressive power” (Rubin 2). At the same time, they looked for artistic inspiration outside of Europe, to the lands that had recently come under European influence, and especially to Japan. John M. MacKenzie views the second half of the nineteenth century as a time of crisis for European art—when “the western arts in fact sought contamination at every turn, restlessly seeking renewal and reinvigoration through contacts with other traditions” (209). Thus, European artists, including van Gogh, collected and studied Japanese prints with the purpose of revitalizing the tradition of European painting. The study of Japanese woodblock prints, in some cases facilitated through collecting them and having them close at hand as sources of artistic inspiration, enabled artists working in France and elsewhere in the last forty years of the nineteenth century to “discover . . . within themselves . . . possibilities for expression which lay dormant in their tradition”; furthermore, by acting on that discovery, artists were able to effect a revolution in European art (Nagai 182). But there was, in addition, a psychological side to van Gogh’s collecting: the artist collected Japanese prints not only as an artist, but as a collector who was interested in collecting, in a metaphorical way, images of the non-Western Other that had a personal resonance for him in his time and place.

James Clifford contends that Western people from the time of imperialism and

colonialism have viewed the non-Western Other as “a knitted-together collective representation figuring a geographically and historically vague but symbolically sharp exotic world” (136). In one of the more recent periods in which “the West has thought itself [and imagined itself] through its articulation of a set of ideas” (Hayot ix) named Japan, van Gogh and his fellow European artists in the late nineteenth century used “Japan” as what Hayot calls a “dream-space” (xii) in which to imagine a new sense of themselves and their art. The images of Japan that van Gogh collected, in a metaphorical sense, were of a place different from the geographically and historically defined country of Japan—an exotic place of which he knew very little. In reality, the Japan of the last forty years of the nineteenth century was a country in the process of rapid industrialization and modernization. Its cities of Tokyo (then called Edo) and Osaka had already started developing into large economic centers beginning in the late seventeenth century. During the 1880s and later, just at the time that European artists were intrigued by Japanese woodblock prints depicting an earlier Japan, Tokyo and Osaka were becoming modern metropolises with the technological accoutrements of European cities of the time, and the countryside was becoming crisscrossed by railroads. But the relative lack of knowledge of Japan was not an obstacle for van Gogh and his fellow artists, since their goal was not “the description, not even the interpretation of a reality, but the formulation of an ideal, desired reality” (van Alphen 3).<sup>6</sup>

Van Gogh, along with other artists of his time, filtered his view of Japan through the contemporary discourse of primitivism. Primitivism, which received its most influential formulation in Rousseau’s *Discours sur les origines de l’inégalité* (1762), praised “man’s fuller life in an earlier, simpler state” and “derided the benefits of organized society” (Varnedoe 180). In the late nineteenth century, under the psychological and social pressure of the advances in industrialization and urbanization, European intellectuals and artists praised what they considered as less sophisticated non-Western societies—societies as diverse as those of Tahiti and Japan—seeing in these imagined primitive spaces “the possible advantages of a life untouched by the conventions of European civilization” (Varnedoe 180). That view was accompanied by nostalgia for a simpler European life, experienced but also partly imagined, that artists perceived as having been lost with the advance of Western “civilization”—a civilization that severed human beings’ ties with nature and religion and fettered them in increasingly complex systems of social and political organization.

In a context in which Europeans wished to use a foreign space to construct their own ideal, desired reality, “any shred” of a foreign “culture could effectively summon a complete world of dreams and possibilities” (Clifford 136–37). One “shred” of Japanese culture that enabled van Gogh to crystallize around the “geopolitical space” (Hayot ix) of Japan a “complete world of dreams and possibilities” was the idea of Japan as a sunlit southern land. The artist had read the novel of Edmond

and Jules de Goncourt entitled *Manette Salomon* (1867), which presented an image of Japan as a land of sunlight—an antidote to the gray Parisian winter. Van Gogh may well have read the 1 May 1886 issue of *Paris Illustré*, sub-titled *Le Japon*, which was edited by the connoisseur of Japanese art Tadamas Hayashi, since the artist later traced, and made the basis of one of his paintings (*Japonaiserie: Oiran* [after Kesai {sic} Eisen]), an image of a geisha that was on the cover of that issue, a copy of which he owned. In *Le Japon*, Hayashi described Japan glowingly, in terms similar to those in which the Goncourt brothers had described it: as a land of sunlight and warmth. Significantly, Hayashi also compared the climate of Japan to that of Southern Europe, particularly to that of Italy.<sup>7</sup> At this time, a discourse of “the South” [le Midi], an area that embraced “a vast geography of warm climates,” including Japan, suggested to Northern Europeans that Southern lands (including Italy) possessed “creative potential” for them (Druick and Zegers 97). Under the influence of this discourse, by the winter of 1887–88 van Gogh had formulated an imaginary idea of Japan as a southern land of sunlight, and considered the south of France, where several fellow artists were already working, as “the equivalent of Japan” (Letter #500; *Letters* II, 589). His arrival in Arles, in the south of France, in late February of 1888 landed him squarely in a place that resonated with his “dream-space” “Japan.”

The “discours du Midi,” which constructed lands with warm climates as spaces with creative potential for Northern European artists, dovetailed with the discourse of primitivism, in that the southern lands idealized by European artists were viewed also as, like Japan, areas relatively untouched by the evils of modernization, areas where people lived closer to nature. Another important “shred” of Japan that summoned up a “complex world of dreams and possibilities” for van Gogh, and the one that most seemed to conjure a land characterized by a primitive way of life was the Japanese woodblock prints themselves. In this regard, it is significant that the prints in the van Gogh brothers’ collection were from the early to mid-nineteenth century, a period pre-dating the period in which European artists collected them. These were prints depicting a world pre-dating the last four decades of the nineteenth century, an era in which the burdens of modernity were especially felt in Europe; they also depicted a world pre-dating the era of modernization in Japan, which hit its full stride only in the 1880s. Unlike the Yokohama prints of the late nineteenth century, which featured Western-style buildings, streetcars, gas street lights, and people in Western dress, demonstrating the penetration of modern Western civilization and technology, these prints focused on a pre-modern world. Furthermore, the prints largely depicted either subjects linked to the world of entertainment, or landscapes—the image of Japan that they presented was that of a land where people, and especially artists, lived and worked close to nature. This was a world where farmers and artisans worked at traditional tasks and where middle- and upper-class people engaged in leisurely outings to view flowering trees. Thus, for

van Gogh, viewing and reading the prints in the mid-1880s as representing Japan, Japanese prints must have seemed to depict a country where time had stopped and where modernity had not occurred, a place that seemed to him to provide a refuge from the highly organized, industrialized, and modernizing metropolises of European colonial empires. Without visiting the country himself, without reading about the history of contemporary Japan, and relying on books such as Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), which presented an exoticized view of Japan, van Gogh depended on idealized artistic images that presented Japan as a pre-modern land as he constructed his own image of Japan.

Through the discourse of primitivism, and based on his collecting and viewing of Japanese woodblock prints, van Gogh not only constructed an image of an ideal primitive Japan—he also fashioned an ideal primitive self in relation to Japan. Following Marianna Torgovnick's argument, in reference to modern people, that "we imagine ourselves through the primitive" (18), I would suggest that the artist imagined himself through the primitive as mediated by his Japanese prints; the Japanese woodblock prints that he collected had a personal resonance for him in that they portrayed a primitive world on which he could project his longings for a primitive existence. From the winter of 1885–86 in Antwerp, when he purchased Japanese prints and "pinned a lot of little Japanese prints on the walls" of his room (Letter #437; *Letters* II, 453), the artist divorced the prints from their original function and made them relative to himself (Baudrillard 7), collecting objects that were an image of his ideal primitive self. He became a "conscious collector of identity, projecting . . . [his] taste onto the objects . . . [he] . . . [chose] to live with" (Elsner and Cardinal 3). The Japanese prints in his and his brother's collection, especially the ones that he hung on the walls of his dwellings and looked at on a daily basis, became sites where he could communicate with Japan as he imagined it. Following Susan M. Pearce's formulation, the Japanese woodblock prints that he collected and viewed "represent[ed] and remind[ed] . . . [him] of the variety of experiences which . . . [he] . . . [had] or might have, and the motives and goals which seemed to be open to . . . [him]" (Pearce 166).<sup>8</sup> Through looking at the "material symbol" of Japan in the Japanese prints, van Gogh was reminded of a different way of feeling, experiencing, and living that he associated with "Japan"—a "primitive" world where people still lived simply, close to nature. As such, the prints were a reminder of a goal he hoped to achieve by moving to the south of France, which he imagined as the equivalent of Japan. As he wrote to Theo in late summer 1888, after he had already moved to Arles, "here my life will become more and more like a Japanese painter's, living close to nature like a petty tradesman" (Letter #540; *Letters* III, 47).

Van Gogh expressed his mature view of Japan as a primitive space and "Japanese man" as the ideal primitive man, in Letter #542, which was written probably in August 1888 in Arles:

If we study Japanese art, we see a man who is undoubtedly wise, philosophic and intelligent, who spends his time doing what? In studying the distance between the earth and the moon? No. In studying Bismarck's policy? No. He studies a single blade of grass.

But this blade of grass leads him to draw every plant and then the seasons, the wide aspects of the countryside, then animals, then the human figure [. . .]. Come now, isn't it almost a true religion which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers?

And you cannot study Japanese art, it seems to me, without becoming much gayer and happier, and we must also return to nature, in spite of our education and our work in a world of convention. (*Letters* III, 55)

Following primitivist discourse, and reflecting what Ernst van Alphen calls exoticism, or the culture of the observer's assigning superior value to another culture (2), van Gogh idealized "Japan" as superior to European cultures in that it had not (yet) transformed into an industrialized society and, thus, did not (yet) possess the so-called "civilized" but, in truth, decadent features of such a society. In van Gogh's "primitive" Japan, the "Japanese man" is constructed as a person living before, or immune to the scientific revolution: he is not a scientist of the nineteenth-century European variety engaged in "studying the distance between the earth and the moon." In addition, van Gogh idealizes Japanese man as a person uninterested in contemporary politics: he is not a late-nineteenth-century European political man "studying Bismarck's policy." Rather, the Japanese man concentrates on studying "a single blade of grass," finding in that blade the knowledge to understand it and his place in nature, and through that knowledge constructing his art (*Letters* III, 55). In this letter van Gogh idealizes the daily life of the Japanese in primitivist terms, viewing them as living "amidst nature as though they themselves were flowers."

The discourse of primitivism allowed van Gogh to place Japan in a primitive space from which he was able to regenerate a self burdened by the so-called civilization of Europe and to create an art that expressed a "primitive" awareness of life. Furthermore, it enabled van Gogh the artist to redirect his artistic impulses to create new art which, although it was inspired by Japonisme, was firmly grounded in his desire for "Japan." Thus, "Japan" as viewed through the lens of primitivism, and mediated by the woodblock prints in his collection, was the ideal that brought into existence a new self and a new art.<sup>9</sup> What transcends the discourse of primitivism in the above letter, however, a letter written after he had already painted the series of flowering trees that is the subject of the next section, is van Gogh's intimation of the Japanese closeness to nature as a "true religion." In the final lines of the quotation, van Gogh urges his fellow Europeans to return to nature to find a "true religion," like the Japanese as he imagines them. These lines suggest that, for

the artist, Japan represented a land whose religious sense was firmly grounded in nature and whose people had a stable moral and spiritual relationship with nature. Such a land, he sensed, would provide a refuge from the over-civilized Europe of the nineteenth century, which was rapidly losing its religious moorings and its connection to nature in the wake of industrialization and urbanization. As he painted the series of flowering trees in Arles in spring 1888, van Gogh looked to “Japan” as a place possessing a religion of nature—an imagined space that would inspire him to create an art oriented around nature that had some of the characteristics of a “true religion.”

VAN GOGH'S COLLECTING OF "JAPAN" IN THE  
ARLES PAINTINGS OF FLOWERING TREES

From the late 1880s, from the time when he and Theo systematically collected Japanese prints, van Gogh had painted various images of “Japan” as an ideal that he dreamed of realizing. In the fall of 1887 the artist traced three Japanese prints, two of which were in the van Gogh brothers’ collection, as an attempt both to learn Japanese aesthetic techniques and to convey his colorful image of Japan as a primitive space.<sup>10</sup> During the winter of 1887–88, he made one drawing and two paintings of his Parisian paint dealer, Julien Tanguy, as a Japanese artist and a “primitive socialist” (Kōdera, “Van Gogh’s Japonisme” 39) living close to nature. In July 1888 he painted a young French girl as a *musume*, or young Japanese girl (*Portrait of a Mousmé*), and he painted himself as a Japanese monk (*Self-Portrait as a Bonze*) in September 1888. Furthermore, he painted Japanese prints, which he and Theo had collected and which he found in magazines of the time, into the backgrounds of portraits of various people he knew: he incorporated those prints depicting his ideal primitive world into his three portraits of Père Tanguy, and into the painting *Woman Sitting in the Café du Tambourin* (spring 1887), which depicts the owner of the Café du Tambourin, Agostina Segatori. Contemporary works on Japan such as Louis Gonse’s *L’Art Japonais* (1883), with which van Gogh was familiar, portrayed Japanese art as having a “passion for nature” and being focused on “the natural and truth” (ii). Such views fitted nicely into primitivist discourse, which imagined the non-Western world and its art as being close to nature. Influenced by the contemporary view of Japanese art as focused on nature, the artist demonstrated his growing interest in Japanese nature through his insertion of natural phenomena inspired by Japanese prints, such as Mt. Fuji, frogs, and lotuses, into the paintings of Père Tanguy and into the painting *Woman Sitting in the Café du Tambourin*.<sup>11</sup> In numerous paintings, the artist also painted natural phenomena other than those with specifically Japanese associations, but even in those paintings, he used Japanese aesthetics derived from *ukiyo-e* and album prints.



Thus, “Japan” in the form of various images, as well as artistic techniques, made its way into his paintings from the time when he and Theo collected Japanese prints. From his insertion of “Japanese” natural phenomena into his paintings, it is clear that van Gogh was intensely interested in nature as constructed in Japanese art. But it is in his series of paintings of flowering trees produced in Arles in spring 1888 that he communicated more strongly than in any other works of art his image of Japan as nature. Indeed, I suggest that the “Japanese” flowering tree, for a time, became for the artist the image of Japan *par excellence*. Van Gogh’s paintings of flowering trees were sites where the artist negotiated an idea of nature as mediated by Japan, and an idea of Japan as communicating the vitality of nature—both of these through a concrete image of a natural phenomenon representing “nature.” If one of the major characteristics of collecting is that it is done in series, through his series of paintings of flowering trees, the artist was accumulating a collection of powerful images of “Japan”—a “Japan” that he had imagined or dreamed based on his collecting of Japanese woodblock prints as well as on his reading about Japan as a land where people lived close to nature. In a context where the artist was seeking a “true religion” in Japanese nature, the flowering tree became a powerful, personally meaningful religious symbol of the vitality of nature for van Gogh, as it was for the Japanese.

From late February to April of 1888, during the first few months of his stay in Arles, van Gogh painted fourteen canvases depicting various flowering trees. According to Ronald Pickvance’s chronology, the artist painted “two small studies of an almond branch” in late February, soon after he arrived in Arles. Almond trees were the first to flower in that area, but that year, due to the unusually heavy and frequent snowfalls, the almond trees were late to bloom. Therefore the artist clipped a small almond branch and placed it in a glass on a table in his room to force it to flower. Due to the snow, van Gogh was at first unable to go outside to paint directly from nature, as was his custom; however, beginning in March of 1888, when the weather became warmer, he went frequently to a specific orchard to paint apricot, peach, plum, cherry, pear, and apple trees in blossom (Pickvance 45). The artist wrote in a letter to his brother Theo dated March 24 that he had completed “his first canvas of a blossoming orchard of apricot trees” (qtd. in Pickvance 41). At the end of March, van Gogh began “four or five more paintings [of blossoming orchards]” and had also “completed a study of two peach trees” (qtd. in Pickvance 42). By April 9 the artist was “still working furiously on orchards in bloom—one canvas of apricot trees, another of plum.” By this time van Gogh had already completed eight canvases and “planned ten more.” In mid-April he spent “one morning working on an orchard of plum trees during a fierce mistral” (qtd. in Pickvance 42).

By April 20, the blossoming of the fruit trees was virtually finished (Pickvance 42) and, with the end of nature’s spring cycle, the artist’s series of paintings of

flowering trees also came to an end. In painting most of the studies of flowering trees, van Gogh worked outside, following Impressionist practice; he also worked “in one recognizable orchard” (Pickvance 45), which provided a variety of trees blooming at different times. All but one of the paintings of this period focus on one or several flowering trees of a particular kind, with only one “allowing a glimpse beyond the orchard, showing an adjacent field with willows and a ploughman, as well as a factory chimney” (Pickvance 45)—i.e., situating the trees in a world beyond that of the orchard. Most of the paintings of the series can be called landscapes, or depictions of a specific, real place in which the flowering trees are part of a composition that includes buildings, fences, and other vegetation in the particular orchard that the artist was using. But van Gogh’s paintings of flowering trees include two other types of organization: one in which two intertwined flowering trees are the focus of the painting, with little or no “background” interference; and one in which a small flowering tree is the focus of the painting. Although Pickvance called all fourteen of the Arles flowering tree paintings “immense still lifes of blossom [sic] *en plein air*” (45), these four paintings suggest the intense concentration of focus of the European still life; two of these paintings depict one small individual flowering tree, one painting of a plum and the other of an almond. The other two, which are larger canvases, create a composition in which two flowering trees, one behind the other, give the impression of one vast and vibrant flowering tree. I shall discuss one painting of each kind—namely, the paintings where the image of the flowering tree resonates as image, the background material constituting the mere trace of the original location of the act of painting. I argue that these trees are sites where van Gogh negotiated his personal symbol of “Japan” as nature.

A small pear tree with a few large blossoms dominates the composition in van Gogh’s painting *Pear Tree in Blossom* (Figure 1). Although the artist had painted or drawn trees with unusual shapes even before he began collecting Japanese prints and Japanese images (see, for example, *Autumn Landscape with Four Trees*, November 1885), his decision here to paint the pear tree’s trunk in a diagonal line from lower left to upper right and to crop the tree’s branches in the upper right section of the work shows the influence of Japanese aesthetic composition. In the larger painting of the two versions of flowering trees, *Pink Peach Trees (Souvenir de Mauve)*, two peach trees in flower virtually fill the top two-thirds of the painting; the positioning of one tree behind the other strengthens the density of the blossoms, making the two trees seem like one very luxuriant flowering tree (Figure 2). Anyone looking at these paintings who has a knowledge of Japanese or Chinese monochrome paintings of flowering trees will think that there is some relation between van Gogh’s paintings of flowering trees, especially these two, and the Sino-Japanese tradition of painting nature. In 1978, one scholar, Fred Orton, recognizing the “Japanese” motif in the Arles paintings of flowering trees, argued that in van

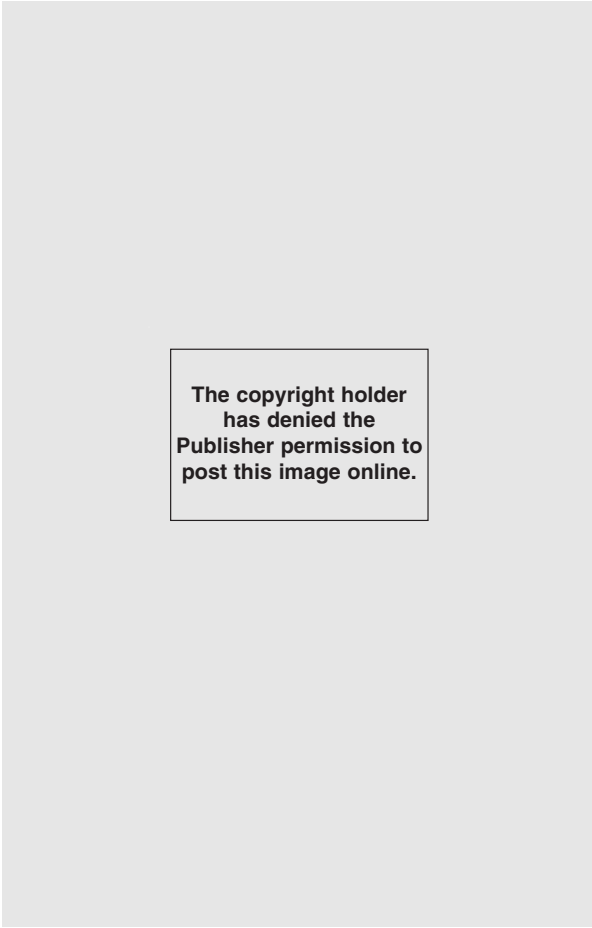


FIGURE 1. *Vincent van Gogh* "Pear Tree in Blossom" Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Gogh's orchard series, "only the motif is Japanese, and then purely by affinity" (19); his comments suggest a merely accidental correspondence between the Japanese motif of flowering trees and van Gogh's motif.

From the late 1970s, several studies of Japonisme in European and American art had appeared in Europe and America, and scholars had become more aware of the influence of Japanese art on the Impressionists and other late-nineteenth-century artists. Thus, in 1984 Ronald Pickvance was able to state, with more authority than would have been possible before the late 1970s, in reference to the series of paintings of flowering trees that "the motif of blooming orchards is related to Japanese prints" (46). I would go even further than that, to suggest that van Gogh derived the idea of painting the series of paintings of flowering trees in Arles from Japanese prints and, specifically, from the prints and other materials in his and Theo's collection that de-

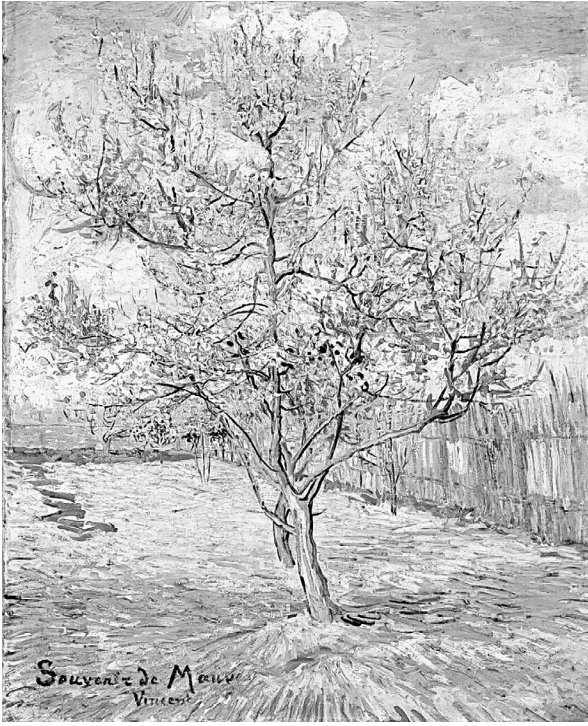


FIGURE 2. Vincent van Gogh “Pink Peach Trees (Souvenir de Mauve)” Collection Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands

picted flowering trees. The artist might also have seen paintings of flowering trees in a number of other contemporary works, including Louis Gonse’s two-volume *L’Art Japonais*, which provided a history of Japanese art accompanied by copious illustrations. His own prints were available to him on a daily basis, however, and it is more likely that the artist became attracted to the image of the flowering tree from viewing the prints that he and Theo had collected. Considering the 352 prints shown or described in *Japanese Prints Collected by Vincent van Gogh*, forty of those contain images of flowering cherry trees, fifteen contain images of flowering plum trees, and an additional thirteen contain images of “flowers,” or *hana*, in Japanese, which could be either cherry or plum blossoms but which, in accordance with Japanese poetic tradition, probably mean cherry blossoms. That makes a total of sixty-eight prints in the van Gogh brothers’ collection that contain images of flowering cherry or plum trees.<sup>12</sup> It is impossible, of course, to prove where van Gogh derived the idea of painting flowering trees—he might simply have been moved to paint flowering trees since they were the first natural phenomena that he noticed after his arrival in Arles. What is certain, however, is that van Gogh would have derived the idea that the flowering tree was an important image of vital nature in Japanese art and culture simply by perusing his and his brothers’ collection of Japanese prints;

FIGURE 3. *Utagawa Kunisada* “*View of the Spring Rain*” (left one of triptych) Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

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this idea might have influenced him as he turned his hand to painting the flowering trees in Arles.

The brothers' Japanese prints depict flowering cherry or plum trees in various forms. In the left print of the three prints of a triptych by Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1864) entitled *View of the Spring Rain* (1820s) [*Harusame no kei*], one large female figure, a geisha, is the central focus of the print, while blossoming plum trees project upward from beneath the veranda into the second-story room in which the female figure is sitting (Figure 3). Together, the flowering trees and the geisha suggest a strong link between human beings and nature, and the flowering tree provides a powerful sense of the vitality of nature in its spring embodiment. The print on the left of another triptych in the brothers' collection entitled *Three Women* by Utagawa Yoshitora (1845–1880) focuses on three female figures who are most likely geisha; small flowering trees whose blossoms are depicted as whitish fluffy balls, almost like cotton candy, occupy the far distance (Figure 4). That van Gogh responded

FIGURE 4. Utagawa Yoshitora “Three Women” (left one of triptych) Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

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artistically to this particular triptych is clear from his having painted the blossoms of the flowering plum trees in the style of Yoshitora in his painting modeled on a print by Utagawa Hiroshige, *Japonaiserie: Flowering Plum Tree*. Another print, from Utagawa Hiroshige’s series *Famous Views of the Fifty-Three Stations Along the Tōkaidō* entitled *Ishiyakushi: The Yoshitsune Cherry Tree Near the Noriyori Shrine* [Isyihakushi Yoshitsune sakura Noriyori no hokora], 1855, contains a large flowering cherry tree whose branches spread from the left side of the print to the right and take up most of the space in the top half of the print (Figure 5). Again, that van Gogh felt an aesthetic resonance to this print is evidenced by the fact that he painted this Hiroshige print in the right background of the portrait of Père Tanguy that is owned by the Musée Rodin.

In his fall 1887 painting *Japonaiserie: Flowering Plum Tree*, van Gogh actually copied an image of a flowering tree that he found in his and Theo’s collection of Japanese prints; he traced the image in an attempt to learn to paint lines in the

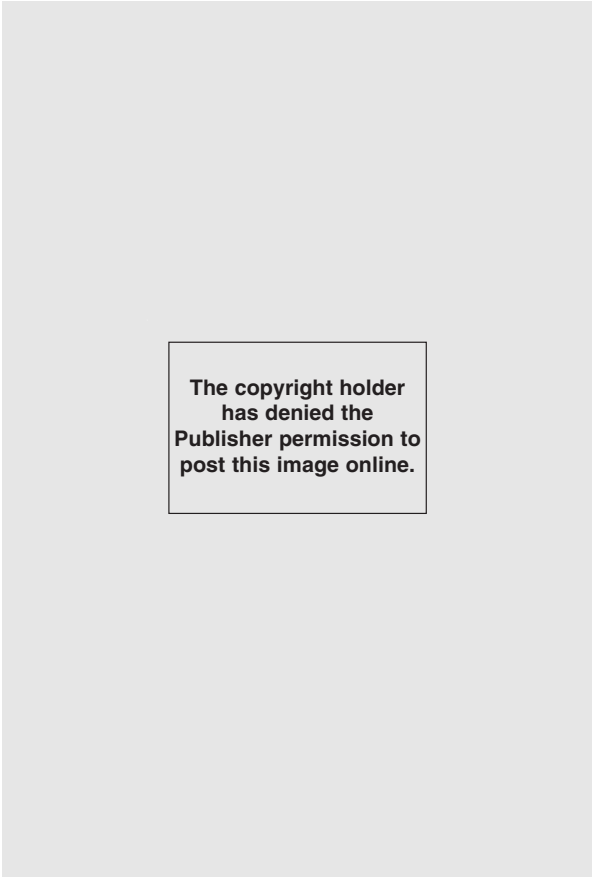


FIGURE 5. *Utagawa Hiroshige* “*Ishiyakushi: The Yoshitsune Cherry Tree Near the Noriyori Shrine*” Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Japanese fashion as well as to learn Japanese methods of composition. This was the image of flowering plum trees found in Utagawa Hiroshige’s *The Plum Tree Teahouse at Kameido* [Kameido umeyashiki], a print from the series *A Hundred Views of Famous Places in Edo* [Tokyo] (1857) (Figure 6). It is likely that the position of the prominent flowering plum tree in the foreground of the Hiroshige print is what primarily interested van Gogh as an artist, as he was experimenting with “contrast perspective,” a technique that he and other European artists of his time borrowed from Japanese prints. This technique placed “part of an enlarged object in the foreground in order to contrast it with the background” (Kōdera, “Van Gogh’s Japonisme 40). However, I would also suggest that the artist was fascinated by the tree itself as a vital natural image. Hiroshige presents to the viewer, whom the artist positions as sitting in a teahouse looking out at the tree, a large, gnarled plum tree that is putting forth pinkish-white blossoms in spite of its age.

The album print is the last Japanese art form through which van Gogh became

FIGURE 6. *Utagawa Hiroshige “The Plum Tree Teahouse at Kameido” Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)*

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familiar with the image of flowering trees. The album, which contained a series of prints, was the most common medium by which mid-to-late-nineteenth-century European artists became aware of Japanese depictions of nature. Significantly, the artist and his brother possessed a series of album prints by Utagawa Hiroshige II (1826–1869), each of which presented a composition containing a different bird and flower. One print, of cherry blossoms and a shrike, from the series entitled *Glimpses of Newly Selected Flowers and Birds* (1850s), depicts a shrike sitting on the branch of a blossoming cherry tree (Figure 7). The image of the flowering tree by Utagawa Hiroshige II occurs here in a composition consisting of two different natural phenomena, in contrast to the prints by Kunisada and Yoshitora, which depict natural images as backgrounds to human figures, and also in contrast to the Hiroshige print *The Plum Tree Teahouse at Kameido*, in which a large flowering plum tree is the central focus of a print that nevertheless has human figures in the background.



FIGURE 7. *Utagawa Hiroshige II "Glimpses of Newly Selected Flowers and Birds"*  
Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

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Significantly, in his series of paintings of flowering fruit trees, van Gogh used the image of the flowering tree differently than had the makers of the Japanese prints. While the album print portrayed a bird together with a branch of a flowering cherry, in the canonical Sino-Japanese genre of *kachō-ga*, or flower-and-bird paintings, van Gogh painted only one or two flowering trees. Similarly, while all of the other Japanese prints in his collection that depicted flowering trees either inserted them into a large-scale landscape that depicted the tree in relation to a village or a building, as in the Hiroshige print entitled *Ishiyakushi: The Yoshitsune Cherry Tree Near the Noriyori Shrine*, or in a composition that included a human figure or figures, van Gogh avoided any human figures and omitted any other images, or relegated them to the background, making the flowering trees the central focus of his paintings. Of all the Japanese prints containing flowering trees in his and Theo's collection, only the one by Hiroshige entitled *The Plum Tree Teahouse at Kameido* focuses so intently on a flowering tree, making it central to the composition. That van Gogh traced this particular print in his fall 1887 painting *Japonaiserie: Flowering Plum Tree* suggests that the artist was attracted to the print not only as an artist,

but also as a person who was moved by the flowering plum tree as a vital natural image.

Van Gogh's admiration for the vital images of nature in Japanese art developed in the broader context of contemporary Impressionist interest in the depiction of nature in Japanese art. Some of his contemporaries had learned about the depiction of nature from the *Manga*, or "collections of thematic models" (Wildenstein 259) by the woodblock print artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Parts of the *Manga* were available in the Bibliothèque Nationale as early as 1817, and it was there, in the Cabinet des Estampes, that Manet studied Hokusai's works in 1858 (Floyd 118). At some point Van Gogh came across Louis Gonse's *L'Art Japonais*; that book provided the first critical assessment of Japanese woodblock artists and singled out for special praise Hokusai, who was "still, in the early 1880s, the Japanese artist most highly esteemed by French critics" (Cate 53). Gonse also praised the at that time lesser known artist Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), characterizing him as "the greatest painter of landscapes" (qtd. in Cate 53). Significantly, both Hokusai and Hiroshige were artists of landscape, and van Gogh found a special resonance in the landscape prints of Hiroshige, of which he and his brother owned several. It is not known whether van Gogh had seen Hokusai's *manga* of individual flowers and birds, but the album of *kachō-ga* in his and Theo's collection by Utagawa Hiroshige II dating from the 1850s would have given him a sense of the beauty and vitality of small natural phenomena as depicted in Japanese art. That he appreciated Japanese artists' sense of nature is clear from his praise of Japanese people as "simple Japanese who live amidst nature as though they were flowers" and also from his remark, in the same letter, that "we must also [like the Japanese] return to nature" (Letter #542, *Letters* III, 55). The fact that this view is clearly filtered through the primitivist discourse of the time does not invalidate the artist's sincere emotional and aesthetic response to the Japanese nature that he saw depicted in Japanese woodblock and album prints.

Viewing images of Japanese nature in Japanese prints and in Japanese art in general, including the image of the flowering tree, van Gogh became exposed to a foreign aesthetic and cultural tradition that had a particular attitude toward nature, one that he saw as different from contemporary Western attitudes toward nature with which he was familiar. In considering the artist's relationship to Japanese art, it should be remembered that "Japanese art" has no fixed content; rather, it "gains content in relation to the values of the observer" (van Alphen 2 [summarizing Tzvetan Todorov]). Thus, van Gogh and his contemporaries, in conceptualizing Japanese art, lent it the value of a tradition that emphasized nature because they themselves desired to attain an art that was closer to nature. Keeping this in mind, it is nevertheless accurate to describe Japanese art as an aesthetic tradition that, though it valued other things also, especially valued nature, and in particular ways.

In Japan, a long tradition of reverence for nature was grounded in the indigenous animistic religion that was later called Shinto. In the Kamakura (1185–1333) and Muromachi (1336–1573) periods, Shinto became amalgamated with Buddhism and China-derived Daoism; as a result, nature was given a high religious value (see La-Fleur). China-derived Neo-Confucianism, which combined the reverence for nature of Daoism and Shinto with the metaphysical concerns of Buddhism, provided a basis for the construction of a view of nature as both possessing a vital religious force and involving a strong moral relationship between natural phenomena and human beings.<sup>13</sup> This view meant that Japanese ideologies of nature stipulated a religious connection between human beings and nature—a connection that was expressed in Japanese monochrome paintings of the Muromachi period.

During the period from the late eighteenth century on, the period that brought forth the popular urban form of the woodblock print, the religious sense of the unity of human beings and nature that had informed monochrome landscape painting yielded somewhat to conventionalized depictions of a human figure with a flowering tree in the background, as in the prints of Yoshitora and Kunisada mentioned above, or to conventionalized depictions of a grand landscape containing a few small human figures. Yet album prints of the mid-nineteenth century that depicted natural phenomena alone, some of which Vincent and Theo had collected, seemed to still express the Sino-Japanese religious vision of the totality of nature. In addition, the later landscape prints of Hiroshige, including the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (1858), of which van Gogh owned the print entitled *The Plum Tree Teahouse at Kameido*, discussed above, can be said to have maintained a sense of the earlier spiritual unity of human beings and nature. That human figures often appear, especially in this last series, only as tiny figures in the background and that natural phenomena are the main focus has perhaps led Henry D. Smith II to argue that, in this series of landscape prints “man seems as often as not to stand apart from the landscape” (Introduction 10). But Hiroshige can to some extent be viewed as an artist who, building on the religious sense of the totality of nature bequeathed by the earlier Sino-Japanese tradition, modernized it by presenting a landscape in more subjective terms, as viewed by a viewer—“an image of the natural world diffracted through the prism of human emotional perception” (Uspensky 17). Thus, in *The Plum Tree Teahouse at Kameido*, the invisible viewer sitting in the teahouse looking out at the magnificent old plum tree in blossom, in his viewing and appreciation provides a new, more subjective site where human beings and nature are linked.

Van Gogh probably sensed and admired the important connection between human beings and nature in the Japanese prints that he came across. Like Hiroshige, whose prints he especially admired, two of which he even traced to make original landscape paintings, the Dutch artist also made natural phenomena a

major focus of his paintings. Although he did not emulate the Japanese style in creating paintings that depicted a strong connection between man and nature, he clearly emulated the Japanese in striving to express the vitality of individual natural phenomena in his art. In doing so van Gogh could draw to a certain extent on his own Dutch tradition of depicting nature, as we will see later. Yet the Japanese aesthetic tradition, with its vital and quintessentially Japanese images such as frogs, lotuses, and the knotty branches of flowering trees, provided important inspiration for him in the mid-1880s. According to Akiko Mabuchi, European painters learning from the Japanese, including van Gogh, were impressed by the “depth of feeling in regard to nature that is reflected in birds and flowers painted by the Japanese.” She goes on to argue that “in the West, ‘still life’ suggests objects detached from nature—things brought inside that will die” and furthermore, that Japanese art “doesn’t avoid leaves that are going to wither or fall but these don’t suggest death—rather, the changing of the seasons” (40 [my translations]). From the beginning of his career, van Gogh had painted natural phenomena such as trees and flowers captured outside in the midst of their natural seasonal cycles. His paintings done before the influence of Japanese prints already gave evidence that he was interested in painting and drawing natural phenomena in the context of the totality of nature; already in these works he communicated what Walther and Metzger call the “vital force within things” (340)—not “things brought inside that will die,” as in Western still lifes. Under the influence of Impressionism, van Gogh had tried to give a strictly objective representation of natural phenomena, but Japanese prints encouraged him to paint natural phenomena with an attention to their vital energy. In the Arles paintings of flowering trees, the artist communicated this quality through a concentration on light, the bright light of Provence. In this way, the flowering trees in the paintings, including the two paintings under analysis, “appear to be lit from within, so to speak, and seem in a sense active, rather than passively immersed in sunlight” (Walther and Metzger 337). Thus, the artist translated a Japanese sense of the vitality of nature, or “Japan” as nature, into his Arles paintings of flowering trees.

Van Gogh would have had no way of knowing that natural phenomena were religious symbols in Sino-Japanese art. As Mabuchi puts it: “However humble the treatment of flowers or animals, these are not considered outside of what nature represents as a whole; they recall this totality and symbolize it” (40 [my translation]). China and Japan have long traditions of colored and monochrome paintings of nature that recall and symbolize the totality of nature. In Japan, during the Muromachi period, monochrome landscape painting was permeated by the fundamental Buddhist tenet that “the Buddha Nature is inherent in all things of the empirical world, down to the most lowly ones, the stones and the animals” (Brinker and Kanazawa 56). It was the goal of this tradition of painting to express the abso-

lute, the religious, in a general sense, through the depiction of nature—whether an individual phenomenon or a large view. In painting the work, the artist expressed his experience of the absolute through the use of set natural phenomena that, because they were not individualized or localized, were held as better suited to express the absolute through their very abstractness. Within this tradition of landscape painting, natural phenomena, no matter what they were, were understood to reveal complete religious truth. In the course of the development of monochrome landscape painting, certain natural phenomena were used over and over again and eventually became symbols that depicted or pointed to the absolute. Such set symbols were, among others, the plum tree and the cherry tree.

In the Sino-Japanese tradition of landscape painting, the development of the seasons was viewed in religious terms as the functioning of the absolute (nature) in time. Among the various flowering trees and bushes that marked the successive stages of spring, the plum tree and the cherry tree, the two most beloved flowering trees, possessed the force of symbols with religious and culturally determined meanings. The plum tree was the first flowering tree to blossom in spring in the Sino-Japanese cultural sphere. A tree located in the liminal space between winter and spring, the plum tree was viewed as a natural phenomenon that represented “the unbroken life force of nature,” as it remained “strong or even green in the midst of winter” and might even “burst into bloom under the weight of fresh snow” (Yamamoto 296). The Neo-Confucian tradition in China and Japan, which used natural images to allegorize human behavior and moral attitudes, viewed the blossoming plum tree of early spring and in particular, the plum tree blooming in the snow, as a symbol of human endurance or fortitude in the midst of adversity. An example of a painting of a flowering plum tree that communicates both the “unbroken life force of nature” and human endurance in the face of adversity is the left half of the paired screen composition entitled “Friends of the Cold Season” by the Japanese artist Yamamoto Baiitsu (1783–1856): *Flowering Plum* (Figure 8). By contrast, the cherry tree, which flowered at the height of spring, served as a natural phenomenon sought out by human beings when celebrating the renewal of the vitality of nature. However, because it only flowered briefly and then lost its blossoms, it also carried for humans the darker Buddhist meaning of the transience of things.

Van Gogh was most likely unaware of what a potent traditional symbol the flowering tree, especially the plum tree and the cherry tree, was for the Japanese when he viewed the prints depicting these flowering trees in his and Theo’s collection. Admittedly, as a European artist with little knowledge of the intricacies of the Japanese aesthetic and religious traditions, van Gogh painted plum and cherry trees in flower along with other flowering trees, because they were there in an orchard near his place of residence and because they provided an interesting



FIGURE 8. Yamamoto Baiitsu “Flowering Plum” Six-fold screen (left half of paired screen composition “Friends of the Cold Season”). Clark Family Collection, on Long Term Loan to the Clark Center for Japanese Art, Hanford, California

aesthetic subject that had to be grasped and painted before it disappeared in the natural flow of the seasons. He did not seek out either plum or cherry trees with a deliberate intent to paint them as personal symbols—only one of his paintings is of a flowering plum tree. When he viewed and painted the flowering trees, it was no doubt with an awareness of the traditional Western meaning of flowering trees as allegorical comment and reflection on the “spring,” or blossoming phase, of a human being’s life. But I suggest that, while knowing little or nothing of the flowering tree’s symbolic meaning in Japanese tradition, the artist nevertheless sensed in the image of the flowering trees in Arles (which he may have viewed as “Japanese” trees, linking them to the prints of flowering trees in his and Theo’s collection) a natural phenomenon full of potential symbolic meaning. Based on the evidence, it is not possible to argue that van Gogh preferred the flowering tree as a personal symbol to other natural phenomena that he also painted numerous times—for example, sunflowers, wheat fields, and olive trees. Rather, I suggest that the symbol seemed important to him during a particular and limited period of his life.

In the flowering tree, an image mediated by Japan, van Gogh found an important personal symbol. His discovery and use of that symbol was linked to his general openness to symbols as an artist, as well as to his interest in the contemporary movement of Symbolism. Charles Chetham argues that van Gogh was an artist who from the beginning of his career was “continually seeing symbols in everyday things and situations” (97). He ties van Gogh as a painter of symbols to a long tradition of British and European illustrated art that reached its peak in the 1870s. According to Chetham, illustrated art operated using a “language of gesture that had developed since the romantic period and which was comprehensible to all” (97). For van Gogh, who was the son of a Protestant minister, symbols had a predominantly

Christian matrix, although he was open for a time to the late-nineteenth-century Christian Socialist context of what Douglas W. Druick and Peter Kort Zegers call the sympathy for the “poor and downtrodden” (33). In his Paris years from 1886–88, van Gogh came under the influence of Symbolism, a movement uniting “writers, artists, and scholars” in which he learned how to articulate his personal vision of the world (Dorn 39). According to Robert Goldwater, Symbolism developed in an atmosphere in which standard symbols had gradually lost touch with the common tradition by which their power had been sustained; because artists could no longer use traditional symbols to capture feeling and move the viewer (5–6), they attempted to fill the void created by the decline in traditional symbols by generating their own symbols. Under the influence of Symbolist ideas, that new art presented the subjective ideals and feelings of the artist externally through objects selected by the artist; in turn, those objects functioned as personal symbols in the art. Thus, through the depiction of a particular phenomenon, an artist could depict both the object—although not in the Impressionist mode of objectivity—and his subjective emotions and ideals; and through a painting, an artist could communicate a meaning that would have some resonance with the public, although not a traditional resonance, as well as a subjective meaning.

Living in Paris precisely at the height of the Symbolist movement, van Gogh was aware of the current issues in the world of ideas and art. As an artist experiencing the decline of the familiar Christian symbols that were so much a part of his background, van Gogh must have felt the need to generate new symbols in and through his art at this point in his life. Two particular aspects of the Symbolist movement must have had strong resonance for him. One of those was the contemporary desire on the part of painters “to make emotion meaningful, by connecting it with humanity at large and by seeing nature as its reflection” (Goldwater 6). In that regard, while living in Montmartre during the summer of 1886, the artist painted familiar natural phenomena in the order of their seasonal occurrence, imbuing them with his personal emotions and also attempting to communicate with humanity through what were new symbols for him. In the summer of 1886, van Gogh chose as subjects for his paintings familiar natural flowers such as carnations, gladioli, coleas, roses, chrysanthemums, daisies, zinnias, geraniums, viscaria, asters, salvia, lilac, cineraria, poppies, peonies, and hollyhocks (Walther and Metzger 158–85). Including vegetables, in the spring of 1887 he painted sprouting bulbs, garlic, lemons, chives, and crocuses (Walther and Metzger 216–30); in autumn 1887 he painted fruits and vegetables: grapes, pears, lemons, red cabbages, onions (Walther and Metzger 279–83); and in autumn and winter 1887 he painted apples, pears, grapes, and lemons (Walther and Metzger 286–89). However, the sunflower is perhaps the best known of van Gogh’s personal symbols taken from nature, appearing in eleven paintings done between August–September 1887 and January 1889.

The sunflower was a natural phenomenon familiar to everyone in the Western world. The artist would have found sunflowers in The Netherlands, in the fields of Montmartre, and, later, in Arles. Furthermore, the sunflower had a traditional symbolic meaning of which he was aware. From the time the flower was “introduced into Europe from the New World early in the sixteenth century,” it was viewed in the light of Christianity; Druick and Zegers note how “its [the sunflower’s] responsiveness to the sun’s movement was seen in terms of lowly nature’s attraction to the divine” (75). But Druick and Zegers also argue that the artist endowed the sunflower with a new personal meaning, making of it a personal symbol, writing that “both Vincent and Theo viewed the sunflower as a metaphor for the artist’s necessary but potentially perilous dedication to nature” (85). Whether or not one agrees with this interpretation, by painting so many images of the sunflower, van Gogh was clearly using a familiar Western natural phenomenon to create a new symbol that had personal meaning for him. In a similar way, the flowering tree was a traditional Western symbol of the burgeoning of new life and of rebirth, and it was a natural phenomenon familiar to everyone. But, there was a difference in quality between the sunflower and the flowering tree: whereas the sunflower was only a Western symbol, the flowering tree was a symbol in both the Western and Japanese aesthetic traditions. When van Gogh chose to depict the flowering tree as his own personal symbol, it took on, besides its traditional meaning, a further residue of meaning that linked it to the images of flowering trees that he had collected in viewing Japanese prints. Though the artist was unaware of the traditional Japanese symbolism of “sakura-ume,” or “cherry and plum” in the Japanese flowering trees that he viewed in woodblock and album prints, there was nevertheless a Japanese overlay in the symbol of the flowering tree that he discovered and expressed in Arles. “Japan,” for van Gogh, after all, represented the possibility of a “religion of nature,” and of a “return to nature” and to a simpler, more natural life. This “Japanese” overlay brought a dimension of depth and complexity to the image of the flowering tree in van Gogh’s *oeuvre*, as well as to the paintings of flowering trees themselves, that would not have been possible for an artist unfamiliar with the Japanese tradition.

The second and related aspect of the Symbolist movement that must have had a powerful meaning for van Gogh was its connection with religion. In a context where Symbolists generated their own symbols in their art—symbols that, unlike allegory, go beyond the expression of personal emotion to “induce a reflective mood, to indicate a wider frame of reference” (Goldwater 5)—art itself became a new religion and the newly created symbols became symbols of a new, subjectively constructed religion. Van Gogh’s use of the flowering tree as a personal symbol at the beginning of his stay in Arles can thus be interpreted as one stage in his continued search for symbols with which to mediate and express what might be des-



ignated as religious feelings. Druick and Segers present the artist as a person who, “having found traditional religion inadequate to his needs and goals,” attempted to make art substitute for religion. Placing van Gogh’s decision to become a painter in the context of writings by Zola, Thomas Carlyle, and Ernest Renan, all of whom the artist had read and who had conceptualized artists as modern Christlike heroes, Druick and Segers argue that van Gogh gradually became convinced that by means of his paintings and drawings he would save not only himself, a modern person cut off from traditional symbolism, but also the viewers of his paintings, who were in the same position (9–37).

Van Gogh in his early years had been exposed to the emblematic engravings of the four seasons utilized by the preachers and writers of the “nineteenth-century reform movement within Dutch Calvinism” known as the Groningen School; these engravings had shown him that there was “symbolic significance in every natural fact” (Druick and Zegers 11). Later he had read a revisionist work on seventeenth-century Dutch painting by Théophile Thoré (Willem Bürger) entitled *Les Musées de la Hollande* (1858–60). According to Druick and Zegers, Thoré’s work presented Rembrandt as a Dutch painter of the past who had practiced a “realism that pointed toward the infinite” (31); it also praised Dutch landscape painting in general as “excluding the latent symbolism . . . of great poetry” (16). It is significant that at a point when van Gogh, under the influence of Thoré’s study, had revisioned the depiction of nature in his own Dutch tradition as a “realism that pointed toward the infinite,” he became familiar with nature as depicted in Japanese landscape prints, both through collecting them and copying them. Consequently, he was able to rediscover a similar religious mode of seeing and experiencing in his own artistic tradition through his discovery of vital Japanese nature and through his intuition of its religious aspect. As a Dutch painter, van Gogh was able to see the Japanese mode of apprehending nature and painting landscape as exercising “a realism that pointed toward the infinite,” like his own tradition, and, hence, to attempt to assimilate the Japanese mode of depicting nature into his own paintings.<sup>14</sup>

With this in mind, I would argue that van Gogh’s two paintings of flowering trees analyzed earlier reflect his attempts to use a natural phenomenon to communicate personal religious emotions. The pear tree in Figure 1 and the two peach trees in Figure 2 may be interpreted as symbols in the Symbolist vein that express the personal emotion of the artist, “induce a reflective mood” and “indicate a wider frame of reference” (Goldwater 5). The first painting depicts the small flowering pear tree in its quiddity, although encouraging an allegorical reading: a golden butterfly hovers above one of the branches of the pear tree, and the artist has inserted the stump of a cut-down pear tree next to the small pear tree.<sup>15</sup> In the second painting, the two flowering peach trees, one behind the other, stand together.

Although this “standing together” might be read allegorically as companionship, through their double mass of blossoms the two trees can more likely be interpreted as conveying a powerful symbol of nature’s vitality—nature conceived, in homage to the Japanese manner, as harboring important religious meanings. Yet the religious meanings were neither Christian nor Buddhist-Shinto-Daoist, but a hybrid mixture constructed on the basis of, and expressing van Gogh’s personal Symbolist religion.

Is it important, at this point, to try to decode the meaning that the flowering tree had for van Gogh? Critics have attempted to situate van Gogh’s paintings of flowering trees in hermeneutic narratives of one sort or another. Ronald Pickvance views the series of paintings in biographical terms, noting that “after the death of the Paris winter, they symbolized his own rebirth. They were also vindications of his vision of Japan in the South” (45). Ingo Walther and Rainer Metzger also view the paintings of flowering trees biographically, as part of a brief period before the artist’s breakdown in late December 1888, when he was able to realize his dream of “Japan” as a “better world,” a “utopia” consisting of the attainment of “the unity of Art and Life” (321). And Tsukasa Kōdera signals the paintings of flowering trees as among the works done in Arles that enthusiastically celebrate van Gogh’s image of “Japan”: a warm, sunny land of the south equivalent to Japan; a country populated by simple people living close to nature; a socialist utopia; and a land where artists worked together in a friendly manner (“Van Gogh’s Japonisme” 37–45).

Significantly, all of those interpretations include the artist’s attitude toward Japan as an important part of their interpretive framework, and I find them all insightful. I would like to bring all of these interpretations, which proceed centrifugally from the artist himself, back to the image of the flowering tree through which van Gogh communicated his image of “Japan” in Arles in the spring of 1888. All of the paintings depict actual trees in an actual orchard in the south, which was for the artist the equivalent of Japan. Although executed in different styles, all of the paintings pay attention to the southern, “Japanese” light, and to the pale pink and white blossoms that van Gogh noticed in the Japanese prints that he and Theo owned. The two paintings that I singled out for analysis depict flowering trees that, while they evolved as personal symbols for the artist in the context of the Symbolist movement, also partook of the latent religious symbolism of the Sino-Japanese aesthetic tradition, enabling the artist, in their execution, to approach the “true religion of nature” that he associated with Japan and Japanese art. Finally, the artist painted the trees outside, in nature, and in an awareness of the sacred natural cycle of birth, flourishing, and death—as nature was painted in the Sino-Japanese tradition. The flowering trees, then, were a personal symbol for the artist of “Japan” and also a means of communicating his dream of “Japan” to the public.

## CONCLUSION

Van Gogh collected Japanese prints as a collector of material objects in the 1880s, during the age of imperialism. He collected techniques from the prints as an artist; and he collected images of Japan from the prints as a person, making the prints into images of an idealized self by hanging them on the walls of his living quarters. From the 1880s onward, the Japanese prints that the artist had collected functioned as symbolic objects, communicating with his self and reminding him, as symbolic objects do, of “the variety of experiences which we have or might have, and the motives and goals which seem to be open to us” (Pearce 166). At this point, what the Japanese prints reminded van Gogh of was his desire to live his life in the way he envisioned Japanese people and artists living their lives: close to nature. Subsequently, in the spring of 1888 in Arles, as a painter at an important moment of his career, van Gogh collected images from an orchard of flowering trees, viewing them through the lens of the flowering trees in his and Theo’s Japanese prints. The paintings of “Japanese” natural phenomena, the flowering trees that he produced in Arles, were the painterly equivalents of those earlier symbolic objects, his Japanese prints. The flowering trees in the paintings, functioning as personal symbols, communicated with the self of the artist who was painting them and put him in touch with a way of feeling and experiencing that he associated with “Japan.” Producing the paintings of flowering trees mediated by “Japan” enabled van Gogh to live out a deep-seated desire, also mediated by “Japan”: that his life would “become more and more like that of a Japanese painter living close to nature” (Letter #540; *Letters* III, 47). Thus, the collecting of “Japan” through the amassing of the Japanese prints, as well as through the collecting of images of the flowering tree, an image mediated by Japanese prints and “Japan,” was one of the important stimuli to van Gogh’s growth as a person and as an artist.

The Japanese flowering tree provided van Gogh with a personal symbol that brought him in contact with the vitality and sacredness of nature as depicted in Japanese art and that reminded him of his own Dutch tradition’s sense of nature as a religious phenomenon. Furthermore, by choosing the familiar image of flowering trees, which was also a meaningful personal symbol, the artist was able to make emotion meaningful by connecting it to humanity at large. In this way, he was able to compensate somewhat for what he perceived as the loss of the communicative power of art caused by the decline of traditional symbols in his time. Finally, at a time when European political and cultural hegemony threatened to overwhelm non-Western cultures, van Gogh was able to create a powerful image of “Japan” that creatively assimilated Japanese aesthetic techniques and cultural beliefs. Thus “Japan” was a “dream-space” filled with European desires and longings of Europeans, but it was still viewed with respect and even reverence. Through his sym-

bolic interaction with the Japanese prints in his collection as material symbols and through his metaphorical collection of images of “Japan” based on those prints, van Gogh was able to translate “Japan” for his fellow Westerners, and thereby contribute to enlightened cultural interaction between Japan and Europe in the age of imperialism.

∞ Rutgers University

#### NOTES

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- 1 European artists associated with every major movement from the 1860s to around 1900, including Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, the Nabis, and Art Nouveau, were profoundly influenced by Japanese art. Major studies of European Japonisme include Ives; Weisberg, et al.; Whitford; and Wichmann. The latter two, unlike the former two, approach Japonisme on the basis of their extensive study of Japanese prints in their art historical context. See Lambourne for a study of Japonisme in the arts and culture that is geared to the general reader.
- 2 Frank Whitford (1977) singles out six techniques that van Gogh assimilated from Japanese color prints and monochrome sketchbooks: the use of large areas of a single color and the brightening of his palette (188); the use of color for decorative rather than descriptive purposes (191); the use of precise and sharp outlines; the flattening of perspective by means of a “strong diagonal that cuts across the lower third of the composition”; and the use of a “graphic, rhythmical system of brushmarks” (193). Siegfried Wichmann (1980, German original; English translation 1985) writes that “the Japanese influence on van Gogh’s portrait painting was of major importance” (44); however, he also argues for major Japanese influence in the areas of the use of color, and dedicates one whole chapter in his monumental *Japonisme*, entitled “Line and Dot in Van Gogh’s Drawings,” to van Gogh’s adaptation of sketching techniques taken from Hokusai’s *Manga* and other Sino-Japanese sketching manuals. See Wichmann (40–44 and 52–61. See Childs for a brief but valuable overview of the influence of Japonisme on van Gogh (119–30).
- 3 Studies on collecting that I have found especially valuable are Elsner and Cardinal, eds.; Pearce; and Baudrillard.
- 4 Ives writes that “the Goncourts, Manet, Whistler, Tissot Fantin-Latour, Baudelaire, Théodore Duret, and [Philippe] Burty” were among the early collectors of Japanese prints (13). Gérald van der Kemp adds to this list of collectors Félix Bracquemond, Zacharie Astruc, Jules Jacquemard, Millet, and Rodin (5). Degas, whose collection of Japanese prints was already mentioned, along with that of Monet, by Ernest Ches-

neau in an article written in 1878 (Aitken and Delafond 12), by the time of his death had collected over one hundred Japanese woodcuts and albums (Ives 34); these were sold posthumously in 1918 (Aitken and Delafond 10). Daniel Wildenstein writes that Gauguin had bought some Japanese prints “before he left Paris in late January 1888,” and that he carried some around with him on his travels “until his dying day” (362). Pierre Bonnard collected Japanese prints (Ives 57) and Camille Pissarro had ten or so prints (Aitken and Delafond 10). Monet is the only collector whose collection of Japanese prints has received full art historical treatment in a catalog. According to the authors of this catalog, Geneviève Aitken and Marianne Delafond, Monet’s collection contained 231 Japanese prints (9), all of which are illustrated in the catalog. The van Gogh brothers’ collection, which amounted to about 400 Japanese prints and albums, might have been the largest on the part of any contemporary artist. It is discussed, and prints from it are illustrated in *Japanese Prints Collected by Vincent van Gogh*, “*Ukiyoe Collected by the Van Gogh Brothers*,” and *Japanese Prints: Catalogue of the Van Gogh Museum’s Collection*.

- 5 For the names of the several Paris boutiques that sold Japanese prints at the time when van Gogh was collecting them, see Ives 21, f.n. 8 and Koyama-Richard 15.
- 6 I am especially indebted to Eric Hayot and to Ernst van Alphen for their insights into how and why the West constructed or dreamed images of the non-Western other. See also Corbey and Leerssen, ed., and Hallam and Street, ed.
- 7 For an analysis of the influence of the Goncourt novel and the essay by Tadamasu Hayashi on van Gogh’s formulation of an image of Japan, I am indebted to Kōdera, “Van Gogh’s Japonisme” 38–39 and Koyama-Richard 20, 59.
- 8 In what is the most comprehensive poetics of collecting, *On Collecting*, Susan M. Pearce puts forward J. P. Hewitt’s theory of symbolic interactionism as a way of theorizing the complex connections that are formed through people and material objects in the process of collecting. According to this theory, material objects are not inert and passive things divorced from human beings through their material existence; rather, they are part of the symbolic system, and thus communicate multiple meanings, as do ideas and words. Pearce characterizes Hewitt’s theory as drawing on the “pragmatic approach developed by figures like Charles Peirce, William Jones, John Dewey and George Herbert Meade” (165). See J. P. Hewitt’s *Self and Society: A Symbolic Interactionist Social Psychology*.
- 9 See the valuable discussions of van Gogh’s primitivism in Kōdera, “Van Gogh’s Japonisme” 41–42 and Kōdera, “Van Gogh’s Utopian Japonisme” 35–38.
- 10 The three prints are Utagawa Hiroshige’s *A Hundred Views of Famous Places in Edo: The Plum Tree Teahouse at Kameido* (1857), which van Gogh copied as *Japonaiserie: Flowering Plum Tree*; Utagawa Hiroshige’s *Shower on the Ōhashi Bridge* (1857), which the artist copied as *Japonaiserie: Bridge under Rain*; and Keisai Eisen’s (1790–1848) *Oiran* (high-ranking geisha), which van Gogh copied as *Japonaiserie: Oiran*. All of the van Gogh paintings are dated fall 1887.
- 11 Van Gogh painted whole prints from his and Theo’s collection, as well as natural elements from prints and other materials in their collection, into these paintings. For speculations on which prints, either prints owned by the van Gogh brothers or prints

- van Gogh might have seen, were transformed either wholly or partially in the artist's paintings, and discussions of how the artist transformed them, see Kōdera, "Van Gogh's Japonisme" 38, *Vincent Van Gogh and Japan* 84, and Orton 16.
- 12 In making my calculation of how many prints in the van Gogh brothers' collection contained images of flowering trees, I relied on the 1978 publication, *Japanese Prints Collected by Vincent van Gogh*, which contained descriptions and in many cases images of more than 352 prints. A more recent publication, *Japanese Prints: Catalogue of the Van Gogh Museum's Collection*, contains descriptions and images of most of the more than 478 prints it treats. Since the focus of this later publication is the Van Gogh Museum's collection, which contains prints collected later and not just the prints originally collected by van Gogh himself, I continue to rely on the data in the earlier publication, which more accurately indicate the actual prints collected by the artist. In any case, I have calculated how many prints in van Gogh's collection included images of flowering trees not to obtain an exact count but rather to indicate the preponderance of images of flowering trees in the prints in his collection.
  - 13 For a discussion of the influence of the three religions/philosophies of Daoism, Buddhism, and Neo-Confucianism on Chan/Zen painting in China and Japan, as well as landscape painting in general in those lands, see Brinker and Kanazawa 17–21.
  - 14 Debora Silverman argues that van Gogh developed "a modern sacred art embedded in nature, communication, and the steady, effortful process of the artist's craft" (392), referring to his last style of painting as "modernist religious realism" (419). Interestingly, Silverman only refers to the final year of van Gogh's life here. Furthermore, although she describes van Gogh's evolution of an artistic persona as one based on what he viewed as "the Japanese artist's devotion to nature" (42), she does not link that artistic persona with the artist's paintings of flowering trees. By contrast, I argue that van Gogh's painting of sacred nature began already with his series of Japanese flowering trees, and in spring of 1888, more than two years before his suicide in July 1890.
  - 15 Druick and Zegers interpret the butterfly in the painting, which was painted soon after van Gogh's arrival in Arles, in Symbolist terms: as a personal symbol reflecting both the artist's fears of leaving behind his old life as a painter and his questioning of what kind of a painter he was to become, to metamorphose into, in his new life in the south (104). Noting that van Gogh had read contemporary articles and books on Buddhism, a fashionable topic in Paris in the mid-1880s, Jacquelynn Baas argues that, as viewed from a Buddhist perspective, "the yellow butterfly and the yellow stump juxtaposed with the blooming tree suggest metamorphosis and regeneration" (28). Both interpretations focus on the butterfly and view it as linking the painting as a whole either to a biographical narrative of the artist or to a narrative suggesting a "wider frame of reference" than that of the artist's life—in this case, a Buddhist narrative. Baas' interpretation tends toward allegory, and Druick and Zegers' interpretation goes in the direction of personal symbol, although the passage from caterpillar to butterfly that is implied in their narrative of metamorphosis also has allegorical aspects. But these interpretations, in their focus on the butterfly, neglect the flowering tree as a personal symbol.

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