

Vincent van Gogh

TEACHING PROGRAM

National Gallery of Art, Washington

Vincent van Gogh

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Commentary by

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Produced for the education division by Ruth Perlin, head, department of education resources, and Barbara Moore, head, department of education publications, with special thanks to Kimberly Jones, assistant curator of French paintings, and Philip Conisbee, senior curator of European paintings. Teaching activities developed with Anne Henderson, Carla Brenner, and staff of the department of teacher and school programs.

Cover: Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1889, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Estate of Betsey Cushing Whitney

page 5: *The Harvest* (detail), June 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

page 30: *The Yellow House* ("The Street") (detail), September 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

page 35: *White Roses* (detail), May 1890, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Pamela Harriman in memory of W. Averell Harriman

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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

These are approximations of French and Dutch pronunciations. Note that each syllable of a French word receives equal stress. For Dutch words, accented syllables are shown in capital letters. The Dutch 'g' is difficult for English speakers to reproduce—try forming a 'g' with the lips as you would in English, then bringing the tip of the tongue to the back of the front teeth before voicing the sound.

Artists and Personalities

Bernard	French	beer nar
Caillebotte	French	kye yuh bot
Cézanne	French	say zahne
Corot	French	core oh
Daubigny	French	doe bin yee
Daumier	French	doe me eh
Degas	French	duh gah
De Vlieger	Dutch	de FLEE ger
Gachet	French	gah shay
Gauguin	French	go gan
"La Mousmé"	French	lah mooz may
Millet	French	me yea
Seurat	French	sir rah
Signac	French	seen yack
Renoir	French	ren whar
Theo [van Gogh]	Dutch	tay oh
	English	THEE oh
Van Gogh	English	van GO
	French	van gog
	Dutch	van HAWK

Places

Arles	French	arl
Auvers-sur-Oise	French	oh vehr sur waz
Clichy	French	klee she
La Crau	French	lah crow
Montmartre	French	mon mart
Saint Rémy	French	san ray me
Scheveningen	Dutch	SKAY ve ning ge

COMMENTARY



SLIDE 1

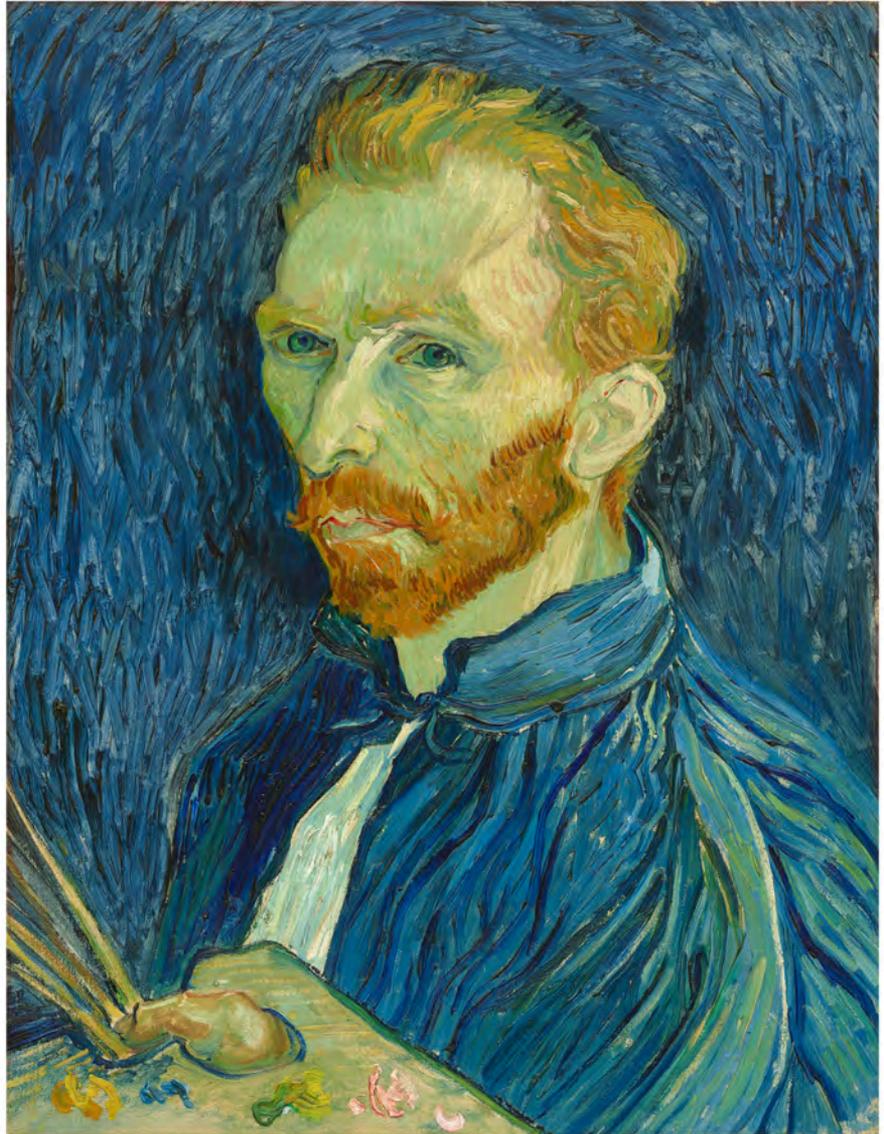
Vincent van Gogh

Self-Portrait

1889

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Estate of Betsey Cushing Whitney



This image (slide 1) is one of some thirty-five self-representations by Vincent van Gogh. As part of an artistic tradition of introspection and self-analysis, the self-portrait was appropriate for a sensitive and thoughtful artist such as Van Gogh. There were also practical reasons for his doing a large number of such works. Professional models were not always available or within the means of a struggling artist. Over the course of his career, Van Gogh

would use his own features to explore a variety of painting styles and techniques. His self-portraits constitute fascinating documents of his development as both an artist and an individual.

Self-portraits also stand within the Dutch tradition. Among the great examples is Rembrandt, whose self-portraits Van Gogh would have known. Van Gogh may have emulated his fellow Dutchman as a way of monitoring his own personal and artistic

progress. Rembrandt's self-portraits are poignant and moving, as are Van Gogh's. Van Gogh was an emotionally charged artist, which is part of his appeal.

Vincent van Gogh was born in 1853 in Groot Zundert, in the province of North Brabant in the Netherlands, very near the Belgian frontier. He was the first son of Theodorus van Gogh, a minister of the Gospel, and the eldest of six children—three boys and three girls. Not surprisingly, religion remained a central theme throughout his life, and piety emerges repeatedly in his art.

Van Gogh's early years can be seen as a series of seemingly disjointed experiences. In 1869, at the age of sixteen, he embarked on the vocation his father had chosen for him, as an art dealer. This seems unusual; one might expect that he would have been directed to a religious career. Nevertheless Van Gogh spent three years—from 1869 to 1872—working at the Goupil Gallery in The Hague, Netherlands. He was then employed at Goupil's offices in London (1873–1875) and Paris (1875–1876). His younger brother Theo, to whom he was very close throughout his life, joined the Goupil Gallery in Brussels in 1873, taking up

the vocation that Vincent would abandon. It is often forgotten that Van Gogh was well versed in the history of art and knowledgeable about nineteenth-century art in particular. In London, for example, he collected illustrations by social realist artists of the previous generation, images that chronicled Britain's socio-economic problems. He began to read French and English literature, especially writings by authors such as Emile Zola that probed the human condition.

Van Gogh continued as an apprentice art dealer until he was dismissed in 1876. By this time he had become zealously pious and, drawn back to his religious roots, decided to devote his life to the service of others. This noble goal was very much in keeping with Van Gogh's expansive and generous nature. At this point he worked at numerous jobs, including as a schoolmaster and as a clerk in a bookstore in Dordrecht. Finally in 1877 he decided to study theology and become a minister, following his father's footsteps. But he did not like the formal training—such as the study of Latin and Greek—preferring to address the humble needs of the common people. Thus he left theology for a three-month course in Brussels to become a missionary, a

shorter path to his goal. In November 1878 he was sent as a lay missionary to the Borinage, a coal-mining district in the south of Belgium. This was a region of intense poverty, where people faced harsh and difficult living conditions. Van Gogh, a compassionate man, was awakened here to the suffering of others.

Van Gogh did not excel as a preacher but proved to be a good nurse, owing to his empathy for the misery he saw around him. He was even moved to give away his clothes and other possessions and become more like the people to whom he ministered. Eventually the heads of the missionary order came to visit and were shocked to find him living among the impoverished; they removed him from his post because of these "excesses."

In the summer of 1880 Van Gogh began to realize his calling as an artist. Throughout this time he had been sketching people he encountered in an attempt to understand them and their travails. His earliest drawings depicted miners. He also began to make copies after the French painter of peasant life, Jean-François Millet, who would be a touchstone for Van Gogh his entire life.

SLIDE 2

Vincent van Gogh

Scheveningen Beach in Stormy Weather

August 1882

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



Van Gogh was making his first forays into a career as an artist. In September 1881 he sought the professional advice of Anton Mauve, a respected artist working in The Hague who was related to Van Gogh through marriage, and he was very pleased with Mauve's response. Van Gogh said in a letter to his brother Theo that he had seen many beautiful things in Mauve's studio and that his own drawings had seemed to interest Mauve quite a bit. Mauve encouraged Van Gogh not only to keep drawing but to take up the brush as well.

Mauve's emphasis on the value of working from life became a central tenet for Van Gogh. In later years Van Gogh would continue to copy other artists' works, particularly Millet's, but life itself became his subject. In a letter of 1882 he expressed his opinion that observed reality was more fertile and enlivening than pictures. He was convinced that nature had to be the core and impetus for an artist.

In late 1881 Van Gogh moved to The Hague from Etten, where he had been living with his parents. He had

experienced mounting tensions with his parents, who disapproved of his chosen career. He may also have suffered a lingering grief over unrequited love for a cousin. Moving to The Hague was pivotal, for it marks the first major phase in Van Gogh's life as an artist.

The Hague was a rich and important artistic community at the time. This early seascape by Van Gogh (slide 2) represents the nearby coast at Scheveningen. It is composed of horizontal bands, descending back into space. Unlike the many bold, daring compositions of the impressionists, who were trying new vantage points and new angles, this work reveals Van Gogh's simple approach. It is straightforward and direct, honest and real, reflecting his own emotions, his own observation. Van Gogh did not want to be coy; he wanted to create art that was accessible. In this painting, among his earliest, one can appreciate this directness.

SLIDE 3

Simon de Vlieger

Estuary at Dawn

c. 1645

oil on panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patron's Permanent Fund and Gift in memory of Kathrine Dulin Folger

One can also see the impact of Dutch art on Van Gogh. In the late nineteenth century artists of the Hague school were particularly influenced by the traditions of seventeenth-century Dutch art—the art of the golden age. It was both a source of inspiration and a burden for artists to seek to live up to the grand tradition of Frans Hals, Rembrandt, and Johannes Vermeer. Bound by a sense of national identity, they paid tribute to their Dutch heritage by drawing on these earlier models.

Artists of the Hague school were also strongly influenced by the Barbizon school in France, the “modern painting” of landscape based on a romantic vision that celebrated nature and actual experience. Ironically, Barbizon landscape itself was deeply indebted to seventeenth-century Dutch painting. Thus the Barbizon painters enabled their Dutch contemporaries to look at their history as interpreted by others and take a fresh viewpoint.

Estuary at Dawn, by Simon de Vlieger (slide 3), is a seventeenth-century Dutch rendering of a popular theme, the seascape. Comparing this evocative marine painting with Van Gogh's version of the theme (slide 2), one can

see that Van Gogh was working within the Dutch tradition. There are similarities in palette, which in both works tends to be dark and gray. The somber coloring is typical of Hague school paintings (also nicknamed the Gray school). It was an artistic response to the dark, damp climate of the Netherlands. Both de Vlieger and Van Gogh reflected what they saw, including dense, heavy clouds over a broad, flat horizon. In *Scheveningen Beach in Stormy Weather* Van Gogh chose to depict a moment before what he called an angry storm, when the color of the sea was like dirty dishwater.

The Hague school artists are set apart from many of their French contemporaries by their attitude toward realism: they opted for a subjective rather than an objective approach. They wished to bring temperament and expression into their art and promote an individual, personal kind of realism. In that way, Van Gogh was in step with his Dutch colleagues. He would maintain this personal, subjective approach throughout his career.



Letter from Vincent to Theo

28 October 1883

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

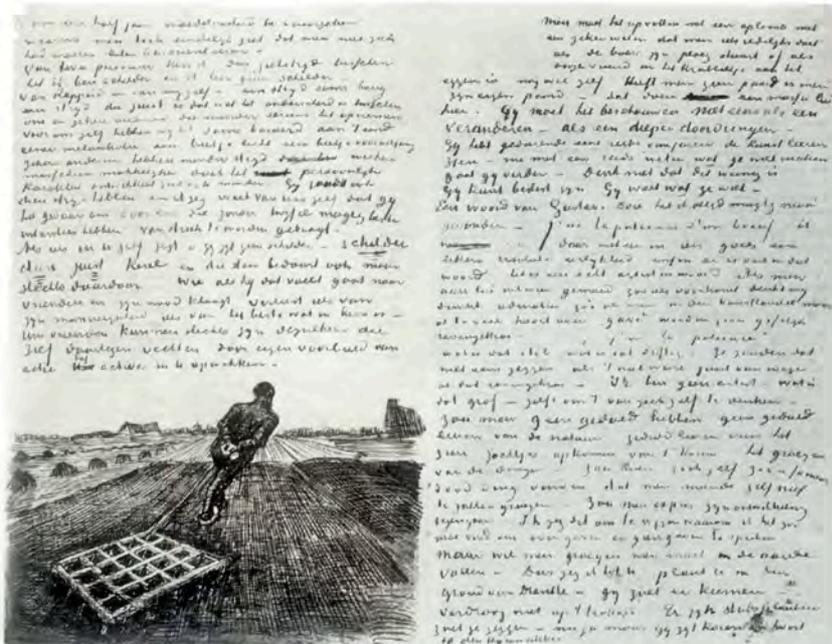
Van Gogh had a very close and intense relationship with his younger brother Theo. One of its most remarkable aspects was their correspondence, preserved in various publications, which provides nearly a day-by-day account by the artist of what he was doing in his art. These letters are notable not only for their sheer number (at least nine hundred) but for the sophistication of the thoughts and ideas they express. They shed light on his art in a way that is rare among artists' documents, and they are deeply moving in the way they reveal his emotional commitment to his art. He talks about everything in his letters—what he is seeing, what he is feeling—but primarily about his art.

Theo provided his brother with vital emotional and financial support and served as his artistic sounding board. Van Gogh worked out his ideas about his art in writing to Theo. Many of his letters contain exquisite pen-and-ink drawings, which complement

his articulate and insightful correspondence. Theo, in return, often offered advice about art based on his knowledge as a dealer who organized exhibitions of modern painters, including Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro. He directed his brother to contemporary French artists and later collected art with him.

The letter illustrated here (slide 4) includes a sketch of a man tilling a field, drawn with great linear richness and variety. Van Gogh used dense hatching to create the foreground field, while he defined the background with much looser and more open pen strokes. He was as taken with peasant themes as was Millet, whom Van Gogh highly admired, particularly for his sincerity.

Van Gogh himself would become one of the foremost nineteenth-century painters of peasants, producing numerous works on the theme that displayed his affinity with the people. His empathy for his subjects is part of what makes his paintings so moving. He is not an objective viewer, standing outside and studying the people; he feels what they feel and experiences their lives alongside them.



SLIDE 5

Vincent van Gogh

The Potato Eaters

April 1885

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

After his productive period in The Hague, Van Gogh decided to spend some time with his father and mother, who were then living at the vicarage in Nuenen, a village in the eastern part of the province of North Brabant. He spent nearly two years with them, from 1883 to 1885. In Nuenen he began to create works that, to a certain extent, look back toward the early explorations of peasant life he had made in the Borinage. But now Van Gogh has grown as an artist, and his goals and ideas are more clearly defined. His continued admiration for Millet is plain in the subjects he depicts.

The Potato Eaters (slide 5) is not only the most famous work from the Nuenen period but one of the most famous

paintings produced by Van Gogh during his lifetime. Its creation consumed the artist for many months. In fact, he wrote his brother Theo that he had spent an entire winter painting studies of the heads and hands. He produced between forty and fifty such studies for this painting—following the tradition of working from preparatory studies to create a large, ambitious piece intended for public exhibition.

In this work Van Gogh accentuated the grim reality and drabness of peasant life. He used a dark, somber palette and confined the figures within a small, dim room. His brushstrokes are harsh, dense, and thick. This is not a graceful painting; its brutality reflects the artist's uncompromising approach



to the subject. Yet there is an aura of sanctity in the friezelike arrangement of figures at the table, as if in a kind of secular celebration of the Last Supper. For this ambitious painting, Van Gogh in fact drew upon a wide range of sources, from engravings in illustrated newspapers and paintings by Dutch artists such as Jozef Israëls to the evocative portrait types of Honoré Daumier and Millet. One can even discern echoes of the dramatic rendering of light and shadow found in the work of Rembrandt.

Reverence tempers the picture's grimy qualities. Van Gogh respects these people and understands their suffering. In explaining the painting to Theo, he said "what I have tried to do is convey the idea that these people eating their potatoes by lamplight have dug from the earth with the very hands they put into their bowls. Thus the painting is about manual labor and about the fact that they've earned their food honestly."

Vincent van Gogh

Boulevard de Clichy

1887

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

A striking aspect in Van Gogh's life was his restlessness, and after living with his family in Nuenen for two years, he was ready for another move. By this time his brother Theo was established in Paris as an art dealer, and Theo encouraged Van Gogh to join him there. Nineteenth-century Paris was the center of the Western art world, and artists from America, Japan, Scandinavia, and elsewhere came there to study. Theo thought his brother would benefit from being in this exciting environment and would have an opportunity to interact with other artists for the first time since leaving The Hague.

Van Gogh arrived in Paris in March 1886 and would stay almost two years. Through Theo's gallery he had the opportunity to see the work of his longtime favorites, Millet, Daumier, and Camille Corot, which he had known primarily through prints until that time. He had not had access, in Nuenen or The Hague, to contemporary French art. But in Paris he could see the creations of the avant-garde, particularly the impressionists.

The eighth and final impressionist exhibition was held in Paris in May and June 1886. Van Gogh saw works by artists such as Edgar Degas and Paul Gauguin, who would later become a friend. He also saw the paintings of younger artists such as Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, now known as pointillists or neo-impressionists. Their innovations would have a profound influence on Van Gogh's still-forming artistic sensibility. The Second Exhibition of the Society of Independents was held in Paris in August 1886; it included works by Seurat and Signac. New art was very much on display, and Van Gogh was fascinated by the variety of styles he was viewing.

Van Gogh made a number of acquaintances in Paris. He briefly took



heavy brushwork of *The Potato Eaters* (slide 5) gives way to a more fluid, softer, faster touch. The formerly raw passages yield to long and sweeping or dashlike brushstrokes. His strokes later became shorter, as he fell under the sway of the impressionists, then of the pointillists. The dashes were transformed into dots and shorter dashes, creating an impression of flickering light and color. Light and color became more clearly expressive vehicles of both subject and emotions. He was caught up in this exciting art world, and the energy is visible in his handling of the brush.

some formal training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, entering the studio of a rather traditional academic artist, Fernand Cormon. This was not a successful venture, in part because of the instructor's conservatism, but also because Van Gogh, at age thirty-four, was nearly ten years older than most of the other students. In Cormon's studio, however, he became friendly with Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Emile Bernard. Through them he was drawn to a vibrant circle of young artists, including Gauguin, Signac, and Seurat.

The first thing one notices in *Boulevard de Clichy* (slide 6) is how dramatically Van Gogh's work changed in Paris. This canvas represents a subject that was popular among young avant-garde artists: the new Paris, with its wide boulevards created by the urban renewal efforts of Baron Haussman in the 1850s and 1860s. It celebrated a new world that was full of potential and excitement. Impressionist artists who treated this theme included Gus-

tave Caillebotte and Auguste Renoir, whose work Van Gogh would have known.

Drawing on his own experience, Van Gogh depicts a scene around the corner from his apartment. It is a view of the Boulevard de Clichy in Montmartre, which was then an enclave for young bohemian artists. The view is from the Place Blanche, footsteps away from the apartment he was sharing with Theo on the rue Lépici. He would have passed the spot daily.

This urban subject is not the only mark of change in Van Gogh's art; his colors and technique have also shifted. The palette that had been so dark during his Dutch period has now become lighter. Van Gogh was exploring pastel tones—soft blues, yellows, pinks—that are clearer and more peaceful, very much in keeping with the luminous air one finds in Paris. This reflected the way the city looked, as well as the artist's brighter outlook. His technique has also become lighter. The dark,

SLIDES 7 AND 8

Keisai Eisen

Courtesan

c. 1820s
color woodblock print
Private Collection, New York

Vincent van Gogh

The Courtesan

copy after Keisai Eisen
summer/autumn 1887
oil on canvas
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Japanese prints took the Parisian art world by storm beginning in the 1860s. A large exhibition of Japanese art had been shown at the World's Fair in Paris in 1867, the first time many Western artists had had the chance to see these works. Like many of his contemporaries, Van Gogh was captivated by Japanese art, and he and Theo collected hundreds of Japanese prints.

In Japanese prints Van Gogh found another approach to creating art, including an entirely new vantage point and different compositional strategy. For example, Japanese compositions are often asymmetrical and cropped, as seen here (slides 7 and 8) both in the print of a courtesan by Keisai Eisen and in Van Gogh's version of the print, *The Courtesan*, which he painted in the summer and autumn of 1887. The figure is cropped at the right in the painting (and at the left in the print). There is a new emphasis on pattern and the interplay of light and dark, and Van Gogh is moving away from dashes and dots to large areas of vibrant color. He was especially drawn to these aspects of other Japanese prints: their bold, daring colors and their dynamic juxtaposition of form and color.

By studying Japanese prints, Van Gogh became fascinated with color and its expressive potential. He began to understand pure color as a powerful conduit of emotion. His painting of *The Courtesan* offers a feast of color—rich yellow ocher (later one of his favorite hues), with vivid blues, greens, and reds, and the ghostly white of the courtesan's face. He used high-key, saturated colors, juxtaposing them to enhance their effect.

It is not clear if Van Gogh knew Keisai Eisen's print in its original form (slide 7), but the image was widely circulated in reproduction, including the May 1886 cover of the well-known



journal *Paris Illustré*. In any case, his copy departs from the original in significant ways. He has intensified the colors, introducing bright red and green and yellow in place of the pastel blues and coral tones of the print. And although he places the figure within a frame that echoes the edges of the print, he creates an imaginative border around it depicting a pond. He plays with Japanese motifs such as the bamboo on the right, the frog in the foreground, and the cranes in the background. Van Gogh integrates oriental motifs into his art in addition to adapting Japanese composition and patterning, but his personal vision transforms the source of inspiration.



SLIDE 9

Vincent van Gogh

The Yellow House (“The Street”)

September 1888

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



The energy, activity, and bustle of Paris that had originally drawn Van Gogh to the city eventually drove him to leave. Although he had thrived in Paris and enjoyed living with his brother Theo and interacting with other artists, Van Gogh also recognized that the drinking and bohemian lifestyle he had embraced was taking its toll. Feeling overwhelmed, nervous, and uncomfortable, he decided that he needed a change and a rest.

Once Van Gogh determined to move, he chose the antithesis of Paris: Arles was a sleepy little town in the heart of Provence, in the south of France. Vincent arrived there in February of 1888. Arles had a Mediterranean climate and boasted sunflowers and glowing wheatfields. The light in Arles was immensely different from that in Paris or in the Netherlands: vibrant, lush, dazzling. It provided a dramatic contrast to everywhere Van Gogh had lived before, and he was completely entranced. The beauty of the environ-

ment helped restore him immediately, and he began to paint prolifically during this period.

He painted within the town of Arles and throughout the countryside, working constantly—soon to the detriment of his health. He would paint for five days without sleeping. He would subsist on coffee and dry bread because he did not want to pull himself away from his art. This feverish pace might have been the first sign of things to come: the intensity was extreme; Van Gogh was too caught up in his art and its creation.

Despite his frenetic pace, Van Gogh's work from this period is masterful and controlled. *The Yellow House* (slide 9), painted in September 1888, is one example. This work depicts Van Gogh's home, on a quiet corner in Arles, with wide streets and only a few figures present at right and left. He creates an effect of serene isolation out of vibrant, contrasting colors. The house is a vivid yellow form, and the green

shutters and door, along with what Vincent called “a sky of pure cobalt,” heighten the tonality.

The influence of Japanese prints is evident in this beautiful painting, particularly in the flattening of forms. The house is defined basically as two flat planes of color: bright yellow on the front facing the viewer and a lighter tone on the right side. The form seems solid and geometric, but there is little use of shadow or the traditional modeling of light and dark. And Van Gogh paid scant attention to the activity of the brush. He created spatial effects as he had seen in Japanese prints—through stark, linear perspective and contrasting colors. Japanese influence is also present in the tilting up of planes, which evokes space rather than giving a convincing illusion of three-dimensionality and depth as seen in Western art.

Van Gogh enjoyed the solitude of Arles, but even before he arrived, he had dreamed of establishing an artists' community there. He based his idea on his knowledge of artist colonies in Japan and on the fact that his friends Bernard and Gauguin had been part of an artistic commune in Brittany, at Pont Aven. He thought Arles would be ideal. It was quiet, peaceful, inexpensive, and decidedly picturesque. Van Gogh sent a number of letters to both Bernard and Gauguin, trying to convince them to join him there. He offered rhapsodic accounts of the beauty of Arles and how wonderful it would be. Ultimately, only Gauguin came to Arles, and his stay marks one of the most notorious events in Van Gogh's life.

Gauguin had been living for some time in Martinique, and he returned to Paris in 1888, broke and ill. Van Gogh's brother Theo, who had purchased some of Gauguin's art, encouraged Gauguin to go to Arles. He made arrangements to give Gauguin an

allowance of 150 francs a month in exchange for twelve paintings a year. Although not enthusiastic, Gauguin recognized that these monthly payments and the sale of other works would enable him to save money and return to Martinique, which was his ultimate goal.

Van Gogh was delighted at the prospect of Gauguin's coming and entered another flurry of activity, preparing his home for his friend's arrival. He produced a number of extraordinary paintings, including a series of seven canvases of sunflowers, which he intended to hang in the house. The sunflowers are among Van Gogh's most familiar works. To the artist they embodied richness, abundance, and vitality—the mood he wanted to create for Gauguin.

SLIDE 10

Vincent van Gogh

The Bedroom

October 1888

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



Van Gogh painted *The Bedroom* (slide 10) in October 1888, precisely the time that Gauguin was to arrive in Arles. It shows his own bedroom, furnished with the basic items of life: a bed, chairs, table, window, mirror, and art on the walls. Each object is closely observed and lovingly portrayed. Van Gogh's everyday life experience is communicated in the most mundane details. The windows, for instance, seem to have been opened slightly to let in a bit of air. It is almost as if Van Gogh himself has just left the room. But the artist's presence is most clearly experienced through his technique—the way he moves paint across the canvas. He has put himself into every stroke of paint.

One aspect of this painting is especially indicative of Van Gogh's growing confidence as an artist and as an individual: the walls are decorated with his own paintings, not with prints by other artists. He has begun to recognize that his own art is good. In previous years he had emulated other artists

and had been awed by them; now he is coming into his own, taking pride in his creations.

Once again, the influence of Japanese prints is obvious—in the way Van Gogh tilts the picture plane, creating a somewhat irrational space. He uses this device to present an emotional space, and that emotional quality is also apparent in the colors. The vivid yellow bed, the slightly acidic green in the floorboards, and the icy blues of walls and door are not so much descriptive as they are emotive. This painting shows Van Gogh as a fully formed master artist.

SLIDE 11

Vincent van Gogh

Almond Tree in Blossom

April 1888

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



The almond blossom is ubiquitous in the Japanese prints Van Gogh would have seen. But it was not merely a motif for him. The almond branch was a symbol of life itself, of life opening up and joy in its presence. This painting (slide 11) is one of many images he made of blossoming fruit trees. Van Gogh became intrigued with the subject shortly after arriving in Arles. Within several weeks, he saw the Provençal orchards begin their spring bloom. Eventually Van Gogh made twenty canvases depicting them—especially the peach, almond, and pear trees.

For this work Van Gogh chose a young almond tree, with just a few branches. Standing beside a path, which moves asymmetrically across the canvas, its blooms stretch literally out of the composition to form a lacelike screen before the middle and far ground of the work. Strong, vertical brushstrokes contribute to a mood of tranquillity and an oriental aesthetic. In the distance the red rooflines of houses can be seen.

Perhaps Van Gogh's most momentous painting of almond branches in blossom was one that he would later produce to celebrate the birth of his nephew. Theo had married, and in February 1890 his wife Johanna gave birth to a son, whom they named Vincent Willem after his uncle. Van Gogh was very pleased. To mark that event he produced a beautiful painting (illus., left) of large branches of almond blossoms against a blue sky for the proud mother and father, intended for their bedroom. Produced near the end of Van Gogh's life, it assumes special poignancy as a symbol of hope and joy amid pain and turmoil.

Vincent van Gogh, *Almond Blossom*, February 1890, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



SLIDES 12 AND 13

Vincent van Gogh

The Harvest

June 1888

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Vincent van Gogh

Harvest—The Plain of La Crau

1888

reed pen and brown ink over graphite
National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon,
in honor of the 50th Anniversary of
the Gallery



The Harvest (slide 12) was one of Van Gogh's favorite paintings. In contrast to his images within the town of Arles — *The Yellow House* and *The Bedroom*, his private space — this work shows the plain of La Crau, just outside of Arles.

Van Gogh always felt a strong affinity with nature — its power, beauty, and emotional tenor. He had an almost pantheistic belief: that nature itself was the greatest expression of God's creation. In this painting he composed a panoramic view that extends into the distance. This is unusual among Van Gogh's landscapes, which tend to focus on a small part of nature. Here the sense is of a vast, open space supporting a range of agricultural activities.

Typical of Van Gogh's landscapes, the human presence is subtle and understated. One has to search the scene to find the figure in the foreground, the laborers unloading a wagon beside the white house at the far right, the horse-drawn cart in the middle distance, and the figure plow-

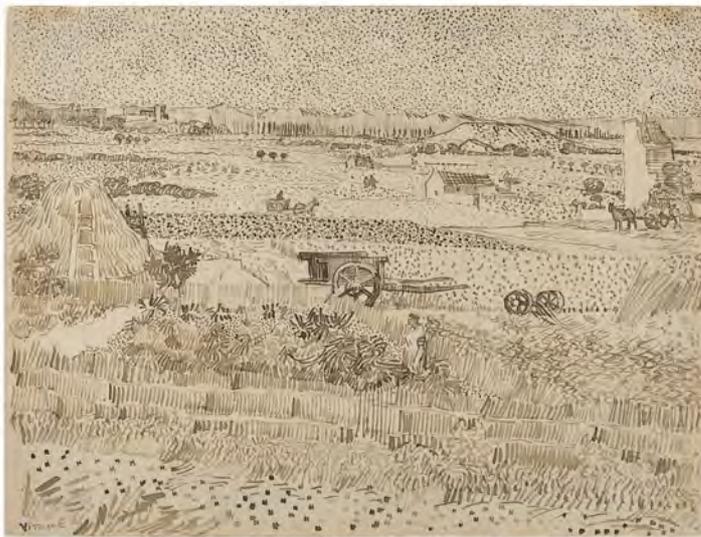
ing a field behind the haystack on the left. Van Gogh shows nature at its grandest; man does not dominate but is part of creation.

The harvest was a compelling theme for Van Gogh. Popularized in many of Millet's paintings, it suggests the joy of the harvest and the continuation of life through the reaping of nature's bounty. For Van Gogh the theme symbolized summer itself. While he was interested in the cycle of seasons, summer held a special appeal. He once wrote to Theo that he was excited by the parching of the landscape: "There's old gold, bronze, and copper in everything, with the azure-green of the incandescent sky, that gives a delicious, extraordinarily harmonious color." Seeing nature in terms of its artistic potential, he gives the richness of the colors an almost voluptuous quality and expresses a passion for nature and its incomparable beauty.

Over ten days between 12 and 20 July 1888 Van Gogh produced ten

paintings and five drawings on the theme of the harvest, including this one. He completed it in a single, lengthy session, retouching it later. He was very proud of the work, telling Theo that this canvas outshone all the others. It is indeed magnificent. It captures the tawny golds of the fields of ripened grain and the exact hue of the summer sky in Arles.

Van Gogh's career was exceedingly brief, but extremely productive: over its ten-year period he painted more than two thousand pictures. His drawings are not as well known. Because of conservation requirements, they are not exhibited extensively or for prolonged viewings. But drawings such as *The Harvest—The Plain of La Crau* (slide 13) testify to his technical originality. This work is not preparatory for the painting, but a drawing *after* it. Van Gogh made the drawing as a gift for an artist friend. It is a tour de force, with the coloristic effects of the painting conveyed purely through pen and ink with hints of graphite and an enormous variety of pen strokes: small, loosely arranged stipples in the foreground, dashes and longer strokes in the middle ground, and tense, tightly spaced stippling in the background. Just as Van Gogh juxtaposed planes of color to create a sense of depth in his paintings, he used the same principle in his drawings, combining pattern and texture to create spatial effects. The resulting variations make one aware of the artist's every touch.



Vincent van Gogh

La Mousmé

1888

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Chester Dale Collection

Portraiture, like landscape, was one of Van Gogh's artistic passions. During his two years in Paris he painted twenty-two portraits, and during a single year in Arles he produced forty-six. He is known to have said, "The only thing in painting that excites me to the depth of my soul, and which makes me feel the infinite more than anything else, is portraiture." He reveled in the exercise of trying to coax out personality, trying to understand another human being.

Given Van Gogh's compassionate character, it is not surprising that he was drawn to exploring another person's inner being, much as he did his own in self-portraits. His concern was for understanding others as well as himself. He did not paint official portraits commissioned (or requested) by others but chose his sitters based on a variety of reasons. Often, not able to pay for models, he asked friends to pose. In other cases he sought to create or find a model for a certain figure



type, such as a Provençal local for La Mousmé (slide 14). In a letter to Theo in July 1888 Van Gogh wrote, "Now if you know what a mousmé is...I have just painted one. It took me a whole week...but I had to reserve my energy to do the mousmé well. A mousmé is a Japanese girl—Provençal in this case—12 to 14 years old."

Here is another example of Japanese influence: Van Gogh has taken a girl of Arles and treated her as an exotic flower, placing her half-length figure against a flat background of bright turquoise. He has chosen vibrant colors and lively patterns. Her dress, with its striped bodice of brilliant red and blue and full skirt of cobalt blue dotted with orange, almost has a life of its own. The composition is dynamic yet subtle in its interplay of curving human and inanimate forms. The girl is seated in a wicker chair whose arms echo the shape of her skirt; her own arm likewise follows the sweep of the chair arm. The striped fabric in the bodice is also reflected in the stripes of the chair. Colors as well as lines play against each other effectively, and the red ribbon in the girl's hair picks up the red in the bodice and skirt.

Van Gogh's colors and brushstrokes tend to be more expressive than realistic in this portrait. He used unusual greenish tints in the girl's left arm while describing her face with clear brushwork that gives a modeled effect. Her wide-open eyes suggest sincerity. This is a sympathetic portrayal of the slight awkwardness of a young girl on the verge of womanhood. The artist's psychological sensitivity makes it an affecting and engaging image.

Vincent van Gogh

Wheatfield with a Reaper

July/September 1889

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

The last nine months of Van Gogh's residence in Arles proved to be extraordinarily difficult. His friend Gauguin had joined him there in October 1888, but the relationship soon began to sour. This should have been foreseeable; the two men were like night and day. Gauguin was cynical; he was always theorizing on his philosophical and intellectual approach to art. Van Gogh, by contrast, had an almost childlike openness; he was emotional and romantic. The only thing the two seemed to have had in common was an intense, determined commitment to their own art and points of view.

What began as free, honest debates became increasingly strident. Van Gogh, who wanted artistic communal-ity, was constantly trying to placate Gauguin, but to no avail. On Christmas Eve 1888 the men quarreled, after which Van Gogh cut off part of his ear, then supposedly went to a local bor-dello—perhaps looking for Gauguin, whom he did not find—and gave his ear to a prostitute named Rachel. This

event was a traumatic one, and Van Gogh was hospitalized. Gauguin fled. He wanted nothing more to do with Van Gogh.

After his release from the hospital, Van Gogh became the object of ridicule and was treated brutally. In February 1889 the citizens of Arles had him committed to an asylum, where he remained for two months. Although he gradually recovered, he was a broken man. His confidence was gone, and he was afraid to live alone. In May 1889 he had himself interned in the asylum in Saint Rémy, where he spent twelve months and experienced several seizures, usually at intervals of about two to three months.

There has been much debate concerning Van Gogh's illness. His doctors diagnosed eliptoid psychosis, or latent epilepsy, characterized by seizures, violence, suicidal tendencies, paranoia, fits of temper, depression, and auditory hallucinations. Whatever the cause, it is clear that he suffered seizures as well as periods of depression and anxiety.

Between seizures Van Gogh could paint, but he lived in continual fear of the attacks. Then after an initial period of discouragement in Saint Rémy, he began to throw himself back into his art wholeheartedly. Reconciled to the possibility that he might never be cured but had to go on, Van Gogh thus found a new inner strength that is communicated in his art. In an apt analogy, he likened himself to a miner (like those he knew in the Borinage), who worked in constant peril; the mines could collapse, but he had to continue working.

One of the works Van Gogh produced during the time he spent in Saint Rémy, between May 1889 and May 1890, is described in a letter to Theo in July 1889. He was working on a wheat field with a small reaper and a large sun. The canvas (slide 15) is pre-



SLIDE 16

dominately yellow, save for the sky and purple hills in the background and the reaper. Dissatisfied with his first version of the painting, Van Gogh discarded it. He completed a second version—this one—around 4 September and was so pleased with it that he produced another, smaller version, which he sent to his mother and sister for their home.

In describing the scene, he said “in this reaper—a vague figure working like the devil in the intense heat to finish his task—I then saw the image of death, in the sense that the wheat being reaped represented mankind.” This sounds like a rather a gruesome image, but for Van Gogh it was a positive one: “there’s nothing sad about this death. It happens in broad daylight, under a sun that bathes everything in a fine golden light.”

Perhaps Van Gogh no longer feared death, for it might bring peace. But there is very little peace in this work. The brushwork has once again changed dramatically, and he uses what became his signature brushstroke: swirling, tumultuous globs of paint. The impasto is rich and dense, pure paint heavily worked on the canvas. Van Gogh seems to be playing out his inner turmoil on the canvas with such life and intensity that one cannot help being drawn into the painting by the turbulent brushwork and luscious color.

The motif harks back to the artist’s earlier interests in the harvest theme. Although his style and palette may have changed, the work strongly recalls the subjects of Millet. But for Van Gogh the theme had new resonance.

Vincent van Gogh

The Olive Orchard

1889

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection

This scene of an olive orchard (slide 16) is another powerful landscape by Van Gogh. Venerable, gnarled olive trees are omnipresent in the south of France, and Van Gogh made them the focus of at least fifteen paintings during his last six to seven months of life. He found the subject demanding and compelling, writing, “the rustle of the olive grove has something very secret in it, and immensely old. It is too beautiful for us to dare to paint it, or be able to imagine it.”

That did not keep Vincent from trying. One of his most admirable traits as an artist was his persistent efforts to express the inexpressible, to communicate the mysteries of the world around him. He wrote to Theo that he was struggling to catch the olive trees. “They are old silver, sometimes with more blue in them, sometimes greenish, bronzed, fading white above a solid which is yellow, pink, violet, tinted orange.... Very difficult.”

When one looks at this painting, one can see that Van Gogh is less con-



SLIDE 17

cerned with visual reality than with emotional and spiritual reality. It depicts another harvest scene, with women picking olives, the fruit that sustains their lives. But the way the trees and the landscape almost merge and the workers are engulfed in the branches suggests that Van Gogh is trying to express an emotional bond both within nature and between the landscape and the humans whose lives it supports through its bounty and permanence.

Vincent van Gogh

Roses

May 1890

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Gift of Pamela Harriman in memory of
W. Averell Harriman

Over the course of his career Van Gogh painted a number of still lifes—often of sunflowers, irises, or roses. To him they were full of life.

The painting of roses seen here (slide 17) was done during the last three weeks Van Gogh was at the asylum in Saint Rémy. It was a time of acceptance: he felt he was coming to terms with his illness, coming to terms with himself. He wrote to Theo that he worked on flower paintings that depicted great bunches of violet irises and big bouquets of roses, including this one. In fact, his letters indicate almost exactly when this work was produced. On either 11 or 12 May 1890 he mentions “a canvas of roses with a light green background.”

In this work the paint surface is lush and sensual. Pigment is laid on thickly in undulating ribbons; diagonal lines accentuate the background and play into the curves of the roses. Van Gogh used a very limited palette in this canvas to create an image of exquisite subtlety and richness.



SLIDES 18 AND 19

Vincent van Gogh

Daubigny's Garden

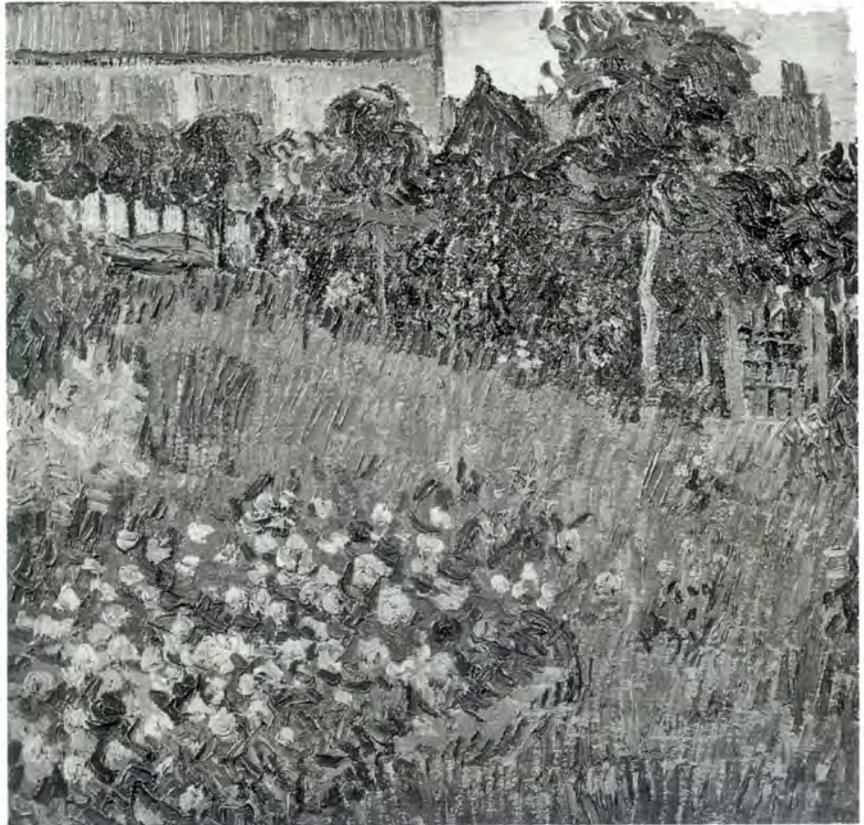
June 1890

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Photograph of Daubigny's Garden

1994



Although Van Gogh had come to terms with his illness during the year he spent in Saint Rémy, he was still having seizures every few months and realized that he might never be cured. On the advice of Camille Pissarro, Theo suggested that his brother move to Auvers-sur-Oise, a small town about 20 miles northwest of Paris. Its proximity to Paris would make it easier for Van Gogh to visit Theo and his family, and vice versa. In addition, Dr. Paul Gachet, who worked for the French Railroad Company and maintained a clinic in Paris, also worked several days a week at his home in Auvers. Pissarro had thought that Dr. Gachet, an amateur painter and engraver as well as a friend and collector of the impressionists, would be more sympathetic to artists than other doctors.

Van Gogh did move to Auvers and followed the therapy prescribed by Dr. Gachet—which was to paint. The reasoning was that since his art brought Van Gogh the most satisfaction and joy this would provide him some relief and happiness. While under the care of Dr. Gachet, Van Gogh did enjoy some measure of relief.

Auvers had a secondary appeal for Van Gogh in that it had an artistic history. A number of artists, including Corot and Paul Cézanne, had worked there. Its location on the Oise River made the town an ideal source for the river scenes favored by the impressionists and post-impressionists. Another artist who took up residence in Auvers, from 1861 until his death in 1878, was Charles Daubigny. Daubigny was a landscape painter of the Barbizon

school who was much admired by the impressionists. He had defended and promoted their art, securing exhibition of their work at the Paris salons. He was a father figure for artists of the younger generation.

Although Daubigny had passed away by the time Van Gogh came to Auvers, his house was something of a pilgrimage site. His widow still lived there, and Van Gogh wrote to Theo shortly after arriving in Auvers, saying that he hoped to visit her. He was taken not only with the house but with its luxurious garden (slide 19), and he expressed to Theo the idea of producing a large canvas of the setting. The relatively small sketch seen here (slide 18) was done in preparation for the painting. It shows the garden, with the artist's house in the background. Soft pastel hues of pink and green are reminiscent of Van Gogh's Paris paintings. The picture is quiet, restful, subdued, reflecting the peace that he and others found in the garden. Van Gogh actually made two finished paintings of the garden that were twice the size of this oil sketch.

The Auvers period was very brief but phenomenally productive. Van Gogh lived there for only seventy days but painted some seventy-five canvases. It was almost as if he recognized that his time was short and he was trying to make the most of it.



Vincent van Gogh

Wheatfield with Crows

July 1890

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Daubigny's Garden provides a marked contrast to other images that poured forth from Van Gogh in his last two months. As his mental health deteriorated, his fits of depression became more severe and he would explode in anger; afterward he would often go out into the fields and talk to himself. He was also keenly worried about being a financial burden to his brother. Now that Theo had a wife and small son to support in addition to their mother, Van Gogh felt guilty about accepting his money.

The claim has often been made that *Wheatfield with Crows* (slide 20) was Van Gogh's last work. That may or may not be true, but it is certainly among the last canvases he produced. He made the painting in July 1890. As in other late works, the mood here is stark and ominous. The colors have become almost acidic in some passages, somber and dull in others. The brushwork, too, has become disjointed. In contrast to the taut, vigorous brushstrokes seen in *The Harvest*, for example, which create an interwoven effect, the brushwork here is starting to fall apart, as if a tapestry is

unraveling. The strokes break up, almost seeming to reflect Vincent's emotional state. They are violent, dynamic, and aggressive in their intensity.

Elements of the landscape contribute to the sense of foreboding. The sky is heavy and dark, and the crows—which feed on carrion—are a symbol of death and disaster. While this painting alludes to the theme of the harvest, there are no human harvesters present. But perhaps most disturbing are the three paths, moving to the left, to the right, and into the center. The middle path suddenly seems to vanish without a trace.

Van Gogh talked about this canvas in a letter to Theo, describing it and another work he was painting at the same time as having "enormous outstretched wheatfields beneath angry skies." He continues, "I have consciously tried to express sadness and extreme loneliness in them." He communicates that sense very successfully.

What happened to Van Gogh at the end is well known. On 27 July 1890 he went into the field to paint, perhaps



on this canvas, and shot himself just below the heart with a revolver. He did not die instantly but managed to return to his room at the Ravoux Inn in the center of town, where he was discovered by the innkeeper. He lingered for two days in great pain, then died in Theo's arms. He was thirty-seven.

Vincent's death came as a tremendous blow to Theo. He died six months later. Several years thereafter, at his wife Johanna's request, Theo was placed alongside of Vincent in the graveyard at Auvers. Van Gogh's life had been a dramatic story of pain and struggle, both personal and artistic. It is easy to understand why the myth of Van Gogh sometimes overwhelms the art, but the art is every bit as powerful.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

Grouped by Beginning, Intermediate, or Advanced. Each activity may be related to various disciplines.

A: Art

LA: Language Arts

SS: Social Studies



BEGINNING

SS

Geography

Van Gogh was well traveled for his time. Have students use an atlas to locate the cities and towns where the artist lived, worked, or visited in column A and associate them with the correct country in column B.

A

Arles
Paris
Saint Rémy
London
Brussels
Neunen
Auvers-sur-Oise
Dordrecht
Scheveningen
The Hague

B

Belgium
The Netherlands
England
France

BEGINNING/ INTERMEDIATE

A

Drawing Exercise

Van Gogh often made pen-and-ink drawings related to his paintings. The pen strokes reflect the way brushstrokes were applied. Show the slides of Van Gogh's letter, which includes his sketch of a peasant pulling a harrow across a field, and his drawing *Harvest—The Plain of La Crau*. Have students choose a landscape painting they like (not necessarily by Van Gogh) and make a drawing based on it. Suggest that they use a wide lead pencil or broad-tipped marker. By holding it at different angles to the page, they can create various kinds of "brushstrokes"—dots, dashes, long and short lines, wide lines or thin ones, straight lines or curving. Marks can be set parallel and massed close together or spaced wide apart.

For examples by Van Gogh look again at slides 4 and 13 and at the paperback book *Vincent van Gogh: Drawings* (New York, 1987), which includes 44 large illustrations.

BEGINNING/ INTERMEDIATE

LA

Landscapes

Have students compare two landscapes, *The Olive Orchard* and *Wheatfield with Crows*. Discuss in class how the artist's choice of colors and handling of paint help establish the mood in each. Have students imagine themselves in the landscapes. As a class, create a list of adjectives, adverbs, and nouns to describe each image. Have students select one landscape, then, using the list of words for that painting, write a poem about the landscape.

INTERMEDIATE

SS

Environment

Dutch painters who were Van Gogh's contemporaries, usually called the Hague school, were sometimes referred to as the "Gray school" because of their preference for grays and dark colors. Actually, these are the colors they often saw in the damp, heavy skies of the Netherlands. Have students research the climate of the Netherlands and the area of the North Sea, the setting for both Simon de Vlieger's marine view and Van Gogh's painting of boats at Scheveningen. Have them continue their research into the climate in the south of France, comparing the qualities of the light and the colors in Van Gogh's works from Arles (such as *The Yellow House* ["*The Street*"] and *The Harvest*). What correlations can be seen?

INTERMEDIATE

LA

Verbal and Visual Matching

Match these quotations from Van Gogh's letters with the paintings or preparatory drawings to which they refer.

July 1888

"It took me a whole week... but I had to reserve my mental energy to do [it] well... a Japanese girl—Provençal in this case—12 to 14 years old." [La Mousmé]

Fall 1889

"I am struggling to catch them. They are old silver, sometimes with more blue in them, sometimes greenish, bronzed, fading white above a soil which is yellow, pink, violet tinted orange... Very difficult." [The Olive Orchard]

September or October 1888

"The broad lines of the furniture again must express inviolable rest. Portraits on the walls, and a mirror and a towel and some clothes... This by way of revenge for the enforced rest I was obliged to take." [The Bedroom]

September 1888

"It's terrific, these houses, yellow in the sun, and the incomparable freshness of the blue... The house on the left is pink with green shutters... This is the restaurant where I go for dinner every day. My friend the postman lives at the end of the street on the left." [The Yellow House ("The Street")]

Two letters from late summer or fall 1882

"All during the week we have had a great deal of wind, storm and rain, and I went to Scheveningen several times to see it... The sea was the color of dirty soapsuds." [Scheveningen Beach in Stormy Weather]

INTERMEDIATE/ ADVANCED

A

Color Impact

Read the following excerpt from a letter Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo about his use of color in a still life.

May 1890

"I am doing... two canvases representing big bunches of violet irises, one lot against a pink background in which the effect is soft and harmonious because of the combination of greens, pinks, violets. On the other hand, the other violet bunch (ranging from carmine to pure Prussian blue) stands out against a startling citron background, with other yellow tones in the vase and the stand on which it rests, so it is an effect of tremendously disparate complementaries, which strengthen each other by their juxtaposition."

Consider the emotional and visual impact of color in a work of art. Show slides of works such as *The Harvest* and *Almond Tree in Blossom*. Ask students to create a still life using a palette of pure colors, juxtaposing complementary colors in the foreground and background. What role does color play in determining expressive/emotional character? How would a palette using tints or shades of these pure colors change the painting's expressive qualities?

**BEGINNING/
INTERMEDIATE/
ADVANCED**

LA

Art and Letter Writing

Van Gogh provided great insight into his artistic intentions and processes in more than nine hundred letters. Have students create a work of art, preferably a painting or sculpture that takes some time to complete. Then have them write a letter to a family member or friend describing that work, the thoughts they had while producing it, problems they encountered and how they solved them, how they expect others will view their work, and so on. Emphasize that their descriptions should be specific and vivid, using adjectives that will help their correspondent “see” the art work.

**BEGINNING/
INTERMEDIATE/
ADVANCED**

A

Self-Portrait

Show Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait* in class and discuss what self-portraits reveal. Have each student create his or her own self-portrait whose purpose is to reveal personality and interests rather than physical likeness. Students may consider using other media, for example, music, poetry, video, dance, or other forms of expression. This activity might be extended and students create a portfolio of self-portraits over the course of the year, or years, and reflect on how their self-portraits change.

**BEGINNING/
INTERMEDIATE/
ADVANCED**

LA, A

The Bedroom

Van Gogh wrote a letter to his brother Theo in which described in detail a painting of his bedroom. The following is an excerpt from that letter:

September or October 1888

“This time it's just simply my bedroom, only here color is to do everything, and giving by its simplification a grander style to things, is to be suggestive here of rest or of sleep in general. In a word, looking at the picture ought to rest the brain, or rather the imagination. The walls are pale violet. The floor is of red tiles. The wood of the bed and chairs is the yellow of fresh butter, the sheets and pillows very light greenish-citron. The coverlet scarlet. The window green. The toilet table orange, the basin blue. The doors lilac. And that is all—there is nothing in this room with its closed shutters. The broad lines of the furniture again must express inviolable rest. Portraits on the walls, and a mirror and a towel and some clothes. The frame—as there is no white in the picture—will be white.”

Read this excerpt in class. Have students compare this description with what they actually see in *The Bedroom*. How do the two differ? Ask students to close their eyes and imagine their bedroom at home. What would be the most important aspect of the room? What things would they include to tell the viewer about their interests and who they are? Have students draw the mental picture and compare their drawings with how the room looks in reality.

ADVANCED

A, LA Debate

Van Gogh and Gauguin spent a few months together in Arles between late October and late December 1888. During this time the two of them painted several subjects that point up their distinct artistic styles and personalities. Divide the class into two groups. One group will study at least three works Van Gogh made during this period, and the other group will do the same for Gauguin. Students should investigate the artist's working method for the selected paintings. Have a representative for each group debate the relative merits of the artist's approach to painting and the results.

Three resources for illustrations and commentary include *Van Gogh in Arles*, a catalogue by Ronald Pickvance published in 1984 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, an exhibition catalogue published by the National Gallery of Art in 1988; and *Van Gogh Museum* by Ronald de Leeuw, published in 1997. Compare, for example:

The Red Vineyard by Van Gogh, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

Grape Gathering: Human Misery by Gauguin, Ordupgaard Collection, Copenhagen

The Night Café by Van Gogh, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven

At the Café by Gauguin, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

Les Alyscamps by Van Gogh, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Les Alyscamps by Gauguin, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Old Woman from Arles by Van Gogh, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Old Women at Arles by Gauguin, Art Institute of Chicago

Farmhouse in Provence by Van Gogh, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Farmhouse in Arles by Gauguin, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

Vase with Sunflowers by Van Gogh, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Van Gogh Painting Sunflowers by Gauguin, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

ADVANCED

A, LA Art History Project

Van Gogh admired a wide group of artists from Europe and Japan. He learned about them through his early employment for an art dealer, his travels, his studio classes in Paris, and his brother Theo. Divide the class into small groups to research the artists listed below and prepare papers about each of them. Have the students create a miniature art exhibition, using postcards and color reproductions to illustrate the visual examples that inspired Van Gogh.

Jean-François Millet, French (1814–1875)

Jules Breton, French (1827–1906)

Léon Lhermitte, French (1844–1925)

Camille Corot, French (1796–1875)

Camille Pissarro, French (1830–1903)

Charles Daubigny, French (1817–1878)

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, French (1824–1898)

Adolphe William Bouguereau, French (1825–1905)

Emile Bernard, French (1868–1941)

Paul Gauguin, French (1848–1903)

Georges Seurat, French (1859–1891)

Paul Signac, French (1863–1935)

Rembrandt van Rijn, Dutch (1606–1669)

Johannes Vermeer, Dutch (1632–1675)

Ando Hiroshige, Japanese (1797–1858)

Katsushika Hokusai, Japanese (1760–1849)

Utagawa Yoshimaru, Japanese (1844–1907)

RESOURCES



Books and Catalogues

Bernard, Bruce. *Van Gogh* (New York, 1992). One of the Eyewitness Art series. Introduces the artist's biography, materials, and stylistic development. Glossary.

De Leeuw, Ronald. *Van Gogh Museum* (Zwolle, The Netherlands, 1997).

Dutch Painting in the Age of Van Gogh [exh. cat., Glasgow Museum and Art Galleries] (Amsterdam, 1991). An excellent introduction to nineteenth-century Dutch art in English.

Gogh, Vincent van. *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1978).

_____. *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, ed. Ronald de Leeuw (New York, 1996). There are other abridged editions of Van Gogh's correspondence as well.

Howard, Michael, in association with the Musée Gauguin, Tahiti. *Gauguin* (New York, 1992). Eyewitness Art series. Introduces the artist's life, range of work and media, technique, materials. Glossary.

Hulsker, Jan. *The New Complete Van Gogh: Paintings, Drawings, Sketches* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1996). The most recent catalogue raisonné (a complete catalogue of an artist's work).

Kendall, Richard. *Van Gogh's Van Goghs: Masterpieces from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam* [exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington] (Washington, D.C., 1998)

Pickvance, Ronald. *Van Gogh in Arles* [exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art] (New York, 1984).

_____. *Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers* [exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art] (New York, 1986). Both exhibition catalogues from the Metropolitan Museum provide thorough discussion of the last phases of Van Gogh's prolific career.

Rewald, John. *Post-Impressionism: From Van Gogh to Gauguin* (New York, 1978). An excellent introduction to the major figures of the French avant-garde: Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, Seurat, and others.

Roskill, Mark W. *Van Gogh, Gauguin, and the Impressionist Circle* (Greenwich, CT, 1970).

Stone, Irving. *Lust for Life: The Novel on Vincent van Gogh* (New York and Toronto, 1934). The most famous of Van Gogh biographies; it has been translated into at least thirty-eight languages.

Vincent van Gogh: Drawings (New York, 1987). Forty-four-page paperback with forty-four illustrations of drawings by Van Gogh, including his sketches for *The Potato Eaters* and drawings of *La Mousmé*, *The Yellow House* ("The Street"), and *The Bedroom*.

Van Gogh Web Site

For the technologically adventurous, there are literally hundreds of Web sites devoted or related to Van Gogh. Images of works by Van Gogh at the National Gallery of Art and information about them can be found on the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov

Films (excluding documentaries)

Lust for Life (1956). Vincente Minelli, director. Classic artist biography film based on the novel by Irving Stone. Stars Kirk Douglas as Van Gogh and Anthony Quinn as Gauguin; Quinn won an Oscar as best supporting actor.

Vincent and Theo (1990). Robert Altman, director. Produced in the Netherlands.

Akira Kurosawa's Dreams (1990). Akira Kurosawa, director. Japanese fantasy film consisting of eight separate vignettes, one of which features Martin Scorsese in the role of Van Gogh.

Van Gogh (1991). Maurice Pialat, director. French film chronicles the last two months of Van Gogh's tragic life. Jacques Dutronc won a César award (French equivalent of the Oscar) for his portrayal of Van Gogh.