

Vincent van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh was born and spent his childhood in the southern Netherlands, where his father was a minister. At sixteen he joined a well-known art dealership and remained seven years although he was not well suited to the business of art. Then, he worked in succession as a teacher, preacher, and missionary. While evangelizing in a poor coal-mining district he began to draw in earnest. Dismissed by church authorities in 1880, Van Gogh finally found his vocation in art.

While studying art in The Hague and briefly in Antwerp, he became increasingly influenced by Japanese prints and the work of French avant-garde artists. In March 1886 he arrived on his brother Theo's doorstep in Paris. Theo, an art dealer, provided constant emotional and financial support throughout the rest of Van Gogh's life. It was in Paris that Vincent's art took flight. He worked with Camille Pissarro, who encouraged him to brighten his somber palette and to juxtapose complementary colors for a luminous effect. At the same time, influenced by younger artists like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Gauguin, he began to use color symbolically and for emotional effect.

Exhausted by the hard life he lived in Paris and wanting to "look at nature under a brighter sky," he moved early in 1888 to Arles, in the south of France. He hoped the warm climate would relax him and that bright colors illuminated by a strong sun would provide inspiration for his art. He worked feverishly, pushing his style to greater expression with intense, active brushwork and saturated, complementary colors. "I have tried," he wrote, "to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green." Yet, neither his colors nor the rhythmic surfaces of his heavily painted canvases were divorced from nature — they were tools to communicate the spiritual power that he believed molded nature's forms.

Opinions about the nature of Van Gogh's illness are still debated, but just before Christmas 1888, he suffered a breakdown. In May 1889, following periods of intense work interrupted by recurring mental disturbances, Van Gogh committed himself to a sanitarium in nearby St.-Rémy. He painted whenever he could, believing that work was his only chance for sanity. After a year, in the spring of 1890, he returned north to Auvers to be closer to Theo; in July he died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.



Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853 – 1890

Farmhouse in Provence, 1888

Van Gogh arrived in Arles in February 1888, the landscape covered with snow. But it was sun that he sought in Provence — a brilliance and light that would wash out detail and simplify forms, reducing the world around him to the kinds of flat patterns he admired in Japanese woodblock prints. Arles, he said, was "the Japan of the South." Van Gogh's time in Arles was amazingly productive. In under 15 months — just 444 days — he produced more than 200 paintings, about 100 drawings, and wrote more than 200 letters.

He described a series of seven studies of wheat fields, "...landscapes, yellow — old gold — done quickly, quickly, quickly, and in a hurry just like the harvester who is silent under the blazing sun, intent only on the reaping." Yet he was also at pains to point out that these works should not be "criticized as hasty" since this "...quick succession of canvases [was] quickly executed but calculated *long beforehand*."

Pairs of complementary colors — the red and green of the plants, the woven highlights of oranges and blue in the fence, even the pink clouds that enliven the turquoise sky — shimmer and seem almost to vibrate against each other. This technique was used by the impressionists to enhance the luminosity of their pictures. Pissarro, who helped introduce Van Gogh to these concepts, noted "if I didn't know how colors behaved from the researches of...scientists, we [the impressionists] would not have been able to pursue our study of light with so much confidence."

Oil on canvas, 46.1 x 60.9 cm (18 1/8 x 24 in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.1734



Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853 – 1890

La Mousmé, 1888

The sensational aspects of Van Gogh's life and suicide often cloud the intention and deliberation behind his highly charged and expressive style. In a letter to his brother Theo he described how this painting consumed his attention: "It took me a whole week... but I had to reserve my mental energy to do the *mousmé* well." This name, he explained, came from a character in a popular novel set in Japan. "A *mousmé* is a Japanese girl — Provençal in this case — twelve to fourteen years old."

The girl's costume is a contrast of patterns and complementary shades of blue and orange. The paint in these bold stripes and irregular dots stands out against the pale green lattice of vertical and horizontal brushstrokes in the background. The vigorous patterns express Van Gogh's sympathetic response to his young sitter, whose face is carefully modeled and finished to a greater degree than other parts of his picture. Compare her hands, for example, which are more sketchily painted.

La Mousmé is one of a series of portraits that Van Gogh painted while living in Arles. They were, he wrote, "the only thing in painting that excites me to the depths of my soul, and which made me feel the infinite more than anything else." The flowering branch the girl holds is probably related to Van Gogh's pantheistic faith in the power of nature's cycles of life and renewal.

Oil on canvas, 73.3 x 60.3 cm (28 7/8 x 23 3/4 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.151



Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853 – 1890

The Olive Orchard, 1889

During the last six or seven months of 1889, Van Gogh did at least fifteen paintings of olive trees — a subject he found both demanding and compelling. He wrote to his brother Theo that he was "struggling to catch [the olive trees]. They are old silver, sometimes with more blue in them, sometimes greenish, bronzed, fading white above a soil which is yellow, pink, violet tinted orange... very difficult." He found that the "rustle of the olive grove has something very secret in it, and immensely old. It is too beautiful for us to dare to paint it or to be able to imagine it."

In the olive trees — in the expressive power of their ancient and gnarled forms — Van Gogh found a manifestation of the spiritual force he believed resided in all of nature. His brushstrokes make the soil and even the sky seem alive with the same rustling motion as the leaves, stirred to a shimmer by the Mediterranean wind. These strong individual dashes do not seem painted so much as drawn onto the canvas with a heavily loaded brush. The energy in their continuous rhythm communicates to us, in an almost physical way, the living force that Van Gogh found within the trees themselves, the very spiritual force that he believed had shaped them.

Oil on canvas, 73 x 92.1 cm (28 3/4 x 36 1/4 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.152



Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853 – 1890
Self-Portrait, 1889

Van Gogh made this self-portrait — one of at least thirty-six that he painted — while staying in the asylum at St.-Rémy. For six weeks he was confined to his room. When able to paint once more, this was the first canvas he made. He observed to his brother Theo:

They say — and I am willing to believe it — that it is difficult to know yourself — but it isn't easy to paint yourself either. So I am working on two portraits of myself at this moment — for want of another model — because it is more than time I did a little figure work. One I began the day I got up; I was thin and pale as a ghost. It is dark violet blue and the head whitish with yellow hair, so it has a color effect.

Van Gogh believed strongly that only by working could he restore his health — and in this image he holds a palette and brushes, and wears a painter's smock. The fervor and fragility that defined his life are told by stark contrasts of color and restless brushstrokes, no less than by his penetrating eyes and wavering contours. Van Gogh painted another, calmer self-portrait at about the same time, but this one, he believed, captured his “true character.”

Oil on canvas, 57.2 x 43.8 cm (22 ½ x 17 ¼ in.)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney 1998.74.5



Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853 – 1890
Roses, 1890

Roses was painted shortly before Van Gogh's release from the asylum at St.-Rémy. He felt he was coming to terms with his illness — and himself. In this healing process, painting was all-important. In those final three weeks, he wrote Theo, he “worked as in a frenzy. Great bunches of flowers, violet irises, big bouquets of roses . . .”

This is one of two rose paintings Van Gogh made at that time. It is among his largest and most beautiful still lifes, with an exuberant bouquet in the glory of full bloom. Although he sometimes assigned certain meanings to flowers, Van Gogh did not specifically make an association for roses. It is clear, though, that he saw all blossoming plants as celebrations of birth and renewal — as full of life. That sense is underscored here by the fresh green of the background, which has the delicate color of new leaves in spring. The undulating ribbons of paint, applied in diagonal strokes, animate the canvas and play off the furred forms of flowers and leaves. Originally, the roses were pink — the color has faded — and would have created a contrast of complementary colors with the green. Van Gogh was fascinated by such combinations of complements. The paint is very thick — so thick that both rose paintings were left behind when Van Gogh left St.-Rémy on May 16. As he explained to Theo, “These canvases will take a whole month to dry, but the attendant here will undertake to send them off after my departure.” They arrived in Auvers by June 24.

Oil on canvas, 71 x 90 cm (27 ½ x 35 ⅞ in.)
Gift of Pamela Harriman in memory of W. Averell Harriman 1991.67.1



Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853 – 1890
Girl in White, 1890

On May 21, 1890, Van Gogh arrived in Auvers, a small town outside Paris. His brother Theo, concerned about his health, had suggested he put himself under the care of Paul Gachet, a homeopathic physician and avid art patron. From his arrival in Auvers to his death on July 29, Van Gogh made about seventy paintings — more than one per day — and many drawings.

In mid-June he wrote Gauguin: “I am trying to do some studies of wheat. . . nothing but ears of wheat with green-blue stalks, long leaves like ribbons of green shot with pink, ears that are just turning yellow, edged with the pale pink of the dusty bloom — a pink bindweed at the bottom twisted round a stem. Over that, against a vivid yet tranquil background, I should like to paint some portraits.” In fact, two paintings show this same young woman: “a peasant woman, big yellow hat with a knot of sky-blue ribbons . . .”

Oil on canvas, 66.7 x 45.8 cm (26 ¼ x 18 ⅛ in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.30

DRAWINGS



Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853 – 1890

Harvest — The Plain of La Crau, 1888

Van Gogh was committed to the craft of his art. Behind his expressive painting are countless drawings with bold, sure lines. He made studies, sometimes with notes about color, in preparation for painting, but he also drew scenes — like this one — that he had already painted, to further his skill and understanding. Van Gogh sometimes sent drawings as gifts or used them in exchanges with other artists.

Drawings, including this one reproduced here, are not frequently exhibited. However, scholars, students, and interested visitors can view them and other works in the Gallery's collection of prints and drawings by appointment. Please call in advance (202) 842-6380.

Reed pen and brown ink over graphite on wove paper, 24.2 x 31.9 cm (9 ½ x 12 ⅞ in.). Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art 1992.51.10