

50 Years of the Van Gogh Museum: A Living Museum

On 2 June 2023, it will be exactly 50 years since the Van Gogh Museum opened its doors. For 50 years and counting, the Van Gogh Museum has inspired people all around the world with the artworks of Vincent van Gogh and his contemporaries.

Legacy

Following his death in 1890, Vincent van Gogh left his entire oeuvre to his younger brother, Theo van Gogh. After Theo's death early in 1891, only six months after Vincent's passing, Theo's widow Jo van Gogh-Bonger faced a decision of huge consequence. What was she to do with her beloved husband's unique legacy? Jo decided to promote Vincent's work around the world, took great care with which works she sold and kept, and published the first edition of Vincent's letters to Theo. The international recognition and fame that Vincent and his work ultimately achieved is largely thanks to her efforts and dedication.



Caption: Engineer Vincent van Gogh (right) during construction of the Van Gogh Museum, 1970

A living museum

Engineer Vincent van Gogh, Jo and Theo's son, who grew up surrounded by his uncle's work, set himself a new aim: keeping the collection together and housing it in its entirety in a museum dedicated to the collection. Engineer Van Gogh said that he had first heard of the idea of a 'living museum' from the art critic Willem Steenhoff. Such a museum was special as it not only exhibited works from the permanent collection; there was also space for temporary exhibitions featuring works from the depot and from other collections. Inspired by this ideal, Vincent published an article in 1937 entitled 'Something about museums and their significance' in the Social Democratic Workers' Party monthly magazine. In his piece, he emphasised how a museum was not only responsible for preserving objects, but also needed to make the collection accessible. The museum would otherwise be nothing more than a 'warehouse that the public avoid, and where only a few students and experts come'.

'Why art and why a museum? Our aim is ultimately to make inwardly free people, and art can help teach people to live from the heart'.

Engineer Vincent van Gogh in his speech at the opening of the Van Gogh Museum on 2 June 1973

The Vincent van Gogh national museum

In 1962, Engineer Vincent van Gogh entered into an agreement with the State of the Netherlands and transferred the entire collection to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, which had been founded in 1960. In return, the State undertook to build the Van Gogh Museum, in order to ensure that the collection would remain accessible to everyone, forever. On 2 June 1973, the long-cherished aspiration of the then 83-year-old Engineer Vincent van Gogh became reality, with the celebratory opening of the Vincent van Gogh national museum. Following the privatisation of national museums in the Netherlands, the name changed to the Van Gogh Museum in 1994. The building was designed by architect Gerrit Thomas Rietveld. Up to a month before his death on 28 January 1978, Engineer Vincent van Gogh was closely and actively involved with every aspect of the legacy. He visited the museum almost every day, brimming with energy and passion.



Caption: Postcard showing the Vincent van Gogh national museum, 1973

The Kurokawa Wing

Around the millennium, the Rietveld Building was refurbished and a new Exhibition Wing was built, designed by the Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa. The redesigned Van Gogh Museum was festively opened by Queen Beatrix on 24 June 1999.