

In a way all my work is founded on Japanese art.

Vincent Van Gogh

It is appropriate that in this year which commemorates the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the restoration to power of the Emperor Meiji, bringing forth the 'enlightened rule' – for this is the meaning of *Meiji* in Japanese - that I am honoured to contribute examples of the magnificent works of art of the Meiji period (1868-1912) – many of which were produced by Imperial court artists – from our unique collection to this exhibition.

Meiji: treasures de Japon imperial Paris is the latest demonstration of the growing appreciation of the nineteenth century Japanese aesthetic in the West. Having amassed, conserved, researched, published and exhibited worldwide the largest collection of Meiji art outside of Japan, we at the Khalili Collections are proud and honoured to have played an important role in this renaissance.

Whilst the Meiji era was a time of rapid change, over its four decades, the Japanese people retained and cultivated their traditional arts. After the opening of Japan's ports in the 1850s to the West, trade with Europe and America began to flourish and Japanese goods flooded western markets. This created an early enthusiasm for all things Japanese which caused ripples throughout the artistic world - their influence can be observed in Western paintings as early as the 1860s. The new Meiji government provided funds for the promotion of Japan at international exhibitions such as those held in Vienna in 1873, Paris in 1878, 1889 and 1900 and Chicago in 1893. The artistic and commercial successes which Japanese art works gained at international exhibitions highlighted the importance of the decorative arts for the national economy; during the period from the late 1870s to the early 1890s, the export of these hand-crafted objects accounted for one tenth of total national exports.

World fairs such as these drew in millions of visitors from around the globe, with records showing 27 million visitors for the Chicago exhibition. The Paris exhibition of 1889 had over 32 million, colossal numbers even by today's standards; especially considering the entire population of France at the time consisted of around 40 million! Encouraged by lavish government funding and imperial patronage, Meiji artists boldly experimented, refined their skills, and worked to create pieces that demonstrated the superiority of their style and technique. In doing so, they constantly pursued (and claimed) new levels of perfection.

As a collector and scholar, I always looked to awaken what I call ‘sleeping giants’ and bring them to the attention of the world; one of these was art from Japan’s Meiji Era. This was a cultural heritage lying dormant, forgotten between the pages of history, until we discovered and awoke it from its slumber. I first fell deeply in love with the Japanese aesthetic in the early 1970s. Overwhelmed by the quality of the artisanship, I bought several pieces of Japanese earthenware whilst I was still a student in New York. I could see that the finest potters are like alchemists, using the four basic elements — water, earth, wind and fire — to transform what is essentially dirt into sublime works of beauty. In Japan, they did this with extraordinary skill, precision and style.

As I added more pieces to the Collection, I found myself increasingly in awe of the mastery of Meiji artists and craftsmen. Not only was I unable to conceive of how they had created such superb examples of artisanship, but I was astonished at how little information was available about this art. Determined to explore this enigma, I continued collecting their works, commissioning scholars to study them under my leadership, and presenting exhibitions with a passion that has never abated. In the early 1990s, I set up the Kibo Foundation — *Kibo* means ‘hope’ in Japanese — as a means to hold this collection and promote the study of Meiji art and design.

It is no exaggeration to say that a Collection which features such a variety of beautiful, intricate objects of such technical precision would be impossible to replicate today. This was a sentiment echoed when we inaugurated our first Japanese exhibition at the British Museum in 1994. This was titled *Japanese Imperial Craftsmen: Meiji art from the Khalili Collection*, curated by the then Keeper of the Department of Japanese Art at the British Museum, Victor Harris. At the inauguration, he thanked me for amassing such a collection. Such a feat, he said, ‘could not possibly be duplicated or even approached by any museum in the world today’.

In the promotion of the exhibition, the British Museum emphasised that the quality of workmanship found in these masterpieces would be ‘unlikely ever to be attained again’. This is a crucially important point especially as, for example, during the late nineteenth century enamel production was at its zenith, and much attention has been paid to European masters such as Fabergé. Yet the Japanese makers were producing work far surpassing the enamels seen in Europe at that time. The finest Japanese makers were awarded medals and commendations at international exhibitions and their techniques were frequently imitated throughout the world. Whilst one could argue it is relatively easy to replicate a Fabergé, to replicate the work of a Japanese master is nigh-on

impossible. Yet the appreciation in the West of the quality of such works remained little-appreciated until I brought their creations to the attention of the world.

Between 1994 and 1996, after many years of intensive research by world-renowned academics and specialists, we published the nine-volume study of the Collection, entitled *Meiji No Takara: Treasures of Imperial Japan*. This was a ground-breaking feat of scholarship and the first of its kind to look at the broader aspects of Meiji art. It included research by leading academics and curators, including the late Dr. Oliver Impey, curator at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. There were also contributions from esteemed Japanese scholars in the field, such as Satō Dōshin of the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Hida Toyojirō of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. The Collection went on to be displayed in many countries around the world, including the UK, Japan, the US, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Israel.

One of the most visited exhibitions we had the pleasure to present was at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam in 2006; this exhibition explored the great artist's connection with Japanese art. This pioneering exhibition left us with a desire to examine in greater detail the concept of *Japonisme* – the term given to the West's infatuation with Japanese art in the 19th century. This resulted in the publication *Japonisme and the rise of the modern art movement*, edited and written by Gregory Irvine, Senior Curator in the Asian Department of the V&A, and with contributions by many eminent scholars from Japan and elsewhere. This landmark exhibition and the publication undeniably paved the way for a deeper exploration of this connection between Van Gogh and the concept of *Japonisme*.

It has long been known that Van Gogh collected prints, but he was equally surrounded and influenced by the abundance of Japanese objects available in Europe at that time. The explosion of interest in Japan was a direct consequence of their participation at international exhibitions and the resulting availability of superb examples of ceramics, metalwork, lacquer, enamels and textiles and other works of fine craftsmanship. Indeed, it is a great matter of pride for me as a scholar and collector to have highlighted this relationship – one that had long been hypothesised by art historians but could now for the first time be examined in detail through the Collection.

In his many letters to letter to his brother, Theo, Van Gogh had often commented on his overwhelming admiration and fascination with Japanese art. In one of these letters he commented: 'I envy the Japanese the extreme clarity of everything in their work. It is never dull, and it never

seems to be done in too much of a hurry. Their work is as simple as breathing, and they do a figure in a few sure strokes as if it were as easy as doing up your waistcoat.'

Ultimately, he would make the greatest affirmation of Japanese influence on his art, stating: 'In a way, all my work is founded on Japanese art'

It is not hard to see why Japanese art had such a firm grip on Van Gogh's imagination. With its refreshingly new approach to the use of colour and sympathetic attitude to nature and the elements, Japanese art provided rich inspiration for the intense and unconventional art of Van Gogh and his contemporaries. It provided a vital ingredient to the sweeping changes which took the late nineteenth century art world by storm as traditional European artistic canons began to be overturned. It supported the two pillars of the new art movement - innovation and experimentation – and provided rich examples and creative approaches to form and abstract representation.



Fig. 1
Unsigned
Late 19th century
Vase in cloisonné enamel; 16
x 7 x 7 cm
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

It is essential to emphasise one very important point: Van Gogh, who was quite poor, relied mainly on woodblock prints for his impression of Japan as these were the most affordable source material at the time. He wrote: 'You will be able to get an idea of the revolution of painting when you think, for instance, of the brightly coloured Japanese pictures that one sees everywhere, landscapes and figures', and additionally that 'Theo and I have hundreds of Japanese pictures in our own possession.' These images, however, were not only what captured his heart and stirred his creative imagination. The magic really began when he visited the Parisian shop of Siegfried Bing, who provided Japanese art for collectors and museums across Europe. Van Gogh visited Bing's shop on many occasions and in his letters to Theo he wrote of the marvels he found there. Seeing masterpieces of metalwork, porcelain, lacquer and enamel, whose exoticism and natural forms pulsating with life, must have fuelled his passion. Indeed, in our *Japonisme* book, Kris Schiermeier notes 'While the influence of Japanese paintings and prints on Van Gogh's work is well documented, the ready availability during his lifetime of three-dimensional Japanese art forms should not be overlooked as a further major source of inspiration'. In fact, one of the few gifts the Van Gogh brothers had given to their mother for her birthday was a simple and inexpensive Japanese enamel vase, now kept at the Van Gogh Museum (fig. 1).

With the burgeoning export market established in the West in the wake of the *Japonisme* phenomenon, traditional Japanese craftsmen turned their fine skills to the production which sought to impress the Western audience with their superb standards of craftsmanship.

This following incense burner (fig. 2) is a fine example. Created around 1890 by a former maker of sword-fittings, this magnificent elephant utilises the refined, multiple skills of the metalworker in many of its delicate details. The subject matter of the white elephant carrying a dragon which in turn carries a crystal ball represents several significant themes in Buddhism.



Fig. 2
Incense burner (Koro)
Signed Shoami
Katsuyoshi, Japan, circa
1890
Silver and gold, height

Equally, this bronze group (fig. 3) by Ōtake Norikuni is yet another *tour-de-force*, clearly intended to impress not only in its size, but in the techniques employed in its manufacture. The group shows *Susano-ō no Mikoto*, a fabled warrior and deity, receiving a sacred jewel from a sea god while all around them the background is adorned with aquatic decorations. The dramatic scene, so full of detail and momentum was most likely made for display at a major exposition.



Fig. 3
Group
Signed with
monogram Otake
Norikuni
Japan, late 19th
century
bronze, with gilding;
crystal ball,
99 x 80 cm

The inventiveness in both composition and execution did not stop at metalworking. With enamels, Japanese artisans were making great strides and inventing and modifying traditional techniques to dazzling effects. The *shōsen* and *musen* techniques were developed by Namikawa Sōsuke, who was appointed Imperial Court Artist in 1896. These techniques depended on ensuring the enamel resisted mixing when the wires separating them were kept to a minimum or were altogether absent. In the *shōsen* technique, the use of wires was kept to a minimum, used only as delicate highlights or to accentuate small details, while in *musen* the wires were completely removed before the pieces were fired, resulting in a soft painterly effect.



Fig. 4
Tray
Signed with seal of Namikawa
Sosuke workshop
Japan, late 19th century
Cloisonné enamel, 30.8 x 26 cm

In the following (fig. 4) *musen* work by Sōsuke the enamels depicting the plum blossom, moon and clouds are a true testament to his workshop's ability to create masterful works that give the appearance of traditional ink paintings.

The technique of *moriage* is believed to have been developed by the distinguished enamellers Kawade Shibatarō and Hattori Tadasaburō. *Moriage* translates as 'piling up' or 'heaping' and in this technique - which was very difficult to master - layers of enamel are sequentially applied so that the final decoration gives a three-dimensional effect to an otherwise flat enamel surface. In this vase (fig. 5) by Shibatarō, *moriage* has been utilized with great success and originality to create an incredible vibrancy to the branches of the plum tree. The bold choice of colour gives further depth and creates a powerful impression.



Fig. 5
Vase
Signed with seal of Kawade
Shibataro
Japan, late 19th century
Cloisonné enamel, height 40.2 cm

The technical and aesthetic innovations of Japanese artisans had considerable influence on western artists. In the later nineteenth century there was even a style of painting popular among certain post-impressionists called Cloisonnism, a term which directly references the cloisonné technique. Cloisonnism describes painting with large areas of colour and flat forms defined with strong lines and contours as in the enamelling technique. This was practiced by artists as renowned as Émile Bernard, Paul Gauguin and of course, Van Gogh. They all shared a deep desire to broaden the scope of painting, and the influence of Japanese artists inspired them to take more creative risks in their own works.

Many of the works in the Collection are excellent examples of the type of objects which inspired Western collectors and artists in the nineteenth century - including Van Gogh and many of his contemporaries. In terms of the usage of colour and motif, numerous examples can be found which

explain the pared down and contemplative approach seen in their paintings. It was not simply the use of Japanese objects in the painting themselves, but rather the Japanese aesthetic which permeated into the subconsciousness of the artists and inspired their creations. This aesthetic has a long and complex history spanning many different cultural practices, from flower arranging through gastronomy, the tea-ceremony, painting, calligraphy and theatre, and is irrevocably linked with Japanese notions of beauty, taste and harmony, a philosophy embedded in everyday life.

It is important to note at this point, however, that there is no one Japanese style and that Japanese art can be as varied and complex as European art. One thing we can be sure of at any rate, is that Japanese artists and artisans understood what it was that attracted the West to their art and were canny at marketing the styles and subjects which held the most appeal.

Van Gogh once observed:

‘If we study Japanese art, we discover a man who is undeniably wise, philosophical and intelligent, who spends his time - doing what? Studying the distance from the earth and the moon?... No! He studies ... a single blade of grass. But this blade of grass leads him to draw all the plants - then the seasons, the grand spectacle of landscapes, finally animals, then the human figure. That is how he spends his life, and life is too short to do everything.’

The art of creating lacquer work is good example of such patience and thoughtfulness and the gradual nature of the work required in preparing and making them. These are labour intensive artworks, painstakingly created in minute detail one millimetre at a time, with close attention being given to timing, temperature, as well as the sourcing of special materials and applying them as required. A lacquer master had to be observant, calm (timing was everything), and with a specialist understanding of the natural materials used in the production of their craft.

Another delicate, time consuming and intricate form of art – and arguably one of the greatest – is the art of weaving and textile-making. Our Collection features hundreds of examples of textile wall hangings, embroidered scrolls, decorative panels, and banners as well as a renowned and wholly separate collection of kimono. This exhibition presents some of our textiles for the first time, and the opportunity to display these masterpieces fills me with joy. The production of textiles during the Meiji era was a thriving and vibrant field of artistic focus, which – as with other works of art in our collection – produced impeccable masterpieces.

In the following textile panel (fig. 6) very fine silk threads were woven to create a shimmering background, clouds, trees and water, while the velvet was cut with extremely intricate scalpel to achieve the magnificent image of a view of Mount Fuji. It is a technique which I came across only recently, and yet again I was dazzled with the ingenuity of the Japanese artisans. Seeing this kind of subdued yet powerful scene executed in textile naturally generated an incredible response in Europe, from artist and audiences alike.



Fig. 6
Textile panel
Cut velvet and silver threads
Attr. Takashiyama
Japan, late 19th century
168 x 132 cm

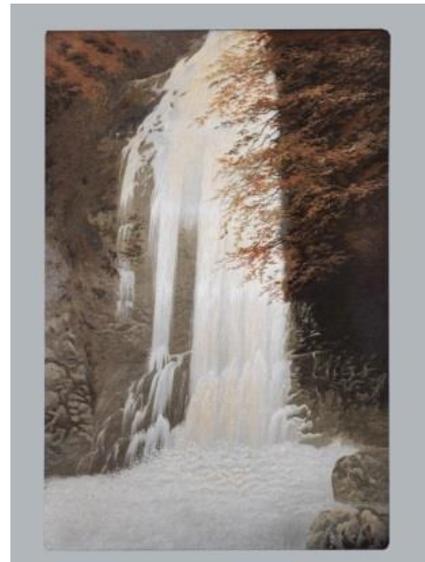


Fig. 7
Embroidered silk panel
Nishimura Sozaemon of
Kyoto
Japan, late 19th century
76 x 51.5 cm

The same could be also said for another masterpiece in the Collection, which depicts a waterfall so full of life and movement it is impossible to imagine this was created by humans using humble threads (fig. 7).

The Western thirst for Japanese art and aesthetics was not limited just to the collecting of art objects, but also had a direct effect on Western fashion. Kimono were sought after by artists such as Whistler, Tissot, Monet, Derain, Breitner and Rossetti whose work often portray western women wearing kimono. Geographically and culturally transformed, in these works the kimono has become part of a space where it evokes the novelty and exoticism of Japan. Interestingly, as the 19th century West was becoming preoccupied with the exoticism of the kimono, in Japan the trend was reversed, and western clothing was adopted by the social elite as a symbol of Japan's drive for modernity.

But the kimono was not only part of the predominantly male vision of Japan. It was in some ways also liberating for women, as it offered a new form of dress that allowed for freedom of movement unrestricted by tight corsets. As such, its influence can be clearly seen in Western fashion in the late 19th and particularly early 20th century. Of course, the perception of kimono in the West also derives from a fascination with Japanese theatre and courtesans, which formed a large portion of the subject matter of prints available to Western audiences.



Fig. 8
Kimono de dessous pour
homme (*juban*) à motif de
voyageurs
Soie, teinture *yuzen*
Japon, vers 1880-1910
126 x 130 cm



Fig. 9
Outer kimono for a
young woman
Japan, 1840–70
163 x 122 cm

I have been working tirelessly for nearly five decades to promote and introduce the world to the master craftsmen of the Meiji period. In Japan my efforts were finally recognised when in late 2011 the National Japanese TV network (NHK) filmed a three-hour documentary entitled *The Secret of the World's Finest Art: Hidden Masterpieces of Meiji Crafts from the Khalili Collections*. The home audiences for this series of programmes were enormous and generated such huge interest in Japan that there was a major resurgence of interest in the arts of the Meiji era. Subsequently there has been a reassessment in Japan of the arts of the Meiji era with museums presenting exhibitions which have drawn very large numbers of visitors.

It was historically, and clearly this is still the case, that it is in the West that the best collections of the Japanese arts of the Meiji period are to be found and from where the impetus to acknowledge the artistry and skills of the craftsmen has mostly come. The forming, exhibiting and publishing of these superb collections have enabled scholars, museum curators, collectors and the wider public in both the West and in Japan itself to re-evaluate the arts of the Meiji period. Bringing this great art to

the world's attention - from when interest seemed to have been virtually non-existent - is one of my proudest accomplishments. It also pleases me immensely that museums and new collectors are now recognising my work and are now showing an interest in this remarkable period of Japanese art. Continuing to be at the forefront of this appreciation is something I hold very dear to my heart. I am honoured to be acknowledged as someone that has used all the resources at his disposal to raise awareness of such marvels and inspired wonder and joy in those who see the pieces displayed in exhibitions around the world and reproduced in books and articles.

So, as we bring this fascinating journey to a close, it would be important to note how crucial it is that this exhibition is happening in Paris, where Meiji art was first introduced to the world and inspired Van Gogh and his contemporaries. I hope this exhibition will open the eyes of the world to seeing the vital connection between the arts of France and Japan. I trust that by showcasing to the public the mastery of Meiji artisans – seen in Paris all those years ago – we will be able to appreciate why their work took Europe by such a storm. In doing so, perhaps we can together re-live Van Gogh's memories as he gazed upon the masterpieces that inspired him.

In a letter to his brother Theo, Van Gogh commented:

'I envy the Japanese the extreme clearness which everything has in their work. It is never tedious, and never seems to be done too hurriedly. Their work is as simple as breathing, and they do a figure in a few sure strokes with the same ease as if it were as simple as buttoning your coat'

Or, one would hope, it might even challenge our own notions of perfection. In Van Gogh's words: 'after a while, one's sight changes: you see things with an eye more Japanese, you feel colour differently'.

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