The Changing Hues of Indigo

– From Tattoos to Art Nouveau –

By Okabe Masayuki

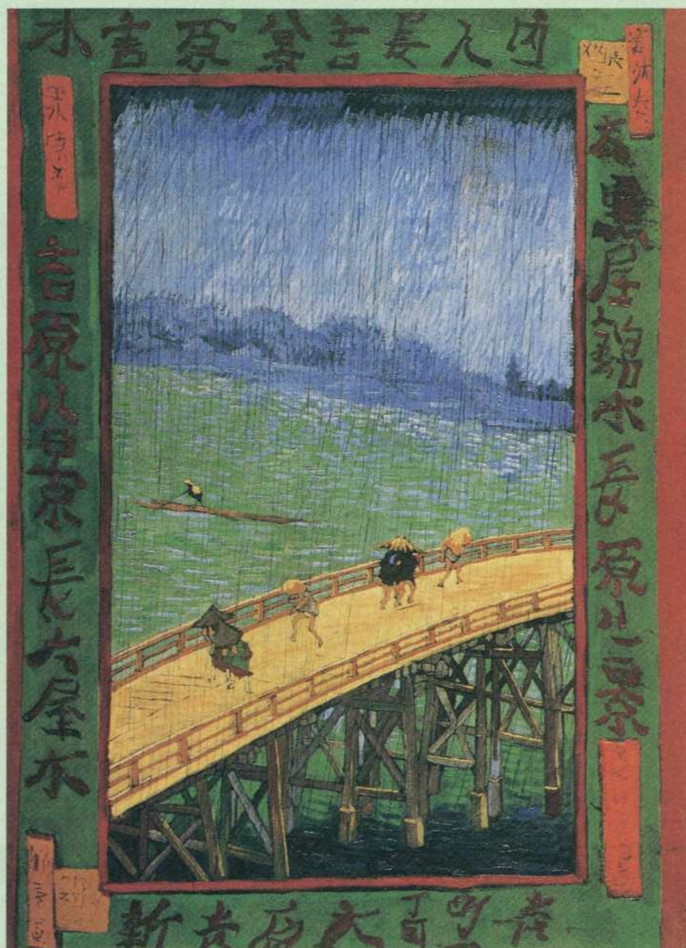

Plate 1: Vincent van Gogh "Japonaiserie: The Bridge in the Rain," Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), 1887, H73.0 x W54.0, oil on canvas

Between late 1885 and the early part of the following year, Vincent van Gogh made an unexpected discovery in Antwerp, the main city of northern Belgium. Antwerp was a place of refinement, entirely different from the rural south of the Netherlands, where Van Gogh had until then resided. In the Netherlands, Van Gogh had spent from dawn till dusk in the dirt and mud, painting country scenery and farms. In Antwerp, however, there was no rural scenery. Having decided to travel abroad for formal artistic training, Van Gogh would stroll, full of curiosity, through the store-lined streets of Antwerp. As he wandered past bookstores and curio-shops, Van Gogh's eye was especially drawn to a particular kind of multicolored woodblock print from a distant land: Japanese *ukiyo-e*.

Van Gogh's eyes were greenish-blue, but when he first encountered ukiyo-e, they must have turned to strong primary colors – blues, reds and yellows. This is because Van Gogh was at that time passionately involved in the study of color. "Color, itself, expresses something," he wrote to his brother Theo. "Without using color for expression, it just won't work. One must use it." Van Gogh was seeking to create his own mode of expression, using his own palette, and his own individualistic tones.

The first thing to catch Van Gogh's fancy in Antwerp was the collection of paintings left to the city by Peter Paul Rubens, the most acclaimed artistic genius born there. The 17th-century court life and the magnificent mythical worlds rendered by Rubens were far removed from the world view and ethic of Van Gogh, who had spent his time depicting the bleak realities of impoverished peasant life, but it was not Rubens' world view to which Van Gogh paid his highest compliments. Rather, it was Rubens' powerfully expressive use of color. The colors that Van Gogh sought were "bright" colors, which were not yet part of his idiom. And colors brighter than those of Rubens were waiting to be found – not in the museums and grand churches that housed Rubens' paintings, but in the bookstores and art-curio shops of Antwerp's shopping district.

The life-changing effect that powerful color-expression had on Van Gogh made the academic courses at the academy of Antwerp seem a complete bore by comparison. He immediately set off for Paris, where he absorbed the theories of color expounded by the Impressionists and the Neo-Impressionists. His passion for collecting ukiyo-e only grew stronger. Van Gogh's colors underwent a complete

transformation after arriving in Paris. His self-portraits, sunflowers and landscapes, for example, bear testimony that he had achieved the creativity in the palette that he had been seeking.

Exactly what kinds of colors did Van Gogh discover in ukiyo-e woodblock prints? Along with the yellows, reds and greens that overtook his canvases, blues gradually came to play a leading role in his art since he first came across ukiyo-e woodcuts and through his years in Paris, Arles, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence and Auvers-sur-Oise, where he spent his final months before dying at age 38. While it is common knowledge that Van Gogh's colors were based on the color and complementary color theories developed by the Neo-Impressionists, his tones differed from the pale, delicate effects by which Georges Seurat engendered poetic sentiments, and the brilliant mosaic-like style of Paul Signac.

His letters tell us what kind of paints Van Gogh used. He loved painting with cobalt blue, ultramarine and cerulean blue. These colors are based on ingredients that were improved by modern Western technology. The support of his brother Theo, who was a successful art dealer, enabled Van Gogh to indulge in the lavish use of these improved paints.

None of these blues, however, matched the quality of the blue in the ukiyo-e – the blue that had inspired Van Gogh's color revolution. He copied two ukiyo-e in Utagawa Hiroshige's *Meisho Edo Hyakkei (100 Famous Views of Edo),* and these faithful works tell us that Van Gogh was attempting to recreate Japanese art, in terms of structure, subject matter and even color. (Plate 1)

Most of the ukiyo-e Van Gogh encountered and collected in Antwerp and Paris were low-priced, widely distributed woodprints that had been produced at that time or immediately prior – at the end of the Edo period. Interestingly, the ukiyo-e works made at the close of the Edo period (1603-1867) all had something in common regarding their color scheme, and that was the abundant use of indigo blue. For instance, Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Kuniyoshi made liberal use of indigo and a special shading technique to create a unique atmosphere in which to express nature and life in Japan. (Plate 2) There can be no doubt that indigo reigned chief of all the beautiful colors that Van Gogh saw in ukiyo-e.

Indigo dye had been a traditional color in Japan, before undergoing a rapid popularization starting in the middle Edo period. Indigo is a widely-used dye throughout the world, with more than 50 different kinds of plant-based indigo in existence. In Japan, high-quality *Awa* Indigo, made using knotweed, was mass produced and sent throughout the country, with the backing of the Tokushima Clan of Shikoku ("Awa" is an old name for the area in Tokushima Prefecture.) The unique quality of indigo, which combines a certain boldness of color with quiet simplicity, providing unpretentious flair, was generally favored by Edo period society. Indigo went on to symbolize the fashion and culture of Japan, as the chic of the chic in the world of color. Hokusai, Kuniyoshi and other ukiyo-e masters helped lift indigo blue into a higher realm of aesthetics. Indigo blue spread to dyed fabrics, kimono, paintings, tea utensils and everyday items.

Plate 2: Katsushika Hokusai, "Fugaku Sanjurokkei, Bishu Fujimigawara," Tokyo National Museum, 1831-1833

Plate 3: Felix Beato, "Batei (Groom)," ca1866, albumen print

The love for indigo had peaked, however, by the 1870s, when Japan entered the Meiji era (1867-1912). Tattooing was very much in vogue among the commoners during the latter Edo period, and could be considered the ultimate expression of love for indigo and ornamentation. Nonetheless it was banned by a Cabinet resolution in 1872, five years into the Meiji Restoration. Resplendent tattoos of flowers, birds and gods, in vibrant blues, reds and greens, had been a shining star of Edo culture, and a custom that held great fascination among foreigners. That part of Japanese culture was dismantled by the new Meiji government.

In this portrait (Plate 3), taken by Felix Beato, we see a stunning tattoo that stretches across the subject's shoulders, down both arms, spans the entire stretch of the back and extends down to the thighs. On his shoulders are flowers (peonies), and on his back is what is presumed to be a mother and child. The ukiyo-e pattern created by

the flowing lines of indigo was truly a woodblock print atop a bare body. The artificial-coloring technology of photography gave beautiful expression to the deep, clear, blue light seemingly released by the ink, which was introduced into the skin with a needle.

Tattooing has a long history. In Japan, it dates back to the Jomon period (ca 10000 B.C. to the fourth century B.C.) The practice of tattooing began spreading throughout society in 1720, when, under *shogun* Tokugawa Yoshimune, convicts were ordered tattooed. More than 100 years later, tattoos had evolved into works of splendor and had gained immense popularity, especially among artisans. This photograph shows more than just a tattoo; it captures the aesthetics of the artisan embodied in the tattoo.

Like woodblock prints, the composition and color of tattoos developed with rich diversity, complexity and grandeur. At the base, however, stood the color blue, applied by pricking the skin with a black ink. The resultant blue was near indigo in color. By the end of the Edo period, indigo blue had become a prevailing fashion throughout Japanese society, leaping from daily life right onto the human body, by way of the tattoo. The new Meiji government, however, in a move to promote Westernization, outlawed tattooing, effectively diluting the influence of indigo blue in the aesthetics of daily life. Ironically, Japanese indigo blue was subsequently imitated in the art of Europe and America, where it gave rise to a new form of expression. This stained-glass window (Plate 4), for example, was created by Louis Comfort Tiffany, a central figure in the Art Nouveau movement. Commissioned by Jay Gould for his daughter, Helen, and entitled "Tiffany's Fawn," this work uses a palette reminiscent of indigo blue to depict a transparent and profound atmosphere of fantasy.

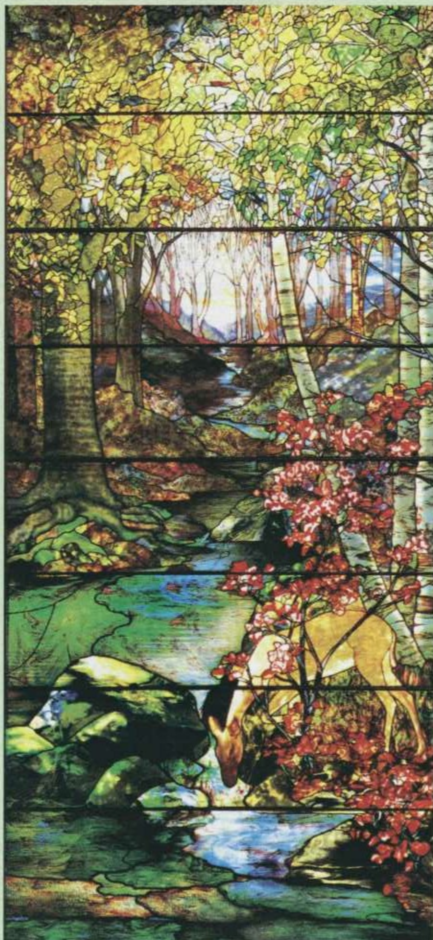

Plate 4: Louis C. Tiffany, "Helen Gould Landscape Window," The Louis C. Tiffany Garden Museum, Matsue, Japan, 1910, H327.0 x W154.0

Many Western artists in the late 19th century were influenced by the beauty of the indigo blue developed in Japan, and they employed it in their works. This blue is found in Paul Gauguin's Symbolistic works, and the Art Nouveau jewelry and accessories of René Lalique and others are also wrapped in a deep blue, which evokes a sense of indigo. More than for anyone else, however, it was Vincent van Gogh for whom blue held a special fascination.

There was no indigo blue among the Western paints used by Van Gogh. In his self-portrait (Plate 5), however, he has reproduced a splendid indigo blue. It would appear that Van Gogh used his personal style of pointillistic brushwork to juxtapose a variety of blues – cobalt blue, ultramarine, cerulean blue and more – in such a way as to produce something that approaches indigo blue. Van Gogh translated Japanese color aesthetics, using paints from the West, to obtain a novel effect and to express a new nuance.

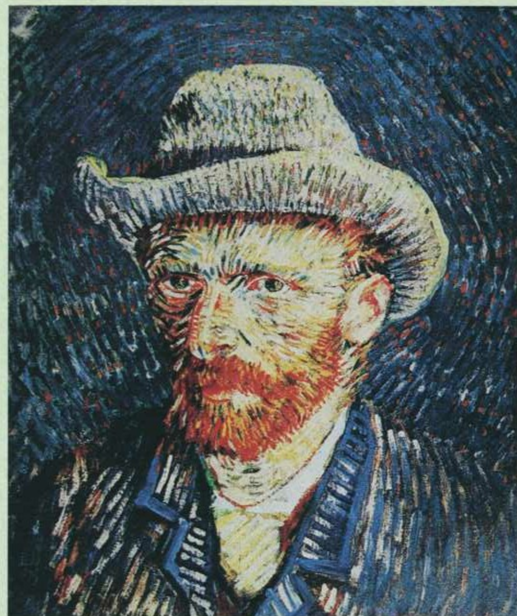

Plate 5: Vincent van Gogh "Self-portrait," Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), 1887, H44.0 x W37.5, oil on canvas

By the time indigo blue caught the eye of Van Gogh, its use in the beautification of daily life in Japan was already waning. Van Gogh developed indigo-like blues in his own particular style. His use of color expression, as is well known, paved the way to Expressionism and subsequent 20th-century art. It is fascinating that the unique color expression of Van Gogh – who had a certain passion for Japan – was inspired, at least in part, by the common color sense of everyday Japanese life. JJTI

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