

# The world of the Japanese Woodblock Print

## Week 2 Ukiyo-e: The Golden Age of Japanese print

U3A 21 July 2025 Michael Harrington

# Changes in weekly topics

**Week 1** Introduction to the Japanese woodblock print.

**Week 2** Ukiyo-e: The golden age of Japanese print -18th & 19th centuries

**Week 3** Ukiyo-e in the West - Japonisme

**Week 4** Western woodblock artists and 20th century Shin Hanga

**Week 5** Introduction to the life and art of Paul Jacoulet

**Week 6** Travels in the South Seas and beyond- In the footsteps of Gauguin

**Week 7** Emergence as a woodblock print artist

**Week 8** WWII and beyond - success and final years in Karuizawa

**Week 9** The Japanese woodblock print world today - artists and collectors

**Week 10** See Jacoulet's work in the Queensland Art Gallery exhibition Birds of Passage: Ian Fairweather & Paul Jacoulet

# Week 2 outline

Week 1 review

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Finish video on woodblock print making

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Intro to ukiyo-e

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Social & Historical Context

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Early development

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Subject matter

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Aesthetic style

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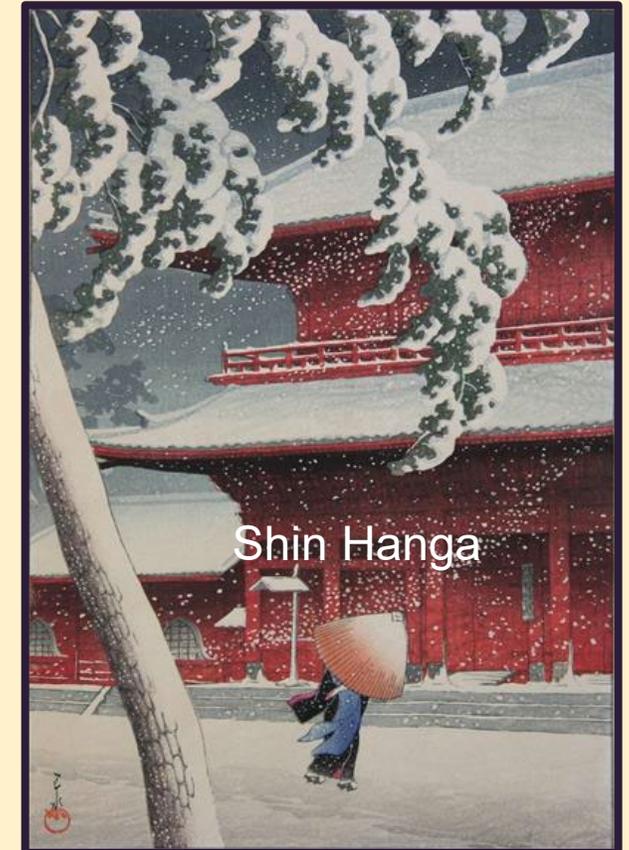
Schools of artists

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## Review #1

### Types of Japanese woodblocks

- » Ukiyo-e 浮世絵  
Edo Period Early 17<sup>th</sup>–  
mid 19<sup>th</sup> century
- » Shin Hanga 新版画  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> century
- » Sōsaku Hanga 創作版画  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> century



# Review #2

## Traditional Woodblock Production

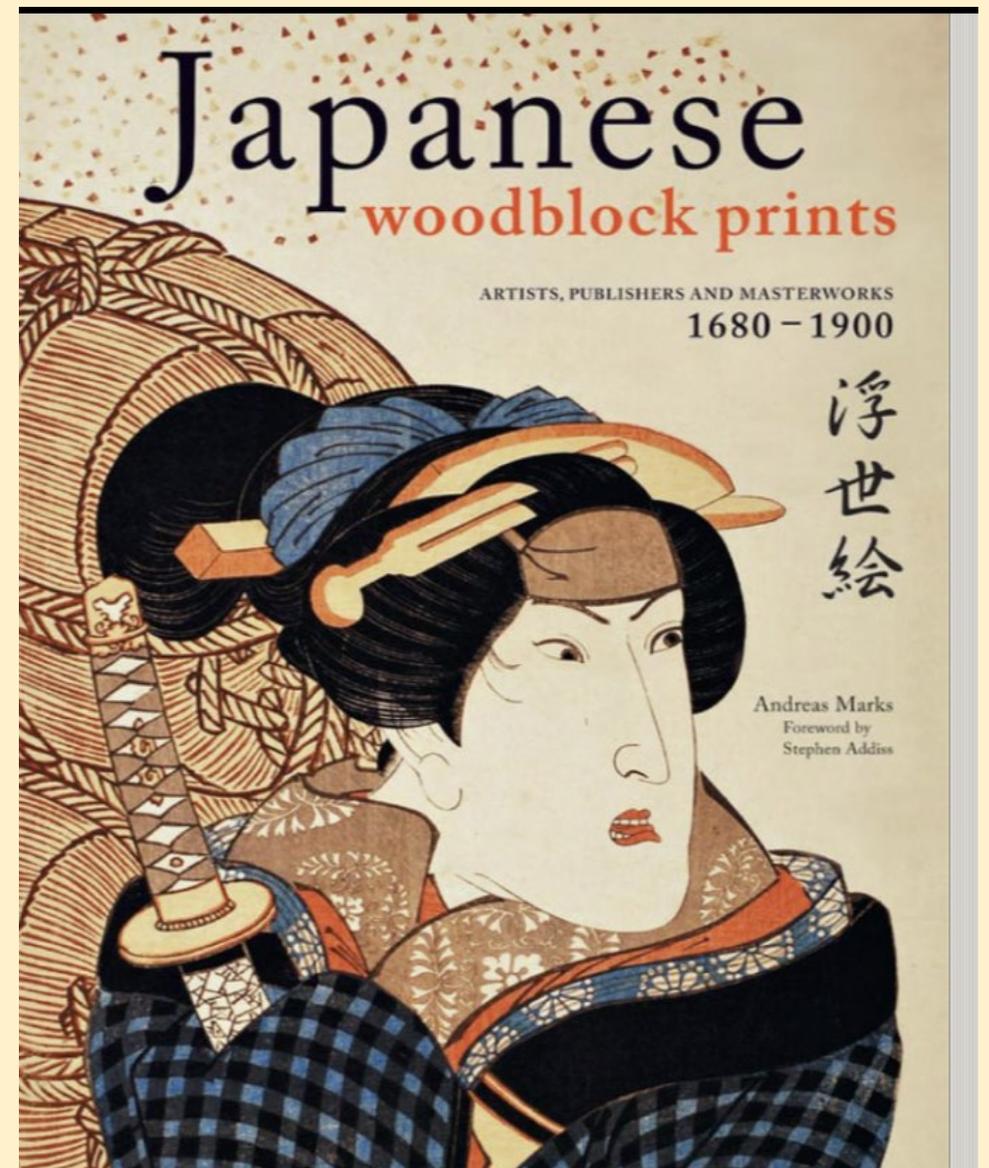
Publisher <<<< Printer <<<< Carver <<<< Artist (< publisher)



Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865)

# Good source on ukiyo-e

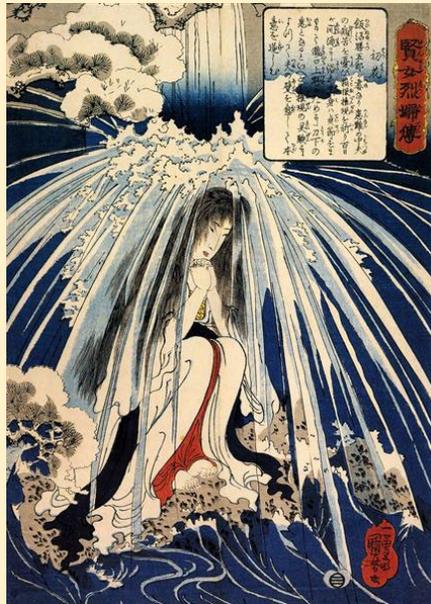
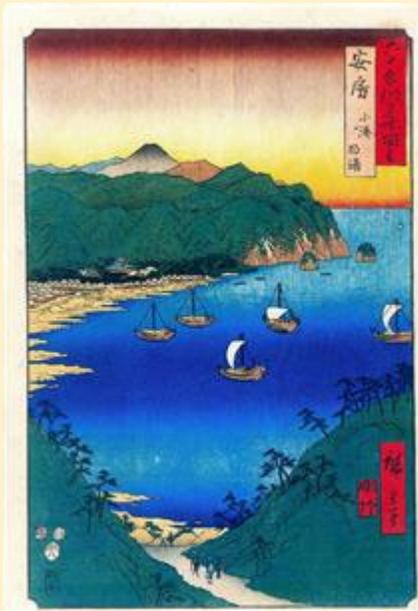
*Japanese Woodblock Prints*, Andreas Marks, 2020  
PDF available for free.



<https://archive.org/details/andreas-marks-japanese-woodblock-prints-andreas-marks/page/33/mode/2up>

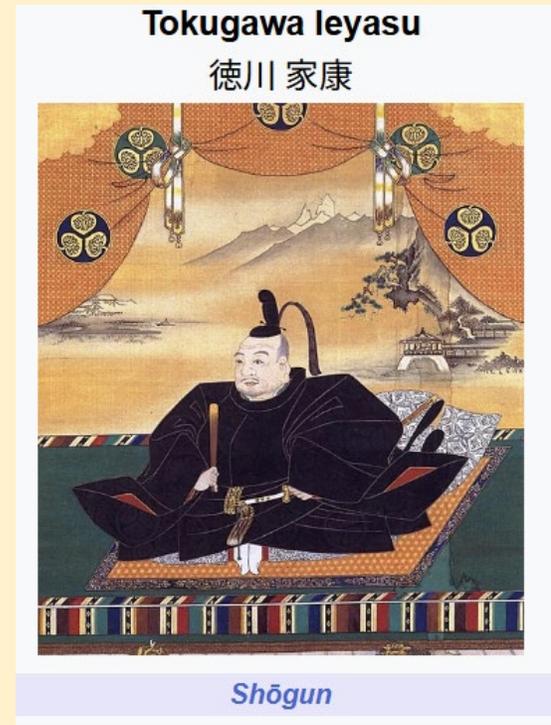
# Ukiyo-e: Art of the Floating World (17th–19th Century)

- Ukiyo-e = 'pictures of the floating world'
- Woodblock prints & paintings of Edo-period Japan
- Themes: beauty, theater, landscapes, daily life



# Tokugawa Social Hierarchy (Edo Period)

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- Emperor – 天皇 (*Tennō*)
  - Shogun – 将軍 (*Shōgun*)
  - Daimyo – 大名 (*Daimyō*)
  - Samurai – 侍 (*Samurai*)
  - Peasants – 農民 (*Nōmin*)
  - Artisans – 職人 (*Shokunin*)
  - Merchants – 商人 (*Shōnin*)
  - Outcasts – えた・ひにん (*Eta / Hinin*)



# Social & Historical Context

- Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868): peace and stability
- Rise of urban merchant class (chōnin)
- Flourishing urban culture: theaters, pleasure quarters, travel



# What is 'Ukiyo'?

- Buddhist origin: impermanence and suffering

The term "*ukiyo*" in medieval Japan was associated with Buddhism and meant "this transient, unreliable world". The term *ukiyo* (憂き世, "sorrowful world"), referred to the earthly plane of death and rebirth from which Buddhists sought release.

- Edo reinterpretation: pleasures of fleeting moments

*Ukiyo* ('floating/fleeting/transient world') is the term used to describe the urban lifestyle and culture, especially the pleasure-seeking aspects, of the Edo period (1600–1867). When written as meaning "the floating world" (浮世) in Edo period is it meant as an ironic, homophonous allusion to the earlier Buddhist term.

*Also referred to as the **demimonde**, a French 19th-century term referring to women on the fringes of respectable society, and specifically to courtesans supported by wealthy lovers. The *demi-monde* was the world occupied by elite men and the women who entertained them and whom they kept.*



# Yoshiwara



Cherry Trees along Gokacho in New Yoshiwara by Utagawa Hiroshige c1835.png

From the series "Famous Places in the Eastern Capital" Hiroshige proposes here a view of the cherry blossoms of Edo, present-day Tokyo, from Yoshiwara, the red light district or pleasure district of Edo, authorized by the shogunate. Filled with brothels and kabuki theaters, and immersed in an aura of a certain mystery and refinement, Yoshiwara (吉原, "The Good Luck Meadow") represented the prevailing philosophy of the ukiyo era, or floating world. These red light districts, which proliferated in all the large cities, were highly frequented by merchants and artisans, key figures in the emergence of the characteristic urban lifestyle of Edo, and were also allowed access to the rōnin, masterless samurai, a once a year to see the hanami (花見) or cherry blossom." WikiArts

# Early Development

- 17th century beginnings – black & white ink drawings to color
- Hishikawa Moronobu's early influence

Hand painted



Beauty Looking Back (見返り美人図) c. 1680–1683, Hishikawa Moronobu 菱川師宣

# The shift to color printing

- 1760s: shift to full-color nishiki-e (“brocade prints”)
- Team effort: artist, publisher, carver, printer
- Multiple blocks for colors



# Polychrome ukiyo-e



"Fuzoku Edo Hakkei, Sumidagawa no Rakugan" (Wild Geese Flying Down the Sumida River)  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art (JP2780)

Suzuki Harunobu (鈴木 春信; c. 1725 –1770) was the first to produce full-color prints ([nishiki-e](#)) in 1765.

# Technical Innovations

## **bokashi (gradation, 暈し)**

Printing technique for **soft color transitions** (e.g., sky, water, mist) achieved by hand applying ink unevenly on the woodblock before printing. Enabled **atmospheric effects** and depth in prints. Perfected by artists like Hokusai and Hiroshige.

## **karazuri, (blind printing, 空刷り, also known as gaufrage)**

Refers to a technique where a raised design is pressed into the paper using a woodblock without ink. This creates a subtle, three-dimensional texture on the print, adding an extra layer of visual interest.

See next slide



神田明神曙之景 Hiroshige  
Dawn at Kanda Myojin Shrine

## Kazari (blind printing)



Lovers Walking in the Snow (Crow and Heron) (蝉雪の中を行く—からすとさぎあいず)  
Suzuki Harunobu— c. 1764–72



Woman Reading a Letter under a Mosquito Net  
Kitagawa Utamaro ca. 1798

# Aesthetic Style:

- ❑ Flat color, strong outlines, bold compositions
- ❑ Focus on mood, atmosphere, and pattern over realism
- ❑ Decorative and accessible



Sixth month Twelve months from the Southern Quarter\_ Torii Kiyonaga 1784



# Bijin-ga: Beautiful Women

- Celebrating feminine beauty and fashion
- Utamaro's expressive portraits

Utamaro's Three Beauties of the Present Day c. 1793]



# Kabuki & Actors

- Yakusha-e: portraits of kabuki actors
- Sharaku's dramatic and expressive faces

Sharaku's Kabuki  
Actor Otani Oniji  
III c 1794



# Landscapes & Travel

- Hokusai's *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* →
- Hiroshige's poetic travel series (*Tōkaidō, One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*)
- Tourism boom influenced demand



# Other Genres: Warriors, Nature, Stories

- Musha-e: warrior prints, hero tales
- Ka-chō-ga: birds and flowers
- Satirical and humorous works



Hyakki Yagyō, Kawanabe Kyōsai, 1865



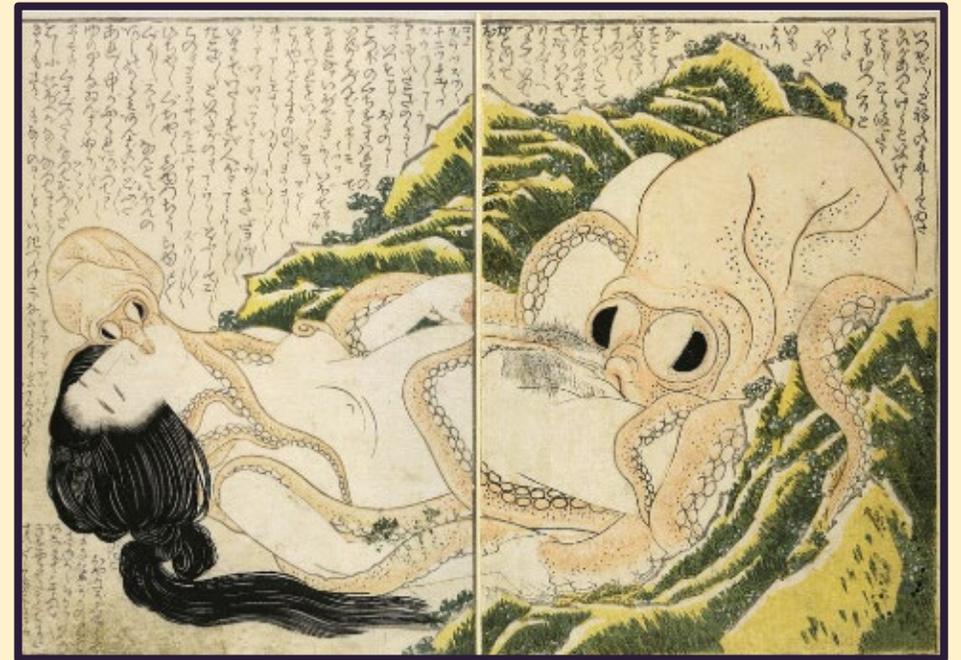
Kuniyoshi, Rori Hakucho Chojun, from the series 108 Heroes of the Suikoden, c.1828, woodblock print, Ronin Gallery.

# Shunga: Erotic Art in Ukiyo-e

- Shunga (春画) literally means “spring pictures.”
- Erotic imagery widely produced
- Entertaining and talismanic - bringing good luck and warding off evil



A man interrupts woman combing her long hair.  
Utamaro 1799



The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife. Hokusai 1814



Caught in the Act.  
Suzuki Harunobu c. 1770

# Schools of Ukiyo-e

- **Torii**: kabuki posters

**Torii Kiyonaga** (鳥居清長, 1752–1815)

- **Katsukawa**: actor portraits

**Katsukawa Shunshō** (勝川春章, 1726–1792) (teacher of Hokusai)

- **Utagawa**: dominant in 19th century

**Hiroshige** (歌川広重, 1797–1858), **Kuniyoshi** (歌川国芳, 1798–1861), **Kunisada** (歌川国貞, 1786–1865)

- **Hokusai** and **Utamaro** are generally considered independent

# Reception by Masses & Literati

- Affordable art for townspeople
- Appreciated by elites as well

Utagawa Kuniyoshi  
Landscapes and Beauties- Feeling Like  
Reading the Next Volume Late 19<sup>th</sup>  
century



# Nagasaki-e and Yokohama-e: Foreigners & New Worlds

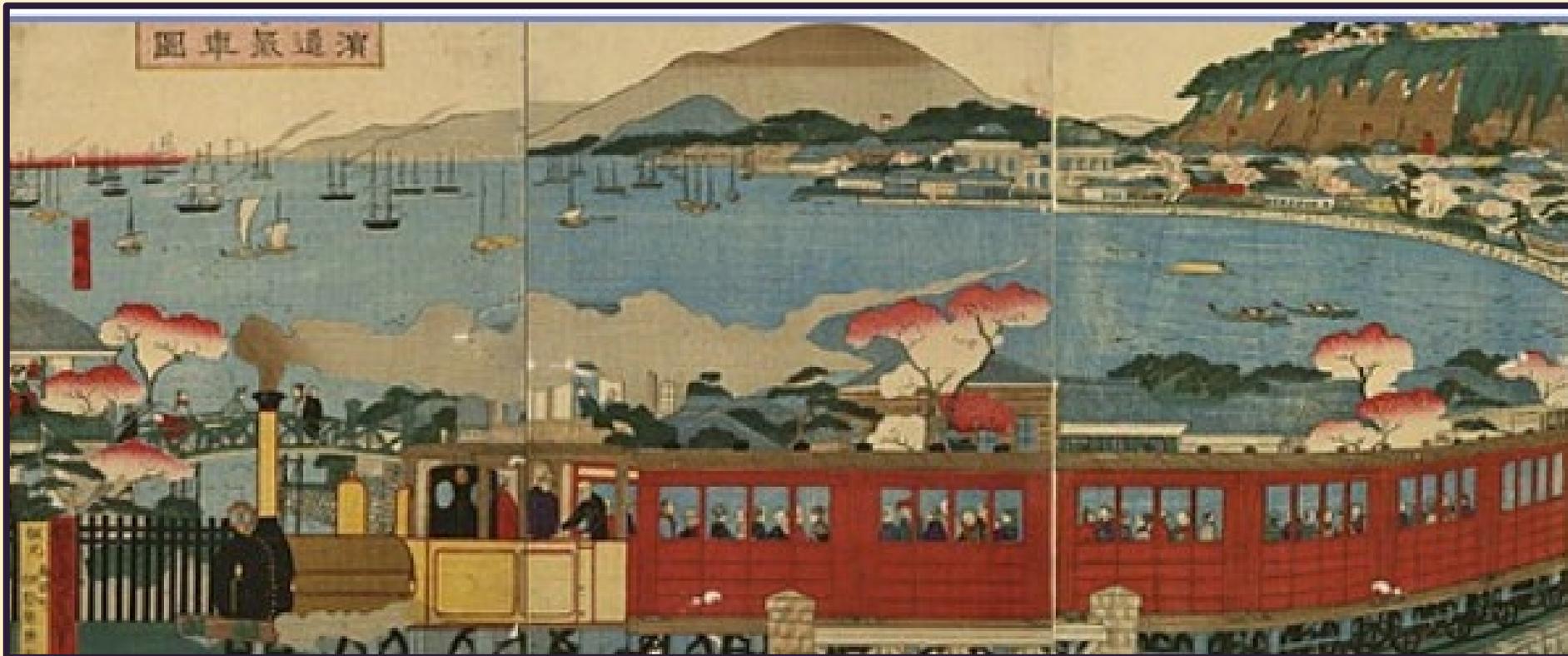
- Nagasaki-e: woodblock prints (18th–early 19th c.) depicting foreign merchants (Chinese, Dutch) in Nagasaki's Dejima trading post
- Yokohama-e: prints from 1859 onward showing foreigners, technology, and scenes from the newly opened port city of Yokohama. See next slide
- Reflected curiosity, fascination, and sometimes caricature of the West

Chinese at Nagasaki. Author unknown, before 1868



Foreigners dining at Dejima. Author unknown, before 1868

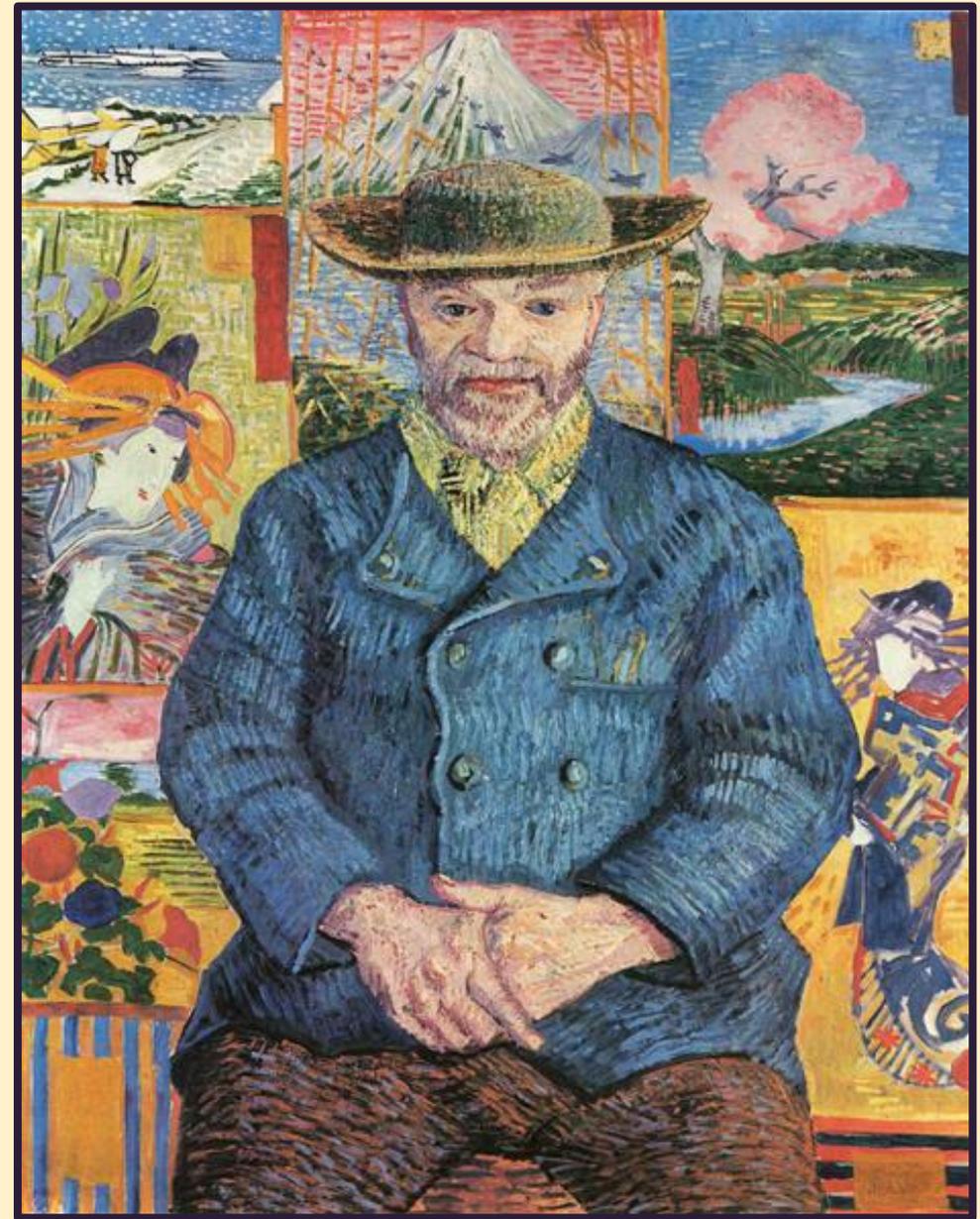
# Yokohama-e



First steam train leaving Yokohama. Utagawa Kunisada III, 1872

## Next: International Impact (19th c.): A Glimpse Westward

- Japan opens to the West (1854 Treaty of Kanagawa)
- Surge in exports: ceramics, textiles, ukiyo-e prints
- Western fascination grows: “Japonisme” begins
- Ukiyo-e inspires European artists (Impressionists, Post-Impressionists)



Père Tanguy Vincent van Gogh (c. 1888)



# Week 2 Wrap up