

# **Gallery texts permanent collection Van Gogh Museum**

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# Ground Floor

## Timeline

### **1853: 30 March: born in Zundert, the Netherlands**

Photo: Theodorus van Gogh, pastor. Anna van Gogh-Carbentus

Photo: Vincent van Gogh's house of birth in Zundert

### **1869-1876: The Hague, London and Paris.**

employed at branches of the art dealer Goupil & Co.

Photo: Art dealer Goupil & Co., The Hague

Photo: Vincent's brother Theo van Gogh, 1882

Photo: Vincent's earliest known letter to Theo, 29 September 1872

Photo: Vincent van Gogh at the age of 19

### **1878-1880: Mining district the Borinage, Belgium**

works as a lay preacher among the miners

**1880: Vincent decides to become an artist at the age of 27,**  
practices through drawing

### **1881: Etten**

Lives with his parents

Mainly draws

Photo: Letter sketches in a letter to Theo

### **1881: The Hague, the Netherlands**

Takes drawing and painting lessons from Anton Mauve

### **1883-1885: Nuenen, the Netherlands**

temporarily living with his parents again

paints The Potato Eaters

Photo: Vincent's parental home in Nuenen

Photo: Sketch of The Potato Eaters in a letter to Theo, 1885

### **1885: Antwerp, Belgium**

studies for a brief period at the art academy

Photo: Standing female nude seen in profile, January-February 1886

### **1886-1888: Paris, France**

lives with his brother Theo

becomes acquainted with (neo)-Impressionist painting

befriends Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Emile Bernard, Paul Gauguin

Photo: Letter to Theo, 1887

Photo: Emile Bernard and Van Gogh (seen from behind) in Asnières, n.d.

### **1888: Arles, southern France**

paints the Sunflowers

lives briefly with Paul Gauguin

cuts off a part of his ear

Photo: The yellow house in Arles, where Van Gogh lived

Photo: Later sketches of the Sunflowers, 1890

### **1889 : Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, southern France**

admits himself to the local mental asylum

Photo: Poster of the asylum in St.-Rémy-de-Provence

Photo: Letter sketch of three Cicadas, 1889

### **1890: Auvers-sur-Oise, France**

produces an average of one painting per day

shoots himself in the chest

and dies two days later on 29 July

Photo: Funeral Card

Photo: The graves of Vincent and Theo van Gogh

## **Self-Portraits**

### **On the wall**

Vincent van Gogh 5 and 6 September 1889: 'People say that it's difficult to know oneself – but it's not easy to paint oneself either.'

## **Face to Face with Van Gogh**

Vincent van Gogh is one of the most famous artists of all time. His expressive, colourful work and his eventful life move and inspire people throughout the world. The hundreds of paintings and drawings that Van Gogh produced in a mere decade (1880-1890) made an enormous impact. His art influenced generations of artists, and is still very much alive in our visual culture. With a collection of around 200 paintings, more than 500 drawings, and almost all of his letters, the Van Gogh Museum offers the largest and most representative overview of Van Gogh's life and work.

A visit to this museum is like taking a journey with Van Gogh. We follow in the footsteps of an artist who was intent on improving himself and deeply engaged in the artistic developments of his day. He was an artist who above all strove to create a new kind of art, one in which he could give expression to our most profound existential emotions in a direct and universally comprehensible manner.

## **Self-Portraits**

Green eyes, a red beard, a furrowed brow, a blue work smock. Sometimes he wears a hat, and at others he smokes his favourite pipe. Looking at Van Gogh's self-portraits we stand face to face with the artist. Recognisable as Vincent, yet different each time. Van Gogh's self-portraits were not meant to show what he was like, but were exercises in colour, brushwork, and facial expression. All except for one, that is: in *Self-Portrait as a Painter* he presents himself as an assured artist

behind his easel. Later he wrote 'It's only in front of the easel while painting that I feel a little of life.'

**Painting: Selfportrait with Pipe, 1886**

**Painting: Selfportrait as Painter, 1886**

**Painting: Selfportrait as Painter, 1887-1888**

**Painting: Selfportait, 1887**

**Showcase 1: Van Goghs palet and paint tubes, 1890**

**Showcase 1 frontside: Selfportrait with Straw Hat, 1887**

**Showcase 2 backside: Still Life with Bottles and Earthenware, 1884-1885**

**Showcase 3 frontside: Selfportrait, 1887**

**Showcase 3 backside: Head of a Woman, 1885**

**Showcase 4 frontside: Selfportrait with Straw Hat and Pipe, 1887**

**Showcase 4 backside: Head of a Man, 1885**

On the wall, left to right:

**Painting: Selfportrait, 1886**

**Painting: Selfportrait, 1887**

**Painting: Selfportrait with Glas, 1887**

**Painting: Selfportrait, 1887**

**Painting: Selfportrait with Straw Hat, 1887**



# First floor

## Van Gogh's examples

### **Bronze statue: Big Farmer**

Jules Dalou (1838-1902) design c. 1898-1899, cast molding after 1902

### **Marble statue: French Peasant Woman**

Jules Dalou (1873-1902)

### **Painting: Haying, 1887**

Léon-Augustin Lhermitte (1844-1925)

### **Painting: The Meal, undated**

Auguste Boulevard (1825-1897)

### **Painting: Old Drents Woman, 1882-1883**

Anton van Rappard (1858-1892)

### **Painting: The Grape Harvest, 1880**

Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848 - 1884)

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.

### **Painting: Young Peasant Girl with a Hoe, 1882**

Jules Breton (1827 - 1906)

### **Painting: Kitchen Boy, no date**

Théodule Ribot (1823 - 1891)

### **Painting: Woman Carding Wool, 1856**

Jean-François Millet 1814 - 1875

### **Painting: Girl Carrying Water, c. 1855-1865**

Jean-François Millet 1814 - 1875

## 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.

### **Painting: Two Women in the Peat, 1883**

### **Painting: Potato Harvester, 1885**

## **1883-1885: 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**

In Nuenen in the province of Noord-Brabant, Van Gogh threw himself into drawing and painting weavers. He knew very few works of this subject and therefore believed that the drawings would sell well. He probably drew studies in pencil in the weaving mill, which he subsequently worked up in pen and ink back in his studio. He did make some minor mistakes; in reality fabric could not have been woven on the loom in this drawing.

### **Painting: Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen**

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: The Vicarage at Nuenen, 1885**

When Van Gogh was making his preparatory studies for *The Potato Eaters* he was living temporarily with his parents. This is their house in Nuenen, where Van Gogh's

father was a pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church. His well-intentioned, but in the eyes of his son meddlesome comments only aggravated the already tense atmosphere. According to Van Gogh, at home the difference between 'people who keep up a position' and himself, 'a peasant painter,' was too great.

### **Painting: The Cottage, 1885**

Van Gogh loved the humble peasant dwellings and their inhabitants. He once called the cottages 'human nests' because, like a bird's nest, they made one feel safe and secure. And, just like a nest, this little house is made of all kinds of material: straw and moss on the roof, plaster on the sidewall, and bricks below the windows. From the two front doors it is clear that not one, but two families were living under a single roof. Van Gogh deliberately set the scene at dusk, the time when the peasants have returned home after a hard day's work.

### **Painting: Poplar Avenue in the Fall, 1884**

### **Painting: The old Church Tower in Nuenen ('The Farm Graveyard'), 1885**

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

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

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

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: Head of a Woman, 1884-1885**

Opposite side of wall:

### **Painting: Woodcutters, 1853-1888**

Anton Mauve (1838 - 1888)

Van Gogh admired Mauve. According to him, Mauve was able to imbue realistic subjects with 'significance' or 'character'. In this painting Mauve emphasised the harmony of the working men with their surroundings; the woodcutters are fully absorbed into the landscape. Van Gogh later instilled this conception of nature in his own work. In his early days as an artist, Van Gogh frequently visited Mauve (his cousin by marriage) in his atelier, who taught him the principles of painting and drawing.

### **Painting: The Sunken Path, 1835-1840**

Jules Dupré (1811-1889)

Van Gogh admired the work of the landscape artists who sketched and painted in the woods near the French village of Barbizon. He had become familiar with their work through reproductions, and in Dutch collections. For Van Gogh, Jules Dupré's

use of colour was 'something of a magnificent symphony,' which he found 'surprisingly CALCULATED and yet simple and infinitely deep, like nature itself.' Initially, Van Gogh favoured dark colours, seeking a balance between the various tonalities.

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

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: The Potato Eaters, 1885**

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.

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

Jozef Israëls (1824-1911)

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: Tile Painters, 1883-1884**

Anthon van Rappard (1858-1892)

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.

## **1886-1887: 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: Vase with Chinese Asters and Gladioli, 1886**

### **Painting: Route de Versailles, Rocquencourt, 1871**

Camille Pissarro (1830-1903)

### **Painting: View of Amsterdam, 1874**

Claude Monet (1840-1926)

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

Claude Monet (1840-1926)

Theo had al sinds 1885 vol bewondering geschreven over de schilderkunst van Monet. Pas in Parijs kon Vincent met eigen ogen zien wat zijn broer bedoelde. Hij werd overdonderd door het heldere kleurgebruik en de losse penseelstreken van de impressionisten. Dit landschap – dat Monet in Nederland maakte – is hiervan een prachtig voorbeeld. Theo verhandelde het Painting in 1886, dus het is goed mogelijk dat Van Gogh het werk gezien heeft.

Painting: Flowers from Normandië, 1887

Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904)

### **Painting: Portrait of a young woman, 1886**

Armand Guillaumin (1841-1927)

Van Gogh was onder de indruk van dit portret op de Salon des Indépendants, waar jonge, vooruitstrevende kunstenaars hun werk presenteerden. Hij schreef: 'Toen Guillaumin zijn portret exposeerde, hebben publiek en kunstenaars er hartelijk om gelachen en toch is het een van de zeer weinige dingen die het zouden houden naast de oude Hollanders Rembrandt en Hals.' Volgens Van Gogh moest een portret de ziel uitdrukken, en was Guillaumin met dit krachtige Painting daarin geslaagd.

### **Painting: The Jetty of Boulogne-sur-Mer, 1868**

Edouard Manet (1832-1883)

This seascape is anything but traditional: two quays transect the composition, and largely conceal the foremost sailing boat. When Van Gogh arrived in Paris, Manet was considered the modern artist *par excellence*. Van Gogh, too, called Manet's work 'very original,' although he would not count him 'among the very best of this century.' Nonetheless, modern elements, such as the bold division of the picture plane and marked cropping, also recur in Van Gogh's work.

**Statue: 'She Who Was Once the Helmet-Maker's Beautiful Wife'**

Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), design 1885-1887, cast 1935-1940

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: View seen through a Balcony, 1880**

Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894)

**Painting: The Old Officers, c. 1884**

Jean-François Raffaëlli (1850-1924)

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, cast aside by society after years of loyal service, in a dignified manner. The sober palette accords with the imagery. The two walking sticks, crossed like swords, allude to their exploits.

**Painting: Plate of Peaches, 1882**

Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894)

**Painting: Head of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette, 1886**

**Painting: Café Table with Absint, 1887**

**Painting: Montmartre: behind Moulin de la Galette, 1887**

**Painting: Impasse des Deux Freres, 1887**

**Painting: Three Novels, 1887**

**Painting: Basket of Hyacinth Bulbs, 1887**

The oval format of these two still lifes is due to their unusual support, namely the lid of a 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: Flowerpot with Garlic Chives, 1887**

### **Painting: Dish with Citrus Fruit, 1887**

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

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

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 (1864-1901)

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.

### **Painting: Red Cabbages and Onions, 1887**

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: Boulevard de Clichy, 1887**

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.

### **Painting: View from Theo's Apartment, 1887**

‘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 his 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.

#### **Painting: Trees and Undergrowth, 1887**

## **Artist Friends**

#### **Painting: The Mango Trees, Martinique, 1887**

Paul Gauguin (1848 - 1903)

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: ‘they’re high poetry, his negresses – and 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: Haymaking , Éragny, 1887**

Camille Pissarro (1831-1903)

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: Bank of the Seine, 1887**

#### **Painting: The Seine at Courbevoie, 1883-1884**

Georges Seurat (1859-1891)

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: The ‘Ponton de la Félicité’ at Asnières (Opus no. 143), 1886**

Paul Signac (1863-1935)

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: The Seine, Morning (Saint-Ouen), 1886**

Charles Angrand (1854-1926)

Van Gogh and Angrand met in avant-garde circles in Paris. Van Gogh most likely saw this striking view of the Seine, in which the water dominates the composition, at the Salon des Indépendants in 1886. Angrand used a pale pink ground, which he deliberately allowed to shine through the rhythmical streaks of paint in the water and the sky. This subtle contrast nicely foregrounds the blue tones, which reinforce the liveliness of the movement of the water.

### **Painting: Railway Junction near Bois-Colombes, 1885-1886**

Paul Signac (1863-1935)

## **1888-1889: 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: Sunflowers, 1889**

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 Pink Orchard, 1888**

### **Painting: The Pink Peach Tree, 1888**

### **Painting: The White Orchard, 1888**

It was still winter when Van Gogh arrived in Arles, but spring dawned just a few weeks later. Full of enthusiasm he embarked on a series of studies of flowering fruit trees. When he saw the works he was pleased with together, the idea of combining them as decorative triptychs was born. Van Gogh was familiar with triptychs, in which three works form a single harmonious entity, from Japanese graphic art.

### **Painting: Small Pear Tree in Blossom, 1888**

### **Painting: The Harvest, 1888**

The aridity and scorching heat of the harvesting time are almost palpable in this panoramic rendering of the flat landscape around Arles. Van Gogh combined the azure blue of the sky with yellow and green tones for the land to convey the atmosphere of a summer's day in Provence. He also wanted to present rural life in this painting. Out in the fields peasants work the land in the summer heat. Van Gogh was delighted with the result. In his opinion it far surpassed the rest of his work from this period.

### **Painting: The Bedroom, 1888**

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: Old Arlésienne, 1888**

### **Painting: The Zouave, 1888**

'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: Portrait of Camille Roulin, 1888**

### **Gauguin's Chair, 1888**

Van Gogh went to great lengths to find elegant furnishings for Paul Gauguin, his guest in the Yellow House. 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.

[Engraving, changing every three months]

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

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: Bridge in the Rain, 1887**

### **Painting: Courtesan (after Eisen), 1887**

### **Painting: The Langlois Bridge, 1888**

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

# Second floor

## Letters

### Family Treasures

In exchange for giving Vincent a monthly allowance, Theo became the owner of the drawings and paintings that his brother sent him. Theo was deeply distressed after Vincent's death in July 1890. More than anything else he wanted to make his brother's art known, but passed away himself a mere six months later. His widow, 28-year-old Jo van Gogh-Bonger, was left behind with their infant son Vincent Willem and a substantial art collection. She considered it her task to champion Van Gogh's art, which she did by selling his work astutely and lending it out to exhibitions. She also published a selection of Vincent's letters to Theo. Without her dedication Van Gogh would never have reaped the fame he did.

After Jo's death in 1925 Vincent Willem was charged with caring for his uncle's works. He created the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, and devoted himself to realising the Van Gogh Museum, where the family collection found a permanent home in 1973.

#### Van Gogh Family timeline

1891

Death of Theo van Gogh. Jo is left with their almost one-year-old son, Vincent Willem.

1905

After previous successful (sales) exhibitions, Jo organises a large Van Gogh show in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. There are 472 works on display. Many exhibitions follow.

1914

Publication of Letters to his Brother in three volumes

1925

Death of Jo van Gogh-Bonger

1931

Vincent Willem van Gogh, nicknamed 'the engineer', gives a substantial number of works by Van Gogh on long-term loan to the Stedelijk Museum. He also organises exhibitions.

1960

Vincent Willem van Gogh establishes the Vincent van Gogh Foundation to keep the collection together.

1969

Construction of the Van Gogh Museum after a design by Gerrit Rietveld begins.

1973

The Van Gogh Museum opens

## A Life in Letters

Vincent van Gogh was a gifted writer. In his time and milieu, letter writing was a very common way of keeping in touch from afar; people corresponded often and extensively.

We know of 820 letters by Van Gogh, most of them addressed to his brother Theo, his greatest confidant. In them Van Gogh emerges as an intelligent, impassioned man, with a great thirst for art and literature. Sometimes his enthusiasm got the better of him, such as in his religious period (1876-1879). He could hold forth with great zeal, and in so doing lost sight of reality. We also read about his vision of life and death, of love, and the human condition. Hence, Van Gogh's letters are the most important source for understanding him as a person and an artist.

### Photo: Interior of Jo van Gogh-Bonger's house in Amsterdam

#### Theo van Gogh's Cabinet, 1790-1800

Hendrik Vrijdag (1763-1832)

This is the cabinet in which Theo van Gogh kept all of the letters that he received from Vincent. Theo's wife Jo described how, after they married in 1889, she found all of the letters in a desk drawer: 'week after week I saw the presently so familiar yellow envelopes with the characteristic handwriting enlarge the drawer's contents.' The letters that were saved were later stored in this cabinet. Most of them are now kept in the Van Gogh Museum.

## Family

#### Theodorus van Gogh, father

Now I must tell you that I had a very unexpected and very pleasing visit from Pa, who came to my house and to the studio.

#### Anna van Gogh-Carbentus, mother

Dear Mother, I didn't get round to writing because I was painting from morning till night.

#### Theo van Gogh, brother

We are brothers, are we not?, and friends — and we may say candidly what we think

#### Jo van Gogh-Bonger, sister-in-law

Jo's letter was really like a gospel for me, a deliverance from anguish which I was caused by the rather difficult hours for us all.

#### Willemien, sister

No, my dear little sister, learn to dance or fall in love, rather, much rather commit any number of follies than study in Holland.

**Anna van Gogh, sister**

Just had a good letter from Anna. Her letters are quite rare, so I'm sending you this one to read.

**Cor van Gogh, brother**

with a handshake for Cor I wish him the best of good luck in his enterprise.

**Lies van Gogh, sister**

Wil asked to be sent a painting, and I'd very much like to give one to Lies as well on the same occasion, who doesn't have any yet as far as I know.

**Letter to Theo, Arles, c. 20-05-1888****Letter to Willemien, Saint-Rémy, 20-01-1890****Letter to his parents, Nieuw-Amsterdam, c. 26-10-1883****Letter to Vincent, Paris, 30-06 & 01-07-1890****Small wall: *Monsieur van Gogh, Paris*  
fast letters**

In Vincent's day letters were delivered two or even three times a day. Moreover, the postal services were very fast. When Vincent, in The Hague, received a letter from his brother Theo, in Paris, his response was sometimes already delivered the very next day!

**writing desk**

This was Vincent's writing desk before he became an artist. Naturally, e-mail and cell phones did not yet exist. That is why people who did not live near one another communicated through letters.

**ink**

In the past, letters were written with a dip pen and ink, which came in little bottles or pots. Blotting paper was used to absorb any excess ink. This came in handy in preventing stains when folding up the letter.

**no money**

Theo sent his brother a monthly allowance. This did not always meet all of Vincent's needs, however. 'I just found a stamp in my pocket, otherwise I would not even have been able to send this letter,' he once wrote. What he meant was that he was entirely out of money.

# Vincent and Theo

Vincent van Gogh grew up in a pastor's family with two brothers and three sisters. His parents instilled their children with bourgeois norms and values: working hard, amounting to something in society, and honouring the family name. That their eldest son often behaved inappropriately made their relationship extremely trying. Vincent had a close bond with his brother Theo. As a friend, a sounding board, and a financier he was the single most important person in Vincent's life. Theo was an art dealer in Paris and earned a good living. He admired Vincent's passion and believed in his art, and supported him with a monthly allowance for ten years. Vincent often swept Theo along in his plans to promote 'the art of the future.' With this in mind, the brothers assembled a collection so that they could someday start their own art trade. They received various works from their artist friends as gifts, or in exchange for Vincent's own work.

**Painting: Closed eyes, 1889**

Odilon Redon (1840 - 1916)

**Painting: Tulip field, before 1890**

Christian Mourier-Petersen (1858-1945)

**Painting: Woman in Vineyard, possibly 1882**

Victor Vignon (1847 - 1909)

**Painting: Portrait of a Girl with a Bunch of Flowers, 1882**

Hans Olaf Heyerdahl (1857 - 1913)

**Painting: The Mine Crachet-Picquery in Frameries, 1888-1890**

Borinage

**Painting: Mill on Montmartre, 1887-1888**

Arnold Koning

**Painting: Landscape on Martinique, 1887**

Charles Laval (1861 - 1894)

**Painting: On the Bank of the River, Martinique, 1887**

Paul Gauguin (1848 - 1903)

**Painting: Portrait of a man, 1888**

Paul Gauguin (1848 - 1903)

**Painting: Vase with flowers, c.1875**

Adolphe Monticelli (1824-1886)

Van Gogh discovered Monticelli's paintings at an art gallery in Paris. His brother Theo bought five of them, including this floral still life, for their collection. Monticelli remained a model for Van Gogh throughout his life on account of his 'sculptural' handling of the paint and his use of colour. According to him, Monticelli succeeded

in combining 'on a single panel the whole range of his richest and most perfectly balanced tones.'

### **Reproduction of business card of Theo van Gogh**

### **Reproduction of account book of Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger, 1889-1925**

Theo van Gogh recorded all of his expenses in this account book. On a separate page he noted the costs for Vincent's stay in the asylum in Saint-Rémy (1889-1890). Every month Theo sent 100 francs to Dr Peyron, the attending physician. Indirectly it appears that Vincent was still working hard: Theo spent substantial amounts of money at Tanguy, and at Tasset & Lhote, dealers in art supplies. He sent the paint and canvasses that he ordered there to Vincent.



# Friends

## Artistic Exchange

During his stay in Arles in the south of France, Van Gogh kept in touch with his artist friends through letters. A particularly lively correspondence sprang up with Émile Bernard and Paul Gauguin, who lived in Pont-Aven and Le Pouldu on the Breton coast. Van Gogh discussed modern art with them from a distance. They exchanged sketches of their work and sometimes also paintings.

Under Gauguin's leadership, a group of artists, including Meijer de Haan and Paul Sérusier, gathered in Pont-Aven. They tried to evoke a certain mood or experience in their work by means of simple forms and planes of colour. Van Gogh dreamt of also establishing an artists' community in Arles. Gauguin finally joined him in October 1888. Van Gogh had high hopes for this visit, but their artistic vision turned out to differ significantly. Gauguin worked from the imagination, while Van Gogh held fast to reality.

### **Painting: The Yellow House ('The Street'), 1888**

Excited by the intensity of the colours, Van Gogh decided to capture his dwelling on canvas. The Yellow House with the green shutters glows 'under a sulphur sun' against a 'pure cobalt sky.' First he set up his studio on the ground floor; sometime later he moved in above it. Van Gogh wanted to turn it into an artists' house, where he could live and work together with others. In the end only Paul Gauguin came; he stayed for two months.

### **Painting: Breton Girl Spinning, 1889**

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)

In the winter of 1889 Gauguin wrote Van Gogh that he was decorating the dining room of the inn in Le Pouldu. Together with the artist Meijer de Haan, he painted the walls, doors, and even a window with Breton country motifs and self-portraits. Breton Girl Spinning, painted on plaster, was one of these wall paintings. Floating above the shepherdess is an angel, probably as a symbol of the profound religious sensibility among the local population.

### **Painting: Landscape at Pont-Aven, 1889**

Émile Bernard (1868 - 1941)

### **Painting: Still Life with a Profile of Mimi, 1889**

Meijer de Haan (1852-1895)

Meijer de Haan's style changed radically under Gauguin's influence. The artists worked together in the seaside town of Le Pouldu in 1889-1890. They stayed at Marie Henry's inn. Her young daughter Mimi is portrayed in this painting. The strongly cropped figure, the pronounced colours, and the daring composition — with the table tipping forward — are typical of the experimental work of the group of artists around Gauguin, also called the Pont-Aven School.

### **Painting: The Apple Harvest, c.1891**

Paul Sérusier (1864 - 1927)

Sérusier was fascinated by the humble peasant life of the inhabitants of Brittany and their age-old Catholic traditions. Based on a typical Catholic altarpiece, the triptych shape of this painting is a direct reference to this. Sérusier chose a symbolic rendering of fertility as the subject of his painting. The young mother with a baby in the left panel and the picking and gathering of the apples in the other panels all refer to this theme.

**Painting: Farm in Brittany, c. 1890**

Paul Sérusier (1864 - 1927)

Like other artists of the Pont-Aven School, Sérusier wanted to capture Brittany's pastoral simplicity. The undulating field of grass with a farmyard, and the clouds in the sky have been reduced to basics, creating the impression of a colourful patchwork quilt. To achieve this effect Sérusier used brightly coloured, flat forms demarcated by wavy lines. He was not interested in faithfully depicting the landscape, but rather in conveying its timelessness. Together with Paul Gauguin, he was the leading member of the Pont-Aven artists' colony.

**Painting: Vase with Flowers and Cup, 1887-1888**

Émile Bernard (1868 - 1941)

**Painting: Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers, 1888**

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)

While staying with Van Gogh in Arles, Gauguin stimulated his friend to work from his imagination rather than from reality. This is what he himself did. Gauguin has here portrayed Van Gogh painting sunflowers. This was not based on reality since Van Gogh did not paint any sunflowers in this period. He thought his portrait was a fairly good resemblance, as he wrote: 'My face has lit up a lot since, but it was indeed me, extremely tired and charged with electricity as I was then.'

**Painting: Selfportrait with portrait of Bernard ('Les misérables'), 1888**

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)

While Van Gogh resided in Arles, Gauguin and Bernard worked together in Brittany. Van Gogh asked them to make portraits of one another in exchange for a work by him, but instead they each sent him a self-portrait. In the background Gauguin and Bernard did, however, include a likeness of the other. Van Gogh found Bernard's work 'as stylish as a real, real Manet' and Gauguin's 'more studied, taken further.' Laval also took part in the exchange. He sent Van Gogh a self-portrait, which Vincent described as 'very self-assured, very distinguished.'

**Painting: Selfportrait of Gauguin, 1888**

Émile Bernard (1868 - 1941)

**Painting: Selfportrait, 1888**

Charles Laval (1861 - 1894)

# Illness and ear

In October 1888, the painter Paul Gauguin came to visit Van Gogh in the Yellow House in Arles. Their personalities and ideas soon clashed. 'Vincent and I absolutely cannot live side by side without turmoil', Gauguin wrote. On the evening of 23 December, Gauguin left the house after a quarrel. He later claimed that Van Gogh had pursued him and threatened him with a razor. After returning home, in a state of total confusion, Van Gogh cut off a piece of his left ear.

This crisis was the first in a series of mental breakdowns, often accompanied by hallucinations and severe anxiety. We do not know exactly what illness Van Gogh had. His doctor thought that he suffered from a form of epilepsy with acute mania. He himself wrote of his 'mental or nervous fever or madness'. At first, he hoped to recover, but after a few months there, he voluntarily admitted himself to an institution for the mentally ill in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Despite moments of despair, he remained confident in the healing power of painting.

## 1888 Arles

23.10

Gauguin joins Van Gogh in the Yellow House. Early December, Gauguin considers leaving because of the growing tension between them.

23.12

Van Gogh and Gauguin quarrel in the evening. Afterwards, Gauguin leaves and checks into a hotel. Van Gogh cuts off his left ear and brings it to a prostitute, folded up in a piece of paper. The police are called in.

24.12

In the early morning hours, Van Gogh is taken to the hospital in Arles. Gauguin sends a telegram to Vincent's brother Theo in Paris.

25.12

In the morning, Theo arrives and visits Vincent, who is physically weak and mentally confused. Theo and Gauguin travel back to Paris together that evening.

## 1889

07.01

Van Gogh returns to the Yellow House. Around 4 February, he has another nervous breakdown and is admitted to hospital again (until 18 February).

26.02

Van Gogh is readmitted to hospital after another breakdown. His neighbours draw up a petition to have him expelled from his home, because he wanders about in a state of confusion.

## Saint-Rémy

08.05

Van Gogh admits himself voluntarily to Saint-Paul de Mausole institution for the mentally ill in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. New crises follow in July, December, January, and February. His treatment consists of cold water baths twice a week.

### **1890 Auvers-sur-Oise**

16.05

Van Gogh leaves the psychiatric hospital. He goes to Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris, where he stays at the inn Auberge Ravoux. Dr. Gachet becomes his physician. He advises Van Gogh to paint above all else.

# Van Gogh at work

In his letters Van Gogh often gave extensive reports on his working methods, and so we are well informed about the practical side of his craftsmanship: from the way he experimented with colour and chose his materials to his use of all sorts of tools. From his letters and technical investigation it also emerges that Van Gogh worked in a highly systematic and well-considered manner: every drawing and every painting was a conscious attempt to make headway. This is contrary to the prevalent image of Van Gogh as an impulsive and purely emotional artist.

## Colour Effects

Colour preoccupied Van Gogh throughout his entire career. Already as a beginning artist he read books on colour theory and its application by the painter Eugène Delacroix. It was only when Van Gogh first saw paintings by Delacroix, and other artists, for himself in Paris, that he finally understood how to achieve the right colour effects himself. He was after strong contrasts, which he created by combining complementary colours. This not only helped Van Gogh to achieve a visually powerful result, it also lent his work an emotional charge. He believed that, 'Colour expresses something in itself.'

## Colour wheel from *Charles Blanc's Grammaire des Arts du Dessin*, Paris 1870

In the book by Charles Blanc, Van Gogh read about the theory of complementary colours. In the colour wheel are the primary colours – red, yellow, and blue – with their secondary colours. To create a complementary contrast, a primary colour is set opposite its secondary colour (a mixture of the other two primary colours): for instance, red opposite green, and blue opposite orange. When placed side by side, these colours reinforce each other.

## Painting: Basket of apples, 1885

In the Netherlands Van Gogh already experimented with colour contrasts. He painted still lifes in which he tried out different combinations based on the colour theory. However, instead of placing them next to one another, Van Gogh mixed the complementary colours into shades of brownish-grey, as in this still life. He did paint contrasting colour accents over the dry paint layer. But he did not yet achieve any strong and bright colour effects.

## Painting: Apollo Slays Python, 1850

Eugène Delacroix (1798 - 1863)

This is a preliminary study by Eugène Delacroix for his ceiling painting in the Louvre. Van Gogh was deeply impressed by the use of colour in that painting. The bright yellow and orange in the sky around Apollo contrast with the dark purple in which Python – and the smoke the monster puffs out – are painted. These complementary colours reinforce each other's power and significance.

## Painting: Apples, 1887

Virtually all of the shades of blue and green in Van Gogh's palette are included in the background of this still life. Over them he applied contrasting yellow, orange, red, and pink strokes of paint. He used the same colour combinations for the apples

in the foreground, but then in reverse: first the warm tones and then the green and blue accents. This is how he introduced unity in the picture.

### **Painting: Grapes, 1887**

Still lifes such as Apples, and this one of Grapes were ideally suited to experimenting with colour. In this still life Van Gogh was interested primarily in the contrast between the yellow and purple tones of the bunches of grapes. These complementary colours reinforce each other's intensity. Van Gogh's colour experiments were inspired by Eugène Delacroix, who used the same colour combination in his ceiling painting in the Louvre.

### **Van Goghs box of red lacquer with balls of wool, 19<sup>th</sup> century**

#### **Perspective Frame**

Van Gogh often went to work carefully, making preparatory studies and underdrawings. To assist him with the correct rendering of depth and proportions, which he found difficult, he long relied on a perspective frame. This device consisted of a wooden frame with a grid of horizontal, vertical and/or diagonal threads that was traced onto the blank canvas or paper. Grid lines are still visible to the naked eye in some of his paintings and drawings. Van Gogh only began to work more freely in Arles, as a result of which he no longer needed the perspective frame.

### **Painting: Along the Seine, 1887**

#### **Letter sketches from a perspective frame in letters to Theo van Gogh**

The Hague, 5 and c. 6 August 1882

In one letter sketch Van Gogh showed his brother how he used his perspective frame. He had gone to the beach to make a seascape, but was dissatisfied with the tool: 'This is why I'm having a new and, I hope, better perspective frame made, which will stand firmly on two legs in uneven ground like the dunes.' In another sketch he elucidated the construction of the frame, which could be adjusted in height.

#### **Infraredreflectogram from *Along the Seine* with grid lines**

#### **Discolouration**

In France Van Gogh developed into a pronounced colourist. Art supply stores in Paris stocked the newest assortment of tube paint in intense colours. However, not all of them were colourfast, which explains why some of the colours in Van Gogh's paintings and drawings now look different than when he applied them. Through exposure to light, the colour of these pigments have radically changed or faded. The latter is often the case with certain types of red paint.

### **Painting: Portrait of Etienne-Lucien Martin, 1887**

Research has revealed that the colours in this portrait of the Parisian restaurant owner Martin were much more vivid at first. Van Gogh decided at some point to tone them down, whereby the painting gained a calmer quality. The originally purple coat and hat have turned a soft greyish-blue due to the fading of the red

pigment (cochineal lake), which was mixed with blue and white. This further dulled the colours of the painting, which thus unintentionally looks even more subdued than Van Gogh intended.

### **Detail of the edge of *Portrait of Etienne-Lucien Martin***

The edges of this painting, being under the frame, have been protected from light, so that the original colours there have been fairly well preserved. This shows that the man's jacket was once much purpler; a colour that must have made a fine contrast with the yellowish-orange colour of his face.

### **Under the Microscope**

Discovering how Van Gogh painted begins with looking closely. Many details are visible to the naked eye, but for additional research a restorer needs technical tools, such as a microscope. Unexpected things then sometimes come to light. Look for yourself if you want to know what.

### **Painting: Seasight at Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, 1888**

#### **Painting: Shrimp and Mussels, 1886**

#### **Grains of sand!**

In May 1888 Van Gogh visited the fishing village Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. He must have made this painting on the spot because grains of sand from the beach blew *in* and *on* to the paint.

#### **Thick clumps.**

Van Gogh is known for his pastose and swirling brushwork. He often worked quickly and 'wet-in-wet': he applied fresh strokes of paint onto the still wet paint. His brush picked up the various colours, which were then mixed together.

## **Van Gogh as a Draughtsman**

Few people know that in addition to being an important painter Van Gogh was also a great draughtsman. He made close to 1100 drawings, half of which are kept in this museum. Because of their sensitivity to light, unfortunately they can only be displayed on a limited basis. Presented in this gallery are rotating displays of works on paper (1880-1890).

Van Gogh devoted the first years of his artistic training entirely to drawing because he believed that it was 'the root of everything' for an artist. Later, too, he continued drawing to improve his skills and develop his own style. Without the distraction of the colours of his palette he could concentrate fully on the expressive power of line.

For Van Gogh, his drawings were not only an exercise or preparation for his paintings, but often works of art in their own right that he took pride in signing. The less elaborated sketches, however, are also worthy of admiration and bring us closer to the artist.

### **On the wall**

Vincent van Gogh 3 June 1883: 'drawing is the root of everything, and the time spent on that is actually all profit.'

[drawings, changing every three months]

### **Painting: Giant Peacock Moth, 1889**

Van Gogh often worked in the big garden of the asylum in Saint-Rémy where he was a patient. 'Yesterday I drew a very large, rather rare night moth there which is called the death's head [...]', he wrote Theo. 'To paint it I would have had to kill it, and that would have been a shame since the animal was so beautiful.' In reality, it was not a death's-head hawkmoth, but a giant peacock moth. Van Gogh nevertheless drew a face or a skull on the insect's back.

### **Showcase: Drawing Material**

These are examples of drawing materials used by Van Gogh. Most were part of standard artists' equipment, such as charcoal, chalk, graphite, and India ink. Van Gogh also worked with relatively uncommon materials, including natural chalk and lithographic ink. In the drawings and letters originating from Holland he frequently used iron gall ink (made from oak galls), which unfortunately turns brown and eats into the paper over time. In Arles Van Gogh cut his own pens from the reeds growing along the banks of the canals.

1. conté crayon
2. charcoal
3. natural chalk  
Swillens Collection, University Museum, Utrecht
4. East-Indian ink  
Swillenscollection, Universiteitsmuseum, Utrecht
5. Chinese ink  
Swillenscollectie, Universiteitsmuseum, Utrecht
6. conté pencil
7. reed pens
8. facsimile of Van Gogh's sketchbook from May-July 1890
9. dip pens
10. ink bottles N. Antoine & Fils firm, c. 1880-1890
11. logwood Ink from N. Antoine & Fils

### **Sketchbooks**

The least known part of Van Gogh's oeuvre consists of four preserved sketchbooks. Van Gogh always carried small notebooks with him so that he could quickly jot down his ideas or impressions. He wrote his brother: 'my sketchbook proves that I try to capture things first-hand'. In addition to notes and rapid scratches, forceful heads and splendid city views can be discovered in them. Page through the sketchbooks digitally [here](#).



# Third floor

## Painting Against All Odds

After his hospitalisation in the asylum in Saint-Rémy Van Gogh felt like a 'broken pitcher' that could never be mended. Even so, in between his bouts of mental illness he worked on steadily and courageously to become an even better artist. Painting and drawing, moreover, gave structure to his days and ensured that he did not fall prey to the loneliness plaguing the other patients.

If he was not able or allowed to work outside of the institution's walls, he painted the view from his room: 'through the iron-barred window I can make out a square of wheat in an enclosure, ... above which in the morning I see the sun rise in its glory.' Or he explored the wild garden, where he undoubtedly found endless subjects. In addition, Van Gogh painted copies of black-and-white prints of works by other artists. He also painted a few splendid floral still lifes 'with calm and a greater sureness of touch.'

### On the wall:

Vincent van Gogh 5-6 September 1889: 'More than ever I have a pent-up fury for work, and I think that this will contribute to curing me.'

### Painting: Almond Blossom, 1890

Van Gogh made this luminous still life of delicate almond blossom against a bright blue sky for his newly born nephew Vincent Willem. Just as the blossom heralds the spring after a long winter, so too does the birth of a child hold the promise of new life. Van Gogh painted the delicate white-pink flowers with great attention and precision: some in bloom, others still in bud.

### Painting: Wheatfield with Reaper

A reaper labours in the field in the scorching heat of the sun. Rendered with thick daubs of yellow paint, the wheat ripples all around him. Van Gogh considered wheat a symbol of the eternal cycle of nature and the transience of life: after having been sown and then grown, it is now being reaped. The subject is weighty, and yet through the golden sunlight and the warm colours, it is depicted 'almost smiling.' Van Gogh even found it 'funny' that he recorded such an existential and monumental vision through the iron bars of his cell.

### Painting: Cypressess and Two Women, 1890

Everything in this southern French landscape is in motion: the branches of the cypresses twist in the wind, the wheat undulates, and the clouds drift by. Van Gogh let his brushstrokes follow the direction of the subject that he was depicting. The emphasis on form and line is what made this a modern work of art in his eyes. The cypresses towering above the two women represent man's insignificance in the face of the grandness of nature.

### Painting: Giant Peacock Moth, 1889

### Painting: Butterflies and Poppies, 1890

### **Painting: Roses, 1890**

### **Painting: Undergrowth, 1889**

Van Gogh made numerous works in the asylum's shaded garden, charting its every nook and cranny. 'It's just a question of putting in some style,' he wrote his brother. He meant that colour, line, and brushstrokes were sufficient to turn a simple subject into a true work of art. In this overgrown patch he radically cropped the composition, translated the ground cover daubs of colour, and contrasted it with the longer strokes of the tree trunks.

### **Painting: Irises, 1890**

While in the asylum Van Gogh twice painted a similar glorious bouquet of irises. Both works were in the first place a study in colour. While he attempted to create a soft pastel effect in the other still life, here he was seeking the most intense colour contrast possible. By setting the purple flowers against a yellow back-ground the decorative forms stood out even more vividly. In the meantime, the irises have discoloured from purple to blue, yet the beauty of this still life remains unsurpassed.

### **Painting: Pietà (after Delacroix), 1889**

Van Gogh copied prints already in his early years, and began doing so again in Saint-Rémy. The Pietà, after a painting by Eugène Delacroix, was the first print of which he made a painted copy. It is quite possible that while he was in the asylum, the mentally troubled Van Gogh identified with the suffering Christ. He wrote: 'I am not indifferent, and in the very suffering religious thoughts sometimes console me a great deal.'

### **Painting: The Garden of Saint Paul's Hospital ('Leaf-Fall'), 1889**

### **Painting: The Sheepshearer (after Millet), 1889**

### **Painting: Peasant Woman Bruising Flax (after Millet), 1889**

### **Painting: The Reaper (after Millet), 1889**

### **Painting: The Garden of the Hospital, 1889**

Colours often had an emotional charge for Van Gogh, which he reinforced either by combining them into a harmonious entity, or the reverse, as a contrast. Here he used the combination of red and green to evoke the madness of the psychiatric patients, which they experienced as 'seeing red'. The tiny figure in the overwhelming landscape reinforces the existential dread Van Gogh wished to convey.

## **1890 Impassioned Nature**

Van Gogh spent the final months of his life in rural Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris. He had always been a prolific artist, but here he painted as never before: he turned out approximately seventy-five paintings in just seventy days. Van Gogh portrayed

primarily nature in all of its manifestations: gardens full of flowers, a close-up of waving wheat, and panoramic landscapes filled with emotion.

On seeing a rising sun, a blade of grass or a ploughed field, Van Gogh tried to make his personal feelings resound in his work. For him nature was sacred, a sanctuary from which to draw solace, or regain strength. That Van Gogh can still communicate these grand emotions to us in part explains his great artistic success.

### **On the wall:**

Vincent van Gogh c. 10-14 July 1890: 'I'm wholly absorbed in the vast expanse of wheatfields against the hills, large as a sea.'

### **Painting: Wheatfield with Crows, 1890**

A wheatfield with a path vanishing on the horizon, a thunderous sky, and crows flying up. It is hardly surprising that this monumental landscape continues to be seen as foreboding Van Gogh's tragic suicide, and therefore as his last work. The fact is, however, that after this painting he made various considerably more cheerful works: it seems that in some cases myth is simply stronger than reality.

### **Painting: Wheatfield under Thunderclouds**

In the final weeks of his life Van Gogh painted several impressive pictures of the wheatfields around Auvers, including this expansive field beneath a dark sky. He was worried about his financial situation and his calling as an artist; so much so, in fact, that the brush almost fell from his hand while he was working, he wrote. In this ambitious work he thus also attempted to express 'sadness, and extreme loneliness.' Quite notably, the powerful emotions that Van Gogh experienced in nature had a salutary effect on his own unsteady state of mind. He described the effect of these landscapes on his constitution as 'healthy' and 'invigorating.'

### **Painting: Tree Roots, 1890**

A persistent myth has arisen that the more dramatic Wheatfield with Crows is Van Gogh's last work. However, Tree Roots is the more likely candidate, for he was unable to complete the painting, as is clear to see at the lower left. The virtually unrecognizable forms, powerful lines, and vivid colours have been forwarded to demonstrate that Van Gogh was an important forerunner of abstract art.

### **Painting: Farm, 1890**

### **Painting: Ears of Wheat, 1890**

For this painting Van Gogh must have stood in the middle of a wheatfield and carefully recorded a small section of it on his canvas. He created a decorative pattern from the tall ears of wheat with their undulating leaves and heavy stalks. To relieve the monotony of the green swaying sea of wheat he painted a cornflower at the upper left and a 'pink bindweed at the bottom wound around a stem' at the lower right.

### **Painting: View of Auvers, 1890**

### **Painting: The Garden of Daubigny, 1890**

Upon arriving in Auvers, Van Gogh visited the house of the artist Charles-François Daubigny, whose widow was still living there. Van Gogh admired Daubigny's work and was eager to see the place where the artist had lived. Van Gogh did not have a canvas at hand, and so made this first study of the garden on a tea towel. He later made two more detailed paintings of this place, which he so cherished.

# Death and recognition

On 27 July 1890, Van Gogh shot himself in the chest with a pistol in a field near Auvers. Although Van Gogh no longer had great ambitions because of his illness, he did show a tremendous appetite for work. Nevertheless, he was mentally unbalanced. Signs of this are found in his letters. For example, his brother Theo planned to go into business for himself, and uncertainty about his financial situation and his future left Vincent in low spirits: 'my life, too, is attacked at the very root, my step also is faltering'.

Van Gogh died two days later, with Theo at his side. His coffin was covered with yellow flowers and surrounded by his last paintings. A number of his artist friends came to the funeral. One of them, Émile Bernard, wrote to his friend, the art critic Albert Aurier, 'We climbed the hill outside Auvers talking about him, about the daring impulse he had given to art.' Not long before, Aurier had written an article in praise of Van Gogh, calling him a 'great and desperate genius'. This was the first official recognition of Van Gogh's talent.

## **1890 Auvers-sur-Oise**

16.05

Van Gogh leaves the psychiatric hospital. He goes to Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris, where he stays at the inn Auberge Ravoux. Dr Gachet becomes his physician. He advises Van Gogh to paint above all else.

27.07

In the afternoon, Van Gogh leaves the inn Auberge Ravoux, where he lodges, to go out and paint. He shoots himself in the chest and returns in the evening, wounded.

28.07

Theo receives word of Vincent's injury and travels to Auvers.

29.07

Vincent dies of his injury, with Theo at his side; he is 37 years old. About twenty of his acquaintances and artist friends attend his funeral, which is held in Auvers on 30 July. His family in the Netherlands is unable to come at such short notice.

## **1891**

25.01

After Vincent's death Theo's health grows worse as a result of syphilis. In October, he suffers a mental and physical breakdown and is admitted to hospital. He dies in Utrecht on 25 January 1891.

## **1914**

14.04

Theo's widow Jo has his remains buried next to Vincent's in Auvers.

# Expressing Personal Experience

Appreciation for Van Gogh's art grew rapidly after his death, especially in artistic circles. The vivid colours, rhythmic brushwork, and emotional charge of his work in particular made a tremendous impact on artists. Van Gogh soon came to be considered one of the great innovators of modern art.

Just as for Van Gogh, personal experience was paramount for the artists' group Les Nabis ('the prophets'). Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, and Édouard Vuillard sought universal or spiritual values in everyday scenes. To that end they experimented with simplified shapes and decorative planes of colour. Odilon Redon also wanted to depict a deeper layer of meaning in his work, which he did using his imagination to create an inner dream world.

## **Painting: The Supper at Emmaüs, 1894**

Maurice Denis (1870-1943)

Denis here depicted a subject from the Bible in a style recalling that of early Italian frescos. He situated Christ's visit in his own surroundings, namely the inn near his house. Denis himself is seated in prayer at the table at the right, while his wife Marthe is entering the room at the left. This is a typical Nabis painting, featuring an intimate interior with decorative elements and framed by a painted border. Denis created an intriguing contrast between the dark space and the colourful vistas.

## **Painting: The Red Tree, 1905**

Odilon Redon (1840-1916)

## **Painting: The Buddha, 1904**

Odilon Redon (1840-1916)

In 1905 Andries Bonger, Theo's brother-in-law, bought two large panels by Redon for his interior: this work and the painting across from it. The material, painting technique, and border make a matt and flat decorative mural-like effect. Redon was consciously seeking this quality. Like many contemporary artists, he wanted to integrate art into daily life: all of the interior fittings, from the mirror to the curtains, were incorporated in a single grand decorative programme.

[pictured: photo interior]

Interior of Andries Bonger's home at Stadhouderskade, Amsterdam, c. 1904

## **Montmartre in the Rain, 1897**

Pierre Bonnard (1867 – 1947)

This is Bonnard's view from his attic studio in Montmartre. The animated street view at the right contrasts with the quiet left half of the painting. The blank wall is rendered as a flat surface in the middle of the depiction, creating a daring composition. Like so many of his contemporaries, Bonnard too was interested in Van Gogh's work, and called him 'a great artist who I admire.'

## **Painting: The Mystical Grape Harvest, 1890**

Maurice Denis (1870 – 1943)

A religious man, Denis depicted how, for Catholics, wine symbolises Christ's blood. Nuns are devotedly harvesting grapes, while above them the figure of Christ appears in a radiant light, blood flowing from his chest. At the upper right Denis

added a biblical passage from the Song of Songs, a celebration of love. He gave this painting to his artist friend Paul Ranson. Presumably Ranson asked Vuillard to make a pendant. He, too, sought inspiration in the Song of Songs and, like Denis, painted a lush garden with winding paths. His depiction, however, is less elevated: the women wear contemporary clothing and a striped cat enters the scene at the lower right.

**Painting: Women in the Garden or Song of Songs, 1891-1892**

Edouard Vuillard (1868 – 1940)

**Painting: Dread, 1891**

Maurice Denis (1870 – 1943)

**Painting: Motherhood, 1896-1897**

Maurice Denis (1870 – 1943)

In this painting Denis portrayed his wife Marthe frontally, tenderly holding their newborn daughter Noële in her arms. Paintings of Mary and the infant Jesus by early Italian artists such as Botticelli served as a source of inspiration. Still, Denis instilled the work with a modern atmosphere by capturing the scene in a flat style of decorative patterns and brushstrokes. Quite subtly, he added a patch of light on the child's head.

## **Van Gogh and the Expression of Colour**

After 1900 many artists became increasingly interested in Van Gogh's bold colour combinations and way of using colour as a means of expression. For an artist like Munch, colour was a way to express emotions in his paintings. The painters Kees van Dongen and Maurice de Vlaminck intensified their palettes even further. To amplify the expressive force of their work, they painted large simplified planes in vivid contrasting colours.

After his all too brief artistic career, Van Gogh continued to influence art. Even now his life and work inspire artists throughout the world, as can be seen in the last gallery.

**Painting: House in the Winter Sun, c. 1909**

Gabriele Münter (1877-1962)

**Painting Mina Tandja, 1910**

Kees van Dongen (1877-1968)

**Painting: Felix Auerbach, 1906**

Edvard Munch (1863-1944)

Munch painted this portrait in a single session, in Auerbach's home. Auerbach is presented as a self-assured man of the world. At the same time the portrait is a splendid display of Munch's bravura as a painter. He experimented extensively with his material and technique. For the intense red background he applied the paint in multiple layers, sometimes so thinly that the paint dripped down the canvas. He also played with different matt and gloss effects, visible in Auerbach's jacket.

**Painting: Salomon Beffie, c. 1912**

Jan Sluijters (1881-1957)

Like Van Gogh, Sluijters used colour in his portraits to emphasise the personalities of his figures, as this painting clearly illustrates. It consists mainly of shades of blue against a pink background. Sluijters kept the picture simple by leaving out details. The result is a compelling portrait of this impressive figure, the art collector Salomon Beffie.

**Painting: De Seine at Nanterre, 1906-1907**

Maurice de Vlaminck (1876-1958)

**Painting: The Blue Dress, 1911**

Kees van Dongen (1877-1968)

Van Dongen often painted women in powerful colour contrasts, such as here his wife Guus. He placed her wearing a low-cut blue gown against an intense red background. That Van Dongen titled the painting The Blue Dress suggests that this is not simply a portrait, but rather that it is all about colour. Van Dongen was directly inspired by Van Gogh, whose work he had seen at exhibitions in Paris.

**Painting: A Crab on its Back, 1887****Red Cliffs near Anthéor, 1903**

Louis Valtat (1869 - 1952)

**Women Kissing, 1906**

Jan Sluijters (1881 - 1957)

**Autumn Day, 1909**

Leendert Gestel (1881 - 1941)

In 1905 a young generation of Dutch artists became acquainted with Van Gogh's work thanks to a large exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. This was also an important stimulus for Gestel to develop his own personal expressive style. He worked with short brushstrokes in intense colours that recall Pointillism. However, with the colour and light effects Gestel wanted foremost to evoke emotions, just as Van Gogh did with his landscapes.

**Whitsun on the Bridge, 1906**

Jan Sluijters (1881 - 1957)

Sluijters had just arrived in Paris when he visited the Salon des Indépendants of 1906. He was deeply impressed by the young progressive artists' expressive use of colour, which he cautiously introduced in this city view. Particularly striking are the red and gold elements that light up in the sunshine. Sluijters painted the festively decorated Pont Alexandre III during Whitsuntide. He looked out at the Grand Palais, the dome of which is visible in the distance.