

Japanese aesthetics

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The *ukiyo-e* woodcut and its imagery is one of several parallel styles in Japanese art. The prints conveyed new ways of looking at art. A few characteristic features of Japanese aesthetics:

1. Two-dimensionality and flatness

The image does not have the illusory depth of the classical Western one-point perspective. The image is stylised and two-dimensional, with parallel perspectives. The field between background and foreground is structured with contours and solid colours.

2. Asymmetry

The composition is asymmetrical, since symmetry was considered less exciting and too easy to grasp. A composition without symmetry can convey a lively tension between shapes and gaps, between positive and negative space. The asymmetry is a surprise that challenges the viewer to think.

3. Emptiness

Shapes and lines stand out against the background – becoming visible when they are juxtaposed with empty space. The balance of the image is created by the relationship between space and shape. The art of composing a picture lies in achieving this balance.

4. Simplicity and stylising

In Japanese art, nature is stylised rather than realistically portrayed. Like the subtle play of lines in calligraphy, natural forces are conveyed by contours, while lines in different directions achieve a sense of movement. The pressure and direction of a simple line can alter its dynamic expression.

5. The enigma of nature – a totality in small parts

In Japan nature is seen as a diversity of life forces and energies, rather than as designs or a prevailing order. The enigma of nature is manifested, and microcosm and macrocosm are interconnected, linked to one another. Small details are given as much attention as the larger elements, everything relates to the totality.

6. Sensory experience

Colours, nuances, textures, shapes and other properties give materials their specific character. Observing sensory perception in itself includes experiencing different moods and atmospheres. Attention to detail helps us understand the world.

Influential Japanese artists

Ando Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) is famous for his landscapes, and especially for *The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō*. The rain against the stylised forest outline creates a stormy atmosphere in the picture. The composition with diagonals evokes a sense of striving. Vincent van Gogh was inspired by Japanese woodcuts, including Hiroshige's *Plum Park in Kameido*.

Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806) made large diptychs and triptychs with women and portraits with individual features. These images were stylistically composed, with contours, flat colour fields and shapes of draped kimonos with different patterns against balanced empty backgrounds. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec took inspiration from Japanese woodcuts for his compositions and lines.

Katasushika Hokusai (1760 - 1849) is one of the most famous *ukiyo-e* artists. His woodcut *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa* is considered to be one of the most iconic Japanese works of art. It belongs to the series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*. Hokusai began drawing at the age of six. He characteristically rendered his own observations of reality without adhering to a traditional style. *Hokusai Manga*, his stylised humorous drawings, are the origin of today's manga comics. The French painter Claude Monet was deeply influenced by Hokusai and owned several of his woodcuts. The composer Claude Debussy included Hokusai's wave on the cover of the sheet music for *La Mer* in 1905.