

SHOKUNIN-DŌ

~ THE WAY OF THE SHOKUNIN ~

The intersection of art, philosophy and a life well-lived:
Edo period Japan, 19th-century France, and today.

Honors Thesis
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Introduction

In the award-winning documentary, *Jirō Dreams of Sushi* (2011), an 85-year-old sushi master articulates a personal approach to life that embodies a quintessentially Japanese form of expression: an intersection of art and philosophy that has been embraced and adapted by artists in Western cultures – particularly in France, beginning with impressionist painters – ever since the mid-1800s when Japan ended centuries of seclusion and opened its doors to the West.

Although the leap from sushi chef to impressionist painter may seem like a stretch, both represent an ideal: they both are *shokunin*, or craftsmen, who strive to perfect their craft – and their life – and thereby create art.

It is a philosophy whose roots span both oceans and centuries. Beginning with animistic beliefs back in the early days of Japan, this approach to life has endured twists of history, geography, politics, economics and culture – in sum, social change – without losing its essence. It has shaped lives both Western and Eastern, from Japanese printmakers and French visual artists to the American filmmaker who made this film about Jirō, all because it inspires. In fact, as I hope to show in this thesis, this search for fulfillment holds value not only for artists but for *all* human beings ... and is worthy of our emulation today.

Jirō Ono, Sushi Master

How to explore such a vast topic? My particular focus will be *Japonisme*, the French fascination with Japanese culture, and the forces that shaped it – but before we examine the history, let's listen to Jirō.

Filmmaker David Gelb's documentary allows the world's most famous sushi chef, Jirō Ono, to tell his own story. A man who has dedicated his life to the mastery of his craft, Jirō is a true *shokunin*, a mix of craftsman-plus-artist who chooses passion, dedication, self-fulfillment, over ego and commerce.¹ Apprentices and critics alike compare his style of work to conducting an orchestra, and his courses of sushi to a concerto. His tiny restaurant – which some might refer to as a 'hole in the wall' – serves only sushi, from a fixed menu carefully selected by the chef himself. Reservations must be made months in advance. However, even though Jirō has already achieved the highest honor possible, a three-star rating from France's Michelin Guide, he is far from satisfied. He is constantly seeking a greater level of craftsmanship, and in turn, self-improvement.

Throughout the film, Jirō's monologue illuminates the qualities necessary for fulfillment, both material AND spiritual. His essential message is this: by perfecting

¹ NB: Pre-Meiji Japan did not distinguish between craftsmen and artists; following the Restoration, however, a distinction was made. Today, both roles are equally valued and their work is part of Japan's Living National Treasure. Also worth noting: the Japanese recognition of craftsmen as artists influenced French perceptions as well (see Napier quote on p. 50).

our 'craft,' whether sushi, art, or life in general, we will find deeper meaning. But perfecting our craft is no easy feat.

First and foremost, Jirō is driven by PASSION.

"I've never once hated this job. I fell in love with my work and gave my life to it." (Jirō Ono in: *Jirō Dreams of Sushi*, 31:28)

POTENTIAL and PERSISTENCE also factor in, as Jirō's son Yoshikazu explains:

"There are some who are born with a natural gift ... If you work hard you'll get good over time, but if you want to reach the next level, you need talent. The rest depends on how hard you work." (Jirō, 7:02)

Jirō's life is a continual striving to achieve his potential, both as a sushi chef and as a human being. His son elaborates:

"Always look ahead and above yourself. Always strive to elevate your craft. Always try ... to improve on yourself. That's what he taught me." (Jirō, 1:19:35)

The fourth requirement is DISCIPLINE. Jirō's process is, to say the least, methodical. He believes that basic skills must be practiced exhaustively before we can begin to hone our craft. His apprentices aren't even allowed to touch the fish until they're able to squeeze out hot towels with perfect results.

We must also be willing to break with tradition – as Jirō does by exploring new and refined approaches to his own craft – but this requires CURIOSITY. IMAGINATION. COURAGE. By exploring possibilities, by taking risks and embracing failure, we commit ourselves to learning. Jirō’s instruction is clear:

“You must immerse yourself in your work. You have to fall in love with your work. Never complain about your job. You must dedicate your life to mastering your skill.” (Jirō, 3:00)

For Jirō, this quest for perfection is bliss. It is also a lesson in HUMILITY: he understands that perfection is something to strive for ... but that it’s not within human reach.

“We don’t care about money. All I want to do is make better sushi. I do the same thing over and over, improving bit by bit. There is always a yearning to achieve more. I’ll continue to climb, trying to reach the top, but no one knows where the top is. Even at my age, after decades of work... I don’t think I have achieved perfection. But I feel ecstatic all day. I love making sushi. That’s the spirit of the *shokunin*.” (Jirō, 29:19 – 31:00)

The Japanese term ‘*shokunin*,’ often translated as ‘craftsman’ or ‘artisan,’ implies far more than its literal definition. Media Design Professor Adrian Cheok – now Department Chair of Pervasive Computing at City University London and

formerly Full Professor at Keio University in Minato, Tokyo – offers a broader interpretation:

“*Shokunin Kishitsu*, or spirit of the *shokunin*, means craftsmanship, however it is much more than that. One of the essential things is to make something for the joy of making it, and to do it carefully, beautifully, and to the utmost best of your ability. In Japan one can see this in the incredible delicate designs, or amazing machinery, and the pride and perfection of even the cleaning staff.” (Cheok, City University London, 2012).

According to Cheok’s definition, Jirō is a true *shokunin*. Rather than focusing on competition, money or fame, he values self-improvement, fulfillment and honor. SELF AWARENESS. Jirō’s younger son, Takashi, argues that competition is necessary to spur improvement – but his father points out that the most useful form of competition lies within: we must compete with ourselves.

We must also have a measure of SELFLESSNESS. To be a true *shokunin*, we must see beyond ourselves, we must nurture awareness of and empathy for those around us. Toshio Odate, a Japanese woodworker and professor who now lives in America, explains:

“The *shokunin* has a social obligation to do his/her best for the general welfare of the people. This obligation is both spiritual and material, in that no matter what it is, the *shokunin*’s responsibility is to

fulfill that requirement.” (Odate, *Japanese Woodworking Tools: Their Tradition, Spirit and Use*, 24).

Basically, this means that each craftsman or artist – in fact, all people – should use their individual talents to contribute to the greater good. Or, as actor Kevin Spacey has reminded us in his film of the same name, “Pay it forward.”

Shokunin are therefore both selfless and selfish: the first relates to our role in the universe; but without the second, what would we have to offer? After all, along with internal and external awareness, personal judgment – subjective opinion – is required. Taste. Or, to express it more firmly, CONVICTION. As the film begins, Jirō asks his audience,

“What defines deliciousness? Taste is tough to explain, isn’t it?”
(Jirō, 0:30)

Most artists want to please their public ... but according to Jirō, they must first please themselves. Jirō describes the standard for deliciousness as “*umami*” (Jirō, 58:10). Defined by some as a profound ‘taste sensation,’ *umami* is brought out by the right balance of flavors. For Jirō, creating a union between rice and fish is like fitting together the puzzle pieces of any artistic effort. This search for the ideal *umami* is as true for a painter or filmmaker as it is for a sushi chef ... and for us: public taste may not align with ours – but if we stay true to the *shokunin* within, if we keep honing our craft, personal satisfaction may eventually earn public appreciation.

The Path to Perfection

Striving for perfection has long been the ‘path to enlightenment’ in Japan – with varied interpretations.

Different paths
 Are chosen by different men
 To climb the mountain.
 But they all look up
 To the same moon high above the peak.

(Jigu, *Remnants from the Western Sea*, 24)

The first path was animism. An indigenous search for the sacred that began with the archipelago’s first hunter-gatherers evolved into Shinto, the ‘way of the spirits.’ Like most religions, it was passed down through generations and centuries without formal codification – until 712AD, when the myths and legends that shaped it were gathered in the *Kojiki* (*The Record of Ancient Matters*), the oldest of Japanese classics. A three-volume book of songs and poems, *Kojiki* tells the tale of the spirits, the ancient gods and heroes who created life as we know it, and who co-exist alongside us today.

Unlike humans, these spirits, or *kami*, have the capacity for perfection. According to Shintoists, then and now – for this is a religion that is *still* Japan’s most prevalent belief system – *kami* are the essence or spirit that animates all visible objects. A rock, a tree, a waterfall. A human being. For 80% of today’s Japanese

population, *kami* are part of their world: not singular, but numerous and omnipresent, the intrinsic magical force which energizes the material universe. They are the ‘god within.’ According to religious historian Joseph Kitagawa, *kami* have

“the power to exert some form of strong or violent influence on Nature, or to affect man’s existence.” (*A Past of Things Present*, 44)

In other words, they have the potential to be good or bad, depending on man’s behavior – and they are nature, personified: an embodiment of the wonder and awe inspired by the natural world, concrete proof of the sacred, a manifestation of the divine ... all connected directly to us and the lives that we lead.

They also serve as reminders. Where humans are fallible, *kami* can be flawless – both as objects of worship and as ideals to be emulated. They represent godlike behavior; they show us the path to our better selves. A quest for sincerity (*makoto*), honesty (*tadashisa*), purity (*kiyosa*). Harmony with the natural order.

According to aesthetic theorist Makoto Ueda, Shintoism is:

“remarkably modern, humanistic. Its cosmos is ruled by anthropomorphic gods; men are derived from and can eventually become gods.” (*Literary and Art Theories*, 212)

Before such perfection or ‘god-hood’ can be attained, however, man must understand what he has in common with Nature. Ueda uses the teachings of

Ikenobō Senno (d. 1555?), the 16th-century master of *ikebana* – flower arrangement – to explain this.

“By looking at a desolate wilderness, or at a work of flower arrangement representing a winter scene, one may learn a truth of nature and of human life. The death of numerous flowers in winter reveals the law of change and mutability in life. [This] symbolizes the eternal truth of the cosmos.” (Ueda, 81)

Ever since animism first took root in Japan, Nature has been the ‘supreme being.’

“The natural world was the original world; that is, they did not look for another order of meaning behind the phenomenal, natural world – at least until they came under the influence of ... Buddhism.”
(Kitagawa, *A Past of Things Present*, 44)

For Buddhists – the religion that came to Japan from India by way of China, beginning in the 6th century – Nature was only a stepping stone. Instead, perfection lay in *Nirvana*, the egoless stillness of a mind freed from worldly distractions. According to Buddhists, enlightened beings leave the earthbound behind in favor of a world beyond. Ueda uses the writings of *Noh* dramatist and actor Zeami Motokivo (1363-1443) to describe this:

“It is a world of higher reality, lying beyond our ordinary senses. It is a realm of permanence, of immortal souls.” (Ueda, 67)

This added a new, even more mystical layer to the Shinto belief system: beyond the original, natural world and its resident *kami*, Buddhism pointed to a transcendental existence, a world that could and should be reached through enlightenment. Ueda elaborates:

“[There are] two sets of reality, ordinary and higher, as symbolized by a series of different images. Ordinary reality is perceptible through our senses, like cherry blossoms, fire, and water; it is appearance, or Being. But ordinary reality is in truth a manifestation of a higher reality, the reality whose essence is hidden.” (Ueda, 69)

In some ways, the differences between the higher reality of the Shintoist *kami* and the Buddhist *Nirvana* are subtle: both describe an essential, but hidden, essence – a promise that perfection, in fact, does exist. But can this perfection be achieved by man? The 12th-century advent of Zen Buddhism, first developed in China and further refined in Japan, tried to address this question.

“Zen is [an] expression of Buddhism. [It drives] toward an enlightenment which is ... beyond religious rite and belief.” [It is] unstructured by particular form or particular system, a trans-cultural, trans-religious, trans-formed consciousness.” (Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 4-5)

Zen offered the Japanese people a ‘here-and-now’ path to enlightenment – a choice embraced by most *shokunin* today. Basically, this was a fusion of the

physical and tangible with the abstract and symbolic: an assurance that enlightenment can be attained through a concentrated focus on everyday tasks like raking gravel, pouring tea, practicing martial arts or planting flowers – in other words, a physical activity that becomes a form of meditation.

“The way of Zen is a school of behavior based upon an appreciation of the simplest acts of life.” (Lambourne, *Japonisme*, 190)

In essence, Zen Buddhism was and still is an attempt to express the spiritual side of our interaction with the physical world – and to counteract the position that the meaningful is always deferred, distant and far away. Ueda cites the ceremony practiced by tea master Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591) as a concrete example:

“Zen emphasizes the human means to attain the [*sic*] Buddhahood.”
(Ueda, 95)

Along with meditative acts, these ‘human means’ include another earthly approach to enlightenment embraced by *shokunin*: the empathy and compassion – selflessness – that leads individuals to look beyond themselves and work toward the greater good of all sentient beings. This is the opposite of determinist ethics. Instead, it allows man a freedom of choice, a chance to realize potential through generous deeds: to become, in the words of 17th-century calligrapher Ojio Yusho (dates unknown),

“a morally perfect man.” (Yusho in: Ueda, 185)

Happily for Japanese people, they have long been free to embrace whichever path to perfection they prefer – Shintoism, Buddhism, Zen, or even all three, if so desired – because none of these belief systems condemn the other ... and all of them have something to offer. The Shinto faith accepts life's mysteries as an integral part of the here-and-now; the Buddhist faith promises otherworldly bliss (along with ornate statues and temples which simpler Shinto shrines do not offer); and finally – as the great poet Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) explained about his own form of meditation, the writing of *haiku* – Zen Buddhism allows its practitioners to

“attain a high stage of enlightenment, and return to the world of common men.” (Bashō in: Ueda, 148)

For a time, the three religions co-existed. Japanese prayed at Shinto shrines, worshipped in Buddhist temples and practiced Zen meditation, depending on their needs. But Buddhism eventually became a socio-political tool.

From the Heian period (794-1192) until the fall of the Shogunate in 1868, military leaders known as *Shogun* gradually took control of Japan. Monasteries became centers of power, with armies of *sōhei*, or warrior-monks. Temples became administrative institutions, where all births, marriages, divorces and deaths had to be registered. Every Japanese family was considered Buddhist, but the label was secular. Certificates were issued; monetary donations were required. A strict class system was formed, with *samurai* warriors at the top, followed by farmers, artisans, and, on the bottom rung, merchants. And, to preserve the status quo, a national policy of isolation kept people fixed in place: professionally,

economically, geographically and spiritually. For over 250 years, Japan had minimal contact with the rest of the world.

For most Japanese, Buddhism lost its sense of the sacred.

“To them, the *dharma* as the cosmic law that sustains the universe meant nothing.” (Kitagawa, *Buddhist Transformation in Japan*, 213)

Popular resentment brewed for centuries. In 1868, with the fall of the Shogunate and the restoration of imperial rule, resentment finally turned into resistance. Known as *haibutsu kishaku* – the ‘Abolish Buddhism movement’ – it led to a series of increasingly violent anti-Buddhist riots, seizure of Buddhist land and destruction of Buddhist temples. Between 1868 and 1874, from a high point of over 100,000 temples (one for every 300 Japanese), at least a third disappeared. The new government approved.

“Neo-Confucian and Shinto [officials and scholars] were, for the most part, critical of Buddhism both on philosophical and practical grounds.” (Kitagawa, *Buddhist Transformation*, 211)

In their view, Buddhist sects had amassed too much power and wealth. As a result, with the support of the Emperor, Buddhist monks – now seen as ‘state agents’ or ‘money collectors’ rather than as religious figures – were defrocked.²

² This was part of an official effort to create a ‘State Shinto,’ where Shinto shrines were used to worship ‘the ancestors’ and the nation itself became a sacred concept. This approach continued in various bureaucratic forms until the Postwar Occupation.

The Shinto faith once again became Japan's dominant religion, while Buddhism's secular focus shifted back to the sacred.

As they had in the past before the Shogunate, Japanese people found the divine in the beauty of nature: Shintoists in their everyday worship of 'heaven-on-earth'; Buddhists in their quest for the 'Pure Land,' a world of beauty that surpasses all other realms (said to be inhabited by flowers, fruits and wish-granting trees where rare birds come to rest); Zen Buddhists in their interaction with nature as a source of intuitive insight and enlightenment, or *satori*.

In each case, it is important to note, these spiritual interpretations of nature are supremely visual. Like so many other aspects of Japanese culture, from the preparation of food to the art of calligraphy, this is tangible proof of Japanese 'ocularity': the innate ability to interpret and communicate concepts in visual terms. This explains the deep connection between religion and art in Japan – and the reason why French Impressionists were so inspired by all things Japanese.

Consider the parable of the Buddha who, when asked to give a sermon on Vulture Peak, did not say a word. Instead, he simply showed a flower to the audience, turning it in his fingers:

“Enlightenment, not expressible in words, was thus transmitted from one heart to another.” (Ueda, 83)

The message? It was wisdom, both religious and aesthetic, gleaned from millennia of interaction with nature:

“All things are impermanent; all things are imperfect; all things are incomplete. A never-ending state of becoming or dissolving.”

(Koren, *Wabi-Sabi*, 46-49)

In other words, perfection is unattainable, life is fleeting, pain is inevitable – but the human condition, like nature, is full of beauty and change. A true *shokunin* – whatever his or her religion, whatever his or her profession – will understand and express this through a lifetime of striving: relying on passion, potential, persistence, discipline, curiosity, imagination, courage, humility, self awareness, selflessness, conviction ... all the attributes that turn a sushi chef into an artist.

Soul Music

Does Japanese art have a soul, a defining essence?

In Japan, religion has long been a form of perception, an exceptionally visual way of interpreting existence – and art has been a form of reverential expression.

“Japanese art has traditionally been a more intimate expression of Japanese, Shinto, Confucian and Buddhist spirituality. In particular, the most contemplative paintings, ink drawings, calligraphies, and the famous ‘art of tea’ have all been deeply impregnated with the spirit of Zen.” (Merton, 89)

According to a wide range of scholars, from religious historians to aesthetic theorists, Japanese art is “a way of spiritual experience” that “awakens the primal consciousness hidden within us” (Merton, 89-90) – both for those who contemplate it and those who create it.

“A superb artist creates a moving work of art out of a landscape within his soul.” (Ueda, 68)

As I will explain below, Japanese artists are known for their attempts to explore some of “life’s toughest questions” (Koren, 9). Japanese aesthetics embrace philosophical principles seldom addressed in the West. The Japanese language has words for subtleties of mood, emotion and metaphysics: abstract concepts that have no exact translation in other cultures. And while Western art has been known for its depiction of beauty as

“something monumental, spectacular and enduring, [Japanese art often celebrates] the minor and the hidden, the tentative and the ephemeral: things so subtle and evanescent, they are invisible to vulgar eyes.” (Koren, 50)

What makes Japanese aesthetics unique? The innate Japanese affinity for visual expression is surely part of the reason –

“[It is] a graphic mode of existing. ... Vision without commentary.”
(Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 80-82)

– but an equally important factor is that Japanese culture enjoyed centuries of insular incubation, searching for answers and defining existence with limited input from the rest of the world.

In Japan, aesthetic concepts are an integral part of daily life. As we will see in various examples below, art is an interpretation of nature; nature represents profound truths; these truths suggest appropriate modes of behavior.

“[There is] no divorce between art and life and spirituality.” (Merton, 90)

Aesthetic ideals are therefore ethical ideals, and a guide to daily living. In this sense, all people are artists: all are *shokunin*.

We see examples of this in almost all Japanese professions and art forms. Perfecting a craft is not an end in itself; it is the path to a higher order of understanding. In order to *be* your best, you must *do* your best. And vice versa. It is a moral and spiritual duty.

We hear this from philosopher and scholar of literature Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801):

“It is each man’s responsibility to do his best within his power.”

(Norinaga in: Ueda, 198)

We hear this in Ueda’s translation of the calligrapher Yusho:

“Calligraphic disciplines are ultimately spiritual and moral. The art of calligraphy becomes a ‘Way,’ that is, a way to ethical and religious perfection.” (Ueda, 184)

We hear this in the teachings of *ikebana* master Senno:

“The ultimate aim ... is to represent nature in its inmost essence; in the process of pursuing this goal the artist disciplines his mind, perfects his personality, and becomes one with the universe.” (Ueda, 86)

Some Buddhists insist that in order to reach *Nirvana*, man must abandon all earthly pursuits, including art itself – but Ueda assures us that creative acts are both necessary and liberating. As he sees it, art’s role is

“not to explain the mysteries, but to make them metaphysically comprehensible.” (Ueda, 197)

Instead of pretending to know the unknowable, instead of trying to rationalize the irrational, the Japanese artistic ideal is simple: to express the essence of being, the spirit, the soul; to express what cannot be seen as seen.

“The merging of the seer with the seen [is] a precondition, even a goal, of aesthetic experience.” (Inouye, *Archipelago*, 95)

Ever since the ‘beginning,’ Japanese ocularity – the innate visual sense that shapes so much of Japanese life – has been directly connected to animistic beliefs.

Because the *kami* reside in all things, they place the sacred within reach, they make the invisible visible. They help

“generate the lyricism that lies at the heart of classical Japanese aesthetics – whether expressed in the form of poetry or painting, ritual bathing, or sumo wrestling.” (Inouye, 38)

Along with a deep regard for figurality, this lyricism is a defining element of Japanese aesthetic identity: an appreciation for and connection to the mysteries of existence. The haiku poet Bashō calls it “poetic spirit.”

“[This goes] far beyond the realm of the *Haiku*. Indeed, it pervades all areas of creative arts. [It] leads one to follow the ways of the universe and to become a friend with things of the seasons. For a person who has the spirit, everything he sees becomes a flower, and everything he imagines turns into a moon. Those who do not see the flower are no different from barbarians, and those do not imagine the flower are akin to beasts.” (Ueda, 148)

According to Ueda, Bashō’s poetic spirit draws strength from the “creative power of the universe” (Ueda, 148). It explores the universal rhythms of life; it probes the depths of human emotions; it finds beauty and balance in nature. It drives artists to pursue and express a variety of spiritual and aesthetic ideals that are unique to

Japan. *Shokunin*, craftsman. *Satori*, enlightenment. *Yūgen*, mystery, or spirit. *Wabi-sabi*, decay. *Mono no aware*, the sadness of all things. And that's just the short list.

Consider the visual lyricism in a spray of cherry blossoms. This is not about shape or color. Western art does not have an exact phrase to describe the concept, but the Japanese language does: it is contained within the aesthetic principle known as *yūgen*.

“This spray of blossoms is the beauty of form. What creates a good form is the spirit. ... *Yūgen*, then, is the beauty not merely of appearance but of the spirit; it is inner beauty manifesting itself outwards ... the inward spirit, the true intent. It is the beauty of the innermost nature of things, the beauty of hidden truth.” (Ueda, 60)

Whether described in a *haiku* or shown in a painting, the object is nothing without its spirit. In order to capture its essence – its *yūgen* – the artist must, as the poet Bashō instructs us in Ueda's translation:

“become at one with the pine tree.” (Ueda, 158)

Whatever the subject, art without *yūgen* is incomplete. The painter Tosa Mitsuoki (1617-1691) was very clear in his warning:

“Unless the painting successfully transmits the spirit of the object, it will have nothing of the divine in it, and, if that is the case, the work is like a shrine with no god in it.” (Tosa in: Ueda, 137)

A second abstract quality, equally essential to Japanese art but little known in the West, is *wabi-sabi*.

Often called ‘the Zen of Things’ because it exemplifies many of Zen Buddhism’s core philosophical tenets, this is an aesthetic ideal that was first embraced by Zen monks and tea masters. Its most famous proponent was 16th-century tea master Rikyū: reacting against the ostentatious perfection of objects imported from China, he taught his disciples to value

“crude, anonymous, indigenous Japanese and Korean folkcraft – things *wabi-sabi* – on the same artistic level, or even higher than, slick, perfect, Chinese treasures.” (Koren, 32-33)

Rikyū found beauty in both simplicity of form and purity of function.

“It was Rikyū who reduced the size of the *chashitsu* teahouse, who introduced the rough black teabowls known as *raku* ware, who was the first to fashion flower holders from bamboo, and who reminded his disciples that ‘the tea ceremony is nothing more than boiling water, steeping tea and drinking it’.” (Richie, *A Tractate on Japanese Aesthetics*, 30)

According to aesthetic theorist Leonard Koren, *wabi-sabi* is the most conspicuous and characteristic feature of traditional Japanese beauty.

“[It] is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It is a beauty of things modest and humble. It is a beauty of things unconventional.” (Koren, 7)

Rikyū called it “the beauty of poverty” (Ueda, 93) – pared down to its essence, but with the poetry still intact. It’s “the quality that compels us to look at that something over and over and over again” (Koren, 72):

“It is everywhere-- The lonesome seacoast with a fisherman’s modest hut, small buds coming out of the snow at a mountain village, or miscellaneous flowers blooming amid the weeds on the roadside. ... It is more lasting, ... more spiritual than sensory.” (Ueda, 93)

It is also an intuitive worldview, an understanding of the evanescence of life. An appreciation of the cosmic order.

“*Wabi-sabi* can in its fullest expression be a way of life.” (Koren, 21)

A third aesthetic ideal with both moral and metaphysical implications is *mono no aware*.

A phrase coined by Norinaga, *mono no aware* is sometimes translated as an ‘awareness of impermanence’ or ‘the pathos of things.’ Norinaga himself describes his phrase as “the opposite of egoism,” the quality in any art form that inspires

empathy: the intangible something that helps us “feel with others,” “understand others” (Ueda, 202).

“It teaches the basis of ethics: what the universal true heart is like ...
why one should be kind, tolerant and sympathetic toward others.”
(Ueda, 212)

Mono no aware connects us to the ebb and flow of existence, to the pain and the beauty of our human condition. Like *yūgen* and *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese see it as an essential ingredient, a necessary dimension in artistic expression: just as a work of art without *yūgen* is like a shrine with no god, a work of art without the poignancy of *mono no aware* is like a heart without love.

Together, all three of these concepts lie within “the nucleus of the creative process” (Ueda, 218). Like three legs of a stool, they provide us with “aesthetic principles, guidelines” (Koren, 75) for both art and life. Each principle contains the assumption that, in essence, all arts are one: “an outward expression of intense inner emotion” (Ueda, 226). And each principle contains, at its core, an essential message: “the importance of transcending conventional ways of looking and thinking” (Ueda, 76).

If we heed this message, even nothingness itself is alive with possibility. Instead of being seen as empty space, as it is in the West, ‘blankness’ becomes rich in metaphysical meaning.

“[This is] *not* an emptiness that [is] merely blank and silly: an absence of knowledge without the presence of wisdom.” (Merton, 121)

It is an emptiness full of promise.

Let's return to the cherry blossoms, not just to the spray of blossoms themselves, but to the space that surrounds them:

“In metaphysical terms, the universe is in constant motion: all things are either evolving from or dissolving into nothingness. This ‘nothingness’ is not empty space. It is rather a space of potentiality. If the seas represent potential, then each thing is like a wave arising from it and returning to it.” (Koren, 45)

We see this potential in *yūgen*, in *wabi-sabi*, in *mono no aware*; we see it in *kami*, in the tenets of Zen. We see it in *shokunin*. And, if we follow Jirō's example, we see it in ourselves.

Potential is the God Within, it's what we strive to achieve. It's the status quo we try to leave behind; it's the perfection that's never quite within reach. It's the impermanence of existence that both Japanese religion and Japanese art have spent centuries trying to visualize. It's a search for deeper meaning, a state of becoming, not being – and it's what connects our sushi master in Tokyo to impressionist painters in France ... and to the ukiyo-e artists who led the first wave, back in 17th-century Edo.

The Floating World

Like so many of the great ‘sea changes’ in history, the world of *ukiyo-e* took root in repression.

Although nominally ruled by an Emperor, the de facto rulers of the Japanese people from 1195 to 1868 were the *Shogun*: hereditary military governors, selected by the Emperor and often at war with each other. Originally appointed to defeat descendants of indigenous tribes who resisted the Kyoto-based imperial court – tribes known as the *emishi* or *ainu*, sometimes referred to as the ‘hairy people’ – the *Shogun* gradually expanded their reach and took control of feudal Japan. Supported by locally-powerful armies of *samurai* (military nobility) and *sōhei* (Buddhist warrior-monks), the *Shogun* clans and their land-holding vassals, the *Daimyo*, ruled the Japanese people with an iron fist.

At first, their power was regional; but in the late 16th Century, the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), followed by the fabled ‘*Daimyo Samurai*’ Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) – the ruthless son of a peasant with skills both military and diplomatic – began subduing other leading warlords. The unification of Japan had begun.

Repression took many forms.

In 1582, Hideyoshi issued two edicts: only the military class could bear arms – and no one could change occupations. The first meant that because lower classes had no guns, they had no means of revolt; the second meant that because they couldn't change occupations, they couldn't change social rank ... and therefore could never revolt with success. Social status was now determined at birth, depending on the class of one's parents: *samurai* warriors were superior to farmers, farmers looked down on artisans, and merchants were scorned by all. Merchants seemed extraneous, useless: they sold others' goods to the feudal lords, but didn't create anything of their own. The only group less esteemed were actors – and they were considered non-persons!

Religious freedom was also curtailed. Along with the persecution of Christians, Hideyoshi turned Buddhist monasteries into military barracks; Buddhist temples into administrative institutions; peasants' swords into liquid metal and the metal into statues of Buddha. Furthermore, travel within Japan was restricted to all but the most wealthy and powerful, as was the purchase of luxurious goods. By restricting movement and acquisition, Hideyoshi controlled taste: he shaped public opinion of what was elegant and desirable – yet one more way to separate aristocracy from the lower classes.

A chilling example is offered by cultural historian Donald Richie:

“[Consider] the ostentatious all-gold teahouse of the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi, with all its gorgeous Momoyama-style paraphernalia, exhibiting true *daimyo* taste – as contrasted with the

aesthetic ideal of the warlord's own tea-master, Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591), who was himself creating many of the subtle, understated aesthetic standards we now associate with traditional Japanese art.”
(Richie, 12)

Rikyū, as we have seen in previous sections, was a master of *chanoyu*, the Zen Buddhist ritual known as ‘The Way of Tea.’ At first, he was one of the warlord's closest confidants; but over time, as he advocated a return to simplicity in all things – views directly opposed to the opulent taste of his patron – their relationship soured. In 1591, Hideyoshi ordered his tea master to commit *seppuku*, ritual suicide. Rikyū complied.

Basically, change was outlawed. After Hideyoshi's death, when Tokugawa Ieyasu rose from the rank of *Kampaku* (one of the regents representing Hideyoshi's young son) to *Shogun* in 1603, restrictions were tightened even further ... particularly when it came to contact with foreigners.

Japan had long fascinated people in other parts of the world.

The Chinese referred to the far away islands as *Nippon*: the Land of the Rising Sun. As early as the 13th century, Marco Polo had written of the fabulous treasures to be found there: gold, silver, copper, pearls. In 1542, a storm drove a Portuguese ship onto the rocky coast of Kyushu; what remained of the crew were the first Europeans to experience Japanese culture. Trade with Europe began; Christian missionaries soon followed – including Father Francisco Xavier, a

Spanish Jesuit whose efforts led to fifty churches and, by 1582, over 150,000 converts.

But by the turn of the century, the 'bamboo curtain' came down. In 1597, twenty-seven Christians were executed, and by the mid-17th century over 40,000 more had died due to famine, disease and outright butchery. Trade also fared badly: a rivalry between European interests led to the 1624 expulsion of all Spaniards, the 1639 expulsion of all Portuguese, and the 1641 confinement of all Dutch to a tiny man-made island in Nagasaki Bay. Trade with these *namban-jin* ('barbarians from the south') was reduced to only two ships a year.

“From now on, Japan would develop in [near] isolation and complete self-sufficiency; wrapped in the iron mantle of the Tokugawa warlords, its people would continue to thrive in secrecy, shielded from the prying gaze of most of the world.” (Neuer, Liberson & Yoshida, *Ukiyo-e: 250 Years of Japanese Art*, 19)

For close to 300 years, Japan's social and economic class structures were nominally frozen in place.

Culture, however, was a different story.

With the advent of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Japan's seat of power shifted from Hideyoshi's fortress in Osaka to Edo (now known as Tokyo). Once a tiny fishing village, Edo grew rapidly into a prosperous city: peasants fled the countryside, hoping for work as manual laborers, while uprooted *samurai*,

unemployed during peacetime, poured into the city as well. A new edict required *daimyo* to reside in Edo for a part of the time and to leave their families there whenever they returned to their provinces. Because of these changes, despite social restrictions, class distinctions evolved. With two residences to maintain, *daimyo* grew poorer; without wars to sustain them, once-wealthy *samurai* became bureaucrats and farmers. Thanks to newly-learned skills, former peasants now called themselves artisans. Even the lowly merchants gained status: because Edo's burgeoning population needed products and services, the vendors grew richer; and because of the profits they made, they went beyond selling rice and became money-lenders for the newly debt-laden *daimyo*.

For the first time in Japanese history, a middle class was forming. But because merchants still had no political means to improve their social ranking, and no right to travel, they spent their newfound wealth on art and entertainment in Edo.

“Oppressed by a Shogunate that severely curtailed any productive development of their wealth, they had no alternative but to dissipate.”

(Neuer, Liberson & Yoshida, 27)

This unprecedented indulgence spawned a world full of gaiety and exuberance, a constantly shifting subculture of travelling performers, high-profile courtesans, and people of questionable reputation. The merchants weren't the only ones to spend time and money in the pursuit of pleasure, however. People from all classes began to frequent

“teahouses, restaurants near *Ryogoku* Bridge, street fairs, seasonal festival sites, *kabuki* theaters, and the facilities within *Yoshiwara*, Edo’s licensed pleasure quarter.” (Karin Breuer, *Japanesque*, 2)

Kabuki became a centerpiece of middle class culture. Passages near the theaters were filled with teahouses, shops and souvenir stalls; productions featured lavish costumes, fantastic make-up and magnificent sets. A synthesis of both lowbrow and highbrow – folk plays and dances, religious ceremonies and even puppet shows interwoven with classical *Noh* dramas – *Kabuki* performances offered something for everyone. To the delight of most audiences, some even contained social commentary or satirical messages ... until a new government prohibition or injunction forced the play to shut down.

Immortalized by Buddhist priest-turned-writer Asai Ryoi (c. 1612-1691) in his book *Ukiyo Monogatari* (1666), this new segment of Japanese society represented far more than social change: it signified a radically altered philosophical outlook. *Ukiyo* (‘the floating world’) was originally a Buddhist concept, reminding people that this world is transitory, and that their energy should therefore be devoted to higher rebirth in the next life. Now, however, Asai was using the term to celebrate the pleasures of life here and now:

“Living only for the moment, gazing at the moon, snow, cherry blossoms and autumn leaves, enjoying wine, women and song, drifting along with the current of life, like a gourd floating down a river:

this is what we call *ukiyo*.” (Asai, *Ukiyo Monogatari, Tales of the Floating World*).

Asai’s book was enormously popular. The tale of a Buddhist priest who attains enlightenment through a life of debauchery, it echoed the Zen concept of wisdom gained through everyday activities. The term ‘*ukiyo*’ soon became a household name for lower-class life in early Edo: an emerging culture that would one day be world-famous.

It also became the name for a new and democratic trend in art. Eager for self-expression, and no longer able to stomach the constant repression of the Tokugawa Shoguns, the citizens of Edo needed an art form of their own. Something beyond the unwieldy pseudo-Chinese screens, moralistic Confucian tableaux and costly murals of the Japanese upper class. Something beyond *kareji*, the ostentatious splendor favored by the *daimyo*. Something more *wabi-sabi*.

They found it in *ukiyo-e*:

“prints and sketches which captured the essence of Edo’s rootless, urban society.” (Neuer, Liberson & Yoshida, 23)

This was a bold departure from ancient classical traditions. Reflecting the passions of the demi-monde, depicting life in the home and on the street as it was seen and experienced, these inexpensive woodblock prints flouted aesthetic norms and conventions.

The prints first emerged after the great fire of Edo in 1657. Over the course

of three days, 100,000 lives and more than two-thirds of the buildings were destroyed, along with almost every trace of old Kyoto-Osaka culture. This was a substantive change: the art owned by the more privileged classes had been a weighty influence; but once that was lost, originality and experimentation had room to flourish.

It also helped that the townspeople – particularly the merchants, the shopkeepers and tradesmen of Edo, whose fortunes grew even more as a result of the fire – needed art for the homes built to replace those that had burned. This was not without irony: in part because of the fire, the ‘least creative’ members of the Japanese social hierarchy became champions of the arts.

“[This] freed the artist’s imagination and glorified his mundane subjects.” (Ives, *Great Wave*, 21)

Another important reason for the new art form’s success was the increase in Japanese literacy. As more and more people learned to read, the demand for books rose – and this created a demand for illustrations. Suddenly, shockingly, art that had always been the exclusive domain of the upper classes was now being mass-produced along with the books. Even better, the lower classes could finally afford it.

The end result? An unprecedented demand for willing and able artists.

One of the earliest artists known for his *ehon* – popular book illustrations – was Hishikawa Moronobu (1618-1694). When his small but vivid compositions

began to attract more attention than the texts themselves, Moronobu began to design his own separate, single-sheet prints in the 1670s. The novelty swiftly took hold, and other artists soon followed suit.

“Moronobu, Kiyonobu and their followers rejected stale subjects and rigid canons and founded a popular, vital sensibility [focused on] daily pastimes: the theater and the café, picnics and boating parties, busy streets and private households – a celebration of ordinary scenes and events. *Ukiyo-e* prints were popular and cheap; sold on city streets, they were the posters, the billboards and the picture postcards of their day.” (Ives, 14-15)

This represented a significant cultural shift: lower-class content and affordable art meant that power was being transferred from the highest class to the lowest.

It also endorsed Shinto and Zen beliefs over the oppressive Shogunate form of Buddhism. Echoing the message of Asai’s book, aesthetic theorist Makoto Ueda confirms that this late 17th-century pursuit of the “gay, pleasure loving world of newly emerging Japan” and the woodblock prints that portrayed it both expressed a form of Zen enlightenment: artists were finally free to practice their craft and search for perfection without leaving “the world of common men” (Ueda, 148).

Over the next 250 years, prints made from woodblocks became the dominant art form, not just in Edo, but throughout Japan. Moronobu’s success with single-sheet prints swiftly led to new applications: *hashira-e* (pillar prints, designed

for the tall wooden columns between rice paper screens inside Japanese homes); *bijin-ga* (images of beautiful women, often shown bathing); *kabuki-e* (theatrical posters); *meisho-e* (images of famous places); *e-goyomi* (calendars); and the infamous *shunga* (albums of erotic art inspired by life in the *Yoshiwara*, the dry riverbed which had become Edo's red-light district).

“The *Yoshiwara* supplied ukiyo-e artists with a large percentage of their themes. Many prints served as advertisements for leading brothels.” (Neuer, Liberson & Yoshida, 25)

At first, prints were monochromatic; color was applied only by hand and only for special commissions. Then came technical innovations: color printing, due to the invention of new dyes; a lacquer-like luster, due to new paints; a clarity of image, due to a new device that held the woodblock in place without smudging the paper. By the 1740s, multiple woodblocks were used to print areas of color. From the 1760s, the success of Harunobu's *nishiki-e* (brocade prints made with ten or more blocks) led to full-color production – and by the 1770s, there were few Japanese who didn't own at least one woodblock print.

“By the third quarter of the 18th century, *ukiyo-e* reigned supreme among the graphic arts enjoyed by Japan's rapidly expanding middle class.” (Neuer, Liberson & Yoshida, 37)

More important than format and color, however, was the design of the image itself. Supported by a meticulous arrangement of lines and forms, unstudied poses and novel perspectives became the essence of *ukiyo-e*. A new vocabulary of

textures and patterns helped distinguish different objects and surfaces: water, land, walls, floors, clothes. Empty space was equally active, creating tension between backgrounds and figures.

“Every object, every gesture, even the most free, the most mobile, seems framed. ... Yet this frame is invisible: the Japanese thing is not outlined, illuminated; ... around it there is: nothing but empty space.” (Barthes, 43)

Like so many aspects of Japanese art, the use of empty space was another outgrowth of Zen Buddhism:

“Zen painting tells us just enough to alert us to what is *not* and is nevertheless ‘right there.’ “ (Merton, 6)

It was an intuitive mix. According to cultural historian Donald Richie, the driving force behind *ukiyo-e* was always process, not product, intuition rather than rational thought. For him, the key word for that era was *zuihitsu*: customarily used to describe unstructured personal musings, its more literal meaning was

“follow the brush.” (Richie, 12)

In other words, Japanese artists were at their best when they avoided pre-planned design and embraced uncertainty: using the brush to see where it took them.

Zuihitsu is what made each work of art different ... and some of them special.

Throughout the 18th century, portraits were the primary focus. Katsukawa Shunso (1726-1793) was known for his contribution to realism: prints of kabuki actors with individual traits and features. Torii Kiyonaga (1752-1815) was a master of *bijin-ga*: the sensuous portraits of courtesans, “immaculate flesh suffused with light” and an “undulating, almost hypnotic flow of line” (Neuer, 37). Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1831) created both “breathtaking treasures of the natural world” (*The Insect Book, The Silver World, Gifts of the Ebb Tide*) and “intimate depictions of human passion and temperament”: a series of females with “warm palpable flesh, quivering flame-like essence, elusive intimations of personality” (Neuer, 38-39). Like Kiyonaga, Utamaro’s “pure, flexible lines” were full of “delicacy” and “grace” (Ives, 42). The revered but mysterious Toshusai Sharaku (dates unknown) produced portraits of *Kabuki* actors and *Sumo* wrestlers, all completed during a brilliant ten months in 1794-95. Some speculate that Sharaku was in fact the young painter and printmaker, Hokusai, working under a pseudonym.

In the 19th century, however, the focus changed. As the Shogunate’s power slowly waned, unrestricted travel was at long last allowed. Portraits gave way to landscapes, intricate networks of trees, rivers, hillsides, buildings, all executed with a fine grasp of perspective. Many were seen from new vantage points, some abnormally low, others from a bird’s point of view – and all showed profound respect for nature.

Two artists emerged as masters.

The first was Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), a bold formalist known for his “indomitable energy,” “daring almost violent design,” “ineffable stillness of form,” and a “deep Zen-like communion with the essential form of things” (Neuer, 38-39). His 15-volume book of sketches, *Hokusai Manga*, influenced the modern form of comics known by the same name – and his masterworks from the 1820s, *The 36 views of Mount Fuji*, including the iconic *Under the Wave Off Kanagawa (Great Wave)*, are among the best-known works of Japanese art.

The second was Andō Hiroshige (1797-1858): a serene, poetic painter known for his atmospheric evocations of nature. His landscapes often celebrated “the magical trilogy: moon, rain and snow” and were consistently filled with “a sense of wonderment” (Neuer, 46). The new freedom to travel, plus an invitation to join a royal procession, led to his own masterwork, *The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido*. A 300-mile journey through breathtaking scenery, it explored the effects of weather, wind and water on both land and people, and secured his fame as a world-class artist.

All of these artists were true *shokunin*. Their mix of persistence and passion was matched only by their humility, their understanding that perfection was something to strive for, but not something they could attain. Witness this statement by Hokusai:

“From the age of six I have had a mania for sketching the forms of things. From about the age of fifty I produced a number of designs, yet of all I drew prior to the age of seventy there is truly nothing of

any great note. At the age of seventy-three I finally came to understand somewhat the true quality of birds, animals, insects – the vital nature of grasses and trees. Therefore, at eighty I shall gradually have made progress, at ninety I shall have penetrated even further the deeper meaning of things, at one hundred I shall have become truly marvelous, and at one hundred and ten, each dot, each line shall surely possess a life of its own.” (Neuer, Liberson & Yoshida, 45)

Hokusai died at age 89 – just four years before the summer of 1853, when the black warships of Commodore Perry entered Edo’s Uruga Bay. Cannons were fired ... and after nearly three hundred years of *sakoku* – ‘the secluded country’ – the Westernization of Japan began.

Change came swiftly. In 1854, the Convention of Kanagawa was signed; foreign trade treaties with other nations soon followed. In 1866, the last of the Shoguns died. Civil conflicts – primarily driven by isolationist *samurai* hoping to regain their lost status and power – urged Japanese people to “Revere the Emperor, Expel the Foreigner” ... but by 1868, the struggle was over. The feudal order of the mighty Tokugawa was replaced by imperial rule, and one of the first imperial edicts was Article Five of the world-changing Charter Oath:

“Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world, so that the foundations of the empire may be strengthened.” (Lambourne, 7)

Known as the *Meiji* Restoration – ‘the Period of Enlightened Rule’ – the next

fifty years brought modernization to Japan, and Japanese culture to the rest of the world. The goal was to mix

“Eastern ethics and Western science.” (Takashina & Rimer, *Paris in Japan*, 39)

Not all the results were positive – but for now, Japan was still ‘pure’: still strongly connected to nature, still deeply rooted in its animist past. Still the same mountainous islands with rugged shores that both Hokusai and Hiroshige had immortalized while they ‘followed their brush.’

Hiroshige was the last of the great woodblock artists. His work was in high demand; yet despite his fame (like so many *ukiyo-e* artists), he never earned much money. In 1856, he finally ‘retired from the world’ and spent the last two years of his life in a monastery, painting. Just before his death, he wrote a poem that was found by his bedside:

"I leave my brush in the East
And set forth on my journey.
I shall see the famous places in the Western Land."

(Isaburo Oka, *Hiroshige: Japan's Great Landscape Artist*, 68)

Little did he know how true that would be. Some speculate that because he never traveled beyond Kyoto, the last line of his poem may simply mean the Western end of Japan; others suggest that it refers to the afterworld, to the Buddhist *Nirvana* ‘Pure Land.’ Whatever his hope, Hiroshige’s future travels surely exceeded his dream: the images that he and his fellow *ukiyo-e* artists created not

only reached our 'Western Land,' but their effect on our art – and our lives – has been profound.

French Revolutions

In the mid 1800s, French art was stuck in a rut. For over 200 years – ever since 1648, when Louis XIV founded the *Académie des Beaux Arts* – the world of 'approved art' was controlled by national institutions. There was only one road to success:

“Students started by perfecting their drawing technique. Not until they had mastered this were they allowed near any pigment – and then only to copy the works of old masters.” (Kuhl, *Impressionism: A Celebration of Light*, 18)

There was nothing intuitive about it. The accepted style of the day was

“scenes from ancient history, the Bible, and mythology; clear composition, well-delineated figures and objects, and barely visible brushstrokes.” (Kuhl, 13)

Studies culminated in competitions: first, the *Grand Prix de Rome*; then the *Salon de Paris*. Described as “the Parisian temple of art” (Kuhl, 52), the *Salon* was “a tradition whose roots lay in absolutist France” (Kuhl, 17). Every two years, close to 8,000 artists submitted a single work. Less than half were accepted. For those

who got in, it was the official 'stamp of approval'; for those who didn't, their career was effectively over.

"There was nowhere else for artists to exhibit their paintings." (Kuhl, 17)

Young artists were frustrated. Like the Japanese artists of the Floating World, they yearned for relevance, for a conduit between their potential and the world around them, a chance to throw off the shackles of a repressive regime and follow individual instincts.

In 1863, hoping to ease tensions, Napoleon III established the *Salon des Refusés*. Intended as a place for marginal artists to exhibit their work, the idea backfired: instead of appreciating 'original, courageous art,' critics scoffed. Artists' protests increased. Later the same year, a manifesto was issued: written by poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire, it condemned the establishment and exhorted French painters to

"turn their attention to modern life." (Ives, 23)

Baudelaire's words struck a chord. Entranced by the urban pace of Paris, by the wine, women and song that came with it – again, a direct parallel with the social upheavals of Japan's Edo period – he was the first French writer to use the term *modernité*. He wanted French art to reflect the here and now:

“the transitory, the fleeting, the random, which make up one half of art, whose other half is the eternal and immutable.” (Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*, 13)

His message became a mantra for students of the *Beaux Arts*. Their attempts to experiment, to paint a portrait or landscape that didn't represent history, however, were scorned: “That requires no artistry!” (Kuhl, 19). United by their desire for change, a small group of unknowns – Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, Frédéric Bazille, Pierre-Auguste Renoir – found refuge in the studio of Charles Gleyre, an artist who encouraged experimentation. They were budding *shokunin*, eager to ‘follow the brush’; but when they voiced interest in finding subjects outside the studio, scenes from daily life, natural landscapes, even Gleyre was cautious. Monet later recalled his former mentor's advice:

“Remember, young man, when painting a figure, one should always recall the Ancients. Nature is very good as an aid to study, ... but it holds no other interest. Style, you understand, is everything.” (Kuhl, 27)

During the restrictive climate of the Second Empire, “landscape painters were regarded ... as opponents of the regime” (Kuhl, 21). Count Nieuwerkerke, the Académie's conservative Superintendent of Fine Arts, described landscape art as

“the painting of democrats, of men who don't change their linen and who mean to force themselves on polite society. This art displeases and disgusts me.” (Kuhl, 21)

The idea of painting outdoors, of painting real life, was anathema. All art was conceived and executed in a studio; all scenes involving nature were

“generally Italianate, featuring a balanced color scheme and harmonious composition and not infrequently dotted with ruins.” (Kuhl, 21)

Then came a series of fortunate accidents, a mix of misfortune and progress that permanently changed our approach to art, not just in France but all over the world.

Beginning in late 1863, financial troubles shut down Gleyre’s studio. The hiatus, plus a growing network of railways and portable oil paints (sold for the first time in tin tubes), provided just what was needed. Monet and his friends began to make trips to the Fontainebleau forest and the Normandy coast. They traded the claustrophobia of studio painting for

“the opportunity to paint directly from nature.” (Guth, *Japan & Paris*, 78)

It was a radical change. First came content: suddenly, their focus was

“everyday life, whether ... at the ballet, in cafes, or on the banks of the Seine.” (Kuhl, 8)

Then came style. Unlike work approved by the *Académie*, their paintings no longer told stories. Instead, they captured impressions:

“what the eye sees rather than what the head knows.” (Kuhl, 9)

Their inspiration? Two hundred years of *ukiyo-e*, first discovered in a shipment of Japanese porcelain: discarded woodblock prints that had been used as packing materials. Wrapping paper.

“The bright flat woodcuts of the Edo schools were to change the course of Western pictorial art.” (Ives, 14)

Traces of Eastern culture had been seeping into Europe for centuries – but it wasn't until Japanese trade opened up with the West in the mid 1850s that the French were exposed to '*Japoneries*.' Among the first to appreciate these exotic imports were Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, two brothers who began collecting prints and then wrote about them. In one of their novels, the hero lounges in his apartment, surrounded by Japanese albums.

“Forgetting the gray Paris day outside his window, he is transported by ‘crimson sunsets,’ ‘white beaches, teeming with crabs,’ and ‘women gliding along in river boats, leaning nonchalantly over fleeting and poetic waters.’ ” (de Goncourt, *Manette Salomon*, in: Ives, 12)

The brothers also wrote personal journals, now better known than their novels. In one entry, Edmond de Goncourt exults over his discovery of erotic *shunga* ('pillow books'):

“I look on them as being beyond obscenity. ... The violence of the lines, the unexpectedness of the conjunctions, the arrangement of the

accessories, the caprice in the poses and the objects, ... the landscape of the genital parts. Looking at them I think of Greek art, boredom in perfection, an art that will never free itself from the crime of being academic!" (de Goncourt in: Ives, 34)

For Monet and his colleagues, *ukiyo-e* prints were a stunning discovery. Despite their feudal origins, the images all seemed so '*moderne*': in content, composition, color – and, perhaps most importantly, mood. There was an unexpected feeling of

"calm, quiet, melancholy" (Breuer, 96);

"an extraordinary unity, a rather subdued radiance." (Pissarro in: Maloon & Pissarro, *Camille Pissarro, the first Impressionist*, 19)

The prints contained an essence of emotion and spirit that French art had no words for: *mono no aware*; *yūgen*. They also echoed an approach to life that was far more Zen Buddhist than Western.

"The Zen experience is a direct grasp of the *unity* of the invisible and the visible." (Merton, 37)

Japanese artist Koide Narashige later described the difference:

"In Western painting, there is something immovable, heavy, a kind of inviolability that seems a property of the oil paints themselves, [while Japanese art] shows in general a quality reminiscent of the delicacy of

paper, of sliding doors, a kind of fleeting softness, quite insubstantial.”
(Takashina & Rimer, 103)

This ephemeral quality was just what the young artists needed. Not only was it a perfect antidote to “the pomp and decadence of the French Academy” (Ives, 14), but it also was validation. According to art critic Ernest Chesneau, the exposure to Japanese sensibilities confirmed their own

“personal ways of seeing, feeling, understanding and interpreting nature. The result was a redoubling of individual originality instead of a cowardly submission to Japanese art.” (Ives, *Great Wave*, 21)

It was, once again, an originality born of repression. As has been the case throughout much of history, these young French unknowns and the printmakers of Edo shared a similar impetus:

“The Japanese printmakers they admired had fought [their own form of] oppression two hundred years earlier.” (Ives, *Great Wave*, 14)

The French rebels didn’t learn this till later – but for now, just the sight of the Japanese prints gave them courage. Despite *Salon* rejections and critical scorn, Monet and his friends continued their break with tradition: aesthetic, social, political, and, as time would prove, philosophical.

The first ruptures were easily visible.

“The slaves of Greek symmetry suddenly [became] impassioned over a plate on which the flower [was] not set dead in the middle, over a fabric in which harmony [was] not achieved by a gradation of tints but by a knowledgeable juxtaposition of raw colors.” (Lambourne, 32)

After decades of subdued tints, the colors displayed in Japanese prints were – literally! – a breath of fresh air.

“Utamaro’s luscious hues, the ‘peachblossom pink,’ ‘sky blue,’ honey yellow,’ and ‘tea green’ became [their] colors too.” (Ives, 53)

Art critic and novelist Emile Zola (1840-1902) was delighted by the “splendid color patches” (Ives, 23) that began popping up in French art. Later, looking back, Monet explained the change:

“We needed the arrival of Japanese albums in our midst, before anyone dared to sit down on a river bank, and juxtapose on canvas a roof which was bright red, a wall which was white, a green poplar, a yellow road and blue water. Before the example given by the Japanese, this was impossible: the painter always lied.” (Lambourne, 48)

Finally, after decades of copying history, of painting ‘ideal beauty,’ this small band of artists began telling the truth. They painted everyday scenes and objects, *en plein air*, exactly as they saw them:

“the incredible effects of the sky, the stripes on a mushroom, the transparency of the jellyfish.” (Lambourne, 34)

As Monet explained it, they tried to forget the object. Instead, they tried to capture its essence, its ‘thingness.’

“Here’s a small square of blue, there’s a pink rectangle, there’s a strip of yellow. We painted the shape and color exactly as we experienced it.”

(Kuhl, 78)

It was their way of capturing *yūgen*. Of ‘becoming one with the pine tree.’

In sum, they discarded tradition. Instead of obeying old rules, they adapted composition and technique to suit the moment. In some cases, the center of a canvas was empty; figures were cut off by the edge of the picture. In others, “objects were merely hinted at with a few brief brushstrokes” (Kuhl, 9). Paintings were expressive. Many resembled sketches.

And many resembled the extraordinary prints on display at the 1867 world trade fair, *L’Exposition Universelle*. France was the host; Japan agreed to participate. One of the first Japanese to set foot in Europe – ever – was Prince Tokugawa Akitake, sent by his Emperor with a selection of *ukiyo-e*. The prints took Paris by storm. Suddenly, all things Japanese were in fashion: silks, fans, ivories, bronzes, porcelains, enamels, lacquered goods; the popular *Société du Jing-lar*, a private club where “kimonos and chopsticks supplanted frockcoats and flatware” (Ives, 12).

Even scholars were impressed: art historian Philippe Burty (1830-1890) coined the word *Japonisme*

“to designate a new field of study of artistic, historic and ethnographic borrowings from the arts of Japan.” (Lambourne, 6)

The effect was gradual, but profound:

“Japanese art challenged, and in some ways even revolutionized, European art, offering not only new ways of looking at space, light, and color, but even implicitly a new value system where decorative arts and the craftsman became as important as ‘fine’ arts and the salon painter.” (Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime*, 8)

For Monet and his *confrères*, this felt official: surely their own efforts were about to be recognized. They spent months outside painting; they spent nights at the *Café Guerbois*, debating selections. Full of hope, they finally submitted one work apiece to the *Salon*, but the jurors’ minds – most of whom were professors from the *Académie des Beaux Arts* – were still closed.

“[They] reacted with shock, indignation and outrage, believing that such banal subjects had no place in art, especially when painted so clumsily and hastily.” (Kuhl, 12)

One after another, the young artists’ radical visions were either rejected outright, or hung way up high where no one could see them. Frédéric Bazille wrote to his parents:

“I’m not sending anything else to the jury. It’s just too ridiculous ... to be exposed to their whims. This view is shared by a dozen or so gifted

young people. We've therefore decided to rent a large studio each year in which we can show however many pieces we wish." (Rewald, *History of Impressionism*, 311)

The Old Guard was shocked: this had never been done. Critics predicted disaster, but the outcasts didn't flinch.

"What could we do? It's not just about painting, you have to sell, you have to live." (Monet in: Kuhl, 101)

By the late 1860s, the group included 30+ artists. Monet, Sisley, Bazille and Renoir – the original team from Gleyre's studio – were now painting alongside Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro, Félix Bracquemond and Gustave Caillebotte, to name just a few.

In 1868, Manet took the first plunge: he used his inheritance to host his own solo show. The foreword in his catalog, written by Émile Zola, vehemently defended his work – but no paintings sold. Even so, Manet refused to give up. He still scorned the Classics. He still loved *ukiyo-e*. He even returned Zola's favor by painting the art critic's portrait ... with two Japanese prints on the wall in the background. It was his way of telling the *Salon* what really mattered.

"Manet's portrait of Emile Zola ... is almost a manifesto." (Wichmann, *Japonisme*, 9)

Manet's friends began planning their own shows, but life got in the way. In the summer of 1870, Napoleon III declared war on Prussia. In the months to come,

German forces laid siege to Paris; radical Socialists put the Commune in power; French government troops finally regained control. Twenty eight-year-old Bazille was killed in battle. He never got to exhibit his work as planned, but his friends did ... with mixed results.

In 1874, after founding the *Société Anonyme des Artistes, Peintres, Sculpteurs, Gravures etc.*, Bazille's friends held their first group exhibition. Among the works presented was Monet's "*Impression, Soleil Levant*," a shimmering vision of the port at Le Havre. The painting was ridiculed. Even worse, a satirical review of the show turned Monet's title into a label for the entire group of insurgents: '*Les Impressionistes*.' The name stuck – and critics were merciless.

"What freedom, what ease of workmanship! Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than that seascape." (Rewald, 323)

"These self-appointed artists call themselves subversives, Impressionists. They take up canvas, paint and brush, apply a few colors at random next to one another and then sign the thing." (Kuhl, 118)

"These pictures are only sketches and poorly worked out, ... nothing more than patches of color lying next to each other." (Kuhl, 21)

"Pissarro must be made to understand that trees are not violet, the sky is not the color of fresh butter, and in no country on Earth are the things he paints to be seen." (Rewald, 321)

Renoir was equally scornful ... in reverse.

“There are barely fifteen art lovers in the whole of Paris capable of recognizing a painter who is not represented in the *Salon*. And at least eighty thousand who will buy any old canvas by an artist who is.”

(Rewald, 317)

The Impressionists left the *Salon* behind and didn't look back. They were poor, yes, but undaunted. And their negative standing in the *Académie's* eyes turned out to be liberating.

“Precisely because the genre was held in such low regard, these artists were able to try out new painting techniques and theories.” (Kuhl, 22)

Instead of trying to please jurors and satisfy critics, they were free to experiment.

My barn has burned down.
Now I can see the moon.

~Mizuta Masahide (1657-1723)

Free to become true *shokunin*.

Follow The Brush

Impressionist art, at its best, is a lot like a *haiku*.

“Like poetry, painting should not describe; it should suggest.” (Ueda, 139)

It is also a lot like calligraphy.

“Ideographic writing is painting’s inspiration. ... The brush can slide, twist, lift off, the stroke being made, so to speak, in the volume of the air. [These are] ‘gestures of the idea’.” (Barthes, 86-91)

It also owes a lot to Zen Buddhism.

“Zen merely enables us to wake up and become aware. It does not teach, it points.” (Merton, 49-50)

According to Japanese artists of earlier centuries, art is a representation of the ephemeral, the impermanent. Like all of life, it is meant to be seized on the fly, appreciated while it lasts, and relinquished with grace. The great *haiku* poet Bashō knew that inspiration is fleeting:

“If you get a flash of insight into an object, record it before it fades away in your mind.” (Bashō in: Ueda, 159)

Bashō also knew that inspiration is intuitive, that it comes from somewhere deep in the soul. As explained earlier in this paper (*Soul Music*, p. 20), this is the force guiding artists when they ‘follow their brush.’

“The poetic spirit [goes] far beyond the realm of the *Haiku*. Indeed, it pervades all creative arts.” (Bashō in: Ueda, 147)

Whether *haiku* poets, calligraphers or *ukiyo-e* printmakers, the goal of Japanese artists has long been a mix of aesthetic and spiritual: to capture the essence of life, the potential within ... all while understanding that perfection can never be attained. The Impressionists understood this as well – and as a result, the parallels between their art and the Japanese art they so admired are both visible and intrinsic. As art historian Théodore Duret (1838-1927) wrote in his seminal book on the French Avant-Garde, *ukiyo-e* artists were

“the first and most perfect of the Impressionists.” (Duret, *Critique d'avant-garde*, 212)

For Monet and his colleagues, this was a compliment. Even though the term ‘Impressionist’ was scornful in origin, it represented them well. They *did* want to suggest, not describe. They *did* want to convey impressions. And although they were friends, and often inspired each other, they also knew how to ‘follow their brush’: how to follow their own personal instincts and passions. They knew, as mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) has put it, how to ‘follow their bliss.’

In other words, these young French insurgents were part of a group, but they each had their own voice. As critic Emile Zola wrote in 1876, just two years after his friends held their first group exhibition,

“[They are] described as ‘Impressionists’ because most of them are striving visibly to convey true-to-life impressions ... but fortunately they

all have their own individual style, their own unique way of seeing reality.” (Zola in: Kuhl, 58)

In the best of senses, they each were their own form of *shokunin*: that idiosyncratic mix of craftsman-plus-artist, honing skills, taking risks, striving for their own ‘personal best’ ... always searching for guidance from the spirit within.

What made each of them special? What do they share with Japanese artists that makes them *shokunin*?

Édouard Manet (1832 - 1883)

“One doesn’t paint a landscape, the sea, or a figure. One paints the impression of a particular time of day.” (Kuhl, 113)

One of the first 19th-century painters to paint modern life, Manet was a pivotal figure in the transition from Classicism to Impressionism and – even though he never exhibited with them – he was a beloved mentor to many younger Impressionists.

“There is only one way to be truthful: at first glance, put down what you see. If it works, it works; if it doesn’t, you go back and start again. Anything else is a waste of time.” (Manet in: Kuhl, 144)

Manet began as a Realist, praised by Salon jurors. To their disappointment, however, he avoided history and preferred painting people at leisure: gypsies, beggars, musicians; friends in cafes. Beginning in the 1860s, he was profoundly

influenced by *ukiyo-e*. He was “one of the first western artists to realize the power of swift, *sumi*-brushed strokes” with “black inkwash,” “fluid sweeps and daubs,” “deceptively casual line,” “spatial simplifications,” “spontaneity,” and “an oriental respect for the white of the page” (Ives, 31-32). Salon jurors were shocked, but Manet kept exploring, evolving.

“Standing your ground in the face of a majority requires courage, the hallmark trait of the iconoclast.” (Sarah Lewis, *The Rise*, 133)

Manet left Realism behind. One example: his lithograph of two whimsical felines, *Les Chats*. A poster designed to promote a book, it echoed the silhouette style of Japanese woodcuts with “dramatic clarity of design, [and] cleverly foreshortened, flat shapes” (Ives, 25).

“Like Hokusai, Manet captured the vital characteristics of his subjects without an unnecessary line.” (Ives, 27)

Edgar Degas (1834 - 1917)

Like Manet, Degas’s early works were rooted in Realism. He held the Old Masters in high regard, copying their works for many years. It wasn’t until 1864, when Manet first introduced him to *ukiyo-e*, that he began to experiment.

While remaining a Realist, Degas explored contemporary subjects, aerial perspectives and asymmetrical compositions. “Without pointing directly to things Japanese,” he absorbed their “subtle use of line, the daring foreshortenings, and unusual organization of space” (Ives, 35). He also embraced their pursuit of

honesty: a “heightened awareness of the world about him, an eye for the unusual in the everyday, the remarkable in the ordinary, the timeless in the momentary” (Ives, 44). Like Utamaro and others, he found compelling subjects in dance studios and houses of prostitution.

“Just as the *ukiyo-e* masters had rebelled against the conventional academic subjects of their day and turned to the life of the city, to its shopgirls and courtesans, Degas rejected legendary goddesses and queens in favor of Parisian laundresses and ballerinas.” (Ives, 35)

Degas was fascinated by the form and volume of bodies, by the fluid lines that the Japanese used to define body contours: “the expressive line most often seen depicting a Japanese woman’s back and the nape of her neck” (Ives, 41). He often focused on posture, combining spontaneity and expressiveness with the western tradition of psychologically acute portraiture. The result? Emotionally charged depictions of dancers and nudes that recalled both the *bijin-ga* by Torii Kiyonaga and the bathers of Hokusai’s *Manga*.

“Many of Degas’s nonchalant bourgeois bathers owe their existence to Hokusai’s peasant women, awkwardly bent over the wash tubs, legs akimbo, arms askew.” (Ives, 39)

At once vibrant and pensive, his studies and sketches were a welcome relief from Western idealizations of ‘the female form divine’ and their conventional poses.

Degas called himself a Realist, but he exhibited with the Impressionists and

never lost his love for *ukiyo-e*. When he encountered a young Japanese artist studying at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, he was shocked:

“When one has the good fortune to be born in Japan, why come here to subject oneself to the discipline of professors?” (Guth, 171)³

By the time of his death, Degas owned well over one hundred Japanese woodcuts and albums.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841 - 1919)

Son of a working-class family, Renoir’s first experience as an artist was painting designs on fine china in a porcelain factory. In 1862, he began studying art at the studio of Charles Gleyre along with Monet and other young hopefuls. Some of his early works were accepted by the Salon, but not all; he soon broke with tradition and joined forces with his Impressionist friends.

Renoir’s style was his own: a mix of East and West. Like his friends at Gleyre’s studio and the *ukiyo-e* artists whom they admired, he focused on everyday life and candid situations. His images were suffused with light and saturated with color. His brushstrokes were visible and expressive. He often painted outdoors, sometimes alongside Monet:

“Light in its evanescence, in its transparent brightness and its colored

³ NB: Ironically, while the Impressionists were inspired by Japanese art, the Japanese were inspired by Western art and lost interest in *ukiyo-e*. The two nations’ exposure to each other’s cultures led them in opposite directions – hence the Japanese art student at the Académie!

reflections became the principal element in [their paintings].”

(Wichmann, 268)

Renoir found color in shadows, and tenderness in expressions. His warmly sensuous nudes evoked the lines of Utamaro, then dissolved them with brushstrokes: they became fluid curves bathed in natural light, fused with the objects around them.

Of all the Impressionists, Renoir enjoyed the most commercial success – but even so, he continued to explore new possibilities:

“I regret to say I am still experimenting, feeling unsatisfied and wiping everything off, time after time.” (Rewald, 154)

Like Hokusai, like Jirō, Renoir had the passion and humility of a true *shokunin*. He also had the persistence: in the final years of his life, despite severe arthritis, he continued painting from his wheel chair – with his canvas on rollers and brush strapped to his hand.

In a letter to his dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel, Renoir explained his philosophy:

“One should do the best possible. That’s all.” (Distel, *Renoir*, 132)

Claude Monet (1840 - 1926)

“How can one convey by means of paint, the grass swaying in the wind, the ripples on the surface of water, the fluffiness of newly-fallen snow,

the crackling fragility of melting ice?” (Monet in: Brodskaja, *Monet*, 168)

Monet was always drawn to nature. When he first visited the Louvre in Paris, he saw artists copying paintings by the Old Masters. Mystified, he chose to sit by the window, painting instead what he saw outside. Not long after, in the early 1860s, he came across twelve volumes of Hokusai prints (*Manga*) in his hometown of Le Havre. He bought them – and the impact stayed with him. For the rest of his life, his goal was

“to capture the light and atmosphere of the landscape.” (Guth, 102)

Even before Gleyre’s studio closed, Monet kept urging his classmates to start painting *en plein air*:

“Everything that is painted directly on the spot has a strength, a power, a sureness of touch that one doesn’t find in the Studio.” (Monet in: Brodskaja, 24)

For him, nature was a workshop. Every day, he dressed for the weather and went to work. Sometimes, when the light changed, he put his painting aside and started another. Eventually, this evolved into series of single motifs, each seen from the same angle but clearly different: a haystack; a row of poplar trees; the façade of a cathedral. His inspirations? Hokusai’s *36 Views of Mount Fuji* and Hiroshige’s *One Hundred Views of Edo*. His style developed swiftly: a dynamic brushstroke, gradations of color and heightened expressiveness. And persistence. He refused

to be sidetracked; instead, he intensified. Above all, he wanted to erase the distinction between the sketch and the picture: in his eyes, no work was invalid.

In 1883, he settled in Giverny, a small village northwest of Paris. “Here, over the next four decades, he created his own world of subjects to paint” (Kuhl, 147). Inspired by images of Japanese landscapes, he replaced an old apple orchard with imported cherries and apricots; he planted willows, bamboo, wisteria, azaleas and iris; he diverted a stream to make a pond full of water lilies. Like Hokusai and Hiroshige, he became obsessed with light on water; from 1899 on, he immortalized his garden pond in over 120 different canvases. In 1914, at age 74, he wrote

“These landscapes of water and reflections have become an obsession ... quite beyond my powers at my age, and yet I want to succeed in expressing what I feel. I’ve destroyed some ... I start others ... and I hope that something will come out of so much effort.” (Monet in: Lambourne, 198)

Like all *shokunin*, Monet was rarely satisfied – but in the process of painting the same subject over and over, he

“came close to the precepts of Zen Buddhism, through his own long and contemplative union with one aspect of nature.” (Lambourne, 198)

Mary Cassatt (1844 - 1926)

The aesthetic revolution in France helped push the boundaries of both art and gender.

An American painter who dreamed of Paris, Mary Cassatt spurned Philadelphia society to study art in France. At first it felt like paradise, until she came up against the vicissitudes of the Salon. In 1868, her first painting was accepted; from then on, however, her acceptances and rejections by the Salon seemed random. The jurors did not favor women, and Cassatt was stubborn: she refused to curry favor. By 1877, she was about to give up on her career as an artist when Degas introduced her to the Impressionists. She was quickly entranced, and participated in their exhibitions until the group disbanded.

“I left conventional art behind me. I began to live.” (Cassatt in: Kuhl, 204)

The open-mindedness of Impressionism allowed Cassatt to explore unconventional subjects; her gradual success brought balance to the male-dominated art world. She was one of the first to add a female perspective: an intimate view of modern women, with a frequent focus on mothers and children. During the 1880s, after her new Impressionist friends introduced her to *ukiyo-e*, she felt an intense connection with Utamaro and his female images:

“[His] seeming familiarity with her own daily experiences was a revelation.” (Ives, 51)

Despite the years and the distance between them, the 18th-century Japanese artist and this American woman living in Paris shared a response to “life’s most humble incidents” (Ives, 53). Their depictions of everyday activities were “honest, uncluttered views,” “devoid of sentimentality” (Ives, 46).

In 1890, to Cassatt's great delight, the *École des Beaux-Arts* held an exhibition of *ukiyo-e*: a vast display of 700 prints, including 89 prints and 16 illustrated books by Utamaro. Only Hokusai was better represented. Cassatt wrote to a friend:

“You must see the Japanese. Come as soon as you can to the *École des Beaux Arts!*” (Cassatt in: Lambourne, 41)

Inspired beyond measure, she spent the next year creating an exquisite set of color aquatints, using metal plates instead of woodblocks. The images echoed specific *ukiyo-e* prints: “commonplace scenes – a woman bathing, embracing a child, or riding the tramway – scenes simply described and consciously ornamented” (Ives, 45). One of them, “*The Letter*,” is pure Utamaro:

“The sensual lips of the girl licking the envelope, the curl of her fingers and the distorted perspective of the desk top, are surely direct tributes to Kitagawa Utamaro.” (Lambourne, 43)

These prints are regarded by many as Cassatt's best work.

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906)

Officially known as a Post-Impressionist, Cézanne was the bridge between his Impressionist colleagues and the ‘modern art’ of the 20th century. Brought into the Impressionist fold through friendships with Zola and Pissarro, he resisted Classical influence right from the start. Instead, he painted outdoors, using small repetitive brushstrokes to recreate his impressions.

“To paint after nature is not to copy the object world but to give form to one’s own sensations.” (Cézanne in: Kuhl, 204)

Like his colleagues, he found inspiration in *ukiyo-e*. His bright planes of color and simple, geometric forms were reminiscent of Japanese prints; his understanding of impermanence, of life’s constant changes, echoed Japanese philosophy.

“Nature is always the same, but of its visible appearance nothing remains constant. Our art must therefore give it the sublime attribute of permanence, along with the elements and appearance of all its changes. Art must give it eternity in our imagination. What is behind nature? Nothing, perhaps. Perhaps everything...” (Cézanne in: Kuhl, 188)

Originally from Aix-en-Provence, Cézanne spent much of his life trying to immortalize nature in the south of France. Over the course of two decades, he devoted months to a series of paintings of Mont-Sainte-Victoire: an unmistakable homage to Hokusai’s *36 views of Mt. Fuji*.

Cézanne’s genius is now widely accepted. Unfortunately, the jurors of the Salon were slow to appreciate it: from the early 1860s on, his submissions were consistently rejected. In 1863, he exhibited at the *Salon des Refusés*; in 1874 and 1877, he exhibited with the Impressionists. In 1882, the Salon finally accepted one of his paintings: it was his first and last submission. By then, he no longer needed their approval.

Like so many of his fellow *shokunin*, Cézanne painted till the end. Caught in a downpour while painting in a field, he kept at it for two hours, then collapsed. The next day he returned, and collapsed again. Two days later, he died of pneumonia.

Not long after his death, in 1907, Japanese artist Arishima Ikuma saw a Cézanne retrospective:

“My eyes were opened, my soul was moved. I learned a new way in which the great garden of art might be cultivated.” (Ikuma in: Ives, 46)

Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890)

“It was through Hiroshige’s woodcuts that the Post-Impressionists first encountered the aesthetic which would urge them in new directions.”
(Neuer, Liberson & Yoshida, 46)

Now considered a Post-Impressionist master, Vincent Van Gogh discovered Japanese art when reading *Chérie*, a novel by the de Goncourt brothers. The book contained the famous phrase “*Japonaiserie* forever!” Scouring the shops of Paris, Van Gogh began acquiring *ukiyo-e*. He tacked the prints to his wall, and wrote to his brother Theo about them. He said he dreamed of visiting “that enchanting land, days without shadow, filled with light” (Lambourne, 44). Sadly, his dream of seeing Japan firsthand was never realized – but he found his substitute in the south of France.

“I always remember the emotions which the trip from Paris to Arles

evoked. How I kept watching to see if I had already reached Japan!
Childish, isn't it?" (Van Gogh in: Lambourne, 47)

Van Gogh spent the rest of his life painting in France. But even so, his continued study of Japanese prints helped him to see the world with a Japanese eye.

"I saw a magnificent and strange effect this evening. A very big boat loaded with coal on the Rhône, moored to the quay. Seen from above, it was all shining and still wet with rain; the water was yellowish white and the clouds pearl grey, the sky violet with an orange streak in the west: the town violet. On the boat some poor boatmen in dirty blue and white came and went carrying cargo onto the shore. It was pure Hokusai" (Van Gogh in: Lambourne, 51)

For him, Japanese figurality was the height of artistic expression. Over the years, he and his brother amassed hundreds of Japanese prints. Proof of their influence is evident in virtually all of his paintings. His highly expressive *impasto* technique featured

"whirls and broad strokes in contrasting colors, sometimes applied direct from tube to canvas without use of the brush." (Kuhl, 186)

He even used Japanese reed pens in some of his renderings. Perhaps most important of all, however – beyond tools, beyond technique, even beyond light and content – was the mystical depth that he witnessed in *ukiyo-e*.

“Come now, isn’t it almost an actual religion which these simple Japanese teach us?” (Van Gogh in: Lambourne, 47)

In 1888, just two years before his death, Van Gogh confessed to his brother:

“All my work is based to some extent on Japanese art.” (Van Gogh in: vangoghletters.org)

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)

Beginning with his childhood in Peru and experiences as a young seaman, Post-Impressionist Paul Gauguin was fascinated by exotic places and primitive peoples. Japanese art spoke to his love of the primitive, and he took *ukiyo-e* prints with him wherever he traveled. For him, the Japanese lived “in the open air and in the sun without shadows” (Ives, 100) and gave “every encouragement ... to the roving imagination” (Ives, 108). As early as 1884, he carved a small box with pictures of ballet dancers and copies of Japanese *netsuke*; he included Japanese artifacts in numerous paintings.

Gauguin’s search for the exotic was lifelong. He first tried painting in the south of France –

“a vision of bright sunlight, blue skies, intense starlight and bold colors”
(Lambourne, 32)

-- but the thrill soon wore off, and he dreamed of Japan. In 1890, he wrote to painter Émile Bernard about his new travel plans:

“The entire orient ... is well worth studying, and I believe I shall find renewed strength there. The West is decadent now, but [I will] gain new power by touching the soil of the East.” (Gauguin in: Ives, 102)

However: money was a problem (and would be for the rest of his life). After failing to land a government post in Asia, Gauguin went to Tahiti instead – but his reverence for Japanese aesthetics continued.

This reverence took many forms. Like Van Gogh, he appreciated the mystical. Convinced “that the key point was the picture’s symbolic import,” its “spirit” (Kuhl, 183), his style soon evolved into what would be known as *Cloisonnisme*:

“clear outlines, geometrized forms, and unified color areas. This new clarity of outline [was] reminiscent of Japanese woodcuts.” (Kuhl, 183)

He also explored other approaches. Echoing the bright yellow paper on which many *ukiyo-e* were printed, Gauguin often used a “decorative play of black ink against a brilliant background of saffron yellow” (Ives, 97). He frequently dispensed with horizons, using flat, colored shapes to depict curvilinear landscapes and stylized water instead of classical perspectives. He even tried his hand at woodblocks. One of the few Western artists to use wood instead of metal, he carved his blocks roughly, creating “contrasting areas of black and white, with expanse enlivened by linear patterns” (Ives, 104). His *Noa Noa Journal* – now in the Louvre – included two Hokusai prints as homage to his Japanese inspiration. In another journal, *Avant et Après*, he presented *ukiyo-e* prints next to Western works

and stated:

“Hokusai draws freely. To draw freely is not to lie to oneself” (Gauguin in: Ives, 106-7)

Gauguin died in poverty in the South Sea islands. When his native friends gathered his meager possessions, they found:

“a Japanese sword, a Japanese book and forty-five prints tacked to the walls of his dwelling.” (Ives, 96)

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901)

“The fluid outlines in his posters are ...like the vital, winding line of Art Nouveau. They are akin to the black key block lines in Japanese woodcuts, and are even closer in character to brushstrokes in Japanese ink drawings.” (Ives, 87-89)

Toulouse-Lautrec is a poignant example of how *ukiyo-e*, Impressionism, and subsequently Post-Impressionism, paved the way to Modern Art of the 20th century. Suffering from an array of crippling health problems, the young Lautrec turned to art. While unopposed to the *plein air* painting favored by his peers, he found his niche in Montmartre, the haunt of many artists, writers and philosophers. His paintings of bohemian life in the northern outskirts of Paris evoked Japan's Floating World.

Like many of his Impressionist predecessors, Lautrec had a deep admiration

for things Japanese. His enthusiasm developed early: at least two camera portraits show the young artist in flowing *daimyo* robes. Even more important, however, was the influence *ukiyo-e* had on his art: they

“opened his eyes to the ‘modern’ subjects of music halls, cafes and brothels,”

and inspired

“a new graphic abstraction based on simple forms, a few principal planes, and a focus on line.” (Ives, 17)

Lautrec was a keen observer and a brilliant draughtsman. For him, the two hundred-year-old prints seemed unexpectedly fresh; he loved their “curvaceous forms, ... startling force, compelling colors and bold composition” (Ives, 80). He soon adopted their idiom, recording what he saw swiftly, sketching exaggerated expressions and movements succinctly. Witty characterizations of people – particularly the demimonde of turn-of-the-century Paris – became his life’s work.

In 1889, after *Le Moulin Rouge* opened, the infamous cabaret became his favorite place to paint. His work was particularly popular with performers. They began using his portraits as posters: contemporary equivalents to the *ukiyo-e* prints used to advertise entertainment in Tokugawa Japan. His images echoed the realism of 18th-century Japanese theater, combining a superb decorative sense with piercing insights into individual character. He also echoed Japanese colors: his purples, oranges and greens were “not unusual in Japanese prints, but to the

Parisian eye, they were shocking” (Ives, 82).

Japanese art filled his life. Like other Impressionists, Lautrec would pour over the woodcuts and albums in various shops and galleries, and often traded his own work for art from Japan. Clutter filled his apartment:

“He would fish out such odds and ends as a Japanese wig, a ballet slipper ... or else he would unexpectedly turn up, in this pile of debris, a fine Hokusai print.” (Ives, 79)

He was especially fond of *shunga*, the erotic Japanese prints, and owned a copy of Utamaro’s notorious album, *The Poem of the Pillow*. Like Degas, he turned to prostitutes as subjects: their everyday life became the subject of eleven lithographs, *Elles*. Unlike Utamaro’s elegant, highly educated and idealized courtesans, however, Lautrec’s Parisian prostitutes were presented with “sympathetic honesty” (Ives, 93).

Even his methods imitated the Japanese. Ukiyo-e artists were known to sprinkle mica or powdered brass dust onto their prints; Lautrec applied gold with cotton pads. Because he admired calligraphy –

“the spontaneous, confident economy of brush drawings in particular”
(Breuer, 82)

– he ordered an ink stone, *sumi* stick and brushes from Japan. He mastered the undulating line, alternately thick and thin, and trained himself to create figures with just a few expressive strokes. He treated dancers’ skirts as both “ornamental

design and vehicles of movement, with only heads and feet visible beyond the turbulent cloth” (Ives, 87).

When Lautrec started out, posters were not ‘respectable’ – but because of his artistry, and the prints that inspired him, poster design became “an art form in its own right.” As art scholars now recognize, Lautrec was ahead of his time: he was

“but a step away from 20th century abstract art.” (Ives, 87)

Legacy

“They were revolutionaries and trailblazers: they opened the way to modern art.” (Kuhl, flyleaf)

Like the philosophy described in these pages, this statement spans oceans and centuries. It describes both the Impressionist painters of the late 1800s and the *ukiyo-e* print-makers who broke with tradition some two hundred years earlier. It describes two groups of *shokunin* who dared fight the establishment ... and changed the world as a result of their efforts.

In the early days of Tokugawa Japan, before the Floating World brought art to the masses, artistic pursuits were, in large part, a diversion for the rich. They were also proof of social status and wealth. Artists depended on patrons, both for funds and approval; the art that resulted often wasn’t what they would have created if left free to choose. In fact, the struggling artist equation has been true throughout

much of history: rich patrons often determine which art or artist survives; established conventions often trump innovation. And those who refuse to compromise often go hungry.

Art *needs* room to breathe, room to explore, to imagine. Without revolutionaries and trailblazers, imagination would die. But without some form of financial support, revolutions are hard to maintain.

Fortunately for the Impressionists – and the Post-Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists, *Les Nabis*, who followed – their mix of persistence and passion created not just a new way to exhibit, but a new way to put food on the table. Because they were *les refusés*, the ‘rejected,’ they came up with alternatives to the *Salon*: store windows, private showings, group exhibitions; people impressed by their efforts who decided to help them. It was a significant change: a social and economic re-ordering.

“A heterogeneous mix of dealers, critics, gallery-owners and private artist groupings took over from the state-controlled Salon. Free enterprise replaced the old institutions.” (Kuhl, 143)

By 1870, over one hundred art dealers were active in Paris; in 1880, the French government organized its last *Salon*. In 1883, rejected artists held a final *Salon des Refusés*, and in 1884, they formed their own *Société des Artistes Indépendents*. The *Salon des Indépendents* soon followed – *sans jury ni récompense*, ‘no jury, no awards’ – where all artists were free to exhibit. It still exists today.

In 1886, the Impressionists held their last group exhibition. Friction between artists plus the fall of the *Salon* meant that such shows were no longer needed – and besides, the Impressionists had a dealer who believed in their work: Paul Durand-Ruel. He, too, was a *shokunin* who took pride in his craft; he, too, took risks. He gave artists stipends and bought their art without knowing whether he would be able to sell it.

“Without America, I would have been lost, ruined, after having bought so many Monets and Renoirs. The two exhibitions there in 1886 saved me. The American public bought moderately . . . but thanks to that public, Monet and Renoir were enabled to live and after that the French public followed.” (Durand-Ruel in: *The Times*, thetimes.co.uk)

Then came *Les Nabis*: a group of avant-garde Post-Impressionists who studied together in the late 1880s. *Nabi* means ‘prophet’ in Hebrew – and this group, too, believed that their path was ‘the future.’ With *ukiyo-e* as inspiration and Gauguin as mentor, they filled canvases with “sweeping lines and flat, bright colors” (Ives, 56). According to *Nabi* Maurice Denis, their credo was simple: all art is a design, a symbol of the real thing, “essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order” (Ives, 67). Gauguin said it better:

“Art is an abstraction.” (Gauguin in: Kuhl, 182)

Japanese influence ran deep. *Nabi* Édouard Vuillard was known for his “caricatural observation of the bourgeoisie”; “insignificant everyday sights”; rhythmic and ornamental treatment of surfaces”; “the pure lines, imaginative patterns, and

mix of tender greens and gray that are Harunobu's trademarks." Like his father and uncle before him, both fabric designers, Vuillard "treated his prints like swatches of cloth" (Ives, 68-71).

By the turn of the century, the greatest disciple of *ukiyo-e* was Pierre Bonnard, 'the ultra-Japanese *Nabi*.' In the early stages of his career, Japanese prints were "the catalyst [for] his emancipation from timeworn Western rules" (Ives, 66).

"Those unprivileged images taught me ... that color, all by itself, could convey light, convey form and convey character." (Bonnard in: Ives, 57)

Bonnard's work heralded the avant-garde to come. His publicity poster for *France-Champagne* echoed Hokusai's iconic woodcut *Under the Wave Off Kanagawa (Great Wave)*, with curvilinear contours and curls of foam cascading from a bubbling glass. Toulouse-Lautrec was so impressed that he sought out Bonnard to learn more about poster-making. Bonnard's paintings were equally ground-breaking. Some were

"as sketchy as the inky little figures in Hokusai's *Manga*. Others depend[ed] upon the careful arrangement of color shapes that characterize the more classic prints of Utamaro." (Ives, 57)

Like so many Impressionists, Bonnard was greatly influenced by Hiroshige, by the landscape artist's "mastery of wind and weather" and his bird's eye perspective,

where “both near and far are inseparably interwoven.” Bonnard’s 1899 collection of Paris views, *Quelques aspects de la vie de Paris*, echoes Hiroshige’s two most famous print series, *Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido* and *One Hundred Views of Edo*. Both artists were drawn to “the anecdotal and the picturesque,” “the animated life of the city in casual scenes of crowded boulevards, bridges and back streets.” Bonnard even explored the Japanese concept of emptiness: his folding screens featured “terraced levels of figures receding in space and size and surrounded by empty areas” (Ives, 60-65).

Les Nabis weren’t alone in their concepts. With impetus from *ukiyo-e* and the early Impressionists, art was becoming increasingly abstract. It was now a new century, people were ready for change – and the Japanese roots of this ‘modernism’ were evident in far more than paintings. As the *haiku* poet Bashō contended over two hundred years earlier, the poetic spirit shapes all art forms, including music – and composer Claude Debussy is a prime example.

Like the Impressionist painters before him, Debussy embraced the lyrical quality of Japanese art. He, too, believed in embracing a feeling: his free-flowing tonality was his way of ‘following the brush.’ And he, too, drew the wrath of critics. Even in 1905 and beyond, his stylistic innovations – “an emphasis on tonal color, flowing wave-like melodies and generally free harmonies” – shocked the gatekeepers of respectable art.

“Debussy displays an excessive propensity towards the exotic. [He is] carried away by the vagaries of Impressionism, which represents the most dangerous enemy of truth in art.” (Kuhl, 128)

Despite the critics, Debussy displayed his roots with pride. The cover of the first edition of his score of *La Mer* is a direct lift of none other than Hokusai’s woodblock print, the *Great Wave*.

Innovations are hard to take. At a 1910 exhibition of ‘Neo-Impressionist’ paintings in London, English art critics were startled by the evolution of artists whom they thought they knew. First, Roger Fry:

“[They are] less interested in the effects of light than in a work’s symbolic import.” (Fry in: Kuhl, 181)

Next, Clive Bell:

“[Their] pictures as a rule grow not as trees; they float as water lilies.”
(Bell in: Ives, 61)

For Impressionist artists from Monet to Bonnard, the Floating World of early Edo had inspired a strange new world of floating abstractions ... and its effect on the ‘modernist’ artists who followed would be even stranger. Consider the work of Paul Cézanne:

“His practice of analyzing depicted objects into plane surfaces ultimately led to Cubism, and earned him the honorific of “The Father of Modern Art.” (Kuhl, 188)

Consider the work of Henri Matisse. Sometimes called a *Fauviste*, or ‘wild beast,’ Matisse encountered Japanese art during his student years:

“And with what pleasure I ... discovered Japanese woodcuts! What a lesson in purity, harmony I received!” (Matisse in: Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 142)

Like Cézanne, Matisse applied his lesson in Japanese harmony to a lifetime of experimentation. For both artists, abstractions of objects and clear palettes of color allowed them to detach from the factual world and enter unexplored territory.

“[This] is what enabled the impressionist movement [to] transcend impressionism, and point far into a future in which artists like Jackson Pollock [and other modernists] were to find ... key impulses for their own creativity.” (Kuhl, 180)

For Matisse, Picasso and other 20th-century artists, the emotive qualities of color, form and spatial ambiguity that they first saw in *ukiyo-e* replaced traditional three-dimensional content. With the help of Japanese art, the modernist world evolved from an art free of pomp to an avant-garde emphasis on individual voice, self-expression and personal vision.

“As the western world stood on the cusp of the modern era, Western painting shifted from mimesis – a realistic representation of a now unfamiliar and disorienting world – to the celebration of an inner life and the endorsement of individual self-expression.” (Guth, 159)

Guth refers here to modernist artists, from Impressionist through Expressionist – but these 20th-century pioneers sound like the printmakers of *ukiyo-e*. After all, both groups were visionaries. They shared

“a heightened awareness of the world around them, an eye for the unusual in the everyday, the remarkable in the ordinary, the timeless in the momentary.” (Ives, 44)

Is this what defines a good artist?

According to aesthetic theorist Ueda, “a superb artist is divinely possessed” (218). When artists strike the right note, when they reach through the clutter and help us understand our relation to the rest of existence, they are “shamans, magicians,” “superhumans” and “seers” who reveal “hidden truths” (216, 235).

If we were to ask Jirō Ono, *sushi* master, what makes a good artist superb, he would add:

“The spirit of the *shokunin*.” (Jirō Ono in: *Jirō Dreams of Sushi*, 31:00)

I believe they’re both right.

Shokunin Today

We live in an imperfect world.

Some say that the human condition is declining, that modern man no longer has a 'pure heart.' That by conforming to social norms, we have suppressed our best selves.

"Conventional rules often destroy the spirit." (Ueda, 50)

That our 'poetic spirit' has grown weaker with time.

It is not that poetry has declined in modern times. It is rather that men's hearts have deteriorated with time." (Norinaga in: Ueda, 206)

Perhaps that's true for some; life is full of disappointments, and change is frightening. History is full of our fears. But history also holds hope: along with the gatekeepers, we have always had pioneers, the revolutionaries and trailblazers who reject oppression and compromise.

"At the heart of every innovator is a rebel, someone dissatisfied with the status quo." (Lewis, 189)

Many of them have been artists. In this paper, I have focused on two groups of artists at a particular intersection of history, first because their approach to art 'speaks to me,' but also, more importantly, because they represent a much bigger

idea, an aesthetic philosophy that can be applied to life.

As Makoto Ueda reminds us, art “teaches the basics of ethics” (212). He cites 18th-century philosopher and literary scholar Motoori Norinaga:

“[Art] presents or describes our inmost human feelings. ... It shows how weak and foolish men really are, and therefore how necessary it is for them to understand, sympathize and help each other. Through [art] man comes to know who he really is, where he stands in the scheme of things, and what he is expected to do in his present existence.” (Norinaga in: Ueda, 213)

Norinaga chose to write about literature; but in essence, all arts are one. 17th-century painter Tosa Mitsuoki “described painting as visual poetry, and poetry as verbal painting” (Ueda, 225). Ueda goes beyond him to say that all arts are an “outward expression of intense inner emotion” and that they help us discover “the spirit, the meaning, or the true intent of a man or a natural object” (226, 221). Impressionist Claude Monet agreed:

“The techniques change, but art remains the same: it is the free and emotional interpretation of Nature.” (Monet in: Brodskaja, 246)

Note that Monet wrote the word nature with a capital ‘N’: like the Japanese, he understood that nature, in its larger interpretation,

“also encompasses the human mind ... and ‘all that exists,’ including the underlying principles of existence.” (Koren, 84)

This is why the arts are so closely aligned with ethics: by interpreting the world that we live in, they not only teach us how to behave, they help us explain life itself. They help us discover what Ueda called the ‘true heart’ of existence.

“To return to the true heart is the very basis of ethics; in fact, that must be the purpose of life for all men, since it is the only way by which man know the Creator.” (Ueda, 199)

For all of these artists and theorists, the arts are akin to religion. And so are all human activities, if we pursue them as true *shokunin*. Whether artist, art dealer, even sushi chef, our life purpose should be, as Renoir put it, “to do the best possible” (Distel, 132). Our goal should be the pursuit of perfection, not perfection itself. The journey, not the destination. Sarah Lewis explores this in *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure and the Search for Mastery*.

“Mastery requires endurance. ... Mastery is not merely a commitment to a goal but to a curved-line, constant pursuit.” (Lewis, 7-8)

In order to thrive, we must trust our intuition. Follow our own brush.

“Like leading an orchestra, you have to know how to turn your back to the crowd.” (Lewis, 48)

Passion is critical. But once we’ve chosen a path, we must also understand the importance of practice. In Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers: The Story of Success*, he finds that preparation and process are more important than talent.

“Excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice. ... Researchers have settled on what they believe is the magic number for true expertise: ten thousand hours.”

(Gladwell, *Outliers*, 40)

Self-discovery, self-fulfillment, take time.

“In life, most people give up too soon. ... It is not talent, not even self-esteem, but effort that makes the difference.” (Lewis, 173)

This effort also takes courage. It’s not easy to fail, rise again and persist, regardless of public opinion.

“Rejection and perseverance require discounting the voices that say that your work doesn’t measure up. To get through it requires what some call tenacity, or others call faith. It requires more courage than you can imagine.” (Lewis, 137)

We have to see failure as a part of the process: not as a comment on our identity, but as information that will help us improve. Perhaps this is why Japanese value negative space: it’s the potential suggested by emptiness.

“Masters are not experts because they take a subject to its conceptual end. They are masters because they realize that there isn’t one.” (Lewis, 33)

Perfection is beyond reach. At age seventy-three, Katsushika Hokusai joked

that he would “become truly marvelous” when he reached his 100th birthday (Lambourne, 45). At age thirty-seven, Vincent Van Gogh wrote to his brother, “Life is too short to do the whole” (Lambourne, 47). At age eighty-five, Jirō Ono admitted “No one knows where the top is” (Jirō, 29:47).

And so we work. By working every day, by honing our craft, we move closer to understanding our place in the world. We ‘rise.’

“We thrive ... when we have purpose, when we still have more to do. Hence Michelangelo’s prayer, written in a letter to a friend while painting the vault of the Sistine Chapel: ‘Lord, grant me that I may always desire more than I can accomplish.’ “ (Lewis, 20-21)

Jirō Ono would surely agree. Despite the fact that he’s known as the world’s best sushi chef, his own personal fulfillment comes from striving, not achieving. And his suppliers respect this! Down in the bowels of Tokyo’s fish market, the vendors all know that Jirō cooks quality rice, appreciates a good fish. One of them laments,

“These days, the first thing people want is an easy job. Then, they want lots of free time. And then, they want lots of money. But they aren’t thinking of building their skills.” (Jirō, 41:45)

The vendors save their best fish for Jirō. Sometimes they sift through the morning’s catch and think, “Ah, this is a shrimp worthy of Jirō” (36:15). In fact, these particular vendors are *shokunin* themselves: contributing to their common craft, trying to be

the best they can be. Making an art of the life they lead.

The truth is, art is everywhere:

“in the texture and grain of wood and stone, in the precise stroke of the inked brush, in the perfect judo throw, the placement of a single flower.” (Richie, 31)

In the work of a sushi master.

“The activity is literally graphic: his stall is arranged like a calligrapher’s table; he alternates pots, brushes, [seaweed, seasoning; he] makes lace out of fish and peppers. ... It is you who eat, but it is he who has played, who has written, who has produced.” (Barthes, 26)

In a life well-lived.

By doing our best as *shokunin*, we channel our own inner potential, we bring some of that greatness to the world around us. And by combining our daily efforts, our struggles, with our search for enlightenment, we become part of the greatness that is already out there. This idea goes back to Zen Buddhism: the simple act of raking gravel can be the key to a higher reality. By turning our lives into well-lived art, we can become “one with the universe” (Ueda, 85).

A truer version of ourselves.

“The outcome is determined by inner resources: spirit, will, belief and focus. All those [who] strive for mastery play on a field that exists largely within.” (Lewis, 25)

Consider this statement from American photographer Mike Magers, who spent months in Japan creating a black-and-white study of Japanese *Shokunin* (on exhibit this month in Kyoto):

“When you’re around these guys, there’s an incredible sense of peace and focus. They’re like monks. And they’re so in the present. There are old samurai texts that talk about doing the small things right, and letting the bigger things take care of themselves. I started to think about how we have this pyramid inverted in the West, where we tie our happiness and our success to these big picture things and in the end, most people are pretty miserable. To create a thing that’s so perfect as the *shokunin* do, you don’t start with the big picture. You start with the small things and you do those things really, really, really well. I thought it was a bit of a metaphor for life itself.” (Magers in: *Roads and Kingdoms*, 2015)

And consider the lyrics of Canadian rapper Aubrey Graham, known to millions of fans as Drake. While nothing suggests that he has ever derived inspiration from Japanese printmakers, he is well on his way to becoming a postmodern *shokunin*.

The first clue is his work ethic, his constant quest for improvement.

“Born a perfectionist, guess that makes me a bit obsessive.” (Drake, “Tuscan Leather”)

One of the hardest workers in the Rap industry, he releases new albums and mixtapes frequently, he is featured in songs with other artists, and is constantly on the road – performing internationally, making TV appearances, hosting charity events. In a 2013 interview with GQ, he elaborates:

“By no means will I take a water break ... I feel guilty on vacation. I feel guilty right now, talking to you, guilty that I’m not working.”
(Drake in: GQ, 2013)

The second clue is his willingness to take risks, to confront the status quo. Instead of falling in with current Hip Hop expectations, he is an innovator at heart. He creates his own brand.

“You don’t have to prove shit to no one except yourself.” (Drake, “Tuscan Leather”)

Next up: humility. Material wealth has always been a popular topic in the world of Hip Hop, and most rappers flaunt it. The same goes for fame. Drake, however, is much more low key. While not immune to bragging, he compensates with a relentless drive to improve his craft ... and in turn, to improve himself, using music as a conduit to better self-understanding.

“I just build and build more.” (Drake, “Tuscan Leather”)

And finally: unparalleled self-awareness. Drake separates himself from other popular rappers by reflecting upon himself and his choices with unusual honesty. He describes himself without flinching:

“Somewhere between psychotic and iconic, somewhere between I want it and I got it ... The furthest thing from perfect like everyone I know.” (Drake, “Furthest Thing”)

Far from perfect he may be – but within his chosen field, his supposed ‘failures’ rise above the rest.

Humility is essential to all *shokunin*.

According to Sarah Lewis, art is born of “seeming failure: the gulf between what is and what should be” (Lewis, 95). In today’s society, we value instant gratification and financial success; we don’t like to admit that our future is uncertain. But our vision IS limited, and we need to accept that. We need to admit how much we don’t know. In an interview published in the *Paris Review*, author and Civil Rights activist James Baldwin was asked “What would you say increases with knowledge?” His reply:

“You learn how little you know.” (Baldwin in: “*The Art of Fiction No. 78*,” theparisreview.org)

As shamans have told us since the beginning of time, “the universe is full of mysteries” (Ueda, 197). Perhaps the greatest gift we’ve received from the artists explored in this thesis is that their “distorted, flat, horizontal world” is our way of

seeing “unfolding, infinite depth” (Lewis, 104). And that our best ‘path to perfection’ is the *Shokunin-dō*. The Way of the *Shokunin*.

“A wind from the East still continues to blow...” (Lambourne, 231)

SHOKUNIN-DŌ

~ THE WAY OF THE SHOKUNIN ~

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