

# The Asian Reporter

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WHAT THE TRUMP PHONE CALL TO DUTERTE WAS REALLY LIKE.



## MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



# Van Gogh & the Courtesan

In 2012, I visited the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. I'd long been a fan of Vincent van Gogh's artwork, particularly the "The Starry Night" and his "Sunflower" series. I was surprised, however, to see Japanese artwork at the museum. When I looked a little closer, the pieces were actually van Gogh copies of Japanese woodblock prints called *ukiyo-e*, an art form that flourished between the 17th and 19th centuries. When Japan opened up trade to the west in 1854, it ended roughly about 200 years of seclusion and allowed exports, including Japanese artwork.

Van Gogh, and many European artists including Manet, Degas, and Monet, were fascinated by Japanese prints. The artists were drawn to the vivid colors, the spatial difference in perspectives with foregrounds and backgrounds, and the joyful approach to the prints. Van Gogh popularized the phrase *Japonisme* to describe the Japanese influence on western art and culture.

Van Gogh especially loved two Japanese artists and copied their pieces while adding his own style and touches. Both artists created their works during the Edo (present-day Tokyo) period between 1603 and 1868, when Japanese society was under the rule of a Tokugawa shogunate. Utagawa Hiroshige is well known for his "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji" landscape series. Keisai Eisen is renowned for his series of prints of beautiful women, particularly courtesans, during the more decadent Bunsei Era (1818-1830). Courtesans at the time held an elite status as entertainers who had a range of art skills in ikebana (flower arranging) and sado (tea ceremony) as well as training on musical instruments such as the *koto* and *shamisen*.

I was fascinated with van Gogh's copies of Hiroshige's "Plum Garden at Kameido" and Eisen's "The Courtesan." While "Plum Garden" depicted a winter wasteland with distant figures, "The Courtesan" was colorful with a beautiful woman looking back almost defiantly. In both paintings, van Gogh added brilliant colors and a border framing his copies. "Courtesan (after Eisen)" is bordered by water lilies, cranes, and a boat as if to give it a more western feel, yet the image of the woman in the painting haunted me. She looked wise and shrewd and as if she was about to speak.

I thought about how van Gogh might have felt staring at the original Japanese prints in his impoverished room in Paris, talking to himself and putting his interpretation into the artwork. I pictured the beginning of his madness and what he might have imagined when "The Courtesan" talked to him, teaching him how to paint differently. Then I thought of an idea. What if I could create a play in which the courtesan came to life to become van Gogh's muse?

Years later, I found translations of van Gogh's letters and began to shape his dialogue with the courtesan in the painting. While reading his letters, I discovered an isolated man who spent a great deal of time alone, writing and reading American and British authors, and otherwise devoting himself to painting. He had little money to do anything else.

Yet his letters spoke in revelatory tones about how much he loved the Japanese prints — to the point of fetishism. The Europeans portrayed Asian art as "Oriental" and exotic, putting it on a pedestal, while at the same time considering it "primitive" and full of Asian stereotypes. Van Gogh collected hundreds of Japanese prints despite his poverty. *Japonisme* caught on throughout Europe and influenced a new wave of painting. Impressionism owes a great debt to Japanese art.

What I learned at that museum moved me enough to write a play based on the Japanese prints that inspired van Gogh. Four years later, I'm staging a reading with music and movement by Unit Souzou to be held at New Expressive Works (N.E.W.), located at 810 S.E. Belmont Street in Portland, on January 27 at 7:30pm and January 28 at 2:00pm and 7:30pm. I've gathered a group of talented Asian-American actors to turn those musings of van Gogh talking to "The Courtesan" into a short play to show not only the global influence of Japan on van Gogh and western art, but also how western consumerism and environmental disasters affect modern-day China. Included in the play is a story about two scientists who deal with an environmental disaster and one day encounter van Gogh's Japanese paintings.

The play is called *The Courtesan* in honor of the original painting in Amsterdam. It is the first play

Continued on page 16