

# National Gallery of Art

## NEWS RELEASE

Deborah Ziska, Information Officer

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PRESS CONTACT: (202) 842-6353  
Patricia O'Connell, Publicist

*"I envy the Japanese for the enormous clarity that pervades their work. It is never dull and never seems to have been made in haste. Their work is as simple as breathing and they draw a figure with a few well chosen lines with the same ease, as effortless as buttoning up one's waistcoat...."*

Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, September 24, 1888

### COURTESAN PAINTING IN VAN GOGH'S VAN GOGHS

### INSPIRED BY PRINT IN EDO: ART IN JAPAN 1615-1868

Washington, D.C. -- Visitors to the National Gallery of Art this fall will have the rare opportunity to see not only Vincent van Gogh's 1887 oil painting of The Courtesan in a survey of the legendary artist, Van Gogh's Van Goghs: Masterpieces from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (October 4, 1998 - January 3, 1999), but also the original print that inspired the painting, which Van Gogh himself never saw.

The nineteenth-century woodblock print by Keisai Eisen depicting a high-ranking courtesan (*oiran*) was reproduced in reverse on the cover of Paris Illustré, in a special edition entitled "Le Japon" (May 1886). When Van Gogh saw the magazine, he made a tracing of the cover incorporating a grid that he later transferred in enlarged form to canvas. The Eisen print is on view through January 4, 1999, in the first rotation of the Gallery's historically significant exhibition Edo: Art in Japan 1615-1868 (November 15, 1998 - February 15, 1999). The magazine cover and tracing are on view in the Van Gogh exhibition.

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Fourth Street at Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20565

(202) 842-6353, *Facsimile* (202) 842-2403

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The Courtesan is not merely a copy of Eisen's "Oiran" but a composed picture, combining several motifs borrowed from other Japanese prints. The image is "framed" by a pond with water lilies, reeds, and bamboo, to which two figures in a boat, two frogs, and two cranes have been added. Although the sources of the figures in the boat and the background landscape are unknown, the frogs are copied from Yoshimaru's New Prints of Insects now in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, and the storks from Satō Torakiyo's Geisha in Landscape.

The Courtesan is one of three paintings by Van Gogh, now in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, that the artist copied from Japanese prints late in his Paris period. The other two paintings are copied from Andō Hiroshige's Plum Garden at Kameido and Sudden Shower over Ōhashi Bridge, two celebrated prints published in the book One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, which are also on view in Edo: Art in Japan 1615-1868.

A fascination with Japanese prints was shared by many of Van Gogh's colleagues, particularly impressionist artists such as Claude Monet. Interest in Japanese art and culture was further propagated by French writers including the Goncourt brothers and Emile Zola. By the end of the nineteenth century, "Japonisme" had developed into one of the most important artistic movements of the time.

Van Gogh copied Japanese prints not merely to study their style and technique. He combined several motifs and painted in a manner that transformed the purely flat color surface of the prints into a more nuanced style, thereby creating his own bold and highly original works. Copying from Japanese prints helped Van Gogh to break away from Western conventions of picture making and develop his own compositional structure.

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Japanese art and culture had a lifelong influence on Van Gogh, from the time he began collecting Japanese prints in Antwerp in 1886 to the days during his stay in the institution at St. Rémy, where Japanese prints decorated the walls of his room. His interest became serious during his years in Paris from 1886 to 1888, when he began to deal in Japanese prints. Van Gogh not only studied and collected these prints but encouraged his friends, such as Emile Bernard, to study them as well.

Van Gogh organized two exhibitions of Japanese prints, first in the spring of 1887 at the café du Tambourin, and later at the restaurant du Chalet at the Boulevard de Clichy. He continued to urge his brother Theo to buy more Japanese woodcuts when he had moved to Arles in the south of France, whose idyllic climate and rural way of life he compared to that of Japan. In his "Yellow House" in Arles, Van Gogh hoped to found an artistic community as if it were a Japanese monastery. Mutual solidarity and the sharing of ideals, knowledge, art, and worldly possessions were to form the basis of this community. Even after his failed collaboration with Paul Gauguin in Arles, Van Gogh did not give up his hope of this utopian art community.

The Van Gogh Museum now possesses a collection of more than 400 Japanese prints, most of which were amassed by Vincent and Theo during the Paris period.

Van Gogh's Van Goghs: Masterpieces from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam in Washington is made possible by generous support from Andersen Consulting. The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Edo: Art in Japan 1615-1868 is made possible by NTT. The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

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## EXHIBITION PASSES

**Van Gogh's Van Goghs: Masterpieces  
from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam**  
**West Building**  
**October 4, 1998 - January 3, 1999**

*For information, call (202) 737-4215.*

Passes will be required daily. **Same-day passes** will be available every day the exhibition is open. Beginning October 4, they may be picked up at the West Building pass desk, located in the Rotunda on the main floor. There is a limit of six passes per person.

**Edo: Art in Japan 1615-1868**  
**East Building**  
**November 15, 1998 - February 15, 1999**

*For information, call (202) 789-4999.*

Passes will be required on weekends, federal holidays, and specially noted days (Saturdays and Sundays, as well as November 26, 27, December 28, 29, 30, and 31, 1998, and January 18 and February 15, 1999). **Same-day passes** will be available on those days. Beginning November 15, they may be picked up at the East Building pass desk. There is a limit of six passes per person.

## ADVANCE PASSES

Advance passes for both exhibitions will be available free of charge in the East Building at the pass desk, beginning August 30. Advance passes may also be obtained for both exhibitions beginning August 30, at all Washington area TicketMaster locations and Hecht's stores for a service charge of \$2.00 per pass and through TicketMaster PhoneCharge for a \$2.75 service fee per pass and a \$1.25 handling fee per order by calling one of the numbers listed below. There is a limit of six passes per person.

Washington, DC	(202) 432-SEAT
Baltimore, MD	(410) 481-SEAT
Northern Virginia	(703) 573-SEAT
Nationwide toll-free	(800) 551-SEAT (outside the areas listed above)

The National Gallery of Art, located on the National Mall at Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W., is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. Admission is free. For general information, call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf at (202) 842-6176; the Gallery's Web site address is <http://www.nga.gov>

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