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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

Vincent van Gogh

Van Gogh painted 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: Undergrowth, 1889

Vincent van Gogh

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

Vincent van Gogh

While in the asylum Van Gogh painted the same glorious bouquet of irises twice. 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 background 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: Evening (after Millet), 1889

Vincent van Gogh

In Saint-Rémy Van Gogh practised painting figures. He used prints of paintings by his favourite artists as models. Although he painstakingly recorded the compositions, he did not consider this copying. He saw it more as 'translating' from black-and-white to colour, just as a musician can freely interpret the work of another composer. Van Gogh thus succeeded in suffusing these works with an entirely individual character and sensibility.

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. Van Gogh was familiar with the region from the paintings of Charles-François Daubigny. He admired the mood and the personal sensibility that this French painter managed to instil in his landscapes. Van Gogh, too, tried to convey in his work the emotions that he experienced watching the sun rise, or looking at a blade of grass, or a ploughed field, to shine through 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: Ears of Wheat, 1890

Vincent van Gogh

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: Wheatfield with Crows, 1890

Vincent van Gogh

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 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, 1890

Vincent van Gogh

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

Vincent van Gogh

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: Daubigny's garden, 1890

Vincent van Gogh

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

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.