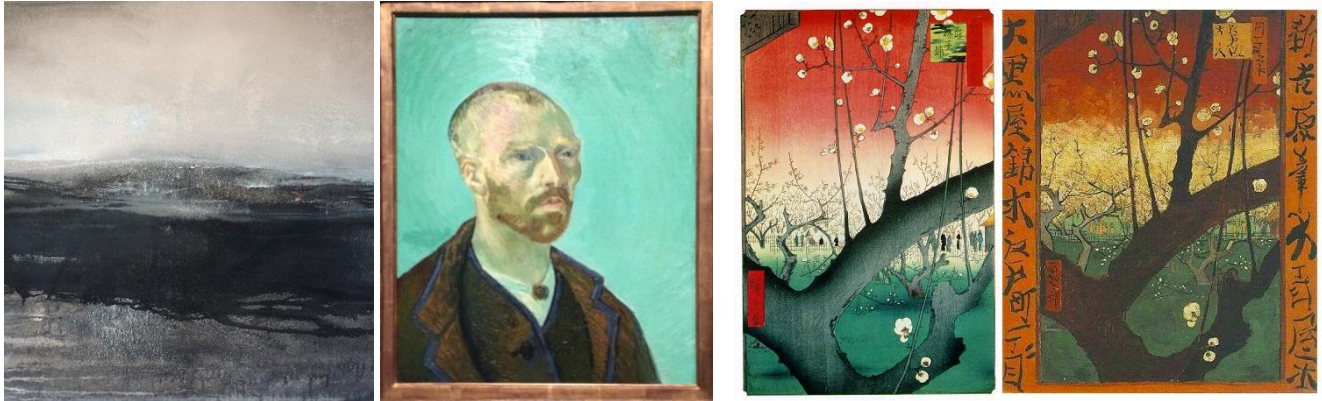


May 14, 2018

The Thinking Touch: Vincent Van Gogh and Japan

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



From Left

Detail, Shodō, Robin Richmond

Self Portrait as Bonze, Van Gogh 1888

Hiroshige, Flowering Plum Tree 1857

Van Gogh, after Hiroshige, Flowering Plum Tree 1887

Since the Hokusai show at the British Museum last year (see blog May 26, 2017) my own work has been swept away to sea like the Master's very own Great Wave. My first ecstatic response to it as an artist was Shodō, a painting that evokes the Japanese art of gestural calligraphic movement on a grand scale. Absent or notional horizons; ambiguous pictorial depth; flat colours; cropped images cut off at their edges; angular, energetic strokes of paint and a limited palette have engaged me ever since. But the work of Van Gogh has never been of primary importance to me as a painter, and although I have spent many hours over many years in the redoubtable Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam, I have frankly striven for understanding about why this man's work is so iconic. Heretical words I know...

But no more. Last week in Amsterdam I found a way to understand more about him both as an artist and as a man. Pictorially I have never grasped his violent arbitrary mark making and his promiscuous use of bold outline. Autobiographically I have struggled with the potent myth of what we might now label bi-polarity. It is all too much. The severed earlobe, the dearth of sales in his lifetime, the reliance on his brother Theo, the intellectual at war with his emotions, the misdiagnosed epileptic, the religious mania, the thwarted love affairs, the botched mutilations, the eventual suicide. But seeing this show, with his own paintings juxtaposed against Japanese woodblock prints, and alongside them - many of them from his own collection - it all suddenly makes sense. And I see the light. And I see his touch. What his hero Eugene Delacroix called "the thinking touch." A lovely phrase.

Since my lecturing days, when I taught a course on the Origins of Modernism, I have been alert to the powerful effect of Japanese art on Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting. Monet and his footbridge in his Water Garden at Giverny. Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas in their decorative, design-led graphic work. But this intelligently curated show, which places Vincent's work in direct relation to Japanese printmaking, has, to paraphrase Dylan, brought it all back home. This is as much about a new kind of graphic mark - making, as about Japan as a state of mind. Always looking for a new country, a new skin, a new persona, a new love, Vincent found a kind of salvation in an art which could not be more different from what he called "our old Dutchmen, Rembrandt, Potter, Hals, Vermeer, Ostade, (and) Ruisdael" in a letter to Theo on July 15, 1888.

And it began like this: Vincent, the unhappy, restless pastor's son from the foggy Lowlands, was always drawn to the bright lights of his "Highlands" otherwise known as Gay Paree. A fan of the de Goncourt brothers' passionate novels which featured Japonisme as a theme, upon moving to Paris in 1886, he began to acquire a significant collection of Japanese prints. With his brother Theo, he amassed over 531 prints and albums, mostly bought very cheaply from the German dealer Siegfried Bing, now in the collection of this great museum. And it's lovely to see his drawing pin holes in his prints and the odd smear of paint. He comes alive and it's comforting to know that he was as lackadaisical as I am with his source material.

But what was not clear to me until now was how the whole *idea* of Japan bore deeply into his very being, with romantic Eastern ideas of asceticism and purity. It's not just the formal qualities of Japanese art that energised him, but the qualities of its production, with its inner quiet, care, and elegance. And it is this noble dream that led to his death. His doomed vision of an artists' commune in Arles, in the famous Yellow House, to which he moved in 1888 with Paul Gauguin, was linked to ideas about being a Japanese monk. What a bad choice to include his monstrously egocentric "best friend" from Paris, in what was to become a short-lived tragic exercise in self-delusion. It was the physical and psychological locus of his decline and was destined to fail miserably.

Vincent was no "bonze" or Japanese monk, as he fantastically depicts himself in a self-portrait of 1888, painted in Arles. He was never going to be a Zen Buddhist priest but only and always a lapsed Protestant son of the Church, a good man rooted in the rich potato-growing soil of the Netherlands with mystical oceanic dreams of one-ness with the universe. In the same letter that I quote above, from July 15, 1888, he finishes with the phrase "it doesn't end."

And it doesn't.

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