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On the cover

Utagawa Hiroshige, *Yokkaichi, Mie River*
(*Yokkaichi Miegawa*), circa 1832-1834,
coloured woodblock print (*nishiki-e*) (Trieste,
Civic Museum of Oriental Art, inv. SNR
1571).

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**SILK,
PORCELAIN
AND
PAPER**

A TOUR OF THE CIVIC
MUSEUM OF ORIENTAL
ART
OF TRIESTE

EDITED BY
SIMONE FURLANI

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UKIYO-E PRINTS: THE VISUAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Maurizio Lorber

In *his Simplified Drawing Course* (1812-1814), Katsushika Hokusai depicts himself painting the five characters that correspond to the definition *Final Volume Simplified Course* with as many brushes held simultaneously with his hands, feet and mouth¹. He therefore does not sketch figures but Chinese characters. This image is well suited to iconographically illustrating the fundamental concept of the Japanese pictorial tradition, which is so different from the Western one. In this regard, Hokusai's words are a good starting point for understanding the conceptual and aesthetic differences:

Since the age of six, I have loved to copy the shapes of things, and since the age of fifty, I have often published drawings, but until what I depicted at the age of seventy, there is nothing worthy of consideration. At seventy-three, I have somewhat grasped the essence of the structure of animals and birds, insects and fish, and the life of herbs and plants, and so at eighty-six I will progress further; at ninety I will have delved even deeper into their hidden meaning, and at one hundred I will perhaps truly have reached the realm of the divine and the marvellous. When I am one hundred and ten, even a single dot or line will have a life of its own².

What Hokusai tells us, particularly in this last sentence, refers to the art of calligraphy, a legacy of ancient Chinese tradition

¹ *Spontaneous Mastery. 'Accelerated Course in Simplified Drawing' by Katsushika Hokusai*, Italian translation and editing by S. Vesco, Venice 2020.

² See *Hokusai*, presentation by T. Duret, with an essay by M. Tazartes, Milan 2016, p. 178.

according to which, since the Ming period, it was believed that this knowledge should contribute, alongside painting, to the education of a man of culture.

The aesthetics underlying this technique, transferred to painting, contribute to the creation of a sort of *pictura compendiaria*, or summary, which aspires to define in a few strokes the minimal characteristics of a tree, a man, an animal, or a landscape. Once the pattern has been grasped, it is possible for the artist to depict the structural essence of the object represented, which is not, nor does it seek to be, a visual duplicate of the object depicted. As Ernst Gombrich demonstrated, even the tradition of *trompe-l'œil* is not a virtual duplication but evokes, through a number of iconic clues, visual reality, with the complicity of the observer's eye. This semiotic assumption underlying Gombrich's perhaps best-known book was, in the Japanese pictorial tradition, a given in terms of practice³.

It was the close correlation between the art of painting and calligraphy that gave Eastern artists a greater awareness of the conventionality of figurative representation⁴. In fact, ideograms, in their sign codification, are the result of a graphic synthesis

. By way of example, we recall the pictogram 木 ('tree'), which evokes, in its extreme graphic simplicity, the stylised form of a tree⁵.

³ 'The message that the artist receives from the visible world must be encoded [...], this coded language [has] been gradually adapted to the kind of signs that art was expected to convey'; E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study of the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Turin 1965, p. 221.

⁴Gian Carlo Calza doubts this close correlation, which we, on the other hand, try to support: 'In East Asia, there are those who argue that drawing and painting derive from writing, and although I personally have strong doubts about this, this type of link is undoubtedly much stronger than it is here'. G.C. Calza, *Lessons from Professor Hokusai*, in *Il Sole24ore*, 6 December 2020.

⁵ The ideogram 'tree', although motivated by the fact that it represents the stylised form of a tree, is not normally recognised for its iconic similarity. When the writer uses it, the association is made between a mental concept and an arbitrary sign. So even though many ideograms are pictographically iconically identifiable, in everyday use they are not recognised for

Japanese artists, based on their figurative tradition, understood clearly that every representation is based on a scheme that selects what is visible, so much so that Hokusai's reflection implies a very advanced semiotic understanding: the drawing of a figure composed of a few lines or brushstrokes does not claim to fully represent the chosen object.

The Eastern artist, as Gombrich wrote about the instructions in a Chinese painting manual⁶, can depict mountains, trees or flowers because he knows the secret of their being, and the evocation of their appearances is based on total trust in the formulas he has acquired. This is because the aim is not to achieve *mimesis*, in which the representation ideally tends towards the duplication of the object – *trompe-l'œil* – but rather to capture its essence, to evoke it, we might say, poetically⁷:

Even if painted without eyes, figures must give the impression of looking; even if painted without ears, they must give the impression of listening [...]. There are things that a thousand brushstrokes could not represent, but which can be captured with just a few strokes, provided they are the right ones. This is truly expressing the visible⁸.

These brief indications illustrate how the concise language of calligraphy supported such representational modes and, at the same time, constituted a conceptual basis that differed from Western tradition from the outset. This does not, of course, mean

their original iconic value, but are treated as unmotivated and arbitrary signs; A. Tollini, *Kanji: elementi di linguistica degli ideogrammi giapponesi*, Pavia 1992, p. 52.

⁶ This refers to *the Manual of the Garden as Small as a Mustard Seed*, which dates back to the Qing dynasty and whose first volume was published in 1679.

⁷ E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, op. cit., pp. 184–185.

⁸ From *the Manual of the Garden as Small as a Mustard Seed*, quoted in E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, op. cit., pp. 249–250.

It seems that Japanese artists were not attracted to Western representational techniques but, as we shall see, translated them according to their own particular tradition and aesthetic sensibility.

From the West to the East

Long before the fashion and passion for what was called 'Japonism' in Europe, profound European influences were evident in the Land of the Rising Sun. From the mid-17th century, the Dutch East India Company, after ousting its Portuguese competitors who had arrived in Japan in 1543, managed to gain a monopoly on trade in Japan, gradually intensifying the exchange of goods and acquiring the privilege of landing in the port of the tiny island of Dejima, near Nagasaki. The Japanese, however, were not only interested in trade relations, but also paid considerable attention to technical and scientific innovations, focusing, for example, on navigation and the mechanics of automata and clocks (called *karakuri*, meaning 'mechanism').

This interest in advanced European techniques also had an impact on the arts, stimulating significant changes. A good example of this is *the Zogrscope*, an optical viewer through which perspective engravings, known as *vues d'optique*, could be observed. This device captured the curiosity of artists because, by accentuating depth, it gave the sensation of observing a relief image⁹.

Vues d'optique or *perspective views* were perspective engravings, often hand-coloured, designed to be viewed through these optical devices¹⁰. They mainly depicted views of

⁹C.A. Zotti Minici (ed.), *Il mondo nuovo: le meraviglie della visione dal '700 alla nascita del cinema* (The New World: The Wonders of Vision from the 1700s to the Birth of Cinema), Milan, 1988.

¹⁰ The history of stereoscopic vision continues today. Google has signed an agreement for the production of a digital stereoscopic viewer derived from

cities with a strong central perspective, defined by a canal, a street or even a portico stretching towards the horizon¹¹. For the Japanese, this mode of representing space on a plane, which was unknown to them, became the defining feature of our figurative culture.

The importance and surprise aroused by these perspective views and optical devices can be seen in the Japanese translations of certain terms: the lenses fitted to the optical viewer were called *oranda-megane* ('Dutch lenses'), while the device itself was called *nozoki-megane*¹².

The first prints made in the mid-1740s by Okumura Masanobu used this perspective setting, derived from the *vue d'optique* model, extensively to depict the interior of the kabuki theatre, so much so that they were called 'floating' (*uki-e*) because of the way they gave Japanese viewers, who were unfamiliar with perspective, a vague sense of vertigo, with the foreground close to the observer and the figures in the background appearing to recede. However, the term should be distinguished from the phrase *ukiyo-e*, 'image of the floating world', which defines the Japanese artistic movement of the Tokugawa period¹³.

the one invented in 1938 by William Gruber, which allowed viewers to view stereo slides placed in a circular cardboard holder: the View-Master disc with seven pairs of plates could be inserted into the G Sawyer's model, one of the most popular in Europe in the 1960s, a true heir to the 'New World' of 18th-century fairs.

¹¹ C.J. Kaldenbach, *Perspective Views*, in 'Print Quarterly', 2/1985, pp. 87-104 and N. Leverenz, *Vues d'optique with Chinese Subjects*, *ibid.*, 1/2014, pp. 20-44.

¹²T. Screech, *The Lens within the Heart. The Western Scientific Gaze and the Popular Imagery in Later Edo Japan*, Honolulu 2002, pp. 99 and 202–211. For a definition of the terms *uki-e* and *megane-e*, see the online dictionary *Jaanus (Japanese Architecture and Art Net Users System)*.

¹³ In this regard, it is interesting to note the semantic change in the word *ukiyo*, which has ancient origins. In fact, it was originally linked to the Buddhist concept that considered life (*yo*) on earth tedious (*uki*) and transitory, in contrast to the eternal blissful life promised to those who detached themselves from their earthly counterpart. This pessimistic view changed in the Edo period, when *uki*, indicated by a different ideogram, came to be understood in the sense of 'floating' or transitory, although without the original negative connotation. With this

It was precisely perspective, as happened in Europe with the *vues d'optique*, that was one of the elements that allowed *ukiyo-e* artists to create striking images that were therefore more popular. Traditionally elitist subjects and iconography – typical of the school known as the Nanga group or the Chinese-derived literati (*Bunjinga*) – became objects of admiration for a wider audience¹⁴.

Comparative representations of space

As highlighted, perspective representation travelled on the wave of Dutch commercial expansionism. Japanese artists used it with the freedom that came from not having academic knowledge of its laws and therefore not being rigidly bound by them. They considered it a novelty that could be reconciled with their pictorial tradition¹⁵. Composing the image according to optical principles allowed them to discover the play of dimensions: small subjects in the foreground could take on a prominent position, while large, monumental ones in the distance, such as Mount Fuji in *Hokusai's The Great Wave*¹⁶, became tiny.

semantic change, *ukiyo* became an exhortation to enjoy existence in its perpetual fluctuation; M. Murase, *Il Giappone*, Turin 1992, pp. 268-269.

¹⁴ Id., *Japanese art*, Exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of art, New York 1975, pp. 211–213; J.A. Michner, *The Floating World*, Honolulu 1983², pp. 72–106.

¹⁵ See K. Varnedoe, *Una squisita indifferenza*, Milan 1990, pp. 53-77 and D. Keene, *The Japanese Discovery of Europe*, Stanford 1962, pp. 66-69. I discussed this topic in M. Lorber, *Japanese Perspectives. From Europe to the Far East: the representation of space in Ukiyo-e prints*, in 'Arte in Friuli - Arte a Trieste', 36/2018, pp. 287-309.

¹⁶The Civic Museum of Oriental Art in Trieste has a copy that is probably one of the last possible prints and therefore retouched in some parts: Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, polychrome print (*nishiki-e?*), circa 1830-1832, Civic Museum of Oriental Art, Trieste, inv. SNR 1344.

Perspective reduction could make Mount Fuji (actually an extinct volcano) appear as large as a flower in the foreground or, again due to perspective, be positioned between the legs of a cooper, or reveal itself, to the surprise of the observer, as a ghostly shadow behind a fisherman's net. Many of these optical illusions were featured in small woodblock prints, composed between 1834 and 1847 by Hokusai¹⁷, collected in a book and printed in black and grey with the title *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*: a collection of symbolic iconography of Fuji and, at the same time, a series of images with surprising perspective effects¹⁸.

Hiroshige, like Hokusai, used Western perspective, but the two most famous masters of *ukiyo-e* views, in accordance with their own aesthetic sensibilities, interpreted it in different ways. Hokusai embraced the principle that any subject could be represented from different and infinite points of view, revealing new perspectives with every slight shift. Hiroshige, on the other hand, was attracted by the surprising effects that spatial domination over the world produced, so much so that, as we can see in the trees on Maiko Beach¹⁹, the artist plays on the variation in size depending on the distance from the observer, emphasising the result in a spectacular way.

This visual solution, derived from Western perspectives, is strongly evident in Hiroshige's print *Two Horses on the Plain with Mount Fuji in the Background*²⁰. The imposing horse in the foreground, cut off on the left, is placed in the grassy plain captured from a low viewpoint and therefore with a high horizon, behind which it leads to...

¹⁷ R. Lane, *Hokusai. Vita e opere*, Milan 1991 and G.C. Calza (ed.), *Hokusai il vecchio pazzo per la pittura*, Milan 1999.

¹⁸ D. Bell, *Hokusai's Project: The Articulation of Pictorial Space*, Folkestone 2007.

¹⁹ Utagawa Hiroshige, *Maiko Beach in Harima Province*, polychrome print (*nishiki-e*), circa 1853, Civic Museum of Oriental Art, Trieste, inv. SNR 1340.

²⁰ Utagawa Hiroshige, *Two Horses on the Plateau with Mount Fuji in the Background*, polychrome print (*nishiki-e*), c. 1853, Civic Museum of Oriental Art, Trieste, inv. SNR 1602, in L. Crusvar, *Japan: Prints and Surimono from the Oriental Collection of the Civic Museums of History and Art*, Trieste 1998, pp. 229-232, entry 1.27.



Mount Fuji, is a display of perspective mastery. However, note the type of modification that the rule of perspective undergoes in Hiroshige's hands: the overlapping dunes, the proportionally diminishing flowers and the diagonally constructed stream are all spatial vectors that also contemplate an almost abstract and synthetic dimension of space. So much so that, to European eyes, the surreal connotation of the whole could only evoke an even more surreal reinterpretation of Paolo Uccello's perspective representation in *The Night Hunt*.

From East to West: the charm of Japanese prints in Europe

The Japanese isolationism (*Sakoku*) imposed by the Tokugawa *shōgun* government came to an end in 1853, following a show of force by Commodore Matthew Perry at the head of US ships. This momentous change led, starting in 1868 (the Meiji era), to the beginning of trade relations and the subsequent influx into Europe of prints, fabrics, silk paintings, ceramics and *netsuke*, which generated a real fashion phenomenon from the 1870s onwards, *Japonisme*, which quickly spread from France throughout the Old Continent⁽²¹⁾

The first signs of this influence can be clearly seen in both drawings and literature: the first Japanese prints appeared in Paris and in 1856 Félix Bracquemond became the first European artist to copy Japanese works, reproducing figures of animals taken from Hokusai on porcelain intended for Eugène Rousseau. Similarly, Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysanthème*, published in 1887, accentuated and contributed to the spread of *Japonisme*.

²¹ S. Wichmann, *Giapponismo. Oriente-Europa: contatti nell'arte del XIX e XX secolo*, Milan 1981; *Le Japonisme*, exhibition catalogue edited by T. Shuji (Paris, Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, May-August 1988 - Tokyo, Musée National d'Art Occidental, September-December 1988), Paris 1988; L. Lanbourne, *Japonisme: cultural crossing between Japan and the West*, London 2005.

Ukiyo-e images, as is well known, were admired in Europe by artists such as Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh, who were mainly interested in two aspects. The first was the opportunity to engage with refined products that were far removed from our figurative tradition, and the second was the vivid attention paid to natural phenomena:

But in short, isn't it almost a true religion that these simple Japanese people teach us, living in the midst of nature as if they were flowers? And I don't think it's possible to study Japanese art without becoming much more cheerful and happy, and without returning to our nature despite our education and our work in the world of convention. [...] I envy the Japanese, the extreme clarity of everything they possess. Nothing is ever boring and nothing seems to be done in a hurry. Their work is as simple as breathing, and they make an impression with a few confident strokes as easily as if they were buttoning a waistcoat²².

But equally important in the eyes of Western artists was the way space was represented, for example, in prints that outlined a compositional key not yet experimented with in the West. In Claude Monet's house in Giverny⁽²³⁾ we find a copy of the aforementioned print by Utagawa Hiroshige, *Two Horses on the Plateau with Mount Fuji in the Background*, hanging on the wall. The attention of artists such as Édouard Manet, Paul Gauguin and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was not limited to the assimilation of exotic images but, as creators who wanted to revamp tired academicism, they saw in *ukiyo-e* prints the possibility of recovering and revitalising the resources still available in the perspective tradition: 'The prints were catalysts that allowed innovative Western artists to rethink in new ways the uses they could make of what they had at hand'²⁴.

²² V. Van Gogh, *Letters to Theo*, edited by M. Cescon, Parma 1984, pp. 342–343.

²³ L. Crusvar, *Japan*, op. cit., p. 232, entry I.29.

²⁴ K. Varnedoe, *An Exquisite Indifference*, op. cit., pp. 71 and 76-77, and D. Keene, *The Japanese Discovery of Europe*, op. cit., pp. 66-69.

Ukiyo-e prints: the visual relationship between East and West



For example, observing the print *A Gust of Wind on the Mie River at Yokkaichi*²⁵, one can understand the attraction that European artists felt for these visual solutions. The work, in depicting the loss of a hat, associated with the bending of the reeds and willow branches, admirably evokes the gust of wind that is also manifested in the billowing of the traveller's cloak on the right. The diagonal lines, in addition to suggesting spatial depth, impart such dynamism to the image that the escaped headgear seems to exceed the limits of the composition.

Dynamic narratives such as this, or images such as the aforementioned *Two Horses on the Plateau with Mount Fuji in the Background*, in transfiguring perspective into an abstract dimension of space, revealed to the

²⁵Utagawa Hiroshige, *A Gust of Wind on the Mie River at Yokkaichi*, polychrome print (*nishiki-e*), circa 1833–1834, Civic Museum of Oriental Art, Trieste, inv. SNR 1571, in L. Crusvar, *Japan*, op. cit., pp. 210–214, entry I.25. Hiroshige's splendid print captures a gust of wind on the Mie River near Yokkaichi and belongs to the series *Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido*, published between 1832 and 1834.

European artists formal solutions that went beyond the established rules of perspective, composition and colour, equally fascinating collectors, who were inevitably attracted to a visually refined figurative culture, even in its less elevated expressions such as *ukiyo-e* prints.

East and West: a comparison of iconisms

The work of Utagawa Kuniyoshi, which we will now analyse⁽²⁶⁾ is a good example of the interplay between text and image that characterises the aesthetics of many of these prints and which, inevitably, escaped the attention of Western artists.

The female figure, holding a letter in her dress, belongs to the *Sankai medetai zue* ('Famous products of the land and sea') series and is significant in terms of the relationship established between image and text – known in semiotics as iconotext²⁷ –, which involves subtleties that could not be grasped by European artists lacking linguistic competence but which were part of the original aesthetic value of the work. In fact, each print celebrates a well-known regional product through its depiction in the smaller image and, in turn, each female figure expresses a desire related, often by linguistic association, to that product.

In the case of the print entitled *Desiring to change her lover's mind*, the connection with the title of the series to which it belongs (*Sankai medetai zue*) is very subtle and not at all obvious. The word *medetai* means 'products for which we should be grateful', but at the same time alludes to the meaning of 'desire for

²⁶ Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Woman associated with a vignette depicting whales, Whales from Ki Island*, polychrome print (*nishiki-e*), 1852, Civic Museum of Oriental Art, Trieste, inv. SNR 1807, in L. Crusvar, *Japan*, op. cit., pp. 305–306, entry I.45.

²⁷ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by R. Guidieri, Turin 1980.

Ukiyo-e prints: the visual relationship between East and West



good omen'. This second meaning establishes a connection with the female figure who, as mentioned in the title, hopes to change her beloved's mind. The suffix *tai* is playfully repeated as the last sound in the subtitle of each print in the series because, at the end of a verb, it indicates the desire to do something. This alludes to the fact that the woman has a particular desire or expectation, which in this case is linked to the letter that appears between the folds of her kimono.

It has been highlighted how the subtle interplay between text and image was accentuated by the creators of *ukiyo-e* prints because, over the years, censorship by *the bakufu* (military government of *the shōgun*) had become so severe that, in the mid-19th century, more restrictive reforms were adopted, forcing artists to limit their choice of subjects and even providing for imprisonment in the event that they made extravagant choices in the selection of images. As Timothy Clark, curator of Japanese art at the British Museum, has rightly suggested, censorship stimulated a kind of challenge that encouraged Kuniyoshi's creative initiative, who also found a way to allegorically criticise the shogunate in a veiled manner. For woodblock printing, this meant paying particular attention to language, increasing the passion for charades and consolidating the intriguing links between writing and image²⁸.

It is quite clear that these references between text and image, typical of Japanese culture, seemed elusive to Western observers, but Utagawa Kuniyoshi's prints also reveal another formal aspect that more strongly marks the distance between the two figurative cultures.

Behind the female character, similar to a hanging painting, is a depiction of three whales created by Yoshitori (Kuniyoshi's daughter), which evoke, as in the entire *Sankai medetai zue* ('Famous products of the earth and

²⁸ T. Clark, *Kuniyoshi and the Censorship*, in *Kuniyoshi from the Arthur R. Miller Collection*, exhibition catalogue (London, 21 March-7 June 2009; New York, Japan Society, 12 March-13 June 2010), London 2009, p. 168 and pp. 19-31.

of the sea'), a particular element typical of a specific place that is always associated with a female bust, as is also the case here²⁹. The tradition of the 'picture within a picture' is also present in the West, but there are profound semiotic differences that reflect the different ways of conceiving European perspective representation and its Eastern reinterpretation³⁰. In Kuniyoshi's print, the motif is not linked to a play on perspective illusionism, as is the case, for example, in Spain in one of the earliest examples of the genre, namely Diego Velázquez's painting *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (c. 1619-1620). In order to grasp the semiosis at work, the observer has only visual data at his disposal, since there is no inscription in the painting and therefore, in the foreground, one figure points to the sacred subject and the other, with a direct gaze – in cinema we speak of a 'camera gaze' – addresses the observer³¹. As Victor Stoichita has pointed out, in Velázquez's painting, the gesture and the gaze establish a dialogue between the figures in the foreground and the image in the background, which can be understood as an 'Albertian window' opening onto the Gospel scene, or as

²⁹The three whales are accompanied by the title *Iki kujira* ('The whales of Iki') and each one is identified by its particular name: Semi Kujira, Aka Ho kujira, Ko kujira. See L. Crusvar, *Japan*, op. cit., pp. 305–306, entry I.45. Since there are three whales, the wish alluded to in the letter is probably to have children.

³⁰Many of these peculiarities of the images of the 'Floating World' and the sign techniques used to represent the becoming of things are analysed in detail in S. Furlani, *Images and Becoming: The Aesthetics of Ukiyo-e*, in Id. (ed.), *Different Images. Problema, natura e funzione dell'immagine nelle altre culture*, Milan 2019, pp. 131–156.

³¹ The 'camera gaze' is a form of interpellation, a figure placed in the space of representation that calls upon its interlocutor. It is a communicative choice, in Casetti's words, which creates a tear in the fabric of fiction, thanks to the emergence of a metalinguistic awareness ('we are at the cinema' or, in the case of a painting, 'it is a painting') which, by revealing the game, destroys it; F. Casetti, *A tu per tu. Il film e il suo spettatore*, in 'Documenti di lavoro', 123-124/1983, pp. 1-35: p. 2. All this can happen in Western pictorial fiction, but not in Japanese representation, which is not 'a window on the world'.

a hanging picture: an image within an image. The interesting thing is that the women in the foreground are not looking at the image/window: 'There is nothing to suggest that they are aware of its presence. It is only the observer's 'surprised eye' that sees both the biblical scene and the one taking place in the ^{kitchen}' (32).

In the West, this narrative choice unwittingly inaugurated a reflection on the semiotic status of the image, since the 'picture within a picture' is an operation that prompts the observer to become metalinguistically aware of the perspective representation: the painting within another painting clearly highlights that both are virtual spaces – fictional – in which the narrative is organised through images. The ideal beginning of this Renaissance conception of painting is Leon Battista Alberti's well-known statement that the painting is 'a window open onto the world through which I look'³³, a key principle of the perspective representation of space.

As we tried to argue at the outset, this assumption of conceiving pictorial space is foreign to the Eastern matrix, but it is precisely for this reason that, at the end of the 19th century, when many European painters wanted to free themselves from the Renaissance foundations of European art, they turned their attention to other figurative experiences. In fact, as we have seen in Van Gogh's words of appreciation for Japanese artists,

"Their work is as simple as breathing, and they create a figure with just a few confident strokes." Nothing could be further from the academic masterpieces of *art pompier* glorified by critics at Parisian exhibitions.

We should also consider that, in order to paint ideograms, both the Chinese and the Japanese held the brush in such a way that the hand never touched the surface of the painting, which was touched only by the tip of the brush. This allowed for a

³² V.I. Stoichita, *The Invention of the Picture*, Milan 1998, p. 26.

³³ 'Wherever I am to paint, I draw a rectangle with right angles, as large as I wish, which I consider to be a window open onto the world, through which I can see what is to be painted there'; L.B. Alberti, *Della pittura* (1436), edited by C. Grayson, Bari 1975, pp. 113-115.

quick and fluid strokes so that, in a single movement, the characters were formed which, although executed according to strict ritual rules, were the result of gestures without uncertainty, similar to the elegance of a fish slipping through the seaweed, not coincidentally a typical theme in Japanese painting.

In summary, we can say that the cult and care for calligraphic skill gave Eastern artists full awareness of the conventionality of the figurative scheme, which is the basis of the relationship between figuration and the figured object³⁴. Thus, their representations had the aim, in the words of Hokusai, of capturing the intrinsic structure of things.

It is for this reason that Japanese prints became a visual source for many painters, as they made it clear to the most discerning eyes that they subverted the basic assumption of perspective, namely its irrepressible mimetic vocation. This is confirmed by the fact that most Japanese artists, once they had overcome their initial confusion, guided by their aesthetic principles, declined the spatial illusion of perspective in a calligraphic composition, transforming it into a sort of inlay³⁵.

Precisely for this reason, the theme of the 'picture within a picture', present in Kuniyoshi's *Sankai medetai zue* series, does not raise or develop semiotic implications of 'metapainting'³⁶, considering that, in

³⁴A concept first clearly expressed by Emanuel Löwy in 1900 (*Nature in Greek Art: A Theory of the Genesis of Figurative Expression*, edited by Carlo Anti, Padua 1946, p. 3) and taken up by Gombrich. I discussed this topic in M. Lorber, *Connoisseurship and visual semiotics: from the peculiar forms of Giovanni Morelli to the patterns and conventions of Ernst H. Gombrich*, in G. Angelini (ed.), *Giovanni Morelli between art criticism and collecting*, Pisa 2020, pp. 119–134.

³⁵ Shiba Kōkan made a different choice, favouring the Western perspective to such an extent that he became an advocate of perspective fundamentalism; C.L. French, *Shiba Kōkan: Artist, Innovator and Pioneer in the Westernisation of Japan*, New York-Tokyo 1974.

³⁶ V.I. Stoichita, *The Invention of the Picture*, op. cit., in particular pp. 266–277. In the case of the 'picture within a picture', it is a perspective representation that stages itself as such, therefore comparable to a metalinguistic operation; see the entry *Metalinguaggio* in A.J. Greimas, J. Courtés, *Semiotica. Dizionario ragionato della teoria del linguaggio*, Florence 1979, pp. 211–213.

Japanese symbolic space, even when Renaissance perspective is used, retains a different 'compositional grammar'. The figurative conventions of the 'floating world' are closer to the art of *ikebana*, in which form, line and colour follow harmonious rules and principles that contribute to the creation of implicit meanings, often vaguely allusive, independent of Western optical ones.

In Europe, these different aesthetic cornerstones were inevitably often misunderstood or misinterpreted due to cultural distance, but it was precisely their obvious diversity that fascinated European artists, who appreciated their alternative potential compared to academic figurative codes.