

The Influence of Japanese Prints and Primitivism on Post-Impressionism

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers the influence of Japanese prints and primitivism on Post-Impressionism. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the influence of primitivism on Paul Gauguin's artwork using examples from this lesson, and describe the influence of Japanese prints on Van Gogh's and Gauguin's artwork using examples from this lesson. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

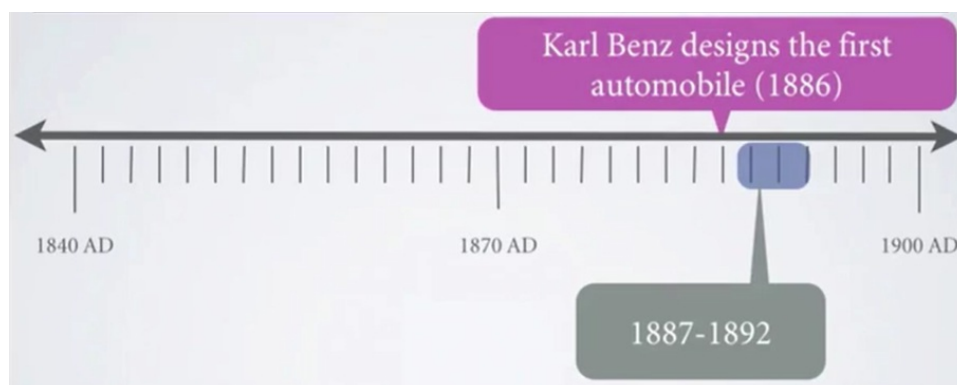


BIG IDEA

Eastern stylistic elements, like the flattened forms and colors of Japanese woodblock prints and the simpler style of Pacific Islander art, were incorporated into the artwork of artists such as Van Gogh and Gauguin.

1. Period and Location: Post-Impressionism Influenced by Japanese Prints and Primitivism

The artwork that you will be looking at today is by Post-Impressionist artists Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh, dating from between 1887 and 1892. This artwork focuses geographically on Arles, France, where Vincent Van Gogh was living and working at the time, as well as Tahiti in French Polynesia, where Paul Gauguin was living and working.



2. Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh: Influence

of Japanese Prints

During the late 19th century, Japan became open once more to Western cultures after literally closing its doors for around 200 years. As Japanese artwork, particularly prints, began to spread west, artists began experimenting with incorporating stylistic elements of Japanese art into their own compositions. Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh were two such artists whose work was influenced by Japanese woodcut prints.



HINT

In the following works of art, you'll notice common stylistic elements inspired by Japanese prints, specifically flattened forms and use of color.

In the example below, "The Vision after the Sermon," notice the unrealistic color, specifically the red of the background of this painting. This use of unnaturalistic colors is a common theme in Japanese prints.



The Vision after the Sermon by Paul Gauguin

1888

Oil on canvas

One of the other notable traits among these paintings is their use of an unusual perspective, which was also common in Japanese prints. For example, in the painting above, the point of view is situated behind a diagonal tree branch. Compare this to the next work of art by Van Gogh called "The Flowering Plum Tree," shown below. This is actually a faithful copy of an actual print by the Japanese artist Hiroshige.



Flowering Plum Tree (after Hiroshige) by Vincent Van Gogh

1887

Oil on canvas



THINK ABOUT IT

What do you notice right away? Is it perhaps the flattened, two-dimensional forms of the trees, the unnatural reddish magenta color of the sky, or the unusual point of view directly behind a diagonal tree branch?

The unusual point of view, in particular, is an interesting aspect of Japanese art—it's as if you're spying on something that's happening in the background, which in this case is a procession that is just barely visible.

Van Gogh made several direct copies of Japanese prints such as this one, but he also incorporated stylistic elements of Japanese prints into his original work. You can see further evidence of this incorporation in this image titled "The Sower," by Van Gogh. He combines several different elements in this composition depicting a man planting seeds—a theme he repeated in several other sower paintings. Notice how the brush strokes are obvious and deliberately placed, as well as the thick buildup of paint, called *impasto*, in the sun.



The Sower (also known as The Sower at Sunset) by Vincent Van Gogh

1888

Oil on canvas

You can see the influence of Impressionism, but also notice the flattened forms and the unnatural use of color in the field and the sky. Once again, your point of view is fixed from behind a diagonal tree. Once you start to notice this pattern, it's very easy to spot in works of art.

3. Paul Gauguin: Influence of Primitivism

Primitivism refers to the artistic movement that looked at the visual qualities of non-Western cultures as superior to those of the contemporary civilization. In a sense, it's a bit of a backhanded compliment, because on the one hand, you're extolling the qualities of a culture, but on the other hand, you're referring to these cultures as primitive.

Paul Gauguin's motivation at the time was to seek out a simpler world, one uncorrupted by civilization. He first looked for the primitive in Brittany, which is in Northwestern France, then moved to the south of France. He then sought it in a French colony in the South Pacific, on the island of Tahiti, where he eventually settled.



DID YOU KNOW

When Gauguin moved to Tahiti, he left his wife and five children behind in France. Gauguin felt that European art had become exhausted, so he looked to other cultures for inspiration and

rejuvenation. He incorporated stylistic influences from the art of Pacific Islanders, most notably the flattened shape and color, and overall, simpler-looking images. The subject in his painting below is his 14-year-old Tahitian wife lying on the bed, possibly imagining the image of the old woman in the background.



The Spirit of the Dead Watching by Paul Gauguin

1892

Oil on canvas

Gauguin's use of fluorescent color is interesting here, as these colors were associated with spirits in the local belief system. His use of color and reduction of forms is another precursor to the art movements of the early 20th century.



TERM TO KNOW

Primitivism

A Western art movement that borrows visual forms based on the belief that the visual qualities of non-Western people are superior to those of contemporary civilizations



SUMMARY

Today you learned about the **influence of Japanese prints and primitivism on Post-Impressionism**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms, describe the **influence of Japanese prints on Paul Gauguin's and Vincent Van Gogh's artwork**, and describe the **influence of primitivism on**

Gauguin's artwork.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



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