Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890)

Vincent van Gogh, the eldest son of a Dutch Reformed minister and a bookseller's daughter, pursued various vocations, including that of an art dealer and clergyman, before deciding to become an artist at the age of twenty-seven. Over the course of his decade-long career (1880–90), he produced nearly 900 paintings and more than 1,100 works on paper. Ironically, in 1890, he modestly assessed his artistic legacy as of "very secondary" importance.

Largely self-taught, Van Gogh gained his footing as an artist by zealously copying prints and studying nineteenth-century drawing manuals and lesson books, such as Charles Bargue's Exercises au fusain and cours de dessin. He felt that it was necessary to master black and white before working with color, and first concentrated on learning the rudiments of figure drawing and rendering landscapes in correct perspective. In 1882, he moved from his parents' home in Etten to the Hague, where he received some formal instruction from his cousin, Anton Mauve, a leading Hague School artist. That same year, he executed his first independent works in watercolor and ventured into oil painting; he also enjoyed his first earnings as an artist: his uncle, the art dealer C. M. Van Gogh, commissioned two sets of drawings of Hague townscapes for which Van Gogh chose to depict such everyday sites as views of the railway station, gasworks, and nursery gardens (1972.118.281).

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Van Gogh's admiration for the Barbizon artists, in particular Jean-François Millet, influenced his decision to paint rural life. In the winter of 1884–85, while living with his parents in Nuenen, he painted more than forty studies of peasant heads, which culminated in his first multifigured, large-scale composition (The Potato Eaters, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam); in this gritty portrayal of a peasant family at mealtime, Van Gogh wrote that he sought to express that they "have tilled the earth themselves with the same hands they are putting in the dish." Its dark palette and coarse application of paint typify works from the artist's Nuenen period (67.187.70b, 1984.393).

Interested in honing his skills as a figure painter, Van Gogh left the Netherlands in late 1885 to study at the Antwerp Academy in Belgium. Three months later, he departed for Paris, where he lived with his brother Theo, an art dealer with the firm of Boussod, Valadon et Cie, and for a time attended classes at Fernand Cormon's studio. Van Gogh's style underwent a major transformation during his two-year stay in Paris (February 1886–February 1888). There he saw the work of the Impressionists first-hand and also witnessed the latest innovations by the Neo-Impressionists Georges Seurat and Paul Signac. In response, Van Gogh lightened his palette and experimented with the broken brushstrokes of the Impressionists as well as the pointillist touch of the Neo-Impressionists, as evidenced in the handling of his Self-Portrait
with a Straw Hat (67.187.70a), which was painted in the summer of 1887 on the reverse of an earlier peasant study (67.187.70b). In Paris, he executed more than twenty self-portraits that reflect his ongoing exploration of complementary color contrasts and a bolder style.

In February 1888, Van Gogh departed Paris for the south of France, hoping to establish a community of artists in Arles. Captivated by the clarity of light and the vibrant colors of the Provençal spring, Van Gogh produced fourteen paintings of orchards in less than a month, painting outdoors and varying his style and technique. The composition and calligraphic handling of The Flowering Orchard (56.13) suggest the influence of Japanese prints, which Van Gogh collected. The artist's debt to ukiyo-e prints is also apparent in the reed pen drawings he made in Arles, distinguished by their great verve and linear invention (48.190.1). In August, he painted the still lifes Oleanders (62.24) and Shoes (1992.374); each work resonates with the artist's personal symbolism. For Van Gogh, oleanders were joyous and life-affirming (much like the sunflower); he reinforced their significance with the compositional prominence accorded to Émile Zola's 1884 novel La joie de vivre. The still life of unlaced shoes, which Van Gogh had apparently hung in Paul Gauguin's "yellow room" at Arles, suggested, to Gauguin, the artist himself—he saw them as emblematic of Van Gogh's itinerant existence.

Gauguin joined Van Gogh in Arles in October and abruptly departed in late December 1888, a move precipitated by Van Gogh's breakdown, during which he cut off part of his left ear with a razor. Upon his return from the hospital in January, Van Gogh resumed working on a portrait of the wife of the postmaster Joseph Roulin; although he painted all the members of the Roulin family, Van Gogh produced five versions of Madame Roulin as La Berceuse, shown holding the rope that rocks her newborn daughter's cradle (1996.435). He envisioned her portrait as the central panel of a triptych, flanked by paintings of sunflowers. For Van Gogh, her image transcended portraiture, symbolically resonating as a modern Madonna; of its palette, which ranges from ocher to vermilion and malachite, Van Gogh expressed his wish that it "sung a lullaby with color," underscoring the expressive role of color in his art.

Fearing another breakdown, Van Gogh voluntarily entered the asylum at nearby Saint-Rémy in May 1889, where, over the course of the next year, he painted some 150 canvases. His initial confinement to the grounds of the hospital is reflected in his imagery, from his depictions of its corridors (48.190.2) to the irises and lilacs of its walled garden, visible from the window of his room. Venturing beyond the grounds of the hospital, he painted the surrounding countryside, especially its olive groves (1998.325.1) and cypresses, which he saw as characteristic of Provence. In June, he produced two paintings of cypresses, rendered in thick, impastoed layers of paint (49.30; Cypresses, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo), likening the form of a cypress to an Egyptian obelisk in a letter to his brother Theo. These evocative trees figure prominently in a landscape, produced the same month (1993.132). Van Gogh regarded this work, with its sun-drenched wheat field undulating in the wind, as one of his "best"
summer canvases. At Saint-Rémy, he also painted copies of works by such artists as Delacroix, Rembrandt, and Millet, using black-and-white photographs and prints. In fall and winter 1889–90, he executed twenty-one copies after Millet (64.165.2); he described his copies as "interpretations" or "translations," comparing his role as an artist to that of a musician playing music written by another composer.

After nearly a year at Saint-Rémy, Van Gogh left, in May 1890, to settle in Auvers-sur-Oise, where he was near his brother Theo in Paris and under the care of Dr. Paul Gachet, a homeopathic physician and amateur painter. In just over two months, Van Gogh averaged a painting a day; however, on July 27, 1890, he shot himself in the chest in a wheat field; he died two days later. His artistic legacy is preserved in the paintings and drawings he left behind, as well as in his voluminous correspondence, primarily with Theo, which lays bare his working methods and artistic intentions and serves as a reminder of his brother's pivotal role as a mainstay of support throughout his career.

By the time of his death in 1890, Van Gogh's work had begun to attract critical attention. His paintings were featured at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris between 1888 and 1890 and with Les XX in Brussels in 1890. As Gauguin wrote to him, his recent works, on view at the Indépendants in Paris, were regarded by many artists as "the most remarkable" in the show; and one of his paintings sold from the 1890 exhibition in Brussels. In January 1890, the critic Albert Aurier published the first full-length article on Van Gogh, aligning his art with the nascent Symbolist movement and highlighting the originality and intensity of his artistic vision. By the outbreak of World War I, with the discovery of his genius by the Fauves and German Expressionists, Vincent van Gogh had already come to be regarded as a vanguard figure in the history of modern art.

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Further Reading


Vincent van Gogh at the age of 19 (Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum / Vincent van Gogh Foundation). The vast majority of Vincent van Gogh’s extant correspondence is to family members – not only to Theo and Jo, but also to his parents and to Willemien, the sister to whom he was closest. On 1 April that year his father confirmed him as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. On 21 May 1851 he married Anna Carbentus (1819–1907), daughter of the Hague bookbinder Willem Carbentus (1792–1845). In 1849 he set up on his own as a bookseller and art dealer in Amsterdam, and moved into premises in Leidsestraat in 1853. The bookshop and gallery moved to Keizersgracht 453 in 1871. His young nephew Vincent visited the shop in 1877-1878, getting to know books and art.