Impressionism And Traditional Japanese Art – Ukiyo-e

“Early modern Art is a magnificent representation of this organic, progressive, self-reflective order that structures early modern disciplines”, stated by Mary Anne Staniszewski, also she believes that “the story of modern art is a gradual development, from realistic, illusionistic representation to more abstract, “ideal” images”. I agree with Staniszewski that modern Art is a way for artists to express what they see and feel about the nature of materials. A characteristic of modern Art from traditional art is the abstraction and the difference in perspective. I believe no matter which genre the artist chooses to present, it all depends on the political environment at that time and the artist’s pursuit.

As one of the pioneers of the modern art movement, Impressionism, developed in Paris in the 19th century, remains one of the most prevalent forms of art, and its influence spread widely. Besides, the post-Impression, as well as the Symbolism, had begun to emerge to the influence of the modern art movement. The artists who contributed to establishing new categories of art got their inspiration in the other forms of art — which had a profound impact on western art history especially for the impressionists — ukiyo-e.

Ukiyo-e, the Japanese woodblock prints that were created for the commercial market, had become a source of inspiration for many Western artists such as Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh. The influence of ukiyo-e lasted about fifty years and people called it Japonisme, which refers to the popularity and influence of Japanese art.

The main characteristics of ukiyo-e prints are flatness and decoration. It often uses flat and bright colors, without adding the lights or shadows, and outlines the shape of the objects with smooth and rhythmic lines to fill the entire screen. The asymmetrical composition is typically used to break the sense of balance in the picture, causing the main subject to deviate from the physical center of the picture to focus on the visual center of the part of the subject better, and treats the subject and the background as being cut off by the edges. This method lets the viewer committed to continuously explore the edge of the frame while omitting unnecessary objects as much as possible to pursue pure expression.

Claude Monet was one of the first impressionists who circulated for perusal and collected more than two hundred of ukiyo-e including Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige’s artworks. Monet's artworks have been closely related to Japanese style since the mid 19th century, moreover, under the influence of Japonism, Monet used ukiyo-e as the main reference in the late 19th century. Monet was obsessed with the expression of natural light and he determined to devote his life to capture the thousands of changes in the natural world to express light, atmosphere or the rhythmical scenery by painting. During the mid-1980s, Monet created few series of paintings including Haystacks and Rouen Cathedral, and later in the 1919s, he painted a series including a couple of hundreds of paintings of water lilies.

As one of Monet’s series paintings, Haystacks (Effect of Snow and Sun) was made in 1891 and it was one the first group of paintings that Monet exhibited as a series. Also, the title refers to a twenty-five canvas painting series that started at the end of summer to the harvest season in the following year. This particular painting is oil on canvas, with thick layering brushstrokes that

could be seen from a distance. Moreover, the colors in this painting that the contrast between lights and shadows with the light blue-gray background express the idea of impressionism and realistically showed the sunlight on the haystacks. According to the Japanese art style that has a longing for nature, Monet protruded the perception and expression in his artworks which depended on the study of ukiyo-e and Japanese traditional aesthetic. Although the use of color is more subjective in Monet's painting, it was still relatively realistic, which coincided with the style of the ukiyo-e.

For a long time, Monet had been intrigued by how the character and shape of an object changed throughout time. Later in 1894, Monet started his thirty-one canvas painting series of Rouen Cathedral in different views and different times of the day and the year. This one was titled Rouen Cathedral: The Portal (Sunlight), made from oil on canvas. He painted the artwork with rich texture brushstrokes that highlights the facade of the cathedral under the sunlight with a conspicuous light blue background. Monet was pursuing the harmony and unity of colors and structures, as well as the different appearances of the same object under different lighting. From these series of artworks, we can find decorative painting methods that intensify the changes in lights and colors which made the shape and color of the object itself became less important. This decorative painting method represents the opposition to the three-dimensional structure pursued by Western art since the Renaissance and the focus on the expression that lies in the coordination of colors and shape. We can find a similar parallel juxtaposition between these decorative patterns and the ukiyo-e scenery that expresses the street scene.

During the last thirty years of Monet's life, he painted a series of approximately 250 paintings of water lilies which often considered as his finest work nowadays. He had a Japanese flower garden that he could paint the water lilies in various lights and at different times during these years. The Water Lilies (1919), is a landscape oil painting on canvas. This almost abstract painting had water lilies, grass, and the reflection of trees and sky in the water with thick brushstrokes that demonstrate the light reflecting off the pond with water lilies on the surface. This artwork combined Impressionism with abstract art in an equal measure showed Monet's passion for capturing the constantly changing lights and colors. Monet's series of water lilies had shown a great influence under the natural view of art, moreover, this influence represents the expression and the pursuit of nature. This series was very consistent with the aesthetics of Impressionism which is emphasizing natural beauty that matches the Japanese traditional aesthetics.

The reflection of the sky in the water and the group of water lilies suggest a wider space outside the frame, which is also a typical style in ukiyo-e. Monet arranged three different layers of space within the same dimension that created a unique sense of space that surpassed the reference of ukiyo-e and reached a new realm.

Some scholars believe that Monet's series of artwork was made under the influence of the Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji by one of the Japanese ukiyo-e artist Katsushika Hokusai. One of the famous view, The Great Wave off Kanagawa, from 1829 to 1833, is a woodblock print that shows the scenery of Mount Fuji over the ocean with a huge resting wave. When Hokusai created this wood print, he was over 70 years old with proficiency in his skills. The use of Prussian blue pigment as the main color emphasizes the rich layers and the asymmetrical composition that brings a powerful visual impact. The Great Wave off Kanagawa is not just a masterpiece in ukiyo-e, it also represents a traditional Eastern aesthetic which is the contrast between the static artwork and the momentum it contains. For example, the giant wave seems

dangerous but the expressions with fishermen were calm; the spindrift was wavy in the front and Mount Fuji was still in the back. This artwork is showing the beauty and danger of the scenery while contrasting the difference calmly.

Another well-known ukiyo-e artwork is Plum Estate, Kameido from One Hundred Famous Views of Edo by And? Hiroshige. This artwork shows the most famous tree in Edo, the “Sleeping Dragon Plum”, which the white blossoms on it were believed to drive the darkness away. Other plum trees could be seen along the horizon in the back with some buds that represent the spring, where the sky is gradually changing from white to red that further extends the space outside the frame. The innovation of the abstract composition with a vertical orientation and the exaggerated perspective creates a focus on the Sleeping Dragon Plum with the ukiyo-e theme.

Moving to the contemporary artworks, the traditional Japanese art form ukiyo-e has been combined with the popular anime culture in a movement to refresh the wood prints method in Japanese history. As the Pokemon Center online shop in Japan released two crafted wood prints as the transformation of ukiyo-e, one of the paintings got my interest—Silence Bridge (Traditional Ukiyo-e Woodblock Print). This painting was colored by the carved wood and printed onto the handmade paper just like the traditional method but involved novel characters. Silence Bridge is a scene that showed the battle between the Pokemon trainer and his Pikachu with Snorlax on a bridge, each of the characters has its distinct exaggerated facial expression. This composition and background were based on the Gojo Bridge, a masterpiece by Yoshitoshi Tsukioka. The Pokemon twist made the invention of the classic scene into a combination of traditional and contemporary art.

Although the growth and development of Impressionism were affected by many factors such as the optics and colorimetry or the invention of cameras, it is undeniable that the impact of Japanese ukiyo-e prints was the most direct and profound. It is an inspiration for Impressionist painters in pioneering new ways of painting. From Monet’s series of paintings, he did indeed get inspiration from ukiyo-e prints for his artistic exploration and application, more importantly, he not only understood the gist of ukiyo-e but also formed his artistic style.

In conclusion, the influence of Ukiyo-e on western artists not only challenges the perspective principles and use of colors that have been perfected since the Renaissance but also promotes changes in Western aesthetics and qualities. Ukiyo-e is still an enduring art theme even to the most present time, with the combination with the popular elements, it could be a worldwide remarkable art.