

Van Gogh and Japonisme

Indebtedness and Transformation

By Ileana B. Leavens



Self-portrait, 1887. Art Institute of Chicago.
Image source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:VanGogh_1887_Selbstbildnis.jpg.

Japonisme is the admiration, adoption, and adaptation of Japanese culture that swept Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was a direct result of Commodore Perry's 1853 imperialistic demand that Japan open its doors to the "Western" world. The resulting trade introduced new products for public consumption, and in France, it led to the Japanese presence in literature, drama, music, and the visual arts.¹ In my view, Japonisme in art does not merely mean the depiction of Japanese objects (kimonos, fans, folding screens, ceramics, woodblock prints, etc.) in paintings—that simply indicates that those objects were imported.² Japanese influence in art is not thematic, but stylistic—it can be seen in the emergence of a Western style based on linearity and flatness, different perspectives, new compositions, and even new techniques.³ These changes can be traced to Japanese woodblock prints, which were inexpensive, imported in large quantities, and readily available to art dealers and artists, such as Vincent Van Gogh, who eagerly collected them.

I selected Van Gogh to illustrate these phenomena, since his letters clearly document how aesthetically pleasing he considered Japanese wood block prints and the important role they played in his artistic development. Van Gogh's adoption of *Japonisme* was nourished by three different, but interconnected, sources: the practical (namely his personal contacts with art dealers and collectors), the visual, and the literary.

The Practical: From Dealer to Painter

Van Gogh's introduction to the art market began in 1869 when he joined The Hague firm of Goupil & Co. as a junior clerk. In 1873, he was transferred to the London branch of the firm, but in March 1876, he was discharged. From 1876 to 1879, Van Gogh's life was a series of attempts to make a living: teacher, theologian, evangelist, preacher, and missionary. All these experiences nourished his artistic career, and in 1880 once more he changed directions—he "begins to draw with serious professional intentions."⁴ In October, he traveled to Brussels to prepare for entrance to the Academie des Beaux Arts, where he "studied perspective and anatomy on his own."⁵ Four years later, he rented a studio in Neunen (Holland) and gave painting lessons; the following year, after his father's death, he moved to the studio. A crucial visit to Amsterdam and the Rijksmuseum a few months later first attracted him to Rembrandt and Franz Hals.

Rembrandt's influence is clearly seen in the sharp contrasts between light and dark in Van Gogh's first major work: *The Potato Eaters*, 1885 (see Figure 1). However, the subject matter is more than the simple portrayal of a group of peasants eating potatoes. In a letter to his brother Theo, Van Gogh wrote,

*I have tried to make it clear how these people, eating their potatoes under the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish; and so the painting speaks of manual labor, and how they have honestly earned their food. I wanted to give the impression of quite a different way of living than that of us civilized people. Therefore I am not at all anxious for everyone to like it or to admire it at once.*⁶

The Potato Eaters is both realistic and symbolic. It is realistic because the images were painted directly from life; it is symbolic in that it depicts an existing class distinction—the social inequality between peasants and the bourgeoisie. There is nothing Japanese in the work, because *Japonisme* had not yet made an impression on Van Gogh, but the painting established a trend that was to reappear at intervals in some of his later Japanese inspired works—symbolism.⁷ In 1888, Van Gogh painted another interior, *The Night Café* (see Figure 2), which combined realism and symbolism with Japanese perspective. Comparing the two paintings, we first see a drastic change in palette: yellows, reds, and green have replaced the earlier browns. Second, we see that the shallow space in *The Potato Eaters* (primarily determined by the peasants around the table), has been replaced by a deeper space, mainly because the yellow floor seems to tilt

upwards.⁸ Within this space, the few individuals present are mostly separated from each other. In both paintings, the true subject matter is suggested by the few individuals depicted: five in the earlier work and six in the later one. Feelings are turned outwards in *The Potato Eaters* as the potatoes are shared; however, *The Night Café* speaks of individual loneliness, of feelings turned inward. Van Gogh made this point clear when in a letter to Theo he wrote:

*In my picture of The Night Café I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, run mad or commit a crime. I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green.*⁹

Color symbolism was added to the subject matter.¹⁰



Figure 1
The Potato Eaters, 1885.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

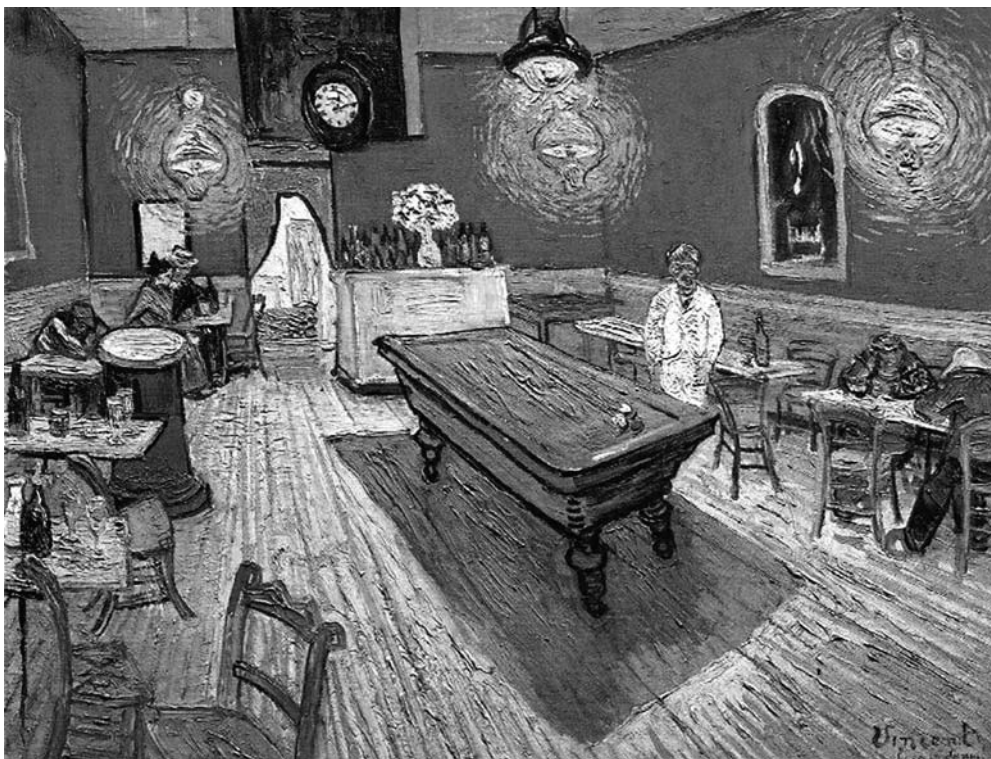


Figure 2
The Night Café, 1888.
Yale University Art Gallery.

The Visual: Japanese Prints

Van Gogh left for Paris around February 28, 1886, where he found a different art scene and new personal relationships. During his Paris years (1886–1888), he lived with his younger brother Theo, who introduced him to several of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Though some of Van Gogh's Paris paintings illustrate his indebtedness to both groups, the most enduring influence came from Japanese prints.¹¹ As early as 1885, during his trip to Antwerp, he had acquired some Japanese prints, but it was in Paris that his enthusiasm for the prints became full-fledged.¹² He was initially attracted to the bright colors of the prints, and, following the traditional approach in art education, he painted from the model (see Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6).¹³

As an art dealer and collector, his brother Theo was in close contact with Samuel Bing, the most influential collector and dealer of Japanese prints. Bing had clearly realized the central role these prints had played in the history of French art, and in his May 1888 introductory article to the first issue of *Le Japon Artistique*, he wrote: "This (Japanese) art is personally bound together with ours. It's like a drop of blood that has been mingled with our blood, and now no power on earth is able to separate it again."¹⁴ Two months earlier, Van Gogh had come to similar conclusions. In a letter to his sister Wilhelmina of March 30, 1888, he wrote:

*You will be able to get an idea of the revolution in painting when you think, for instance, of the brightly colored Japanese pictures that one sees everywhere—landscapes and figures. Theo and I have hundreds of Japanese prints in our possession.*¹⁵

In letters to Theo he indicated their importance to his work: "We must not undervalue the small advantage we have now in rummaging through thousands of them (prints) to make our choice," and more explicitly, of "having been able to buy all the prints he wanted from Bing's enormous stock at three *sous*

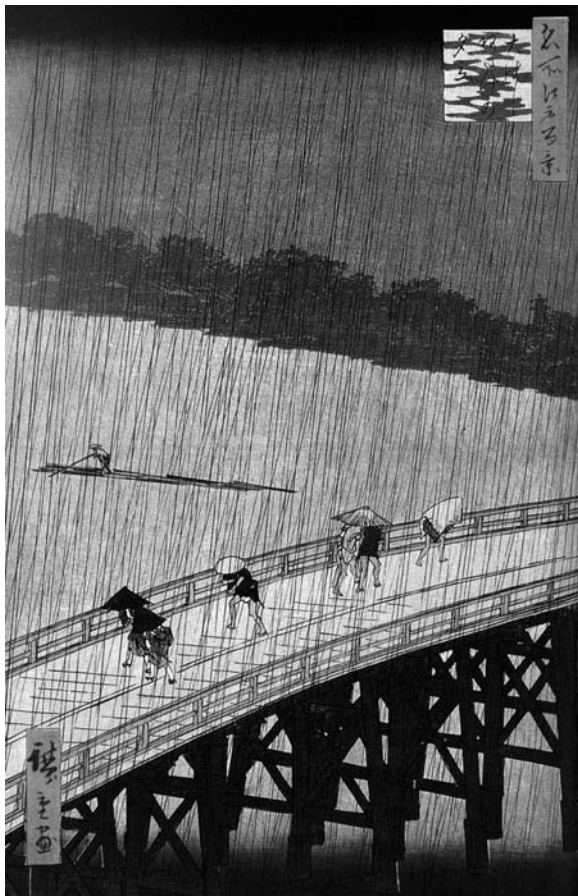


Figure 3
Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi Bridge and Atake by Ando Hiroshige, 1856–1858.
Image source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hiroshige__Van-Gogh-2.jpg.



Figure 4
Bridge in the Rain (after Hiroshige), 1887.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

each.” (A *sou* was equivalent to an English halfpenny).¹⁶ In a letter to Theo written prior to his 1888 departure for Arles on February 19, Van Gogh summoned his views on a *Japonisme* that had taken hold of his work, affected his business connections, and opened his eyes to its importance for France’s future art.

*In a way all my work is founded on Japanese art, and if I have held my tongue about Bing, it is because I think that after my visit to the South, I may be able to take up the business more seriously. Japanese art . . . takes root again among the French impressionist artists.*¹⁷

Van Gogh traveled to Paris in February 1886, and he left for Arles two years later. There he experienced Japonisme from two new sources: literature and Arles itself.



Figure 5
Plum Estate, Kameido, by Ando Hiroshige, 1856–58.
Image source: <http://www.hiroshige.org.uk/hiroshige/influences/VanGogh.htm>.



Figure 6
Flowering Plum Tree, 1887.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

The Literary

A voracious reader of French and foreign novels, Van Gogh’s knowledge of Japan is tied to Pierre Loti’s highly influential *Madame Chrysanthème* from which he derived his views of a country he never visited.¹⁸ Loti’s work provided Van Gogh with the subject matter for a painting, as well as insights into Japanese life. The novel is an account of Loti’s short-lived relations with a Japanese eighteen-year-old woman who became his common law wife. These arrangements were not uncommon and often involved much younger girls. In a letter to Theo in July 1888, Van Gogh wrote:

*If you know what a “mousme” is (you will know when you have read Loti’s Madame Chrysanthème) I have just painted one . . . A mousme is a Japanese girl—Provençal in this case, twelve to fourteen years old.*¹⁹ (See Figure 7.)

Van Gogh also acknowledged Loti for his descriptions of Japanese homes. In Loti’s words, “What always strikes one on first entering a Japanese dwelling is the extreme cleanliness, the white and chilling bareness of the walls.” This initial reaction was later changed to read: “To any one familiar with Japanese life, my mother-in-law’s



Figure 7
La Mousmé, July, 1888.
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

house in itself reveals a refined nature—complete bareness, two or three screens placed here and there, a teapot, a vase full of lotus-flowers, and nothing more.”²⁰ Van Gogh’s comment to Theo was

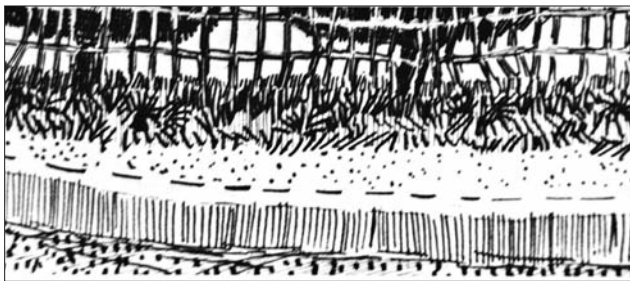
*Loti’s book Madame Chrysanthème taught me this much: the rooms there are bare, without decorations or ornaments. And that very thing wakened my interest in the excessively synthetic drawings of another period.*²¹

The key phrase is “wakened my interest in the excessively synthetic drawings of another period.” What did Van Gogh mean?

During his Paris years, Van Gogh had been essentially a student, learning from the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, and specifically studying Japanese prints. He duplicated their subject matter, but also modified their style, composition, and even their color scheme. But in Arles, he returned to a group of Japanese drawings which he had previously dismissed. He was referring to the dot and line landscape drawings of Chinese origin that had been introduced into France through Japanese manuals, such as Hokusai’s fifteen-volume *Manga* and his *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*. In the drawings, the artist systematically applies dots and lines to represent all manners of textures, thus making visible the basic qualities of the subject. For example, an irregular pattern of dots can stand for foliage or indicate a path’s texture without replicating the visual properties of either foliage or path (see Figures 8 and 9).²² In Loti’s description of his mother-in-law’s room, the few screens, the vase with flowers, and the teapot are three-dimensional counterparts to the dots and lines in Hokusai’s drawings—they define the visual and textural character of a given space. Loti’s description gave Van Gogh the necessary impetus to make the connections.

Van Gogh’s attempts at the dot and line technique can be seen in *Cottages in Sainte-Maries*, 1888 (see Figure 10). For this drawing, Van Gogh used a reed pen, which he built. The pen produced dots and lines similar to the Japanese style, and by twisting the pen, he was able to control a line’s thickness and direction, necessary for depicting plant growth. This process, however, presupposes the artist’s ability to become one emotionally with the subject, to feel spiritual resonance with the intrinsic character of nature.

During his Paris years and the early months at Arles, Van Gogh’s indebtedness to Japonisme included color symbolism, adoption of the dot and line technique, and the introduction of a high horizon line. Compare *Undergrowth*, 1887 (see Figure 11) and *Undergrowth with Ivy*, 1889 (see Figure 12). The following year, he used the same technique in *The Starry Night* (1889), painted at St. Remy, where the repeated lines in the cypress, landscape with houses, and sky provide a unifying textural element throughout the painting (see Figure 13). Interestingly, the church is the only exemption.



Figures 8 and 9
Katsushika Hokusai, *Mount Fuji Beyond a River Bank* (detail) c.1834–1835, Wichmann, 52, fig 94; 53, fig. 96.

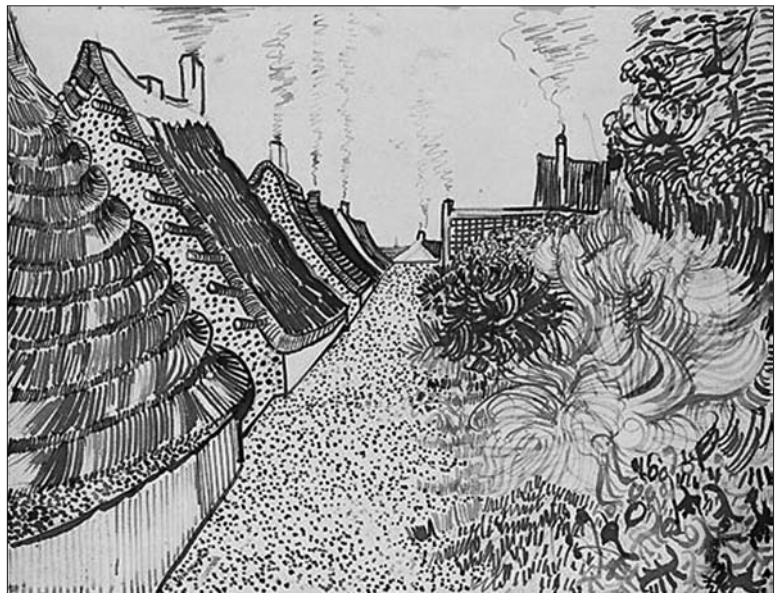


Figure 10
Cottages in Sainte-Maries, 1888.
Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Figure 11
Undergrowth, 1887.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Figure 12
Undergrowth with Ivy, 1889.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Figure 13
Starry Night, 1889.
Museum of Modern Art, New York..

Visual Expanded: Arles

According to Van Gogh, the trip to Arles was mostly to search for the rich colors he had seen in Japanese prints. Once there, he came to perceive Arles as the embodiment of Japan; he saw Arles with Japanese eyes. His letters give eloquent testimony to this change. A letter to Wilhelmina reads:

Theo wrote me that he had given you Japanese pictures. . . . For my part, I don't need Japanese pictures here, for I am always telling myself that here I am in Japan. Which means that I have only to open my eyes and paint what is right in front of me, if I think it effective."²³

In a letter to Theo he compared Arles "to a Japanese dream" and to his friend Emile Bernard he wrote: "This country seems to me as beautiful as Japan as far as the limpidity of the atmosphere and the gay color effects are concerned."²⁴

Van Gogh's Paris experience had conditioned his eyes to bright colors: Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Japanese wood block prints had all contributed to this change, but the most important contribution was Japan. Upon arrival at Arles, the bright sunshine, clean air, and warmth (so different from Paris) led him to see the city as the embodiment of Japan. Loti's novel added to the picture he conceived. Arles provided the background for his Japanese-inspired portraits of postman Roulin, Madame Roulin, and Madame Ginoux, all done at Arles, that emphasize linearity and flatness (see Figures 14, 15, 16).

Close to the end of his life, at Auvers, Van Gogh painted *Tree Roots and Trunks*, 1890 (see Figure 17). It is a close-up view with no background and no horizon line, the colors are non-representational, and the tree trunks and roots are mostly blue, flat, and linear. Only at the bottom right-hand side, in the group of parallel red lines, do we see the re-emergence of his dot and line technique. The painting is unfinished. On July 27, he shot himself in the chest; two days later he died, with Theo at his side.

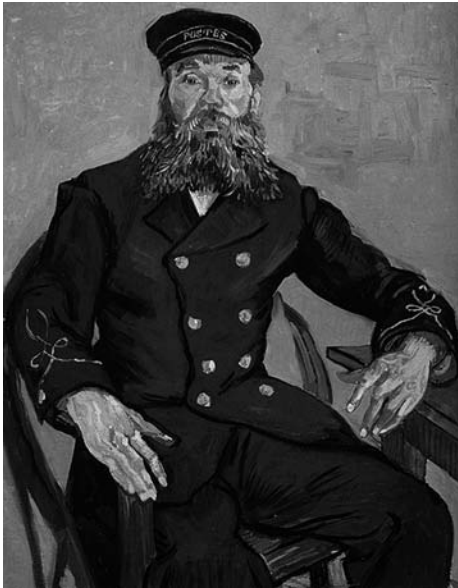


Figure 14
Postman Joseph Roulin, 1888.
Boston Museum of Fine Art.



Figure 15
La Berceuse (Woman Rocking a Cradle), 1888.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 16
L'Arlésienne: Madame Joseph-Michel Ginoux, 1888.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In my view, *Tree Roots and Trunks* is Van Gogh's last word and testament—both a compendium of his indebtedness to Japanese art and a posthumous self-portrait that clearly demonstrates a spiritual harmony with nature's struggles for survival that paralleled his own. It also parallels Vincent's letter to Theo that ends as follows:

I tell you again that I shall always consider that you are something other than a simple dealer in Corots, that through my mediation you have your part in the actual production of some canvases which even in the deluge will retain their peace.

For this is what we have got to, and this is all or at least the chief thing that I can have to tell you at a moment of comparative crisis- at a moment when things are very strained between dealers in pictures of dead artists, and living artists.

Well, my own work, I am risking my life for it and my reason has half-foundered. That's all right – but you are not among the dealers in men. You can still choose your side, acting with humanity, but what's the use?

With a handshake in thought,

Vincent

July 27, 1890²⁵ ■



Figure 17
Tree Roots and Trunks, 1890.
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

NOTES

1. Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence on Western Art since 1858* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 12. Siegfried Wichmann's book *Japonisme* provides an excellent overall view of the Japanese impact on Western culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
2. Examples include Monet's portrait of his wife wearing a kimono against a background of Japanese fans, and Whistler's painting of a kimono-clad woman in front of a Japanese folding screen looking at woodblock prints.
3. We can follow the Japanese influence on French art from Manet to the Impressionists (Degas, for example), and to the Post-Impressionists Mary Cassatt, Seurat, Signac, Gauguin, Lautrec, and Van Gogh, among others. Cassatt, in particular, developed a new printmaking technique inspired by Japanese woodblock prints.
4. Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, ed., *Van Gogh in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), 170.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Irving Stone and Jean Stone, eds., *Dear Theo: The Autobiography of Vincent Van Gogh* (New York: Signet Books, 1969), 290; Ronald de Leeuw, ed., and Arnold Pomerans, tr., *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 290–292.
7. Art is essentially symbolic since its images (whether or not representational) are reality made visible. What is meant by symbolism in relation to Van Gogh's work is the depiction of "a reality that transcended the everyday." See: Wichmann, 10–11. Also see below, note 10.
8. This tilting is of Japanese origin.
9. Stone, 383; de Leeuw, 399.
10. In late 1888 and just prior to his breakdown and self-mutilation, Van Gogh was working on two paintings about chairs. The first depicted Van Gogh's chair, humble in aspect with his pipe and tobacco pouch on its seat. The other was Gauguin's chair, sophisticated in style with books and a lit candle on its seat. The first is painted yellow, a color that for Van Gogh stood for love, warmth, and friendship. The main colors in Gauguin's chair are red and green. These two works indicate that Van Gogh had turned once more to color symbolism.
11. For example, he met Pissarro, Gauguin, Seurat, Signac, Lautrec, and Bernard among others. His *Factories at Asnieres Seen from the Quai de Clichy*, 1887, is Impressionist in style; *A Restaurant Interior*, 1887, is pointillist.
12. Welsh-Ovcharov, 170.
13. Though the bright colors did appeal to him, Van Gogh's own palette became even brighter while at Arles.
14. Wichmann, 12.
15. *Ibid.*, 40.
16. *Ibid.*, 57.
17. *Ibid.*, 52.
18. Pierre Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème* (New York: Current Literature Publishing Company, 1908). This work is available online through Project Gutenberg at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/3995>.
19. Wichmann, 58.
20. Loti.
21. Wichmann, 42. Synonyms for the term "synthetic" include artificial, false, fake, mock, or unnatural.
22. *Ibid.*, 52–53.
23. *Ibid.*, 42.
24. *Ibid.*, 42.
25. This letter has traditionally been considered as the last one van Gogh wrote before committing suicide. As de Leeuw has indicated, this was a short note to Theo dated July 24, 1890, which was not posted and which Van Gogh had with him July 29. See: *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, 501–502. Van Gogh's emotional and financial dependence on Theo is a recurring theme throughout his letters. A very readable translation is the collection of letters to Theo edited by Irving Stone; a highly recommended and newer translation is de Leeuw's *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*.

ILEANA B. LEAVENS, PhD, is instructor of Art History at Seattle Central Community College. In 1995, she participated in the NEH Summer Institute on Japanese Culture and Civilization, and she was selected for the 2002 JSA Summer Seminar in Honolulu. She has presented at the Annual Japan Studies Association since 1997, and participated in Asian Studies Development Program workshops and conferences. She has contributed to EAA twice previously. Her research interests include the application of the transculturation model to art history problems.