

# Gallery texts First floor

## permanent collection Van Gogh Museum

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On the wall: Van Gogh's Models

Painting: The Grape Harvest, 1880

Jules Bastien-Lepage

Van Gogh admired Bastien-Lepage's heartfelt and unpretentious approach to peasant life. In this painting, a young woman looks over her shoulder to say something to the persons in the left distance. Or, is she checking to see if the weather will stay clear enough to begin harvesting the grapes? The figure's averted, monumental pose leads our eye deeper into the landscape. Bastien-Lepage used a lively variety of brushstrokes and tints for the overgrowth and the sky.

## Rural Life

Van Gogh only found his true calling as an artist at the age of 27. Without knowing whether he had any real talent, he set to work with unbridled drive and great determination. He taught himself the rudiments of the craft by studying the art of others. Because he had worked in the art trade for a few years he had already seen a great many works of art and so had trained his eye.

Van Gogh admired primarily the work of French 19th-century peasant painters, such as Jean-François Millet and Jules Breton. They portrayed life in the countryside, paying homage to this so-called honest and humble existence in the face of encroaching industrialisation and urbanisation. With these models in mind, Van Gogh decided to focus on peasant life. He could thus transform his love of nature and the rural landscape into depictions of diggers, sowers, and peasant dwellings.

## Painter of Peasant Life

After having worked as an artist for several years in various places in the Netherlands (1880-1883), Van Gogh settled in Nuenen, the country village where his father was a pastor. From there he wrote

his brother Theo: 'I desire nothing other than to live deep in the country and to paint peasant life.' Van Gogh idealised peasant life, which according to him was 'so much better in many respects than the civilised world.' Peasants and farm workers were close to nature; their life was linked to the cycle of sowing and harvesting, of life and death. He found his ideal subjects in the fields around Nuenen, in the peasants and in their humble abodes. Van Gogh had already been preparing himself well for more than a year when he decided to make a large composition with peasant figures: *The Potato Eaters*. He wanted it to be his 'visiting card' as an artist.

On the wall: Vincent van Gogh 13 April 1885: 'When I say that I'm a peasant painter, that is really so; I feel at home there.'

#### Painting: View of the Sea at Scheveningen, 1882

Vincent Van Gogh

Van Gogh made this view of the sea in 1882, while living in The Hague. He went from the city to the seaside to paint a 'nasty little storm'. The wind made it difficult to work. The sand blew onto the canvas and mixed with the paint. Though this is one of Van Gogh's first oil paintings, it already features his powerful brushwork.

#### Painting: Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen, 1884-1885

Vincent van Gogh

There is a special story behind this painting. Van Gogh made the painting as a gift for his mother, who was confined to bed with a broken leg. He was careful in his choice of subject: his father was the pastor at this church.

#### Painting: Head of a Woman, 1885

Vincent van Gogh

In December 1884 Van Gogh devised a plan to make a series of heads 'of the common people.' There were to be around fifty of them. He wanted to show the peasants as a specific type of people that had been plodding away on the land for centuries. 'They remind one of the earth, sometimes appear to have been modelled out of it,' Van Gogh wrote. With thick brushstrokes he underscored their angular build and weary eyes. In doing this, expression was more important than a correct rendering.

#### Painting: Still Life with Bible, 1885

Vincent van Gogh

Van Gogh here placed the hefty Bible of his recently deceased father – who as a pastor led a strict Christian life – centrally in this composition. Next to it is his own well-thumbed copy of Emile Zola's *La joie de vivre*, presented as a 'bible' of modern life. The books symbolise Van Gogh and his father's differing world views, about which they regularly quarrelled. Van Gogh actively chose modernity, and moved to the big city, to Antwerp.

#### Painting: Tile Painters, 1883-1884

Anthon van Rappard

In Van Gogh's early years as an artist, Anthon van Rappard proved indispensable as a friend and colleague. Van Rappard began working on this group of tile painters around a table in 1883. Van Gogh followed his progress closely: 'As for your Tile painters — I was interested to hear that you're working on it again — I'm especially interested in what it's like and what it will become.' Just like his friend, Van Gogh hoped to paint a monumental group composition of ordinary people.

### Painting: Peasant Family at the Table, 1882

Jozef Israëls

The peasant meal was a popular subject and became known in the Netherlands chiefly through Jozef Israëls. Van Gogh admired the work of the older artist, and even called him one of 'the peasant painters of this century.' This picture may have inspired Van Gogh to make his own version, namely *The Potato Eaters*. He, however, took a highly personal approach: instead of an idealised image, he painted a gritty rendering, 'a REAL PEASANT PAINTING.'

### Painting: The Potato Eaters, 1885

Vincent van Gogh

A true peasant painting, according to Van Gogh, ought to smell of bacon, smoke, and steaming potatoes, and that is just what *The Potato Eaters* appears to do. Steam rises from the platter of potatoes, the simple meal shared by the entire family. Van Gogh saw the very essence – and primarily also the tragedy – of life in these poor peasants. He wanted to render them in all of their roughness, with coarse features and bony calloused hands. For his colour scheme he chose dark ashen tones that matched the dusty land. He prepared his final composition with many studies. Still, with no less than five figures the picture proved to be a 'formidable fight.' In the end, however, Van Gogh was very pleased with the final result. He hoped that his brother Theo, an art dealer in Paris, would exhibit the painting, but he found it much too sombre.

## New Perspectives

Keen to be in step with the latest artistic developments, in 1886 Van Gogh moved to Paris, which at the time was the centre of modern art. He realised that if he wanted to get ahead he needed more intensive contact with art and artists. He found ample inspiration in galleries, museums, and at exhibitions – an impression of which can be gained on the first wall. Face to face with the Paris avant-garde, Van Gogh became aware of just how old-fashioned his Dutch work must have appeared. He eagerly absorbed the many new impressions. He experimented with colour, brushwork, line and planes. And, he became friends with artists of his generation, including Paul Gauguin, Émile Bernard, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. They worked together and exhibited their art in the cafés of Montmartre, the artists' district. Van Gogh's time in Paris proved extremely fruitful, and thanks to his contacts with other artists he discovered possibilities for developing his own expressive style.

On the wall:

Vincent van Gogh September or October 1886: 'What is to be gained is progress and, what the deuce, that it is to be found here I dare ascertain.'

### Painting: Tulip Fields near The Hague, 1886

Claude Monet

Theo had been writing full of admiration about Monet's art as early as 1885. It was only in Paris that Vincent could finally see with his own eyes what his brother meant. He was astonished by the bright palette and loose brushwork of the Impressionists. This landscape – which Monet painted in the Netherlands – is a beautiful example of this. Theo sold this painting in 1886, and so it is possible that Van Gogh could have seen it.

### Painting: Portrait of a Young Woman, 1886

Armand Guillaumin

Van Gogh was impressed by this portrait, which he saw at the de Salon des Indépendants where young progressive artists presented their work. He wrote: 'When Guillaumin exhibited his portrait, public and artists laughed at it a great deal, and yet it's one of the rare things that would hold up alongside even the old Dutchmen Rembrandt and Hals.' According to Van Gogh, a portrait had to express the sitter's soul, which Guillaumin had succeeded in doing in this powerful likeness.

Bronze statue: 'She Who Was Once the Helmet-Maker's Beautiful Wife', design 1885-1887, cast 1935-1940

Auguste Rodin 1840 - 1917

The deterioration of the human body is key in this sculpture by Rodin. The old woman's twisted pose underscores her frail, gaunt frame. In this Rodin was openly disregarding the classical ideal of beauty. As a modern artist he wanted to show the scars of a harsh life in order to evoke emotion. Van Gogh, too, was after something 'keenly felt' in his figures.

Painting: The Old Officers, c. 1884

Jean-François Raffaëlli

Raffaëlli's work appealed to Van Gogh 'because it's *thought out* through and through, sensible and honest.' This artist often painted individuals on the fringes of society, the type of people Van Gogh also liked to portray. This picture presents old veterans, in a dignified manner. The sober palette accords with the imagery. The two walking sticks, crossed like swords, allude to their military exploits.

Painting: Portrait of Léonie Rose Charbuy-Davy, 1887

Vincent van Gogh

Léonie Rose Charbuy-Davy was the niece of the art dealer Pierre-Firmin Martin, a friend of Theo and Vincent. He portrayed Léonie emphatically as a mother, with a cradle in the background. The painting is built up entirely of dots and short strokes, and evidences Van Gogh's experiments with modern painting techniques.

Painting: Impasse des Deux Frères in Montmartre

Vincent van Gogh

With its mills and cafés the hill of Montmartre was a popular place for day trippers in Van Gogh's time. Here we see the street leading to the gardens around the mill on the hilltop. The little mill on wheels is probably a kind of advertising column. The bright colours – blue, red and green – echo the pleasant atmosphere of an early spring day.

Painting: Basket of Hyacinth Bulbs, 1887

Vincent van Gogh

The oval format of these two still lifes is due to their unusual support, namely the lid of a little Japanese box. Hyacinth bulbs and French novels would seem to be a curious combination, but both nature and literature were of paramount importance to Van Gogh. He loved all that grows and blooms and drew strength from the power of nature. The depicted naturalistic novels gave an unvarnished image of modern life. This honesty was essential for Van Gogh.

Painting: Red Cabbages and Onions, 1887

Vincent van Gogh

For Van Gogh this still life was primarily a study in colour contrasts. He set the yellow onions before a purple (now a discoloured blue) background. As complementary colours they reinforce one another.

The cloth underneath the vegetables is painted as an abstract, flat plane of colour that seems to tilt up. Van Gogh applied these modern pictorial devices in his own personal way.

Painting: Garden with Courting Couples: Square Saint-Pierre, 1887

Vincent van Gogh

Van Gogh himself called this sun-drenched park view 'the painting of the garden with lovers.' Amorous couples stroll beneath young chestnut trees or sit along the winding paths. Van Gogh took liberties with the Pointillist technique of coloured dots, setting airy streaks next to rapid daubs of paint. He succeeded in rendering the effect of a dazzling spring day, which in turn reinforces the sense of young love and intimacy that Van Gogh wished to express here. He too longed for a wife and a family, but he had 'the most impossible love stories.' He ultimately resigned himself to this situation; after all, he was devoted to his art.

Painting: The Mango Trees, Martinique, 1887

Paul Gauguin

Together with his brother, Van Gogh tried to stimulate the sale of paintings by his friend Gauguin. For instance, Theo bought this 'exotic' figure painting that Gauguin produced on the island of Martinique. Van Gogh wrote to Bernard: '... everything his hand makes has a sweet, heart-rending, astonishing character.' Charles Laval accompanied Gauguin to Martinique: the adjacent landscape clearly reveals his teacher's influence.

Painting: The Seine at Courbevoie, 1883-1884

Georges Seurat

According to Van Gogh, Seurat was the undisputed leader of the young avant-garde. This view of the Seine is an early study. Despite the sketchy execution, Seurat observed his subject closely: the loose blue strokes of the water stand out against the exposed ground of the panel and the dominant pink tones. Van Gogh, too, who visited Seurat in his atelier, made numerous small studies. In his Seine view he experimented with different kinds of strokes of paint in unmixed colours.

Painting: Het 'Ponton de la Félicité' bij Asnières (Opus nr. 143), 1886

Paul Signac

Signac and Van Gogh first met in Paris in early 1887. They both painted regularly along the banks of the River Seine, just outside of the city. This picture also originated there. We see some people on a dock waiting to take a cruise on the Seine in the boat 'la Félicité', and a gas factory looming up at the right. Signac was depicting modern themes, such as recreation and industrialisation. Moreover, he painted them in an equally modern style consisting of countless short dashes and dots.

Painting: Haymaking, Éragny, 1887

Camille Pissarro

Everything in this landscape is dynamic and colourful, from the haystacks and peasants to the summery sky. The hay in the foreground alone is built up of a multitude of vivid tints of red, orange, pink, purple, and green. This forms a handsome contrast with the field beyond. Pissarro portrayed the traditional subject of haymaking in a modern manner. This inspired Van Gogh, who only a short while before had wanted to become a 'peasant painter.'

Painting: In the Café: Agostina Segatori in Le Tambourin, 1887

Vincent van Gogh

A lonely woman sitting at a table in a café was a popular subject among young Paris painters, such as the adjacent work by Toulouse-Lautrec. The strikingly dressed woman is Agostina Segatori, owner of *Le Tambourin*, a café Van Gogh frequented. Before her is a glass of beer, and in her hand a lit cigarette. The two dishes reveal that she has already drunk one beer. Proper ladies did not drink or smoke in a café, this was associated with artistic types or prostitutes.

Painting: Young Woman at a Table ('Poudre de Riz'), 1887

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

This work by Toulouse-Lautrec hung in Theo's Paris apartment. He probably bought it on the advice of Vincent, who was befriended with the artist. The adjacent picture of the expressive Segatori in bright red and green forms an intriguing counterpart to this matt, pale portrait with 'the face powder and stylish outfit,' as Van Gogh described it. The title *Poudre de Riz* refers to the little red jar with rice powder, which women at the time used to give themselves a fashionably light complexion.

Boulevard de Clichy, 1887

Vincent van Gogh

Boulevard de Clichy is a wide street in the district of Montmartre, an artists' quarter, in Paris. Van Gogh painted the intersection that he frequently crossed, with at the far right the beginning of Rue Lepic, where he lived with his brother Theo. Parisian street scenes were popular among Impressionist painters. Van Gogh's working manner, too, with brightly coloured daubs of paint placed next to one another betrays the influence of this artistic movement.

View from Theo's Apartment, 1887

Vincent van Gogh

'A magnificent view across the city ... a piece of sky above it that is almost as big as when one stands on the dune.' This is how Theo described the sweeping view from their apartment. Here Vincent's attention seems to be focussed more on the tall apartment buildings. He painted the angular outlines, the windows, and steep roofs in a mass of daubs and streaks. Van Gogh began experimenting with this technique after becoming acquainted with the work of the Pointillists.

## Artistic Flourishing

Van Gogh's sojourn in Paris had greatly stimulated his development as a modern artist. However, he needed quiet and space to find his own direction. He therefore left the busy city behind and moved to Arles, to the countryside in the south of France. There, struck by the bright light and shimmering colours, he threw himself into painting orchards in bloom, scenes of harvesting, and other nature themes. He also dearly wanted to be a portraitist, for he could capture the essence of his time in characteristic heads and, according to Van Gogh, this is where the future lay.

He continually strove for 'passionate expressions, using as a means of expression and intensification of the character our science and modern taste for colour.' In this endeavour, in Arles he reached the peak of his powers. He developed his famous style with energetic brushwork and powerful colour contrasts. Even though his subjects are always simple, they convey just how deeply Van Gogh felt the essence of life, beauty, and tragedy.

On the wall: Vincent van Gogh 18 August 1888: 'Instead of trying to render exactly what I have before my eyes, I use colour in order to express myself forcefully.'

Painting: The Langlois Bridge, 1888

Vincent van Gogh

Van Gogh had been in Arles for more than a month when he painted this picture of a drawbridge. He laid out the simple composition with large planes of colour and dark outlines in an attempt to convey Provence's essential beauty. Van Gogh was utterly charmed by the southern French landscape there. He wrote to his friend Émile Bernard about 'the clearness of the atmosphere and the gay colour effects.'

Painting: Sunflowers, 1889

Vincent van Gogh

In August 1888 Van Gogh painted a bunch of sunflowers in a vase. In spite of – or perhaps thanks to – the simplicity of the subject and the style he created a true masterpiece. With nothing more than three tints of yellow he achieved a colour harmony that shimmers like a vision. In a letter, Theo praised 'the effect of a piece of fabric embroidered with satin and gold.' Van Gogh, too, realised that he had made a remarkable picture and described just how deep he had had to dig in order to achieve it. He had used all of his energy and concentration 'to sufficiently catch fire.' Proud of the result, he proclaimed himself the painter of sunflowers. He would ultimately paint five versions, every single one an icon of modern art.

Painting: The Harvest, 1888

Vincent van Gogh

The scorched air of the harvesting time is almost tangible in this panoramic rendering of the flat landscape around Arles. The combination of 'old gold' and 'azure blue' had to convey the essence of the landscape and the overwhelming beauty of nature. Van Gogh was very satisfied with the result. In his opinion, it 'absolutely surpassed' all of his other works from this period.

Painting: The Bedroom, 1888

Vincent van Gogh

Van Gogh became increasingly skilled in using colour and style to express emotions. For instance, the bright tones of his bedroom had to convey 'utter repose' in a period during which he felt anything but calm due to all of his hard work. He hoped that his paintings would afford comfort not only to himself, but others as well. Van Gogh was convinced that this now famous painting had that: 'When I saw my canvases again after my illness, what seemed to me the best was the bedroom.'

Painting: The Zouave, 1888

Vincent van Gogh

'I have a model at last,' Van Gogh sighed in June 1888 when he was allowed to draw and paint a soldier. He wanted nothing more than to become a great figure painter, but people rarely wanted to sit for him. In portraying this rugged and exotic type, Van Gogh was interested primarily in the expressiveness of the head. Accordingly, he stressed the Zouave's 'eye of a tiger' and 'neck of a bull' and used hard, contrasting colours.

Painting: Gauguin's Chair, 1888

Vincent van Gogh

Van Gogh went to great lengths to find elegant furnishings for his guest in the Yellow House, Paul Gauguin. This unusual painting of Gauguin's chair can be understood as a portrait of the artist. As a pendant to this work, with its nocturnal atmosphere and mysterious red and green colour contrast,

Van Gogh painted his own rustic chair in a bright yellow and blue. The two works symbolise the very different characters of the two artists, who soon thereafter would quarrel fiercely and part ways.

## Dreaming of Japan

Van Gogh drew much inspiration from the hundreds of Japanese woodblock prints that he collected together with his brother Theo. He shared his enthusiasm for these colourful prints with most of the French modern artists of his day. They admired how the Japanese translated the world around them into decorative images by means of planes of colour, patterns, cropping, and outlines. Van Gogh began applying these features and was soon making Japonist works.

Yet Japan meant much more to him. Van Gogh identified with the image of the Japanese artist as a monk devoted entirely to his art and leading an ascetic life in nature. This is also what Van Gogh was seeking in Provence, a region in the south of France that he compared with Japan.

### Painting: Flowering Plum Orchard (after Hiroshige), 1887

Vincent van Gogh

Van Gogh copied this depiction of a plum orchard in bloom at sunset from a woodcut in his collection. He did, however, take some liberties in his use of colour. He replaced the black and grey of the monumental tree trunk in the foreground with red and blue tints. Van Gogh also introduced the ornamental orange borders with Japanese characters solely to create a decorative and exotic effect.

### Painting: Fishing Boats on the Beach at Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, 1888

Vincent van Gogh

Van Gogh wrote that in Arles he looked 'with a Japanese eye.' This is evident in this painting, which he made during an outing to the seaside town Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. He set solid areas of colour next to one another, such as red, yellow, green, and blue in the little boats. He also outlined the forms with contours and used the coastline to create a distinct diagonal in the composition. These stylistic features all appear in Japanese graphic art, which Van Gogh used to simplify and introduce more colour into his work.