

The aim of *The Japan Society Review* is to inform, entertain and encourage readers to explore the Japan-related works reviewed in its pages. With many events in the UK being held online, cancelled or postponed due to the current pandemic, this October issue concentrates on books, but nevertheless the scope of our publication is once again as diverse as always.

Our first review explores the recently published memoirs of Hans Brinckmann, a Dutch banker who has lived in Japan for over forty years. Covering a period from the early 1950s to the present, *The Call of Japan* offers an individual's view and experience of postwar Japanese history.

Approaching history from the perspective of important events, *Tanaka 1587: Japan's Greatest Unknown Samurai Battle* by Stephen Turnbull examines the historical siege and battle of Tanaka Castle occurred in the context of the reunification of Japan under Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

This issue also presents reviews of two fictional books, *My Year of Meats* by Ruth Ozeki and *One Love Chigusa* by Shimada Soji. Shimada's short novel, translated by former

Japan Society chairman Sir David Warren, is a dystopic story with cyberpunk touches which questions and challenges the meaning of life and love. *My Year of Meats* is set in the United States and follows the experiences of two women, a Japanese American filmmaker and a Japanese housewife, in the modern world determined by corporations and gender expectations.

Finally, we conclude this issue with the review of *Japanese Prints: The Collection of Vincent van Gogh*, the catalogue of the homonymous art exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam in 2018. Accompanied by splendid, full-colour prints of both European and Japanese works, this art book discusses the influence of Japanese arts and prints on the life and work of the celebrated Dutch painter. The review is illustrated with beautiful images that reveal visually how Van Gogh was inspired by the work of Japanese artists such as Utagawa Hiroshige.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Roger Buckley, Laurence Green, Trevor Skingle, Azmina Sohail and Beau Waycott.

Image: Detail from the cover of *Japanese Prints: The Collection of Vincent van Gogh*.

The Call of Japan: A Continuing Story - 1950 to the Present Day

by Hans Brinckmann

Renaissance Books (2020)
ISBN-13: 978-1912961146

Review by Roger Buckley



Confessions for starters. For decades I would see Hans Brinckmann in the lobby of the apartment block in Mita but we rarely exchanged much more than a perfunctory nod and a mumbled “good morning”. Now at last there is the opportunity to make up for lost time and learn a great deal about an international banker, strikebreaker, actor, author and political commentator as he relives his long years in Japan. All this thanks to *The Call of Japan*. Hans Brinckmann’s memoirs, despite a title with a slight Victorian echo that conjures up the determination of medical missionaries and university lecturers to enlist in the West’s initial modernization schemes, are frank, detailed and highly readable.

As is invariably the case with autobiography the early years prove the more interesting. Readers, while following Brinckmann’s progress from raw apprentice to banking boss, will also inevitably find themselves comparing their own experiences against those of the young Dutchman. Few, though, will be able to recall an arrival in Japan as early as 1950 when the country was still under Allied, largely American occupation. Fewer still will have spent most of the ensuing decades right up to 2020 looking so carefully and fairly as the nation picked itself up from widespread poverty and moved on to an enviable affluence. In the process Brinckmann worked both hard and successfully at his adopted profession and yet found the time and energy to closely identify with numerous aspects of Japanese culture. His heart was to remain in the Kansai, though the requirements of international finance brought him necessarily to Tokyo.

First-hand accounts by Western authors on the postwar transformation of banking and high finance are considerably rarer than those telling of the more traditional of Japanese arts. It follows, therefore, that Brinckmann’s sections on what he sees as the ‘secret’ (p. 156) of the nation’s success from the 1960s onwards deserve respect. By then, he reckons, ‘[t]here was no question about it: Japan was on its way to greatness’ (p. 157).

Yet there have been and still remain endless explanations from both within and without on how the nation raised its game and evolved so rapidly into the near top rankings of the premier league. For Brinckmann ‘Japan’s demonstrated strength was not

to be found only in quantifiable techniques, which could be copied, as indeed they increasingly were’. Japan was no ‘ordinary country’ (p. 156). Instead he prefers the cultural view that ‘their whole attitude to work, life and society differed fundamentally from ours’, insisting that Japanese ‘egos were not allowed to get in the way of collaborative effort and the pursuit of handed-down objectives’ (p. 156). From his early occupation-era beginnings Brinckmann saw ‘clear national objectives to guide the business world and the workforce’ (p. 157), though he does slightly change his tune when it comes to the nation’s predicament in the 21st century.

While Brinckmann does, indeed, discuss what it must be said is a somewhat well-rehearsed listing of Japan’s ‘fundamental problems and vulnerabilities’ (p. 273) in his concluding section, the core of his work is more personal than political. It is inevitably the view based on both his successful personal career and a fulfilling, if decidedly nomadic, family life with moving descriptions of both his mother-in-law and his wife Toyoko, to whom he was married for nearly half a century. The account of her last illness and the funeral services is particularly moving.

Doubts about Japan’s future, however, are not the author’s main concern. Equally, his criticisms of what might almost be termed his adopted nation rarely get in the way of a generally positive and graphic, chronological portrait. Brinckmann places most attention on his first two decades in Japan from starting out in 1950 to the celebratory Expo 70 and Mishima Yukio’s bizarre suicide.

It was in these earlier years that Brinckmann first produced what he slightly grandly calls Japan’s positives and negatives. Prompted, perhaps, by his banking background, he deploys the equivalent of his personal slide rule to chart what is almost literally a national balance sheet on Japan’s successes and failings. Most expats never actually get round to putting this type of examination onto paper, though such comments come up frequently in casual conversation with friends in the office or faculty room at the end of a particularly tiring working day.

Brinckmann, professing what is, of course, an impossible objectivity, decided to carefully analyze ‘Japanese traits, habits and realities’ (p. 215). It is a mixture of recent history, social anthropology, aesthetics and personal foibles that he may not have greatly altered in later years. He made it immediately after shaking the ‘clammy, grasping and hasty’ hand (p. 214) of Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei when paying a courtesy call with

his American superior - it seems to have been at least one reason behind the author's wish to quit Japan in 1974. Needless to say, the draw of the country would bring him back regularly on business and family trips, before he returned permanently in 2003.

At times he would indeed report on the nation's faults, calling it a 'twisted country' (p. 207) with 'a suffocating web of social obligations and rituals' (p. 206), but his criticisms were generally outweighed by his respect for its 'solid social foundation' (p. 300). His kaleidoscopic memoirs include everything from calls on the renowned potter Hamada Shoji and two visits to the Yoshiwara before it finally closed its doors,

plus serious attention to Zen, squash at the British embassy's now lost court, endless mega-receptions, as well as fast footwork in order to get round financial red tape and a polite interrogation for residential infringements.

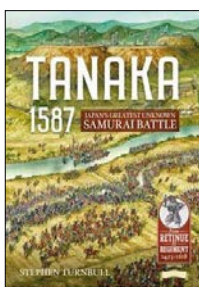
Hans Brinckmann has clearly made the most of the opportunities and challenges that came his way, concluding with a deep bow for 'Japan's generally caring, non-violent, balanced way of life' (p. 302). *The Call of Japan*, packed with photographs, would make an ideal gift for the approaching Christmas and the New Year seasons. [S](#)

Tanaka 1587: Japan's Greatest Unknown Samurai Battle

by Stephen Turnbull

Helion & Company (2019)
ISBN-13: 978-1912866496

Review by Trevor Skingle



Tanaka 1587: Japan's Greatest Unknown Samurai Battle is part two of the 'From Retinue to Regiment' series which is currently limited to four books and covers the period 1453 to 1618 connecting the High Medieval Period to the Early Modern Era. For those who are familiar with Stephen Turnbull's many publications not much of an introduction is needed. His generally enjoyable romps through Japanese history, mainly focused on the samurai, ninja and historical battles, are always well laid out, easy to read and, even though containing much historical detail, are aimed at the non-academic. The cover title though is rather misleading. The battle isn't that unknown in Japan. However this is clarified early on in the text when the author explains that the 'unknown' factor relates, predominantly, to the rest of the world. There is however, prior to this publication, a dearth of information in English relating to this specific conflagration.

The book's narrative revolves around the Higo-kunishu Ikki (Higo People's Revolt), the conflict which helped trigger the katanagari sword hunt in 1588, commonly referred to as the Taiko's Sword Hunt, to deny swords to Toyotomi Hideyoshi's enemies and the peasantry. The conflict coincided with Hideyoshi becoming Kampaku (Imperial Regent) and is remembered every year on the 2nd Sunday of

February with the Sengoku Higo Kunishu Festival at Mikawa Sogo Shishatonari in Kumamoto.

The part of this history which is referred to as the Battle of Tanaka Castle (Tanaka-jo no eki) is described locally as one of Japan's most important historical events, 'a grand battle' between Toyotomi samurai and Wani kunishu (local troops). It is reproduced during the festival in order to convey the event to posterity, although the author rather mockingly describes it as 'a noisy, enthusiastic and highly inaccurate recreation of the battle'.

The historical context leading up to the siege of Tanaka Castle, along with the complex and seemingly ever changing alliances and conflicts in the region, is explained with great clarity. The account of the transition from the Warring States period to the gradual reunification of Japan under first Oda Nobunaga then Toyotomi Hideyoshi and finally Tokugawa Iyasu (who, according to legend, in sequential order boiled the water, made the tea and drank it) are quite detailed yet probably much clearer and easier to understand than many explanations seen in previous publications.

What then follows is an account of a rather more localised Kyushu conflict, initially between Hideyoshi's forces and the Satsuma Shimazu prior to the Higo Rebellion, the final part of which was their last heroic stand at the siege of Tanaka Castle.

There is a lot of necessary detail about the involvement of the loyal vassal of the previous ruler Oda Nobunaga, the Daimyo Sassa Narimassa, in the process of centralising control in the region. The account goes on to explain that it was this and the reallocation of the land belonging to the local independent kokujin (provincial samurai) to Narimassa's vassals, with the accompanying loss of prestige and economic status, which fostered the resentment and eventually led

to the Higo Rebellion and the destruction of Tanaka Castle by the forces of Hideyoshi.

The chapter on the Wani Family and Tanaka Castle is probably the most revelatory given that not a lot of information, especially the most recently discovered, about the layout of the castle has been available to the general reader. The narrative is laid out in a logical sequence and even though the initial context setting seems somewhat wide-ranging, it really is necessary to lay the foundation for the culmination of the story that leads to the siege. The book doesn't disappoint with the illustrations and photographs which range from

the sort of thing that might be expected in a computer game through reproductions of Japanese prints to the author's own photos, along with one photograph, a bit of a coup, which is accredited to Gensaiji Temple in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

Though a relatively small book the amount of information contained and covered within its just over one hundred pages is extensive. Whilst the text is a reasonably easy read, and as pointed out is non-academic, there is a lot of detail to digest. The book is definitely one for either the visitor to the area or the serious Japanese military campaign buff, or both. [S](#)

One Love Chigusa

by Shimada Soji
translated by David Warren

Red Circle (2020)
ISBN-13: 978-1912864102

Review by Laurence Green



Going to the office was something of a relief. He felt as if he was at last returning to being a normal working person. When he looked around, half the office staff looked as they had before. Someone raised their arm to him in greeting. Grinning, he gave a slight bow in return, but it was a person he didn't recognise.

It's a scenario that might feel all too familiar for many of us over the coming months, but for Xie Hoyu, it's the very least of his concerns. Returning to the office after a horrific motorcycle accident that requires his mutilated body to be re-built from scratch, the beleaguered protagonist of Shimada Soji's *One Love Chigusa* finds his life is never quite the same again.

The year is 2091, and we are in distinctly weird territory, even by Shimada's standards. Famous for bestsellers such as *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders* (published in English by Pushkin Vertigo) which is invariably hailed as one of the best locked-room mysteries of all time, Shimada pulls no punches in describing the finer points of Xie's accident and the resulting aftermath. We are told in excruciating detail how his body was 'crushed, torn to pieces and scattered around', but that he is to be thankful 'his insides remained intact despite becoming part of the debris spread around the crash site'. To these remnants, prosthetic arms and legs are attached, and Xie becomes - in essence - a cyborg-like machine-man hybrid.

Longtime aficionados of Japanese pop culture will immediately recognise in the premise echoes of *Tetsuo*:

The Iron Man, Akira, Ghost in the Shell or *Astro Boy* - the overwhelming sense that this tale is more like something out of a cyberpunk anime or manga than traditional Japanese mystery literature. Indeed, it will come as no surprise, and as the book's dedication makes plain upfront, that all this is intended very much as a homage to the so called 'God of Manga' Osamu Tezuka.

It's not all about the graphical extremities though - there's wry humour to be had here too, with some telling nods to the perils of modern, technology-dependent urban living. At one point, Xie's doctor observes 'You've got an extraordinary number of devices in your body... You'll need to attend rehab classes at least once a week for the next year'. As Xie comes to terms with his new mechanical body, he feels terrible discomfort, fear and loneliness at seeing how almost everyone around him rushes past, faces screwed up in anger. 'In an instant, he lost the confidence to live in this city'. In a manner recalling many of the patients in Oliver Sacks iconic *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, although Xie's physical body has been patched up and repaired, his mental acuity has been left bizarrely altered. All women now appear to him as red-faced devils, whilst men become transparent when he looks at them, with 'indicators like calculators displaying financial figures on their bodies'. The world has become a revolting, terrifying place for him. Smiling faces no longer register on his visual cortex and his sexual desire has entirely departed... That is, until he spots a singularly beautiful woman who reignites his reason for living.

With shades of Haruki Murakami's *On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One Beautiful April Morning* mixed with Makoto Shinkai's *Your Name*, we see Xie fall head over heels in love with this one-in-a-million encounter, and he proceeds to follow her with dogged insistence. In a brilliant sequence, which to reveal more of

would spoil the punchline, we think we discover the woman's identity, only to be immediately challenged in our assumptions. Much like *The Matrix*, we are never quite sure what is part of Xie's imagination and what is genuine reality in this strange, futuristic world. At times, the outright weirdness and tones of body-horror recall Kobo Abe's *The Face of Another*, whilst at others the techno-philosophising are more reminiscent of Philip K Dick or George Orwell. Reading Shimada's dark, razor sharp prose, I began to ponder that other master of the short story form such as Roald Dahl and his 1953 collection *Someone Like You* (the source of much of the material that would be adapted into the classic television series *Tales of the Unexpected*), which has seen a remarkable sales boom in Japan this summer after it was mentioned on TV by the popular comedian Kazlaser. Like Dahl's own 'unexpected' tales, Shimada's fable-like storytelling uses exaggerated, often shocking weirdness to unveil the shadowy, conflicted depths of the human heart; the hidden rhythms and desires that drive us to often incomprehensible action.

All these cultural touch-stones, intended or not, come as shivers up the spine; Easter egg-like nuggets of déjà-vu that thrill in the exercise of accumulation, reference stacked within reference. Indeed, if these plot devices feel at times overly familiar or derivative, one could argue that is precisely the point and pleasure of the book's parable-like qualities. As the story progresses further, things slide into the meta-physical as Xie's thoughts become increasingly existential; pondering the very meaning of what it means to live and love.

The tale's closing chapters, full with idolisation of the 'heart', in many ways surface themes similar to those seen in *Metropolis* - both in its Fritz Lang incarnation, and the Tezuka manga of the same name.

Perhaps what is most remarkable about *One Love Chigusa* is how unassuming it is in many ways. Fans of Japanese literature in the Anglophone world have been father spoiled for choice recently, with a raft of stellar releases hitting the shelves over the past few years (including the Jay Rubin-edited *Penguin Book of Japanese Short Stories*, which *One Love Chigusa* feels as if it shares much of its DNA with). That this little book can fit in so many big ideas is also testament to the highly proficient, powerful translation by David Warren, who will be familiar to many as the British Ambassador to Japan from 2008 to 2012 and Chairman of the Japan Society of the UK from 2013 to 2019. As part of a series of 'Red Circle Minis' - offering first editions of some of the finest voices in Japanese literature, written specifically for the series and published in English first - this is an admirable initiative. Likewise, at a concise 115 pages, this is a tale that can be polished off in a single sitting, and when its conclusion finally comes it is every bit as satisfying as it is (quite literally) heartbreaking.

Just as Xie himself is pieced back together following his accident, so too is *One Love Chigusa* an assemblage of pieces. A kind of MTV-esque 'greatest hits' melange of science-fiction tropes rendered into a bullet-like, postmodernist package; taken as a whole it makes a riveting statement as a *Frankenstein* for our After-Corona age. Electrifying stuff. [S](#)

My Year of Meats

by Ruth Ozeki

translated by Michael Brase

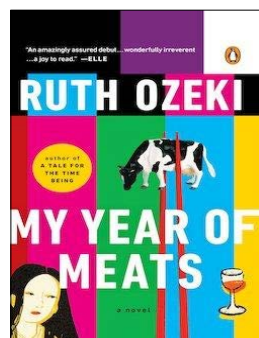
Viking Press (1998, first edition)

ISBN-13: 978-0670879045

Review by Azmina Sohail

If you've read any work by Ruth Ozeki, you know that her writing has the power to draw you into her world. "Ozekiland", as she likes to call it. A world that teaches us that time travel is possible, Zen Buddhism is strangely familiar and the curious lives of Japanese schoolgirls are a force to be reckoned with. In a word, Ozekiland allows us to discover lives we never knew we needed and *My Year of Meats* is no exception.

In true Ozeki-style, the story is two-fold. We are first introduced to Jane, a Japanese-American



documentary filmmaker working in partnership with BEEF-EX, a corporation whose aim is to promote the beauty and health benefits of American meat to Japan. Through the creation of a new TV series, *My American Wife!*, Jane travels across the country in search of "model housewives" for her Japanese audience. Wives whose concern is no longer 'old-fashioned consumerism' but 'contemporary wholesome values' like providing 'good, nourishing food for her entire family. And that means meat.'

Running parallel to this is the story of Akiko Ueno, a shy manga-artist in Japan and new wife to John, a deeply misogynistic employee of BEEF-EX. From her naivety and ingrained ideologies, she enters into this abusive relationship with the expectation to purely cook and conceive for her husband. Without this aim, she is useless. Through each segment of *My American Wife!*, Akiko's eyes are soon opened to alternative

possibilities of living in the world and having a family. For Akiko, Jane's housewives are perfect; a sweet young mother with a picture perfect family (and a husband's dark secret), a flamboyant Southern farmer, (whose meat consumption has disturbing consequences on her child's development), and a black vegetarian woman (whose lesbian lifestyle is still taboo in Japan). Akiko slowly discovers her true desires and what fertility really means to her.

When Ozeki writes, it's clear she knows what she's talking about. As a Japanese-Canadian herself, she intertwines her facts with her fiction creating candid characters that highlight the difficulties of cultural assimilation between consumerist America and traditional Japanese approaches to family. Both Jane and Akiko are on paths of self-discovery that, through fate and time (occurring themes in Ozeki's writing) bring them a step closer to each other. Each woman learns to acknowledge and accept their past in order to take control of their future. Their journeys prove to be perfectly imperfect and illustrate the heterogeneity of the female experience in the modern world.

The story also sheds light on the link between diet and fertility, particularly in the case of the "mad cow disease" or BSE (Bovine spongiform encephalopathy) of the 90's, whose outbreak effected meat consumption in the UK, US and Japan. During the late 80's, a case of BSE was confirmed in the UK, a new disease found in cattle. Fear that this could be transmitted to humans in the form of Vcjd (a slow-degenerative disease), consumption of

specific offal was banned and 3.7 million cattle were destroyed. Despite these precautions, human cases were eventually identified and found to be the causes of death. Eventually, media attention dissipated and the supposed threat of the disease disappeared. Now, over two decades later, can we confirm that our attention to meat consumption has changed?

Thanks to the rise of social media, health has now become something to be celebrated, questioned and investigated. More attention has been placed on British grown food, organic farming and veganism and consumers have started to ask questions. *My Year of Meats* asks us to transfer these concerns to meat. Much like Jane's housewives who toil over adorning and decorating their meat to produce an appetising meal, the same attention needs to be placed on the care of cattle. How are they kept? What is their diet like? How are they slaughtered? If we are becoming a fast-paced, no-nonsense and lethargic society, then so is our food and our attention to it.

My Year of Meats is essentially a story of the human life and the human body. It asks us to question what it means to be a woman, what we put in our bodies and how our offspring will value themselves in a world we create. It teaches us that time is not only healing but changing. Fertility and food now come in various forms and no two experiences will be the same. These notions are not just about comfort, but personal progress and happiness; two notions integral to every humans journey of self-discovery. [S](#)

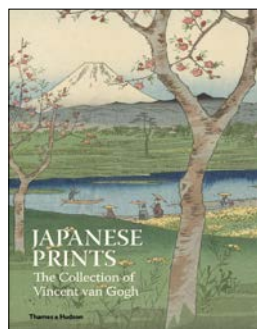
Japanese Prints: The Collection of Vincent van Gogh

Edited by Axel Rüger and Marije Vellekoop

Van Gogh Museum, Thames and Hudson, 2018
ISBN-13: 978-0500239896

Review by Beau Waycott

Published by the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to accompany their 2018 exhibition *Van Gogh & Japan*, *Japanese Prints: The Collection of Vincent van Gogh* is a collection of enriching essays detailing Van Gogh's relationship with Japanese art and the influence it had over him. Accompanied by beautiful, full-colour prints of both European and Japanese works, this is an art book that serves as more than a coffee-table piece,



holding true and tangible value in its aesthetic design and intellectual property.

In the first chapter, Louis van Tilborgh (professor of Art History at the University of Amsterdam and senior researcher at the Van Gogh Museum) provides a brief biography of Van Gogh. In the winter of 1886-7, Van Gogh bought 660 sheets of Japanese art for trade; 33 years old, poor (thus having to share a Parisian apartment with his brother Theo, who regarded Vincent as constantly involved in 'the most impossible and highly unstable love affairs') and addicted to brandy and absinthe, Van Gogh was hoping to capitalise on the *Japonisme* that was in vogue amongst France's commercialised middle class. With Japan having been hermetically sealed for decades, there was an immense interest in its culture from the 1850s onwards in France (although to a lesser extent in Van Gogh's native Holland). Later in the text, Chris Uhlenbeck (Japanese art dealer and curator) discusses

Van Gogh's connection with Siegfried Bing, a Japanese art specialist who founded *Le Japon Artistique*, a trilingual journal on the interwoven relationship between Japanese art and the art nouveau movement, which won Bing friendship and business with great impressionists such as Claude Monet, Alphonse Mucha and Paul Gauguin.

Van Gogh found the strong, central use of vibrant colour in Japanese prints, such as Utagawa Kunisada's *Actor Tying a Poem Slip to a Cherry Tree* (fig. 1), reflected the more positive life he was aiming to lead in Arles, Provence, as opposed to his earlier use of more subdued colours when affirming primitivist tropes.

Making a distinct loss on his investment, Van Gogh left Paris for southern France later in 1888, writing in a private letter to his brother that he viewed Provence as just 'as beautiful as Japan'. One reason for his move was a desire for a "pure", more simple society which Paris just didn't have. In Holland, Van Gogh had embraced the aesthetic idealisation of primitivism, coupled with extreme physical and mental austerity. In Provence, however, he lived a more light, musical existence with gaiety and freedom, and it is thought that the simple and uncomplicated nature of Japanese prints appealed to Van Gogh's newly-found buoyancy. However, in late 1888, Van Gogh suffered a mental breakdown, leading to the ever-famous self harm of his ear, housing in an asylum, and later suicide. After this passage, Uhlenbeck explains how the prints were dispersed over Europe during the late 1800s through to the mid 20th century, when many prints came into the passion of the Van Gogh Museum.

The influence of works of *nanga*, a style made famous by artists such as Ike no Taiga, can clearly be seen in van Gogh's *The Rock of Montmajour with Pine Trees* (fig. 2), with the use of a reed pen to create supple and distinct lines and the deft use of thickness to create depth and perspective.

However, it is the art creating during Van Gogh's time in Provence that shows the most influence from Japanese prints. Appreciating the clear, lucid effect the prints held, Van Gogh attempted to replicate the distinct style of succinct and varied brushstrokes, but found the flat effect this creates difficult to achieve. As a result, he learned to incorporate more abstain into both his portraits and (more noticeably) his landscapes. Van Gogh also borrowed a large part of his stenographic vocabulary from *nanga* (a style of painting, also known as *bunjinga*, popularised in the late Edo period in which landscapes are depicted in



Fig. 1 - *Actor Tying a Poem Slip to a Cherry Tree*, fifth sheet of the pentptych *Favourites All Together in Full Flower*, Utagawa Kunisada, Edo, 1858, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).



Fig. 2 - *The Rock of Montmajour with Pine Trees*, Vincent van Gogh, Arles, 1888.

basic strokes of monochrome ink), and began to work in dots, dashes, hatchings and short strokes of ink.

Uhlenbeck argues that the use of colour in Japanese prints had the greatest impact over Van Gogh, citing his detest at the fashion for *agrément jaunis* (literally 'agreeably yellowed', it was an artificial patina whereby

dealers would bleach prints or soak them in tea to dull the colours, as preferred by French buyers, something Van Gogh did to not one of his prints). However, for an impressionist so interested in colour, Uhlenbeck has a fascinating passage on how there is no written evidence that Van Gogh ever remarked on the special effects used in Japanese prints, such as *bokashi* (graduated colour) or *karazuki* (also known as ‘blind painting’, a kind of *gaufrage* that adds patterns of relief to the paper or wood). Van Gogh wrote many letters about his Japanese prints, making it strange that he never remarked, for example, on Hiroshige’s use of *bokashi* to juxtapose reds, greens and blues, or the striking 3-D effect that *karazuki* gives to the hems of kimonos.

Whilst the successful use of *bokashi* to celebrate sublime stillness is evident in both Utagawa Hiroshige’s *The Residence with Plum Trees at Kameido* (fig. 3) and Van Gogh’s *Flowering Plum Orchard (after Hiroshige)* (fig. 4), Gogh never acknowledged any kind of interest in the traditional Japanese technique. Furthermore, Uhlenbeck also notes that, especially for a collection purchased for trade, Van Gogh’s prints are strangely uniform, consisting primarily of portraits, and to a lesser extent landscapes, with over 40% of his pieces showing women (far more when you consider onnagata –male actors playing female roles in kabuki– a distinction Van Gogh is unlikely to have been able to make). Interestingly, Van Gogh did not own any shunga (erotic prints) or warrior prints, both of which were extremely fashionable at the time; his kachoga (prints of birds and flowers) collection was also very limited. Following this, Uhlenbeck details the distinctive printing techniques used, and Shigeru Oikawa provides an insight into the Western interest in chirimen-e (crépons) and the craftsmanship involved in their production, which is a well-appreciated addition, as this is a field uncommonly discussed in art literature.

Overall, *Japanese Prints: The Collection of Vincent van Gogh* is a rewarding book that deftly balances erudite and engaging writings with beautifully reproduced prints, including works of Van Gogh, Hokusai, Hiroshige and Kunisada. All images are full-size, and there has been no cropping or other digital manipulation, which adds to the thoughtful aesthetic of the book, which is truly beautiful, with each glossy page detailing fascinating intellectual material alongside exquisite artworks. Despite its relatively high price, the book will leave you with a warm feeling, the kind of feeling only the most delicate combination of stimulating, precise words coupled magnificent, pan-continental artwork creates. §



Fig. 3 - *The Residence with Plum Trees at Kameido*, from the series *One Hundred Views of Famous Places in Edo*, Utagawa Hiroshige, Edo, 1857, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



Fig. 4 - *Flowering Plum Orchard (after Hiroshige)*, Vincent van Gogh, Paris, 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).