CHROMASIA

CHROMASIA NOWALLS GROUP 2025

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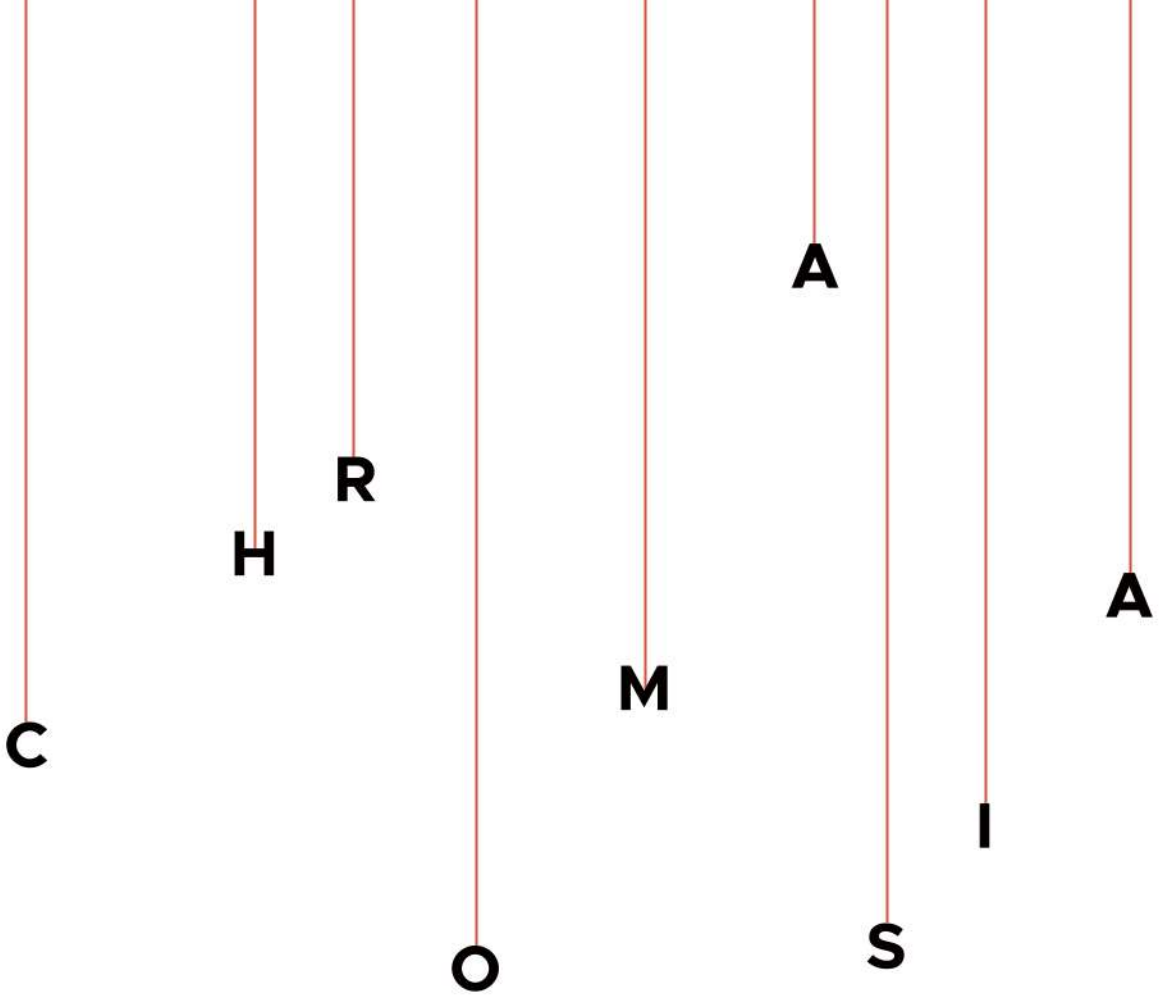

Introduc

CHROMASIA: The Language of Color in East Asian Art

No matter how much you know about East Asian art, one thing is certain: it is a unique and continuously growing branch of world art. There are many differences between it and Western art, such as the emphasis on experience rather than representing reality. Among the various characteristics of East Asian art, color is an unavoidable focus, and color has never been a matter of mere decoration. Color is a language. Across millennia, East Asian colors have conveyed identity, emotion, hierarchy, and beliefs.

“

秋色渐将晚
霜信报黄花

Autumn deepens in color,
while chrysanthemums in
full bloom foretell the frost to
come.

This line is from a poem written by the Song Dynasty poet Ye Mengde after his retirement to the countryside. Through the imagery of autumn and chrysanthemums, the poet paints a vivid seasonal scene dominated by shades of yellow. Autumn, being the season of withering and decline, naturally evokes melancholy. The blooming chrysanthemums, heralding the coming of frost, further link the color yellow with a sense of fading vitality and sorrow. Combined with the poet's personal background, it's easy to understand his use of poetry to express his anxieties about state affairs and his sorrow at his own aging and inadequacy.
This example demonstrates the connection between color and emotion in East Asian art. East Asian colors have both intuitive aesthetic value and rich symbolism, connecting the vast spiritual space behind the work.

ction

In Japan, color is closely linked to the aesthetic of mono no aware. The subtle sadness we experience in everyday life, often unnoticed, is expressed through color and art, imbued with poetry and depth.

Beyond emotion, color in Japanese art can also reflect the historical transformation in cultural identity. During the Edo period, the use of Prussian Blue in ukiyo-e prints embodied this evolution. This synthetic pigment, introduced to Japan from Europe, possessed a brightness and saturation not found in traditional Japanese blue pigments. Artists such as Hokusai used Prussian blue to depict landscapes such as the sky and the sea, expanding the sense of space in ukiyo-e. According to Smith II (2005), some experts also suggest that Prussian blue reflected Japan's desire for exotic cultures, a period of technological advancement. This exotic color helped Edo-period artists reshape Japan's cultural identity, preserving its own traditions and spiritual core while opening it up to the world. From Prussian blue to Ukiyo-e blue, color in Japanese art achieved a fusion of tradition and modernity, reflecting Japan's evolving identity during modernization.

The colors in Korean art reflect Korean philosophy. Deeply influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, Korean aesthetics value harmony, balance, and a sense of beauty that lies in moderation rather than excess. The Obangsaek system is a traditional color system in Korean art. As Yisoon (2015) mentioned, the Obangsaek system is based on five colors: blue, red, yellow, white, and black. Each color represents a direction among the east, west, south, north, and center, and also corresponds to a certain moral quality. Whether it's the restrained elegance of Joseon-era white porcelain, the vibrant dancheong patterns of temples, or the symbolic colors of hanbok, color serves as a bridge connecting communities and people. Furthermore, according to the website (Obangsaek (Korean Color Symbolism): Meaning behind '5-a-Day' in Korea, 2016), the Obangsaek system is not limited to the scope of art, but has penetrated into people's daily lives and is often reflected in Korean cuisine. This color philosophy integrates nature, life, and social ethics, making the colors in Korean art reflect all aspects of people's lives.

When viewed together, these chromatic traditions form a dialogue across time and geography. Despite national differences, their colors collectively present a unique artistic philosophy, conveying messages of identity, culture, morality, and emotion. In East Asia, color is a gateway to a vast spiritual world within artworks. Chromasia is dedicated to exploring the magnificent world of East Asian color. We invite you to explore

Obangsaek (Korean color symbolism): Meaning behind '5-a-day' in Korea. (2016, January 20). Gastro Tour Seoul. https://gastrotourseoul.com/the-five-colors-of-korea-what-do-you-know-about-o-bang-saek/
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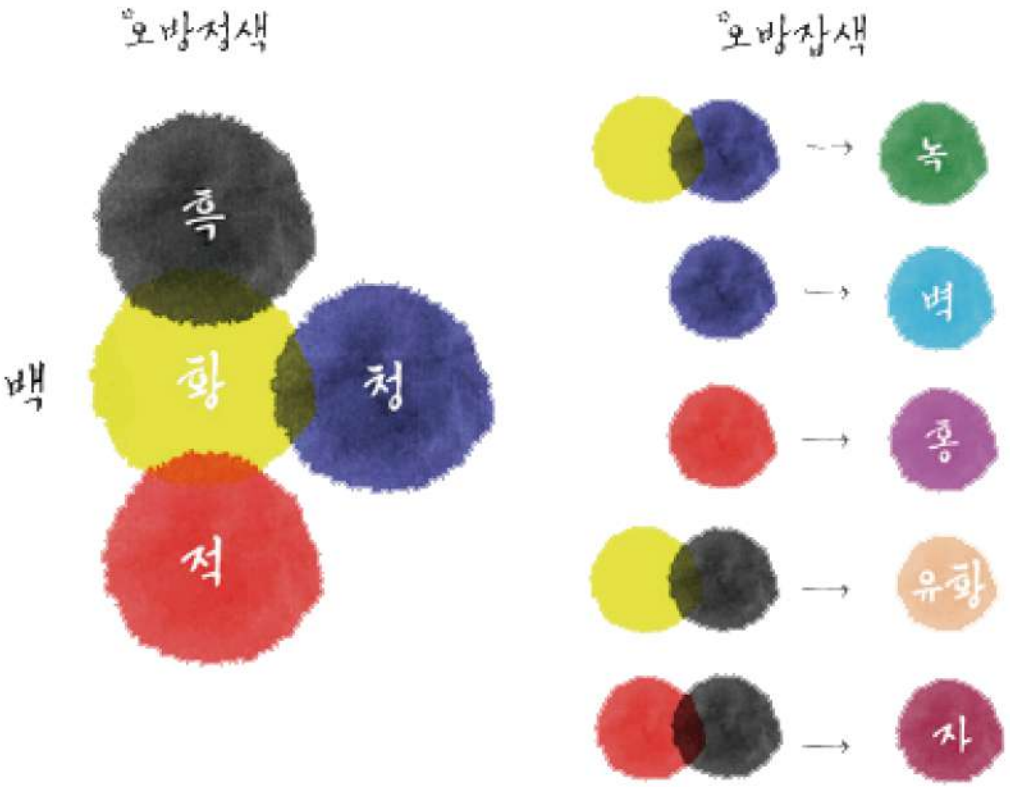
Obangsaek



Where Black Meets White

In Chinese art, black and white are more than just colors – they form a philosophy. Traditional ink wash painting (**水墨画** shuimohua) relies on black ink and white paper to create entire worlds. Classical thinkers in China saw black and white as complementary forces (akin to yin and yang), where each defines and completes the other. Early Daoist teachings praised simplicity: "Various colors make people blind... colorless painting makes colorful". In other words, by stripping away vivid hues, artists could reach a purer truth. For centuries, black ink was considered the ultimate color – capable of infinite nuances. A famous saying insists that "ink has five colors," meaning a single black ink stick can yield a full spectrum of tones from inky midnight to the palest dove gray. With different dilutions and brush pressures, painters conjure depth, light, and atmosphere, proving that monochrome is anything but monotone.

Equally important is the role of white – typically the white silk or paper that serves as the painting's ground. Rather than merely background, emptiness is an active element in Chinese aesthetics. The concept of liúbái (**留白**), literally "leaving blank," elevates negative space into a narrative device. Artists deliberately leave portions of a composition white, letting unpainted expanses suggest mist, sky, or water. This blankness carries profound philosophical weight. In Daoism and Chan (Zen) Buddhism, emptiness signifies potential and the void from which life emerges. A recent study on Song painter Ma Yuan notes that liúbái reflects Daoist ideas of "nothingness" – by leaving areas blank, Ma Yuan "evokes a sense of infinite potential and quiet contemplation" in harmony with the Dao. Thus, the white void in a painting is not empty at all – it is alive with the unseen, inviting the viewer's imagination to fill the space. As an old Daoist adage in art goes: "Great fullness seems empty; and it cannot be exhausted."

A tradition known as literati painting (**文人画** wénrénhuà) crystalized these ideals. These were works created by scholar-amateurs – poets, philosophers, statesmen – rather than professional court painters. Literati painters from the Song dynasty onward prized personal expression over outward

Su Shi (1037–1101) is often credited as an early voice of this movement. A statesman, poet, calligrapher – and occasional painter – Su championed the idea that painting should be judged like poetry, by its ability to convey the artist's inner world. Few paintings by Su Shi survive, but historical accounts praise his unorthodox style. It was said that Su painted in ink with the same bold informality that he wrote poems, caring little for meticulous likeness. He famously collaborated with his friend Wen Tong (1019–1079), a poet-official renowned as the first master of ink bamboo. Wen Tong's simple images of black bamboo stalks bending in the wind were revolutionary in their day. He applied the calligraphic line to painting, using swift, inky brushstrokes to depict slender canes and leaves. Each stroke both described the bamboo and expressed the artist's mood.

Guo Xi, Early Spring (1072). Ink on silk, Northern Song dynasty. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Meanwhile, professional academy painters also explored the power of ink around this time. The Northern Song court artist Guo Xi (c. 1020–1090) created grand landscapes like Early Spring (1072) using primarily ink on silk. Guo Xi meticulously layered washes of ink to create depth in mountains and forests, demonstrating how tonal variations alone could model form. He wrote that a good landscape should have

"chi-yun," or spirit resonance – an energy that comes from the harmonious play of brush and ink. Even without bright pigment, Guo Xi's compositions feel alive: misty white blanks depict morning fog, dark "bone strokes" anchor the rocks, and soft ink washes indicate hazy distance, achieving what one critic called "a mysterious dialogue between human and nature" in monochrome.

By the Southern Song period (12th–13th century), a more minimalist aesthetic took hold. Court painters like Ma Yuan (active c. 1190–1225) became famous for one-corner compositions – scenes with a few elements clustered in one part of the frame and the rest left intriguingly empty. Ma Yuan's album leaf Scholar Viewing a Waterfall (early 13th century) is a classic example. In this tiny painting, a lone scholar sits on a rocky ledge at the painting's bottom right, gazing at a waterfall that plunges from a high cliff. Ma rendered the scholar and foreground pine tree in dark, crisp ink lines, but as the waterfall drops, the ink grows pale, dissolving into the white of the silk. The entire upper left expanse is left blank to convey swirling mist and vast open sky. This liúbái emptiness is balanced by the painted corner, creating a powerful contrast that draws our focus to the tiny human figure amid overwhelming nature. Philosophically, it echoes Chan Buddhist ideas – the humble scholar contemplates the void, finding enlightenment in nature's majesty. Later critics hailed the "blankness" in Ma Yuan's landscapes as the height of elegance, a beauty that "offers infinite space for the viewer's imagination". His style set the stage for centuries of landscape painting to come.

In the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), when many scholars retreated from government service, the ink-wash tradition truly flourished. Masters like Ni Zan exemplified austerity: Ni Zan's landscapes are notoriously spare, often little more than

Ma Yuan's Scholar Viewing a Waterfall (Southern Song dynasty, c.1200). Ink on silk album leaf.

Shen Zhou, Poet on a Mountaintop (ca. 1480), ink on paper, Ming dynasty.

a few dry ink strokes indicating a clump of trees and a distant shore, with huge areas left untouched. One of Ni Zan's contemporaries quipped that Ni Zan "cleaned" the world in his paintings, leaving only the essence. This extreme minimalism was a form of personal protest and purity. In the blank air of Ni Zan's scenes, one can sense the Chan Buddhist reverence for nothingness – a silent, tranquil void more eloquent than any detail.

The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) continued the literati lineage with artists who blended ink painting, calligraphy, and poetry into unified works. Shen Zhou (1427–1509), a leading scholar-painter of the Ming, often inscribed his own poems directly onto his ink landscapes, the calligraphic characters floating in areas of sky or water. His famous Poet on a Mountaintop depicts a tiny figure standing on a peak, surrounded by vast blank sky into which Shen Zhou penned a poem about the scene. This integration of poetic text and imagistic void illustrates the unity of black and white: the black ink of the characters inhabits the white space as meaning inhabits the void. Shen Zhou was also a master of texture techniques – he used cun (皴) or texturing strokes to build up forms. In paintings like Lofty Mount Lu (1467), Shen piled layer upon layer of energetic ink brushstrokes to convey the mass of a great mountain, yet left the summit engulfed in white mist. The interplay of dark, tactile brushwork below and empty whiteness above evokes the "mountains and rivers that flow through the mind" . Indeed, Ming painters believed that by not fully delineating a scene, they allowed the viewer's mind to complete it, thus communicating mood and moral sentiment more effectively.

Black and white, in the world of ink painting, are never just opposites. They are partners in dialogue — the brushstroke and the silence, the mountain and the mist, the poet and the page. What seems blank is never empty; what looks simple is infinitely rich. Perhaps that is why, centuries later, we still find ourselves pausing before these quiet landscapes, letting our own imagination flow into the untouched spaces.

The Colors of the Wilderness:

The Power of Colors in Shi Tao's "Wilderness Atlas"

In the long river of Chinese painting, colors are often overshadowed by the power of ink. East Asian art is renowned for its ink wash painting, emphasizing the principle of "treating white Spaces as black" and stressing subtlety and leaving blank Spaces. However, Shi Tao from China uses the splashed-color technique, with its contingency and freedom, to express the momentum and vitality of nature. His representative work, "Wilderness Atlas", consists of twelve pages. It not only showcases the wild atmosphere of nature but also presents the tremendous

THE ECHOES OF COLORS IN THE WILDERNESS

In the "Wilderness Atlas", Shi Tao depicts mountain forests, valleys and wilderness scenes with splashed colors. He boldly splashed mineral pigments such as turquoise, ochre, cinnabar and opal on the paper, and combined them with the varying shades of ink and wash, the picture presented a vigorous and imposing momentum. Unlike traditional literati paintings where only a few strokes of cinnabar are dotted among the rocks, Shitao gives color a dominant position. He made nature no longer just the outline of ink, but endowed the wilderness with echoes and power.

In the album of the Peach Blossom Riverbank, Shi Tao quotes Li Bai's verse, "The smoke clears, the orchid leaves are fragrant, and the wind warms; the riverbank is surrounded by peach blossoms, and the waves rise in brocade," presenting the atmosphere of spring through the interweaving of poetry and painting. The vast fields of pink and purple-red peach blossoms along the riverbank spread out like brocade, forming a sharp contrast with the steady blue of the distant mountains. The contrast between red and blue makes the picture brim with the vitality of spring, as if nature is breathing and singing. Peach blossoms are not merely scenery; they are a symbol of vitality and the most vivid response of colors in the wilderness. Similarly, in the Yellow Leaf Figure album, a scholar stands in the wild forest. The autumn scenery of the wild forest is dotted with bright yellow. Here, the yellow leaves infuse rhythm and tension into the quiet background, as if nature is responding to people's emotions, making the silence of the wilderness echo with colors.

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Shi Tao once proposed the "One Painting Theory", believing that all things originate from "one painting". In the "Wilderness Atlas", this concept is concretized through color. The free and unrestrained splashing of color is not only a breakthrough in the painter's technique but also a manifestation of his spiritual freedom. As a remnant of the late Ming Dynasty, Shi Tao's life was filled with loneliness and contradictions. However, in the flow of colors, he found a kind of liberation of the soul. This spiritual color expression is presented at different levels in the two album pages, "Linshui Mountain Temple" and "Yinshan Mountain Temple of Shuijing Tower".

The former creates an atmosphere of transcendence from the mundane world through the contrast between the ochre slopes and the distant bluestone mountains, as if the characters are seeking spiritual sustenance in nature. The latter, on the other hand, adorns the quiet pavilions with bright red flowers, making the silent scene leap with the colors and symbolizing the unyielding strength within the painter's heart. Here, color is no longer merely a realistic representation of nature, but an outlet for the painter's soul. It can either point to the transcendence in the distance or ignite the vitality in the secluded realm. It is precisely in this free and unrestrained expression that Shi Tao has accomplished the expression and persistence of his own spirit.

COLOR AND THE CONTEXT OF EAST ASIAN ART

In the context of East Asian art, ink has always been the most core form of expression. Especially in China, literati painting, ink wash painting and landscape painting have all reached their peak and have influenced the development of painting in neighboring countries. However, although colors exist, they are mostly used sparingly as embellishments. In "Wilderness Atlas", Shi Tao truly placed color at the core. Unlike the previous way of merely embellishing, he used large areas of ochre and lapis lazuli to cover the mountains, giving the picture a heavy texture by itself. When depicting the trees and village dwellings, he also covered them with a strong sense of green, making the spatial layers and vitality more prominent. For instance, in one painting, the lush green mountains and forests set off the quiet village houses, while in another, the towering mountain scenery is interwoven with ochre and cyan. In both, it can be seen that the colors "dominate the picture" rather than being dependent on the ink lines. All these have enabled us to see more possibilities of color in the context of East Asian art.

Conclusion

In the "Wilderness Atlas", we can directly see the "colors of the wilderness" and also feel the unique power conveyed by the colors. In the traditional context of East Asian art, Shi Tao made a bold attempt: he enabled color to break away from its dependent role and truly gain an independent status. Through these twelve pages, he demonstrated that colors can also speak independently and serve as a medium for communication with nature. Looking back at the history of art, we will find that the development of art has never been a straight line, but has been driven forward by repeated breakthroughs and innovations. It is precisely for this reason that Shi Tao's exploration still reminds us to bravely try new ways of expression and constantly reflect on the boundaries of artistic language to this day.

Wilderness Colors, ca. 1700
Shitao (Zhu Ruoji, 1642–1707)
Ink and color on paper, album of twelve leaves
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Public Domain

SOLIDIFIED COLOR ORDER:

The Chinese Concept of Color in Cloisonné Craftsmanship

In traditional Chinese art, color serves not merely as a visual embellishment but as a highly ordered cultural language. Since ancient times, the application of color in Chinese art has been intricately intertwined with the philosophy of the Five Elements, religious beliefs, and ritual hierarchies, forming a comprehensive symbolic system. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, this color logic found its most concentrated expression in the field of decorative arts, particularly evident in the art of cloisonné. As a craft form combining metal and enamel, cloisonné's wire-framed structure confines colors within precise boundaries, creating a distinctively layered, high-contrast, and deeply symbolic chromatic system. Here, color ceases to flow freely; instead, it is constrained by structure and defined by culture, thereby becoming one of the most representative expressions of color order within Chinese visual culture.

Foliated dish with floral scrolls,
early 15th century, China.
Cloisonné enamel on copper; diameter: 15.2 cm.
Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Public Domain.

Cloisonné, also known as filigree enamel, is a fusion of traditional Chinese metalwork and enamel firing techniques. Artisans outline patterns on a copper base using metal wires, then fill the spaces with enamel glazes of varying colors. Finally, high-temperature firing sets the colors, creating a visual effect with sharply defined borders and vivid, saturated hues. Unlike the fluidity of brushstrokes and color gradation in painting, cloisonné lends color a tangible solidity and sense of order through its physical structure. Each hue is securely anchored within the wire-enclosed compartments, endowing every color with a defined position, boundary, and symbolic meaning. Building upon this foundation, the combination and proportion of colors strictly adhere to traditional Chinese color theory principles such as primary and secondary colors, and the Five Elements and Five Colors. This makes cloisonné an

In cloisonné art, one of the most representative base colors is blue-green. This hue serves not merely as a visual backdrop but as a profoundly cultural visual matrix. It resonates with the elements of water and wood in traditional Chinese Five Elements theory while evoking a tranquil, introspective psychological atmosphere. In numerous cloisonné pieces, the blue-green base dominates, complemented by high-purity, high-luminance color blocks like red, yellow, and white. This not only sharpens the visual focus on the main motif but also creates an aesthetic effect where elegance and splendor coexist through the interplay of warm and cool contrasts. For instance, the cloisonné plate depicted in Figure 1 features a vibrant blue-green base. Its decorative patterns, composed of red, yellow, green, and white hues, are meticulously guided by the precise lines of the cloisonné technique. The distinct color blocks stand independently yet complement each other, establishing a powerful yet harmonious visual order.

The vase displays a circular vessel with a more intricate composition, where the color arrangement exhibits distinct layers. The central section features a symmetrical design in deep blue, green, and red, while the outer rim layers yellow and white wave-pattern borders. Within the dense filigree framework, this creates a radiating visual structure. This outward-expanding color scheme not only reflects the traditional cosmological concept of "Heaven is round, and earth is square." but also demonstrates the rigorous logic underlying cloisonné's color organization. Each color group is distinctly separated by metal wires, enhancing the luminance contrast between color blocks while maintaining overall balance.

Vase with lotus scrolls,
Ming dynasty (15th 16th century),
cloisonné enamel on copper with gilt bronze mounts;
height 34 cm, width 15.9 cm.
Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Public Domain

Double vessel with mythical beasts (champion vase) depicts a cloisonné long-necked vase. The body is entirely covered in a blue-green glaze as the base tone, creating a striking contrast with the red, yellow, and green patterns adorning the neck and shoulders. Floral motifs unfold symmetrically across the vessel, where crimson peonies intertwine with verdant foliage, symbolizing prosperity and vitality. Yellow, used as an accent color, is concentrated on the neck and footring, emphasizing the composition's center of gravity while creating a rhythmic visual flow. Additionally, the gilded borders around the mouth and footring reflect metallic luster under light, enhancing the vessel's overall sense of prestige. These metal edges not only reinforce the structure but also serve as the finishing touch in the color scheme.

Overall, cloisonné art employs filigree structures as its framework and color fillings as its substance, constructing a highly standardized yet richly decorative visual system. Its color usage is not arbitrary but rather a stable system generated through the interplay of traditional philosophy, aesthetics, and hierarchical culture. Unified by a base palette of blue-green tones, enamel works achieve a perfect equilibrium between order and splendor through the decorative application and delineation of highly saturated hues like red, yellow, green, and white. Variations in color composition across different vessels reflect the artist's sensitive grasp of cultural significance and flexible application of aesthetic strategies. Cloisonné represents not only the pinnacle of craftsmanship but also the crystallization of Chinese color culture. Its construction of visual language and communication of color spirit continue to be revered and referenced by later generations.

Double vessel with mythical beasts (champion vase)
18th century, China.
Cloisonné enamel on copper;
height 21.6 cm, width 9.8 cm, depth 8.3 cm.
Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Public Domain.

The Floating World's Indigo

Katsushika Hokusai,
Feminine Wave,
painted while living in Obuse, 1845.
Ink and color on paper.
Hokusai Museum, Obuse.

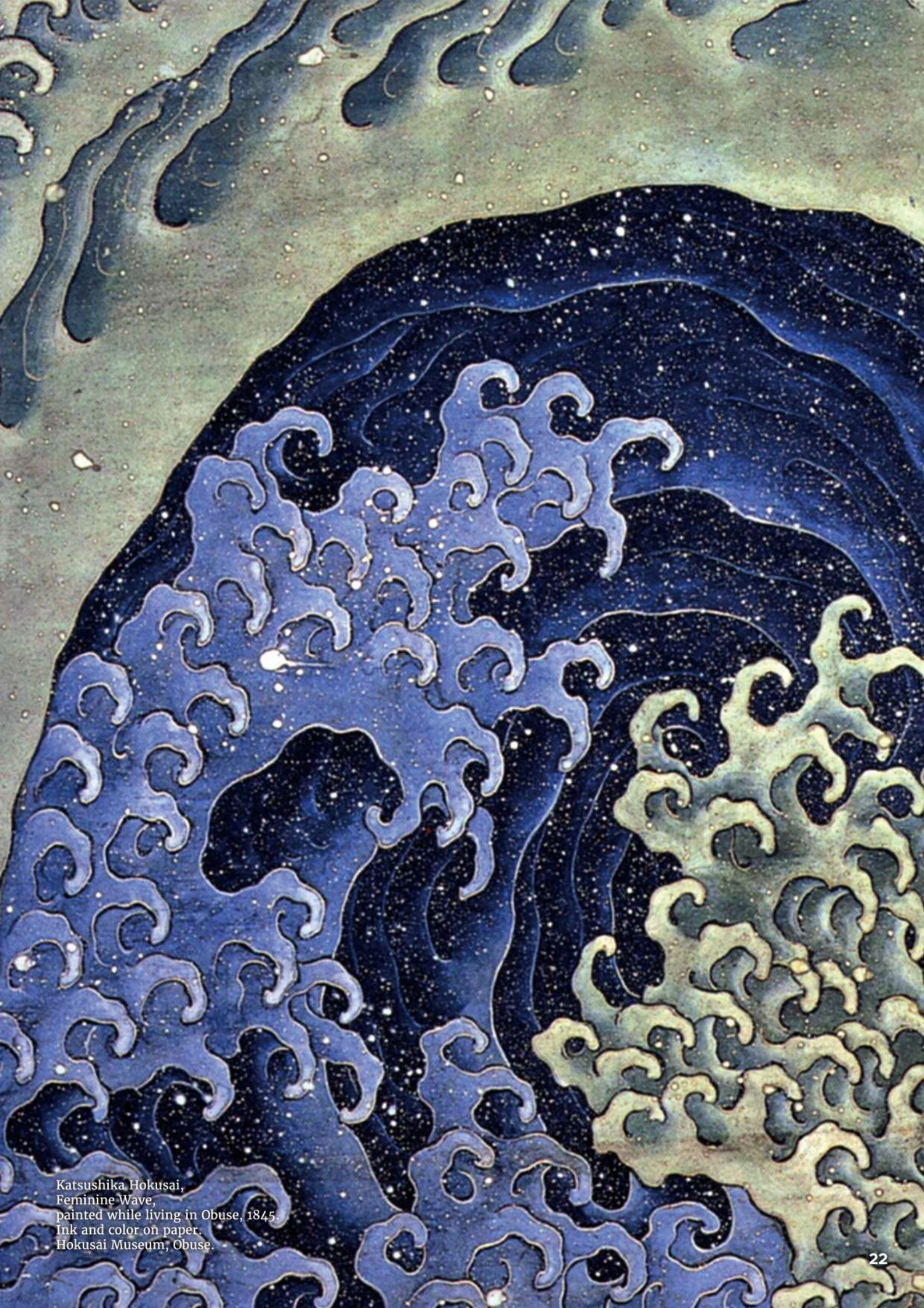
Even if you're not familiar with ukiyo-e, you've surely seen this famous print—Under the Wave off Kanagawa (c.1831) by Katsushika Hokusai. The iconic giant wave in this painting leaves a lasting impression, and it is precisely the use of Prussian blue within the wave that embodies the late Edo period's color revolution.

In 1829, the highly expensive synthetic pigment Prussian blue became available in China at a low price. This blue possessed a uniquely mysterious and profound charm. Its production method was originally a closely guarded secret of Western alchemists, until mid-18th century British scientists finally succeeded in creating it by mixing raw materials like silver, copper, and lead with ox blood. The artificial synthesis of Prussian blue is hailed as the first revolution in blue pigments.

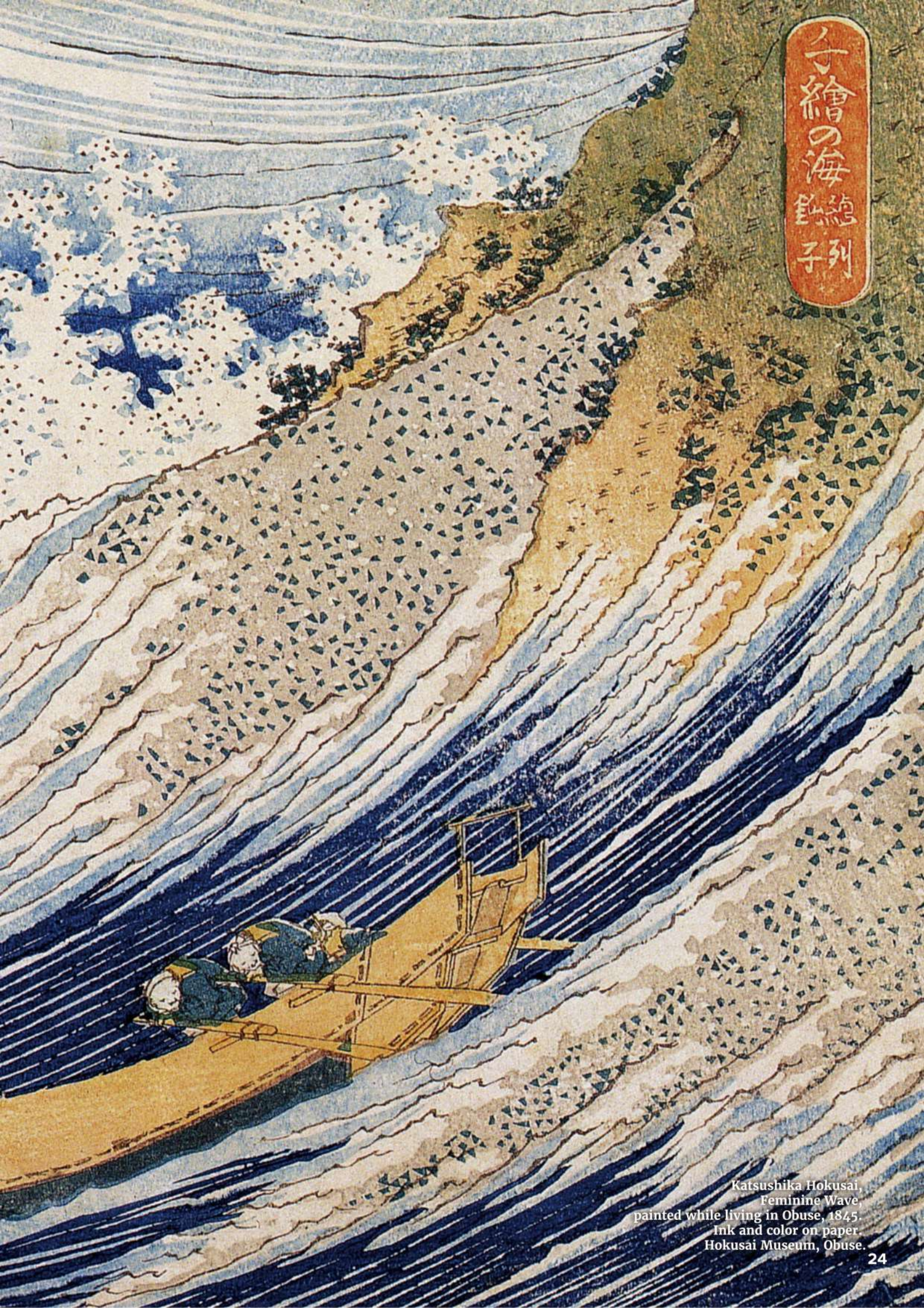
Before Prussian blue, Japanese woodblock printers primarily used shibori blue (derived from the petals of the Asian yellow flower) and indigo (a dye extracted from plants). These blues were delicate, prone to fading, and difficult to control in large-scale printing. Their fragility meant prints would quickly lose their vibrancy when exposed to sunlight, leaving only faint traces of their original colors. Although early ukiyo-e artists like Suzuki Harunobu or Kitagawa Utamaro employed blue in clothing, decorative patterns, or subtle accents, the color rarely dominated compositions. When landscapes did appear, they tended toward subdued tones or muted grays. Against this backdrop, the advent of synthetic, stable, deeply saturated pigments was nothing short of revolutionary.

Prussian blue—known in Japan as Berorin-ai or Berlin blue—arrived via Dutch and Chinese traders (the only foreign contacts permitted under Japan's isolationist policy). Unlike the traditional plant-based blues such as indigo or dayflower petal dye, this pigment was richer in tone and far more resistant to fading. It could produce deep oceanic blues and velvety night skies that previous pigments simply couldn't match. Its powerful saturation and ability to create gradients make it an ideal choice for depicting skies, oceans, and atmospheric effects.

The introduction of Prussian blue sparked what historians often refer to as the blue revolution in ukiyo-e prints. The public was enthralled. Hokusai's Great Wave, for example, caused a sensation in Edo. Its dramatic composition – a monstrous blue wave curling over tiny fishermen – combined with the novelty of the unfading "foreign" blue made it incredibly popular. It's said that an original Great Wave print cost about the same as two bowls of noodles in the 1830s, making it an affordable visual marvel for the masses. Many thousands of impressions were printed to meet demand (perhaps 8,000 or more, until the woodblocks wore out). Edo's print-buyers, always hungry for something new, eagerly collected these blue-rich scenes. Thus, Prussian blue not only expanded ukiyo-e's color gamut but also reinvigorated the market for prints in an era of fierce competition for popular attention.



Katsushika Hokusai,
Feminine Wave,
painted while living in Obuse, 1845.
Ink and color on paper.
Hokusai Museum, Obuse.



Katsushika Hokusai,
Feminine Wave,
painted while living in Obuse, 1845.
Ink and color on paper.
Hokusai Museum, Obuse.

After the introduction of Prussian blue, the impact in Japan was immediate and widespread. Hokusai's daring use of the pigment was only the beginning. Other masters, most notably Utagawa Hiroshige, adopted this vivid color to shape entirely new atmospheres—twilight skies fading into indigo, rivers glimmering under a pale blue moon, or sudden showers rendered with delicate gradations known as bokashi. These innovations turned blue into a vehicle for emotion, weather, and time, extending its role far beyond dramatic seascapes. For Edo's urban public, the new blue was not merely an artistic novelty but a cultural phenomenon. Prints saturated with Berlin blue circulated in thousands of impressions, priced cheaply enough for ordinary townspeople to own. The unfading skies and deep seas became part of the everyday imagination, a shared visual language of modernity in the floating world.

It was precisely this new visual language—vivid, flat, and boldly colored—that caught the eye of European artists when ukiyo-e prints began to circulate in Paris decades later. The "blue revolution" of Edo had thus prepared the ground for a second revolution: the rethinking of color in European Impressionism. During the latter half of the 19th century, Japanese woodblock prints were exported, sparking a craze in Europe (a trend known as Japonism). European artists, many weary of the muted browns and conservative palettes of academic painting, were stunned by the vibrant, flat colors of ukiyo-e. These prints looked unlike traditional Western art, with its heavy shading and realism. Instead, they offered expansive, unmodulated planes of color, bold outlines, and surprising compositions that proved immensely inspiring to Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters.

Impressionist masters like Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Édouard Manet were avid collectors of Japanese prints. Monet hung Hiroshige and Hokusai prints in his home in Giverny and studied their color treatment of nature – the idea that shadows could be blue, or that a night sky could be one flat tone with a crisp silhouette of a tree. These lessons found their way into his paintings. For instance, Monet's series of poplar paintings against different skies echo the simplicity of Japanese color aesthetics, and his later water lily panels, with large areas of lilac, green, and blue, have a kinship with the harmonious color fields of ukiyo-e. A National Gallery of Australia commentary notes that Japanese prints, "with their use of flat planes of bright colour, asymmetry, and telescoping of near and far," suggested to Monet new ways to compose and use color in his Impressionist vision.

Vincent van Gogh went even further in his admiration. He copied two Hiroshige prints stroke for stroke – one of them being *Sudden Shower over Shin-Ohashi Bridge*, which he painted in oils with vivid blues and yellows, and the other a print of plum blossoms (Hiroshige's Plum Garden at Kameido) which Van Gogh surrounded with calligraphic characters to pay homage to the original. Van Gogh loved the clear colors of ukiyo-e and wrote, "All my work is based to some extent on Japanese art." He described the "free, harmonious use of color" in prints and how all the Impressionists shared that influence. Notably, Van Gogh's iconic painting Starry Night features swirling blues that some art historians have likened to the powerful blues of The Great Wave – indeed an ABC News essay pointed out that the vibrant Prussian blue linking Hokusai's wave and Van Gogh's night sky is an example of a pigment connecting two masterpieces across cultures. While that may be poetic license, it's true that Van Gogh and his contemporaries eagerly adopted Prussian blue (invented in Europe, ironically) and other bright pigments partly under the influence of Japanese art's example of bold coloration.

Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890)
The Starry Night, 1889
Oil on canvas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

In summary, *ukiyo-e*'s legacy is inextricably linked with its use of color. The colors of Edo prints – from the first soft safflower pinks to the explosion of Prussian blue – not only defined an art form and delighted a society, but also bridged worlds. They flowed into the palettes of Manet and Monet, van Gogh and Lautrec, coloring the dawn of modern art. Next time you see an Impressionist painting with bold flat hues or a contemporary graphic poster, remember that behind it, in spirit, might be a floating world of geisha in red and landscapes in blue, whispering their enduring influence.

Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858)
Sudden Shower over Shin-Ohashi Bridge and Atake, from One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, 1857
Woodblock print, ink and color on paper
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The Blue Echoes: The Colorful World of Katsushika Hokusai

THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF JAPANESE ART, KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI IS CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH THE USE OF COLOR. HE BROUGHT PRUSSIAN BLUE INTO UKIYO-E WOODBLOCK PRINTS, GIVING THE WAVES AND SKY A REMARKABLE SENSE OF DEPTH AND EMOTION. THIS SHADE OF BLUE TRANSCENDED ITS TRADITIONAL ROLE OF REPRESENTING NATURE—IT BECAME A SOURCE OF VISUAL ENERGY, SYMBOLIZING THE RENEWED VITALITY OF EDO SOCIETY AND MIRRORING PEOPLE'S DEEP CONNECTION WITH NATURE AND THE SPIRIT. FROM THE HUGE WAVES IN "THIRTY-SIX VIEWS OF MOUNT FUJI" TO THE ETERNITY OF MOUNT FUJI, HOKUSAI REWROTE THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF JAPANESE ART WITH COLOR AND ALSO WROTE A NEW CHAPTER FOR THE COLOR OF EAST ASIAN ART.

"Under the Wave off Kanagawa" from the Series "Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji".
Tokyo National Museum.

Hokusai Blue: The Power of Nature

Katsushika Hokusai's most renowned "Hokusai Blue" originated from Prussian blue, which was introduced to Japan via the Netherlands in the 18th century. This brand-new chemical pigment, with its high saturation and non-fading properties, quickly replaced the traditional indigo and mineral blue and became the darling of the Edo art world. Hokusai was the first to use it on a large scale in "Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji", making blue the core visual force of the work.

In "Under the Wave off Kanagawa", the waves are depicted in layers of deep blue, and the surging crest of the waves forms a sharp contrast with Mount Fuji in the distance. Blue not only represents the vastness and irresistible power of the ocean, but also endows the picture with a cold yet magnificent sense of rhythm. in the Province of Yolo Falls in Mino, the blue color transforms into the surging water flowing straight down. The layers of blue and green gradients in the sky, mountains and vegetation create an atmosphere full of natural vitality. This unprecedented blue language not only presents a more authentic natural landscape to the Japanese public, but also symbolizes the new vitality that emerged during the Edo period due to foreign exchanges. Hokusai blue thus became a cultural imprint that transcended personal style, transforming the depiction of nature into a symbol of the spirit of The Times.

"Yōrō Falls in Mino Province" from the Series "A Tour of Waterfalls of the Provinces". Tokyo National Museum.

When it comes to Katsushika Hokusai, people often first think of the depth and coldness brought by "Hokusai blue". However, his artistic world is not merely a solitary blue. The subjects of ukiyo-e are not the nobility but the common people living in the daily life of Edo Castle. To cater to the public's taste, these prints must use bright colors and have rich layers. in Blossoms on Asuka Hill in the Eastern Capital, the blue sky firmly holds up the entire scene, while the earth and the hillside are dotted with red, yellow and pink flowers, trees and houses. The interweaving of blue and warm colors fills the spring flower-viewing scene with festive joy and vitality. Viewers can not only feel the splendor of nature, but also experience the lively and fast pace flowing in the lives of the general public.

The colors here are not symbolic metaphors but direct visual pleasures. It turned ukiyo-e into "an art that everyone can understand", making Hokusai's color world encompass both deep blue and exuberous red and yellow. Between cold and warm, it formed a vivid landscape belonging to the Edo period.

The Splendid Floating World: Colors and Popular Culture

"Blossoms on Asuka Hill in the Eastern Capital" from the Series "Outstanding Views of Snow, Moon, and Flowers". Tokyo National Museum.

Mount Fuji has always been regarded as a sacred place in Japanese culture, symbolizing eternity, sublimity and the national spirit. In his later years, Katsushika Hokusai constantly depicted Mount Fuji, regarding it as an eternal and unchanging spiritual symbol. Here, color transcends its decorative function and transforms into the language of faith, making the picture a spiritual refuge for the viewer. This is precisely the most powerful aspect of Hokusai's color world: through the echoes of blue and red, it elevates nature to spirit and transforms personal gaze into universal faith. in The Tama River in Bush Province, Mount Fuji is embraced by the blue sky and the river, standing quietly in the depth of the picture. The blue here conveys a profound sense of depth, with just a few bold strokes capturing the ocean's immense depth and vastness. In contrast, in Mild Breeze on a Fine Day, the entire Mount Fuji is rendered in vivid red, creating a striking red-blue contrast that reveals an extraordinary force of nature.

The symbol of Fuji: color and spirit

"The Tama River in Bushū Province"
from the Series "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji".
Tokyo National Museum.

Echoes of Color: Hokusai in the Context of East Asia

But if we look at Hokusai's pictures in the whole long river of East art, we could discover that, speaking of the use of color, compared with other artists', his color was generally stronger and more exaggerated, more extroverted and bright. And this attitude of his was also, somehow, reflected on the side of the demand of art and culture in Edo period at that time. And in addition, the change and development of ukiyo-e could also make Hokusai's color spread out of Japan and be familiar with in East and even whole the world. Especially that blue in his painting brought new eye and focus to the East Asian art and also opened up the new space.

"Mild Breeze on a Fine Day" from the Series "Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji". Tokyo National Museum.

Conclusion: The blue color is still surging

In general, Katsushika Hokusai invested blue with an emotion, and introduced bright colours into the daily vision of the common people, little by little bestowing on ukiyo-e the capacity to convey culture and spirit, not merely popular entertainment. And to this day we can still recognise the shock he obtained in us with blue. Certainly he shook up the colouration that had surrounded traditional woodblock prints in the history of East art as far as the 19th century. That is why, in a way, Hokusai's colour world does not die away in the 19th century but still vibrates even today.

The Korean Chromatic Worldview:

From Obangsaek to Visual Philosophy

Korean traditional art demonstrates a profound understanding of color, rooted in cultural heritage and philosophical thought. Within the broader context of East Asian artistic systems, it has developed a distinct identity. The use of color in Korean art reflects not only a keen observation of nature but also a strong emphasis on ethics, order, and symbolic meaning. This chromatic worldview was shaped by the principles of the Five Elements and Confucian cosmology, gradually evolving into a system that balances aesthetics with rational structure—known as the Obangsaek, or Five Directional Colors. Comprising blue, red, yellow, white, and black, these five primary colors correspond to the cardinal directions of east, south, center, west, and north, as well as the elements of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. This system has not only defined the visual logic of traditional Korean culture but has also profoundly influenced color choices and structural compositions in painting, architectural ornamentation, clothing, and everyday crafts.

Photo by
KS Kyung

Photo by
Byung Kwan Lee

In painting, the five cardinal colors are not merely formal visual choices; they constitute a symbolic linguistic system. Particularly in court painting, color was often intimately linked to politics, ethics, and cosmic order. The use of each color embodies specific cultural logic. Red was often imbued with symbolism representing orthodoxy, the sun, and national aspirations; black signified authority, guardianship, and oversight; blue symbolized nature and vitality; white conveyed purity, justice, and spiritual clarity; Yellow, as the central color, frequently symbolized the core of power and stability. These hues were not randomly paired but formed a symbolic system within a strict cultural framework. Unlike Chinese painting, which emphasizes the expressive qualities of brushwork and ink, or Japanese art, which pursues decorative color arrangements, traditional Korean painting prioritized restraint, subtlety, and symbolism. It did not strive for realistic depictions of light and shadow but focused instead on the harmony between color and cultural values.

Hawk at Sunrise by Jeong Hong-Rae epitomizes this chromatic philosophy. Currently housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, this late Joseon Dynasty work is a hanging scroll painted in color on silk. It depicts an eagle perched upon a rock, with the rising sun in the distance and rippling water, presenting a composition that is both simple and dignified. At first glance, this appears to be a nature-themed animal painting, yet it carries profound political symbolism and cultural allusion. The dominant palette consists of red, black, and blue, a color scheme that not only creates visual rhythm and depth but also strictly adheres to the structural logic of the Five Directions color system.

The most striking element in the composition is the crimson sun suspended high in the background. This color scheme serves not merely to emphasize light sources or temporal shifts, but also carries symbolic meanings of national righteousness, the legitimacy of imperial authority, and the hope of rebirth. Within the visual language of the Joseon Dynasty, the rising sun frequently represented light and renewal, serving as a visual expression of auspiciousness and ethical illumination. Positioned at the visual apex, the crimson sun forms the spiritual core of the image. Its color is rich yet restrained, maintaining structural tension with other hues while preserving overall harmony.

The central figure in the composition is an eagle, rendered with deep brown and black tones to depict its feathers and contours. Black, representing water and the north in the Five Directions color system, is often employed to convey depth, integrity, guardianship, and strength. Within Joseon's political culture, the eagle symbolized the supervisory system and the force of justice—both a predatory bird of nature and a metaphorical representation of power. Thus, in this work, the eagle's black hue is not merely a visual choice but a cultural identity marker. Its vertical confrontation with the red sun—one above, one below—establishes a symbolic relationship between the rising sun and the guardian, between hope and vigilance. This adds a layer of moral rhetoric beyond the formal composition of the entire image.

Hawk at Sunrise,
attributed to Jeong Hong-Rae (Korea, active late 18th–early 19th century), Joseon dynasty.
Ink and color on silk; height 113 cm, width 59.7 cm.
Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public Domain.

The blue-green hue is applied to rocks, rippling water, and distant mountains, forming the foundational structure of the composition. Blue-green belongs to the Wood element in the Five Elements theory, associated with the east, spring, and growth. Within the image, this color not only expresses the vitality of the natural environment but also constitutes the supporting foundation upon which the eagle stands, symbolizing the solid foundation of the nation and the perpetual vitality of society. Additionally, white foam and mist intermingle among the water ripples. Though occupying a small portion of the composition, white plays a harmonizing role in the visual structure. It adds breathability and vitality to the space, softening the overall color scheme and creating a balanced equilibrium amidst the intense contrasts.

The absence of yellow throughout the painting is understandable within the Five Directions color system. Yellow represents the central earth element, typically signifying imperial authority or institutional orthodoxy. Here, the nation's aspirations are embodied by the crimson sun, oversight by the black eagle, natural foundations by the azure-green, while white imbues the space with clarity and spiritual essence. Precisely through this highly coordinated color arrangement where each hue fulfills its role, the work achieves rich cultural layers and symbolic logic within its minimalist composition.

The use of color in Hawk at Sunrise reveals a key feature of traditional Korean painting: constructing visual order through symbolic color rather than mimetic realism. The contrast between the hawk and the rising sun is not merely compositional but represents institutional authority and moral vigilance. Color transitions are guided by ethical and cosmological structure rather than natural observation. This reflects a distinctly Korean approach—where color serves as a cultural tool to convey harmony, hierarchy, and philosophical meaning. Rather than pleasing the senses, it organizes values. Through its restrained palette and symbolic clarity, Jeong Hong-Rae's work exemplifies how Korean art merges aesthetics with ideology, offering a window into a worldview where color reflects order, ethics, and tradition.

Hawk at Sunrise,
attributed to Jeong Hong-Rae (Korea, active late 18th–early 19th century), Joseon dynasty.
Ink and color on silk; height 113 cm, width 59.7 cm.
Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public Domain.


C&A

Q1 What pigments were used to create the brilliant blues and greens in traditional Chinese landscape paintings?

These dazzling, gem-like blues and greens were not ordinary pigments—they came from rare minerals known as azurite and malachite. Azurite, a deep blue mineral, was finely ground and washed to produce the pigment for blue tones. Similarly, malachite, with its rich green hue, was processed into green pigment. Artisans carefully crushed and washed these minerals multiple times to obtain particles of varying sizes, the finer the grains, the brighter and more luminous the resulting colors.

When painting, artists would apply these pigments in layered washes, creating saturated and translucent effects that gave the works a radiant, almost ethereal quality—like capturing the spiritual essence of nature itself. A pinnacle of this technique is the Northern Song masterpiece A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains, which showcases this resplendent palette with stunning clarity and enduring brilliance even after a thousand years.

Q2 Is the deep blue on blue-and-white porcelain also made from "shiqing" (azurite)?

Although both are mineral pigments with similar hues, the blue used in blue-and-white porcelain is completely different from shiqing, which is azurite (a basic copper carbonate). The secret behind the porcelain's deep blue lies in cobalt-based pigments—not azurite. Artisans ground cobalt ores, such as the famed imported Sumaliqing or locally sourced cobalt materials, into extremely fine pigments. These were painted onto the porcelain body, covered with a clear glaze, and then fired once at around 1300°C. During this high-temperature process, the cobalt transformed into a rich, stable, and unfading blue with a serene intensity.

By contrast, shiqing (azurite) cannot withstand high temperatures; its color would be destroyed in the kiln. Therefore, these two blues belong to entirely separate artistic systems—painting and ceramics—and exemplify the brilliance of ancient craftsmanship across different media.

Q3 What other unique pigments did ancient Chinese artists use?

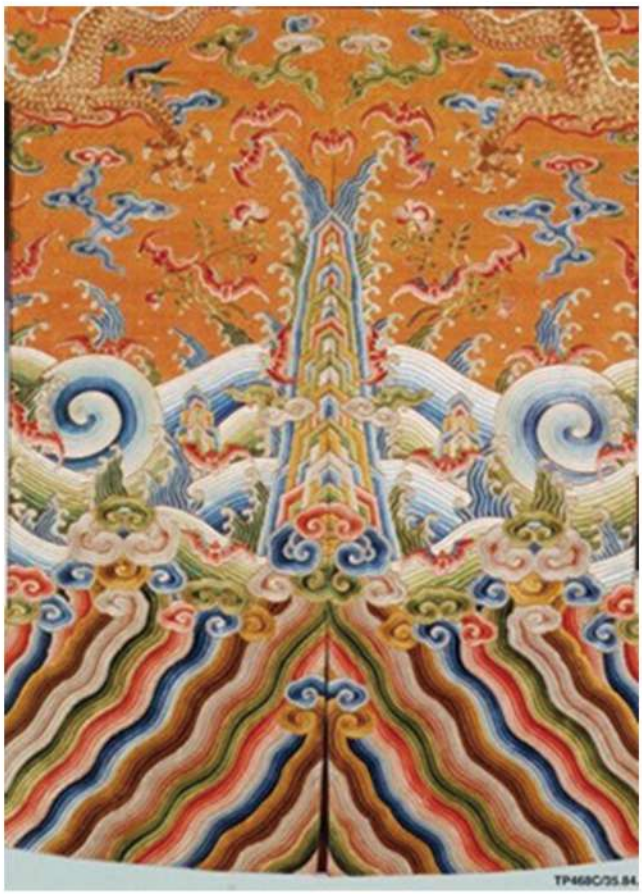
The pigment palette of ancient China was a veritable treasury of rare and fascinating materials. Among the most iconic was vermilion (zhusha), derived from cinnabar ore. Its pure, vivid red tone was remarkably durable, making it the ideal choice for painting seals, important figures, and religious murals. Clam white (hefen), produced by calcining and grinding marine shells, offered unmatched whiteness and opacity. It was often used for rendering facial highlights, flower petals, or as a bright base layer. The delicate rouge red (yanzhi), extracted from safflower petals, added a soft and lifelike warmth to the painting. Additionally, the technique of applying gold leaf directly onto artworks brought forth a sense of radiant brilliance and solemn grandeur, especially in Buddhist imagery and imperial court paintings.

Q4 Chinese painting is often referred to as "ink-and-wash painting." Why did ancient artists seem less fond of using color?

This preference is rooted in deep currents of Eastern philosophy. Literati painters, influenced by Daoist ideals such as "plainness surpasses ornate beauty" and Confucian notions like "painting follows the purity of the silk," believed that vibrant colors merely depicted outward appearances. In contrast, ink—with its five tonal variations of charred, dense, heavy, light, and clear—could transcend physical likeness to convey inner spirit, emotion, and atmosphere. This approach of using ink in place of color, emphasizing mood and moral character, was regarded as a more refined and cultivated form of artistic expression. However, this did not mean ancient Chinese artists rejected color altogether. Lavish, richly colored gongbi paintings and grand murals formed their own parallel tradition. Together with ink painting, they shaped a dual aesthetic landscape—where the ornate and the understated stood in creative tension, like twin peaks or diverging rivers within the vast terrain of Chinese art.

THE MODERN TRANSFORMATION AND INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE COLORS

In the Qing Dynasty, a bright yellow dragon robe was embroidered with a five-clawed golden dragon, symbolizing imperial power and the center of heaven and earth. Since ancient times, Chinese colors have not merely been visual decorations but a set of cultural codes that imply order and symbolic meanings. In ancient times, the "Five Colors" concept corresponded blue, red, yellow, white and black to the five elements' positions and further implemented them as a ritual system: different identities and occasions each had their own exclusive tones, and colors became the carrier for maintaining rituals and laws - bright yellow was exclusively used by the royal family, while common people followed norms such as red wedding gowns and white mourning clothes for weddings and funerals. In traditional society, color first carried "order" and then reflected "beauty". This article traces how traditional Chinese colors have been reorganized into a readable, usable and communicable design language in contemporary times from three layers: "ritual system - material - context".



The color schemes of dragon robes, sacrificial robes, palaces and ancestral temples are never random decorations. They "press" the cosmology and social hierarchy into the visual system: bright yellow is used in the imperial space, vermilion and gold mark solemnity and celebration, and cyan and blue are associated with "reverence for heaven" and "tranquility". The patterns of clouds, thunder, water and mountains work in coordination with the color scheme to visualize the meaning of the ritual. It is precisely because of the logic that comes first and the clear hierarchy that traditional color schemes can be repeatedly refined and reused in today's designs - they offer a set of operational order frameworks.

Festival Robe,
Qing dynasty (1644–1911), second half of the 18th century.
Silk satin with silk and metallic-thread embroidery;
144.8 × 186.1 cm (57 × 73 1/4 in.).
Classification: Costumes—Embroidered.
Credit line: Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1935. Object Number: 35.84.8.

Unlike the single strength of chemical pigments, the "temperament" of traditional colors comes from materials science: blue grass turns into indigo, madder turns red, turmeric turns yellow, and the layers of stone blue, stone green and cinnabar paint are scraped and piled up to bring about a sense of composure, weight and glimmer. When looking at a vermilion lacquered round box, what first catches the eye is not the "red" itself, but the volume and luster of the red - the undulations left by thick accumulation and thin scraping transform "auspiciousness and nobility" from symbols into a sense of touch. Looking at the green and blue landscape, the mineral particles spread out a stable and calm color field on the Xuan paper, making "green and blue" a memorable material experience. These "tactile memories" naturally extend to contemporary CMF (Color - Material - Process) strategies: the micro-reflection of lacquer imitation, the soft diffuse reflection of silk imitation, and the visual texture of mineral particles can all translate the texture of traditional colors into modern products and spaces.

Entering modern society, traditional colors are no longer confined but are continuously experimented with and adopted in scenarios such as fashion, architecture, and visual communication. The designer superimposed classical main colors such as bright yellow, light green and vermilion with modern cutting, structure and materials, which not only retained the charm of the East but also obtained contemporary vocabulary. The investigative reproduction of historical tones in films, TV series and games, using low-saturation court color schemes to create a simple and elegant visual atmosphere; Urban wayfinding, festival packaging and public cultural visuals are also gradually absorbing the sense of order and ceremony from traditional color schemes.

It should be noted that if the revival only stays at the level of "naming and packaging", ignoring the material science and ritual context behind the color names, the so-called return is very likely to degenerate into a fast-moving consumer goods style sample. The truly effective approach is to embed the three-layer logic of "order - touch - context" into the product and graphic system: color assumes the information hierarchy, materials correct the visual texture, and application scenarios test readability and durability. The green and blue series remains highly persuasive in contemporary times.

From a global perspective, a more accurate judgment is not the "transfer of discourse power", but the multi-centralization of color narratives: traditional Chinese color matching has become an important resource and reference for many designers. "Chinese red" is no longer merely a holiday label; colors like cyan and dark blue are also used as stable and narrative color gamut. The growth in interest among overseas audiences is not due to their "exotic" nature, but rather because these color gamut demonstrate better hierarchical readability and emotional recognition in modern products, Spaces and interfaces - while maintaining sufficient cultural content.

To truly bring traditional colors to life, the key is not to replicate their names or set up a set of "national style color cards", but to treat them as a computable grammar: first, organize the information hierarchy with the logic of ritual systems - use higher saturation and contrast for important and warning items, and warm metals and solemn proportions for ceremonies and memorials. Then, the texture and craftsmanship are corrected by material memory - allowing the micro-reflection of the imitation paint, the soft diffuse reflection of the imitation silk, and the deposition of mineral particles to return to the visual effect. Finally, readability and sustainability are tested in the context of use - adapting to dark/bright screens, barrier-free contrast, and contextualized color matching. Thus, bright yellow is not merely an "imperial color", vermilion is not merely a "festive color", and cyan is not merely a "classical filter". Instead, it will stably function in different media and cultures, forming a contemporary color grammar. The modern transformation of traditional colors is thus not a retro movement, but a set of production methods oriented towards the future: generating style in order, placing memory in touch, and completing communication in context.

Scholar-recluse in Blue-Green Landscape (hanging scroll),
Chen Hongshou (Chinese, 1598/99–1652). Ming dynasty, 1633.
Ink and color on silk.
Image: 92 3/4 × 30 5/8 in. (235.6 × 77.8 cm);
overall with mounting: 126 5/8 × 34 5/8 in. (321.6 × 87.9 cm).

Covered box with figures in a garden,
Ming dynasty, Xuande mark and period (1426–35), China.
Carved red lacquer.
Dimensions: H. 3 3/4 in. (9.5 cm); Diam. 10 3/8 in. (26.4 cm).
Classification: Lacquer. Credit line: Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving, 2020.
Object Number: 2020.323.1a, b.

The Escape

Trajectory of East Asian Colors:

A Visual Shift from Symbolism to Perception

Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858)
Sudden Shower over Shin-Ohashi Bridge and Atake, from One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, 1857
Woodblock print, ink and color on paper
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

In the context of East Asia, colors have never been merely colors: blue represents the east, red belongs to the fire element, yellow is in the middle, white symbolizes purity, and black indicates solemnness. It is a dictionary of rules. But in the age of images, do we still need this dictionary? We will see that color has not "escaped" but has shifted its position along the three tracks of perception - form - institution - it is no longer just a code, but directly determines what we see first, where we stop, and what kind of emotional changes we feel.

In the tradition of East Asian images, colors were once subordinate to the codes of ritual systems: blue was associated with the east, red with the virtue of fire, and Xuan symbolized solemnity... However, in the later period of the Edo period, the depiction of the "perceptible world" in ukiyo-e led color to retreat from the "referent" to the "sensory". Take Utagawa Hiroshige's Sudden Shower over Shin (1857) as an example: The picture does not emphasize which "blue means which meaning" but uses the gradation of blue and gray to lay out the temporality of the sudden rain(Figure 2). The raindrops form a diagonal web, compressing the distant view. The black and brown of the pedestrians' clothes on the bridge are highlighted in some areas, creating a tactile color rhythm - the viewer is not "reading" the colors but is surrounded by them. The damp and cold river wind, the trembling wooden bridge, and the dark clouds pressing down on the city - the physical sensations occur before any symbolic interpretation.

The key to this work does not lie in the names of the colors, but in the sense of color: the progressive shades of blue, on the one hand, flatten the foreground, and on the other hand, increase the depth of field. The rain curtain turns the opposite bank into a silhouette. The light in the blank Spaces and the texture of the paper jointly create the tension of "the last second before the rain stops". Guangzhong uses a limited color gamut to create the shape of "weather". Colors, like weather, organize attention and distribute the rhythm of the picture, rather than playing the fixed answer in the dictionary that "blue equals melancholy and black equals solemnity". Returning to the East Asian tradition, this precisely dilutes the single-line narrative of "five colors - directions - virtues": colors are no longer merely "containers of meaning", but the places where experiences occur. In the context of curation, this reminds us that when discussing East Asian colors, we should not merely remain at the level of cultural index, but also allow the audience to be "touched by colors" in the lighting, movement lines and viewing rhythms. If contemporary exhibitions can, like Guangzhong, promote physical experiences through "small color gamut and strong rhythm", colors will transcend symbols and generate meanings on the spot.

Dish,
Joseon dynasty, second half of the 15th century.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession no. 2004.124.

When color no longer fully obeys symbolism, it can also enter form composition in a "nearly colorless" manner. Take the white porcelain plates of the Joseon Dynasty as an example: the plain white porcelain of the late 15th century (Figure 2) organized the viewing rhythm only by the lightness of the white glaze, the proportion of the vessel shape and the conscious blank space. In the aesthetic orientation of the Li Dynasty, which was influenced by Neo-Confucianism, blank space itself was a form of structure. Without intricate patterns or heavy mineral colors, "white" becomes the lens that magnifies the form, luster and subtle kiln changes - here, color does not carry any meaning but allows the form to manifest. In contrast, the Chinese green and blue landscape is rendered layer by layer with mineral pigments such as lapis lazuli and turquoise, creating a scene of color through the spread of color gamut and the outlining of gold and blue. The common point of the two lies in that color directly serves the structure of the picture or object, rather than being attached as a symbolic label. In this sense, pure white is not "colorless", but rather a "developer" that brings form and luster to the viewer's eyes.

A crucial turning point in the concept of color emerged during the Meiji period. Take Kuroda Seiki's "Lakeside" (1897) (Figure 3) as an example: The painter depicts a lady in a kimono resting by the lake using Western oil painting techniques. The soft light and color represent the texture of the fabric and the water surface. The background incorporates the Impressionist style of lake and mountain scenery - from symbolic flat coating and gold foil to the depiction of visible light colors and instantaneous sensations. This shift from "symbol to perception" has laid the historical foundation for contemporary re-coding.

Entering the contemporary era, traditional East Asian colors are constantly being interpreted and reconstructed in the new visual system. On the one hand, cultural institutions and designers consciously implant traditional color symbols into the modern communication context, endowing them with new life: museum displays and publications bring ancient pigments back to life through digital restoration, and audiences can directly experience the splendor of a thousand years ago in apps and online exhibitions, thereby transforming their understanding of colors from textual metaphors to immediate experiences. On the other hand, in the visual language of the Internet, traditional colors have "flown into the homes of ordinary people" in creative forms. Social media and design platforms have witnessed the emergence of "traditional Chinese color" palettes and Japanese-style color matching tutorials, transforming the colors of emperors and sacrificial ceremonies into everyday design elements. In the "national style" trend, young designers have incorporated ancient color names such as "dark red", "Moon White", and "Jade Black" into posters, animations, and fashion, breathing new life into traditional colors in a new context.

Kuroda Seiki,
Lakeside (Kohan), 1897,
oil on canvas. Public Domain;
Tokyo National Museum.

At the same time, it should be noted that the ritual system and religion still maintain strong symbolism on many occasions (such as the bright red for weddings, the color schemes of palaces and temples, and the standard colors of countries and brands), which coexist and coexist with the contemporary aesthetic use of colors. Of course, the re-encoding of colors does not automatically equal "liberation"; When traditional colors are reused by brands and algorithms, they may also solidify into new symbolic patterns - this is precisely what curation and education need to constantly analyze.

Rather than constantly asking what red equals and what blue equals, it is better to return to the act of viewing itself, to feel how an image makes the gaze move in sequence, how long the body stays still, and how emotions fluctuate. In the context of East Asia, color has not completely bid farewell to symbolism, but its way of working has changed, with a greater emphasis on perception and structure, as well as re-encoding driven by institutions and media. The traditional five-color system still speaks out in the background, while contemporary experience constantly pulls it into new relationship networks. Thus, color is no longer a fixed entry in a dictionary but a generation mechanism that continuously produces meaning in different scenes and at different times, enabling viewers to establish new connections in their encounters with the world.

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