

VINCENT VAN GOGH

ARTIST GUIDE

Painting, letters, colour and the making of modern art

TheHistoryOfArt.org

Vincent van Gogh

Artist Guide



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This free guide introduces Vincent van Gogh's art and life. It is a compact learning companion to the fuller articles at TheHistoryOfArt.org.

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Photograph: identification as Vincent van Gogh is unconfirmed. See page 39.

Vincent van Gogh, painter, draughtsman, letter-writer and one of the defining figures of modern art.

Introduction

Vincent van Gogh was a Dutch Post-Impressionist painter whose career lasted only about a decade, but whose art changed the way modern viewers think about colour, brushwork, feeling and artistic purpose.

Born in Zundert in the Netherlands on 30 March 1853 and dead at Auvers-sur-Oise on 29 July 1890, he left behind a body of work that feels both intensely personal and unusually generous: peasant interiors, orchards, wheatfields, portraits, self-portraits, cypresses, irises, sunflowers, night skies and rooms that seem to breathe with human presence.

Van Gogh's artistic life was late-starting and compressed. Before committing to art, he worked for the art dealers Goupil, tried religious and teaching paths, and spent time in the Borinage mining district. These experiences shaped his sympathy for labourers, weavers, peasants, miners, sowers and ordinary interiors.

The Nuenen period culminated in The Potato Eaters , which he defended in letters to Theo as the result of long preparation, studies of heads and hands, and a desire to make peasant life appear earned rather than sentimental.

The move to Paris in 1886 changed the surface of Van Gogh's art. There he encountered modern French painting, brighter colour, shorter brushwork,

urban subjects and Japanese prints. Still lifes, portraits, windmills, cafes and views around Montmartre gave him a laboratory for experiment.

Arles , from 1888 into early 1889, gave Van Gogh the south he had imagined: stronger light, orchards in blossom, the Yellow House, night cafes, the Rhone, the Langlois Bridge, wheatfields, sunflowers and the hope of a Studio of the South. It also brought the difficult collaboration with Paul Gauguin and the crisis in December 1888 that ended with Van Gogh mutilating his ear.

Van Gogh in Context

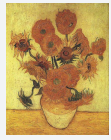
1853	Vincent van Gogh is born in Zundert in the Netherlands.
1869	He begins work with the art dealers Goupil, learning the commercial world of pictures before becoming an artist.
1878-80	The Borinage mission crisis redirects him toward drawing, peasants, workers and vocation.
1885	The Potato Eaters gives the Nuenen period its dark, ambitious culmination.
1886	Van Gogh moves to Paris, where Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism and Japanese prints transform his colour.
1888	Arles becomes the great southern experiment: orchards, Sunflowers, cafes, portraits and the Yellow House.
1889	At Saint-Remy he paints Irises, cypresses, olive groves and The Starry Night while living under medical care.
1890	Auvers-sur-Oise brings Dr Gachet, wheat fields, village subjects and his final weeks.
1891-1925	Theo and then Jo van Gogh-Bonger preserve, publish and circulate the work that builds his posthumous reputation.

Major Works at a Glance



The Starry Night

Saint-Remy night vision, cypress and cosmic movement.



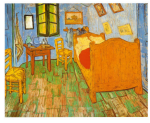
Sunflowers

Arles colour, friendship and decorative ambition.



The Potato Eaters

Nuenen peasants, work, lamplight and moral seriousness.



Bedroom in Arles

Domestic hope, simplified colour and unstable space.



Irises

Garden close looking at Saint-Remy.



Wheatfield with Crows

Auvers field, myth, mood and late landscape.



Cafe Terrace at Night

Night colour, urban theatre and Arles spectacle.



Dr Gachet

Portraiture, care, melancholy and Auvers reputation.



Photograph: identification as Vincent van Gogh is unconfirmed. See page 39.

Van Gogh's life should be read as work, belief, family, study, illness and ambition - not only as legend.

Biography and Vocation

Vincent van Gogh lived only 37 years and worked seriously as an artist for barely a decade, yet his paintings, drawings and letters changed the course of modern art.

This biography follows the full life without reducing it to poverty, illness or tragedy.

Vincent Willem van Gogh was born on 30 March 1853 in Zundert, a village in North Brabant. His father, Theodorus van Gogh, was a Protestant minister; his mother, Anna Cornelia Carbentus, came from a cultured family and drew and painted watercolours. The household gave Vincent a mixture of religious seriousness, moral duty, reading, nature and family expectation.

It also gave him a name already shadowed by absence. A stillborn older brother, also named Vincent Willem, had been born exactly one year earlier. This detail should not be overinterpreted as a simple psychological key, but it belongs to the emotional atmosphere of his early biography.

The young Van Gogh was not an easy fit for institutional life. He attended several schools but left formal education relatively early. His later letters show a man with wide reading and a hunger for moral and artistic purpose, yet his path was irregular from the start. He was drawn to books, prints, nature walks and

intense personal attachments, but struggled with settled professional expectations.

This early period is expanded on the early life page. The central point for the biography is that Van Gogh's artistic vocation emerged late from a series of failed or abandoned callings, not from a straightforward academy route.

In 1869, through family connections, Van Gogh began work with Goupil & Cie, the international art-dealing firm. This placed him inside the commercial art world before he became an artist. He worked in The Hague, then London, and later Paris. The experience exposed him to reproductions, salon painting, prints, collecting habits and the business mechanisms by which art moved through Europe.

London was emotionally important and difficult. Van Gogh admired English literature and city life, but his personal disappointments and religious intensity sharpened. In Paris, his discomfort with the art trade deepened. He increasingly judged pictures through moral and spiritual seriousness rather than saleability. The same world that taught him how art circulated also convinced him that he did not belong comfortably within its commercial routines.

By 1876 he had lost his position with Goupil. The next years were unstable: teaching, assisting in a bookshop, and trying to find a religious role. These were not irrelevant false starts. They formed the moral vocabulary of the artist he would become. His later peasants, sowers, miners, worn shoes, old men and labouring bodies come from a mind already trained to see work, poverty and consolation as serious subjects.



The dark Dutch years and the shock of Paris explain how quickly his art changed.

From Nuenen to Paris

Painted in Nuenen in 1885, The Potato Eaters was Vincent van Gogh's first great manifesto painting: a dark, difficult, deeply prepared image of peasant labour, earned food and family life under lamplight.

In 1869, when Vincent was sixteen, family connections helped place him with Goupil & Cie in The Hague. This was not yet the beginning of his life as an artist. It was the beginning of his life in the art trade: selling, handling and looking at images within a commercial network of dealers, reproductions, prints and collectors.

The Hague years also show why the later artist cannot be separated from print culture. Van Gogh's mature work is often discussed through colour and brushwork, but his early visual world included black-and-white reproductions, illustrated material and the habits of looking developed by a dealer's clerk.

The Borinage was the coal-mining district in Belgium where Vincent van Gogh's failed religious mission became one of the decisive hinges of his life. Between 1878 and 1880, he went there as an aspiring Protestant evangelist, entered a crisis of purpose, and began the path that led him toward art.

This was not a simple conversion story in

which preaching failed and painting magically appeared. The Borinage joined several strands already present in Van Gogh's life: religious seriousness, sympathy for working people, exposure to art, dependence on Theo, and a growing need to find a form of work that could hold his moral intensity.

One of the common myths about the Paris period is that Van Gogh simply became an Impressionist. The truth is more interesting. He studied Impressionist colour and light, but he kept a strong concern for structure, expressive weight, drawing, and emotional force. He also tested Neo-Impressionist and divisionist methods without submitting to the strictest versions of optical theory.

The result is a freer, more personal use of broken touch. Van Gogh learned that colour could be separated into lively strokes, that shadows could be coloured rather than blackened, and that complementary contrasts could charge a surface with energy. Yet he often bent those lessons toward expression rather than optical calm.

This is why Paris is essential for understanding Van Gogh's colour and brushwork . The mature style of Arles and Saint-Remy depends on discoveries made here: colour as structure, line as emotion, and visible brushwork as a form of pressure.

Japanese prints became one of the most important visual languages of Van Gogh's Paris period. Vincent and Theo collected them, and Vincent studied their flat colour, strong contours, unusual cropping, decorative pattern, and sense of everyday life transformed by design. He did not treat Japanese art as a minor ornament. It became part of his rethinking of modern painting.



Arles gave Van Gogh colour, heat, speed, friendship and one of the most fragile studio dreams in art history.

Arles and the Southern Studio

Vincent van Gogh arrived in Arles in February 1888 after two demanding years in Paris .

He was thirty-four, physically run down, restless for a new climate, and convinced that the South of France could give him what Paris no longer could: clearer light, stronger colour, cheaper living, and enough distance to begin again.

In May 1888 Van Gogh rented rooms in a yellow building on Place Lamartine. The Yellow House was a real rented address, not a romantic legend. It gave him a studio, a possible home, and the physical basis for a larger idea. Letter 602 to Theo, dated 1 May 1888, describes the right-hand wing, the rooms, the yellow exterior, the whitewashed interior, the red-brick floors and the rent.

The Yellow House later became one of the most charged places in Van Gogh's life. He painted it in September 1888 in The Yellow House , also known by his own title The Street . The Van Gogh Museum identifies the painting as an oil on canvas made in Arles in September 1888, now in Amsterdam, with catalogue numbers F464/JH1589.

The house was a practical base, but also a manifesto. Van Gogh wanted an environment where paintings, furniture, colour and hospitality worked together. He imagined rooms filled with pictures

from top to bottom. He wanted a place where another artist could stay. The Yellow House linked domestic life to artistic community, and it gave physical form to his hope that modern painting could be lived as well as made.

Van Gogh's Arles Sunflowers were part of the Yellow House project. They should not be treated as cheerful flower pictures detached from the room they were meant to transform. In August 1888, while waiting for Gauguin, Van Gogh worked quickly on sunflower canvases because the flowers wilted fast.

The Sunflowers brought together several Arles concerns. They were still lifes, but also decorative panels. They were colour experiments, but also gestures of hospitality. They related to Gauguin, who admired Van Gogh's sunflower motif, but they later became tied to Van Gogh's own artistic identity. In January 1889, after the December crisis, he made repetitions of some sunflower compositions, showing that repetition for him could be deliberate, serious and expressive rather than mechanical copying.

The detailed version history, Paris sunflower studies, August originals, January repetitions, F/JH catalogue identifiers, museum locations, conservation issues and version-count confusions belong to Sunflowers .

The Bedroom was painted in October 1888, shortly before Gauguin's arrival. It shows Van Gogh's room in the Yellow House, but it is not merely a record of furniture. In Letter 705 to Theo, Van Gogh explained the work through colour and rest. The simplified forms, flat tints and reduced shadows show his interest in Japanese prints and in the expressive power of colour alone.



The late work is not a simple decline story: it includes structure, experiment, repetition and extraordinary concentration.

Saint-Remy and Auvers

Vincent van Gogh spent a year at Saint-Remy-de-Provence, from 8 May 1889 until mid-May 1890.

He entered Saint-Paul-de-Mausole voluntarily after the crises of Arles , seeking care, quiet and observation. What followed was not a simple story of cure, confinement or decline. It was a year of restriction and work, relapse and recovery, fear and discipline, in which he made some of the most searching paintings of his career.

Saint-Paul-de-Mausole was not simply a hospital in the modern sense. It occupied a former monastery near Saint-Remy, with enclosed grounds, garden spaces and views toward the Alpilles. The setting mattered. Van Gogh's year there was shaped by what he could see, where he was allowed to go and what the institution permitted him to do.

At first, his range was narrow. The garden and buildings supplied subjects close at hand: paths, flower beds, trees, stone walls, corridors and views through windows. That limitation was not only a loss. It forced concentration. In the same way that the Yellow House shaped the Arles period, the asylum garden shaped

the opening of Saint-Remy.

Later, with permission, Van Gogh worked outside the walls. The surrounding countryside then became central: wheatfields under the mistral, olive trees, cypresses and the Alpilles. Saint-Remy was restrictive, but it was not empty. It contained a garden, a studio, letters, canvases, memory, books, prints and motifs that could be worked and reworked.

Van Gogh's first Saint-Remy subjects were close to the ground. In the garden he found irises, lilacs and the ordinary vegetation of the asylum grounds. The Getty painting Irises marks the beginning of the asylum year. Its online article explores the object data, Japanese-print influence, colour change and later conservation history.

The garden gave Van Gogh a manageable field of vision when his movement was limited. It also let him work from nature immediately. That matters because Saint-Remy is sometimes told as if the paintings simply emerged from inward disturbance. The early garden works show something more deliberate: close looking, cropping, pattern, colour contrast and physical engagement with plants in front of him.

Van Gogh stayed at the Auberge Ravoux, the inn run by the Ravoux family. Although it is associated with his death, it was first his working base.

The lodging was practical and economical. From there he went out to paint village views, fields, cottages and gardens; from there he wrote letters; and there he encountered Adeline Ravoux, the innkeeper's daughter, whom he painted during the final period.

The Auberge Ravoux belongs to several stories at once: meals, stairs, a small room and the social world of a village inn. Van Gogh also died there on 29 July 1890, two days after he was wounded. The online Death article examines the evidence for his final hours; the Adeline Ravoux article explores her portrait and memories.

Dr Paul-Ferdinand Gachet is central to Auvers, but he should not be flattened into a single role. He was Van Gogh's doctor, but also a collector, amateur artist, etcher and member of a network that valued modern painting. The Musee d'Orsay describes him as closely linked with Van Gogh's final Auvers period and as a figure connected to artists including the Impressionists. He had his own artistic identity too, signing work under the name Van Ryssel.

Van Gogh's first reactions to Gachet were mixed. He was alert to the doctor's nervous temperament and strangeness, but by early June he was writing of him as a friend and almost a brother. That ambivalence matters. It avoids two weak stories: Gachet as saviour and Gachet as

villain. The more accurate Auvers story is one of proximity, usefulness, artistic sympathy and difficulty.



Van Gogh's surface is built from colour, direction, touch and drawing discipline.

Paintings, Drawings and Brushwork

Vincent van Gogh's paintings form one of the most intense and recognizable bodies of work in modern art.

In a little more than a decade as an artist, he moved from dark Dutch scenes of peasants and cottages to Paris experiments in modern colour, Arles sunflowers and night cafes, Saint-Remy cypresses and irises, and the urgent wheatfields and portraits of Auvers-sur-Oise.

Van Gogh made paintings, drawings, sketches, letter sketches and lithographs. Many show how he studied before he painted. The online Works article covers this wider oeuvre. The Paintings article focuses on painted works, especially oils on canvas, and provides routes through their subjects and periods.

Readers can follow the subjects and periods that interest them.

If you want the full art map, start with Works . If you want drawings and works on paper, use Drawings . If you want the painted achievement itself, begin here: the Dutch interiors, Paris still lifes and portraits, Arles flowers and nocturnes, Saint-Remy gardens and cypresses, and the final Auvers fields.

Van Gogh's first ambitious paintings came out of the Netherlands rather than the bright South of France. In The Hague, Drenthe, Nuenen and nearby villages, he studied workers, cottages, looms, fields,

church towers, digging figures and peasant interiors. These early paintings often use a narrow, dark palette: browns, blacks, olive greens, ochres, grey light and the dull glow of lamps.

"drawing is the root of everything"

That short phrase clarifies the role of drawing in Van Gogh's art. He did not treat it as a beginner's exercise to be abandoned once he became a painter. Drawing supplied the structure under colour, the discipline under speed and the habit of looking that made his mature work possible.

Drawing gave Van Gogh a practical way to work when paint was expensive, weather was difficult or a subject had to be seized quickly. It also gave him a language of contour, rhythm and hatching that never disappeared, even after colour became central to his art.

Van Gogh's technique is one of the reasons his paintings remain legible even from a distance. A cypress bends like flame. A wheat field seems to move. A face is built from small coloured strokes rather than smoothed flesh tones. Sunflower seed heads become rough islands of paint. In The Starry Night , the night sky is both a view and a surface: colour and paint describe the world while also drawing attention to themselves as colour and paint.

A brush mark need not be read as a psychological confession. Van Gogh's handling has often been drawn into the myth of the uncontrolled genius, but the technical evidence points in a more interesting direction. He studied. He copied. He repeated. He made drawings after paintings and paintings after drawings.

He also adjusted handling from subject to subject: smooth bands in a vase, jagged petals in Sunflowers , pulsing marks in skies, woven strokes in fields, nervous colour stripes in self-portraits and graphic outlines around irises or trees. Van Gogh did not have one brushstroke. He had a vocabulary.

Van Gogh did not arrive at thick, bright, broken brushwork in one leap. In the Dutch years his subjects were peasants, weavers, cottages, fields, worn shoes and still lifes. His paint handling tended to be darker, earthier and more tonal. That dark tonal painting trained him to build forms through mass, shadow and structure before he adopted the brighter touch associated with Paris and Provence.



Colour, contour and flat design became a practical language for feeling and structure.

Colour and Japanese Art

Vincent van Gogh's colour can look immediate, blazing and instinctive. That is part of its power, but it is not the whole story. His mature paintings were built from study, comparison, experiment and repeated testing.

Colour was something he learned, argued with, practised and pushed until it could carry structure as well as feeling.

"the night is even more richly coloured than the day"

That line is a useful key to Van Gogh's colour. He was not looking for a neutral copy of the world. He was trying to discover where colour became more intense, more structural and more expressive than ordinary description.

Van Gogh's early colour is sometimes treated as a problem that Paris solved. That is too simple. The dark Dutch palette was not merely immature or mistaken. It belonged to the subjects he had chosen and to the traditions he admired: peasants, cottages, earth, labour, interiors, worn clothing and the moral seriousness of rural life.

In works such as The Potato Eaters , colour is deliberately close to the soil. Browns, blacks, greys and greenish shadows make the figures feel part of the same world as the potatoes they eat and

the room they inhabit. Van Gogh wanted the painting to be rough, truthful and materially connected to peasant labour.

"All my work is based to some extent on Japanese art."

Van Gogh's serious engagement with Japanese prints belongs above all to his artist-period stay in Paris from 1886 to 1888. Paris gave him access to modern painting, print dealers, artist friends, exhibition spaces and Theo's professional network. It also gave him a market in which Japanese prints could be bought in quantity.

One key figure was Siegfried Bing, the dealer and publisher associated with Japanese art in Paris. In a letter from Arles in July 1888, Van Gogh urged Theo not to give up the stock of Japanese prints connected with Bing. He mentioned an attic full of prints, remembered giving prints to Emile Bernard, and described the prints as a resource that gave artists pleasure and instruction.

The brothers' apartment also mattered. Van Gogh wrote that Theo's apartment would not be what it was without the constant presence of Japanese prints. That remark shows the prints as part of a working environment. They were not hidden in portfolios for occasional study. They shaped the visual atmosphere in which Van Gogh, Theo and visiting artists thought about art.



The still-life pages are not side rooms: they are central to Van Gogh's colour, friendship, seasons and decorative ambition.

Flowers and Still Life

Flowers run through Vincent van Gogh's art as far more than attractive subjects.

They were portable colour laboratories, seasonal records, gifts, decorations, signs of friendship and family, and tests of how much emotional force a painting could carry through colour alone.

The Sunflowers are Van Gogh's most famous flower paintings, but they are part of a wider subject. The dedicated online article explains their versions, museum locations, F/JH identifiers, Yellow House chronology, relationship with Gauguin, technical research and the difficulties of counting the series.

Here, the essential point is that the Arles Sunflowers changed flower painting into a decorative programme. Van Gogh was not merely painting a vase of flowers for its own sake. He imagined large sunflower canvases as part of an interior, connected to the Yellow House, Gauguin's expected arrival and his idea of an artists' studio in the south.

Three clarifications matter most. First, Van Gogh's Sunflowers are not one painting. There are Paris cut-sunflower still lifes and later Arles vase pictures. Second, the Arles vase paintings belong to decoration

and friendship. Third, they are colour experiments of unusual ambition, especially in the yellow-on-yellow problem of the Amsterdam Sunflowers , F0458/JH1667, Van Gogh Museum object s0031V1962.

Almond Blossom is one of Van Gogh's most personal flower paintings. It was painted at Saint-Remy in February 1890 for Theo and Jo after the birth of their son Vincent Willem, who had been named after the artist. The Van Gogh Museum identifies the painting as F0671/JH1891, object s0176V1962.

The painting is often described through new life, and that reading is source-supported. Almond trees flower early in spring, and the painting was made for a newborn child. But it is not simply a sentimental image of hope. Its tenderness is built through design: branches cut across a blue field, bold outlines define the forms, and the composition owes much to Japanese printmaking.

Van Gogh's still-life story begins early in his serious painting practice. The Van Gogh Museum identifies Still Life with Cabbage and Clogs as a Hague work of November-December 1881, catalogued F0001/JH0081, object number s0137V1962. Its catalogue position is striking: F1, the beginning of the Faille numbering, is not a landscape, a portrait or a famous sunflower vase, but a still life with ordinary things.

Anton Mauve set Van Gogh in front of old clogs and other objects as an oil-painting exercise. That detail matters. Still life gave the young painter a controlled subject: no moving figure, no changeable sky, no social drama, just objects whose colour, texture, volume and surface could be studied intensely. The cabbage leaves, clogs and surrounding matter gave him a problem in touch as much as in description.

The clogs also point forward. Van Gogh would spend much of his Dutch period trying to represent peasant life without prettifying it. Household objects, worn footwear, baskets and food were not neutral props. They were part of a world of labour. Still life let him bring that world close enough to touch.

Still Life with Bible is the intellectual centre of Van Gogh's Dutch still-life practice. The Van Gogh Museum dates it to Nuenen, October 1885, and gives the object data as F0117/JH0946, object number s0008V1962. The painting shows an open Bible, associated with Van Gogh's father, who had died earlier that year, beside a copy of Emile Zola's La joie de vivre .



Fields, roads, skies, cypresses and night scenes carry some of Van Gogh's richest thinking.

Landscape, Night and Fields

Vincent van Gogh's landscapes are not a side category of his art. They are one of the main ways he thought about work, weather, place, colour, faith, recovery, loneliness and modern painting itself.

From the dark fields and cottages of the Netherlands to the Paris suburbs, from the orchards and bridges of Arles to the cypresses, olive groves and wheatfields of Saint-Remy and Auvers, landscape gave Van Gogh a subject that could be observed from life and remade through feeling.

Van Gogh painted and drew landscapes throughout his career. His subjects included Dutch fields, ditches, cottages and labouring peasants; Paris windmills, gardens and suburban riverbanks; Arles orchards, bridges, harvest fields and night skies; Saint-Remy cypresses, olive groves, mountains, enclosed gardens and wheatfields; and Auvers village views, cottage groups, roads and broad final fields.

The most famous Van Gogh landscapes include The Starry Night , Starry Night over the Rhone , Wheat Field with Cypresses , Wheatfield with Crows , the olive-grove series, the flowering orchards of Arles, the Langlois Bridge pictures, Green Wheat Fields, Auvers , The Church

at Auvers , Daubigny's Garden and the late Auvers cottage and field views.

Van Gogh did not treat landscape as scenery behind more important subjects. Nature was a subject in its own right and a testing ground for almost every part of his art: drawing, colour, structure, spiritual longing, observation, memory and expressive brushwork.

His landscapes often bring together three pressures. First, they are based on close looking. Even when the handling becomes intense, the subject is usually rooted in a real place: a bridge near Arles, the asylum garden at Saint-Remy, olive trees outside the hospital walls, a wheatfield at Auvers, or the roads and cottages around the village.

Second, they are built through memory and art. Van Gogh's landscapes are full of other art: Dutch seventeenth-century landscape, the Barbizon school, Jean-Francois Millet, Impressionism, Japanese prints and the work of contemporaries he saw in Paris. The landscape becomes a place where he tests what modern painting can inherit and transform.

The most important point is simple: Van Gogh did not treat night as an absence of colour. He used night to intensify colour.

Night, for Van Gogh, could be blue, violet, green, orange, sulphur yellow, royal blue, red-gold and bronze. It could be public or private, social or solitary, observed or invented. It could glow from gas lamps, shimmer through river reflections, burn inside a cafe or open into a sky of stars.

The phrase "night painting" can suggest blackness, grey shadow and dim outlines. Van Gogh moved in the opposite direction. He wanted nocturnal painting to prove that darkness had its own colour relationships.



Photograph: identification as Vincent van Gogh is unconfirmed. See page 39.

Van Gogh's heads and self-images test likeness through colour, relation and emotional address.

Portraits and Self-Portraits

Vincent van Gogh's portraits are among the clearest places to see what he wanted modern painting to become. They are not conventional likenesses, and they are not simply psychological documents.

In portraits of peasants, postal workers, artists, doctors, innkeepers' daughters and friends, Van Gogh tried to make colour carry character.

Van Gogh is often introduced through landscapes, flowers and self-portraits, but portraiture was one of his most persistent ambitions. He wanted to paint people with the force he found in earlier Dutch figure painting, the social weight of peasant life, the colour discoveries of Paris, and the emotional directness he sought in Arles and Auvers.

His portrait sitters were rarely aristocratic or official. Many came from the everyday world around him: peasants at Nuenen, cafe figures, a postal employee in Arles, the Roulin children, a doctor's daughter, an innkeeper's daughter, an artist friend, a gardener, a military officer and local women. This gives the portrait project its modernity. Van Gogh's sitters are not presented as social trophies. They are people encountered through work, lodging, friendship, illness, neighbourhood and artistic exchange.

Van Gogh's portraits are not only about

faces. They are about the pressure of colour. A blue uniform can become a statement of public role and personal force. A red-and-green background can intensify a face. A floral wall can transform Augustine Roulin into La Berceuse, a mother and a lullaby. A deep blue ground behind Eugene Boch can suggest infinity or a starry mental space. A doctor's hand, books and foxglove can turn a seated sitter into an image of modern melancholy.

Van Gogh's mature portrait theory can be summarized simply: likeness was not enough. He wanted portraits that would remain alive for later viewers because colour, arrangement and expression had been heightened beyond ordinary appearance.

Van Gogh made about 35 painted self-portraits and a small number of drawings. Counts vary with doubtful works, drawings, double-sided objects and version categories. The Courtauld Gallery's 2022 exhibition summary gives 35 painted representations and two drawings, made over roughly three and a half years from spring 1886 to September 1889.

That number is striking because of the time span. Rembrandt's self-portraits stretch across decades. Van Gogh's surviving group belongs to a compressed late-career burst. Before Paris, he had trained himself through peasant heads, figure studies and drawings of working people, but the great self-portrait sequence begins when he enters the modern artistic world of Paris.

The Paris years were the turning point. The Metropolitan Museum of Art notes that Van Gogh made more than twenty self-portraits during his Paris stay, where he was short of funds and needed practice in figure painting. That practical explanation is essential. The self-portraits were not only acts of introspection. They were part of a working artist's training routine.

Self-portraiture can sound like vanity if it is detached from the realities of nineteenth-century studio life. Van Gogh's case points in the opposite direction. He often struggled financially. Paid models cost money. Friends and sitters were not always available. A mirror gave him a face, a head, a beard, eyes, hands and clothing that he could study again and again without paying anyone to sit.



Photograph: identification as Vincent van Gogh is unconfirmed. See page 39.

The letters are one of the great archives of artistic thought, but they also reveal the practical family network behind the work.

Letters, Quotes and Family

Vincent van Gogh's letters are one of the richest primary sources in modern art.

They reveal how he thought about colour, work, reading, friendship, faith, illness, ambition and the paintings now at the centre of his reputation.

The official scholarly edition, Vincent van Gogh: The Letters , brings together the surviving correspondence with transcriptions, English translations, facsimiles, notes and contextual information. It is the best starting point for anyone who wants to read Van Gogh's words responsibly, check a famous quotation, or understand how a painting relates to the circumstances in which it was made.

The letters support the broader biography , clarify his relationship with Theo van Gogh , help frame the works , and provide a more reliable foundation for Van Gogh quotes than anonymous quote lists or social-media wording.

"There's the art of lines and colours, but there's the art of words that will last just the same."

Van Gogh's letters matter because they show an artist thinking in real time. They record practical needs, family tensions, reading lists, spiritual longings, arguments about art, money worries, travel plans, illness, ambition and self-doubt. They are intimate, but they are not simple diary entries.

Van Gogh left behind hundreds of letters, especially to his brother Theo van Gogh . They are the strongest source for his own words about art, work, faith, literature, colour and daily life. The letters are also complicated evidence. Van Gogh wrote mainly in Dutch and French, and modern English readers often know his words through translation.

That means three different things can all be true at once: a quote may express a real Van Gogh idea, the familiar wording may not be the exact official translation, and the original letter context may be more complex than the short quotation suggests.

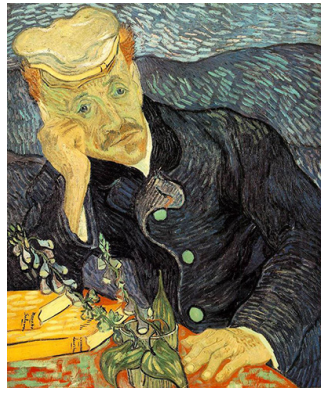
"I want to make drawings that move some people."

Theo is often introduced as the brother who supported Vincent financially. That is true, but it is not enough. It can make Theo sound like a bank account with a family name, when the evidence points to something more complicated and more historically important.

Theo was part of the art trade. He understood pictures as objects that moved through dealers, collectors, exhibitions, stockrooms, friendships and reputations. The British Museum's biographical note identifies him as a Dutch art dealer based in Paris and stresses that Vincent's letters to Theo provide an autobiographical account of much of Vincent's life.

Van Gogh's fame can look inevitable from the present. The paintings are now museum icons; the letters are a central document of modern art; works such as Almond Blossom , Sunflowers, The Bedroom and the late wheatfields are almost impossible to imagine as fragile family property. But reputation is not automatic. It is built by preservation, access, argument, taste, timing and trust.

Jo's achievement was to turn an inheritance into a cultural legacy. She kept the works and letters together long enough for them to matter as a body. She lent and exhibited paintings so critics and artists could see them. She sold selectively, helping works enter collections without letting the entire estate vanish into the market. She cultivated people who could write, speak, buy, advise and persuade. She delayed the major publication of the letters until the paintings had gained more recognition, then gave readers a version of Vincent as an artist, brother and man.



Van Gogh's final weeks need both caution and fullness: evidence, medical uncertainty, rumour and later myth must be separated.

Death, Illness and Myth

Vincent van Gogh died in Auvers-sur-Oise, France, in the early hours of 29 July 1890. He was 37.

The standard museum and scholarly account is that he suffered a self-inflicted gunshot wound on 27 July 1890, returned wounded to the Auberge Ravoux, and died there two days later with his brother Theo nearby.

Van Gogh arrived in Paris from Saint-Remy in May 1890, then moved to Auvers-sur-Oise on 20 May. Auvers offered a village landscape close enough to Paris for Theo to visit, and it placed Vincent near Dr Paul Gachet , a physician with artistic connections who had been recommended within the Impressionist circle.

The final Auvers period was short and extraordinarily productive. The Musee d'Orsay's exhibition material on Van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise describes an intense 70-day period in which Van Gogh produced dozens of paintings and drawings before his death. That chronology matters because it prevents a simple, misleading story in which the final weeks are treated only as decline. Van Gogh was distressed, isolated and worried, but he was also working with enormous force.

The late Auvers works include Wheatfield with Crows, Tree Roots and portraits of Dr

Gachet, views of the village church, fields, cottages and gardens. Those works belong to the story, but none should be reduced to a hidden death certificate. The late paintings need to be read as art, not merely as clues.

These events have several contexts. The ear episode belongs to the Arles crisis of 1888 and should not be blurred into the Auvers death narrative. The online Theo van Gogh article explains the brotherly relationship that shaped Vincent's career and final days. The Jo van Gogh-Bonger article follows the preservation, editing, exhibition and reputation of the works and letters after both brothers died.

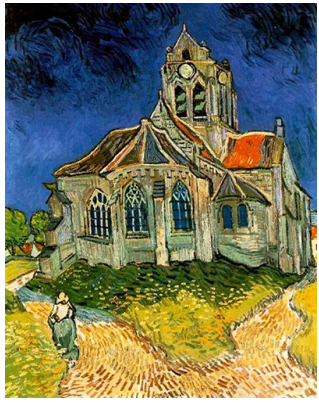
The suicide account remains mainstream because it fits the established chronology, the early tradition around the death, and the way major museum and scholarly sources have continued to summarise the event. The Musee d'Orsay's Auvers material, the National Gallery of Victoria timeline and other institutional chronologies present the death in those terms.

That does not mean the evidence is complete. Historical accounts of Van Gogh's death rely on a mixture of institutional chronology, letters, later testimony and biography. But lack of perfect evidence is not the same as evidence for an alternative conclusion.

Mental illness, self-harm and suicide are discussed here in historical context. Van Gogh's illness was real and at times devastating, but no modern diagnosis can be proved from the surviving documents. Historical medical terms such as mania, delirium and illness of an epileptic nature are treated here as period evidence, not final medical labels.

For the detailed Arles ear incident, see Vincent van Gogh's Ear . For the final events at Auvers-sur-Oise, see The Death of Vincent van Gogh . If this topic is personally urgent for you or someone nearby, contact local emergency services or a qualified crisis-support service.

Posthumous diagnosis has a long history in Van Gogh studies. Different authors have proposed epilepsy, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, psychosis, borderline personality disorder, alcohol-related illness, absinthe effects, malnutrition, lead poisoning, porphyria, sunstroke and other explanations. Some theories focus on mood, some on seizures, some on substance use or physical illness, and some on combinations of factors.



Van Gogh's fame was made after death through family labour, exhibitions, collecting, reproduction and modern art's changing values.

Legacy and Reputation

Jo van Gogh-Bonger was Theo van Gogh's wife, Vincent van Gogh's sister-in-law and one of the decisive figures in the artist's posthumous reputation.

After Vincent and Theo died within six months of each other, she preserved, exhibited, lent, sold and published the material that made Van Gogh visible to the modern world.

Van Gogh's fame can look inevitable from the present. The paintings are now museum icons; the letters are a central document of modern art; works such as Almond Blossom , Sunflowers, The Bedroom and the late wheatfields are almost impossible to imagine as fragile family property. But reputation is not automatic. It is built by preservation, access, argument, taste, timing and trust.

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recognition, then gave readers a version of Vincent as an artist, brother and man.

This does not mean Jo made Van Gogh famous single-handedly. Theo's support, Vincent's own extraordinary work, artist networks, dealers, critics, collectors, exhibitions and changing modern taste all mattered. But without Jo's decades of attention, the evidence and the artworks would have had a far less coherent route into public life.

A better way to describe her is as the first long-term steward of Van Gogh's posthumous meaning. She was not merely preserving things. She was creating conditions under which the things could speak.

After Theo's death Jo returned to the Netherlands. In spring 1891 she opened a boarding house, Villa Helma, in Bussum, not far from Amsterdam. She ran it until 1901. The detail can sound domestic, but it is central to understanding her legacy work.

Van Gogh's fame was not immediate in the simple way popular myth suggests. During his lifetime he sold little and depended heavily on Theo. After Vincent died in July 1890 and Theo died in January 1891, Jo van Gogh-Bonger inherited a vast responsibility: paintings, drawings, letters and a fragile reputation. Her work in preserving, lending, exhibiting and publishing helped make the modern Van Gogh possible.

That legacy is one reason Van Gogh can now feel both intimate and universal. The paintings are everywhere, but the best way to recover their force is to slow them down: which version, which place, which letter, which relationship, which technical problem, which myth needs correcting?

Places, versions, letters and relationships offer a more specific way to read Van Gogh than the familiar tragic-genius summary. Follow the online articles for fuller explanations and evidence.

Themes and Routes

Van Gogh is best read through several routes at once: biography, places, medium, subject, correspondence, individual works and the later machinery of reputation.

Start with

Letters and looking

The letters make Van Gogh unusually audible: ambition, friendship, doubt and working method sit close to the paintings.

Colour as pressure

Paris and Arles turn colour into a structure for emotion rather than mere natural description.

Fields and roads

Landscape pages let readers follow wheat, cypress, olive and road motifs across Nuenen, Arles, Saint-Remy and Auvers.

Flowers and still life

Sunflowers, Irises, roses and almond blossom show how still life could become symbolic, decorative and intensely observed.

Then follow

Portrait and self-image

The portraits and self-portraits turn identity into a testing ground for colour, line, companionship and crisis.

Myth correction

The death, ear and mental-health pages separate evidence-led biography from later simplification and rumour.

Influence networks

Japanese prints, Millet, Gauguin, Theo and Jo show Van Gogh as a connected artist, not an isolated miracle.

Close reading

Annotated images support slow looking at individual works without replacing the fuller article pages.

Close Reading: The Starry Night



Annotated details adapted from the matching Van Gogh article.

1 Moon and halo

The moon is both celestial body and painted force, surrounded by strokes that make light move.

2 Central spiral

The central spiral is the painting's most famous invention, turning the sky into a visible current.

3 Stars

The stars are not pinpoints; each is given a body of colour and surrounding motion.

4 Cypress

The cypress rises like a dark flame, joining earth, village and sky.

5 Village

The village below remains comparatively still, sharpening the contrast with the turbulent sky.

6 Blue hills

The hills form a rolling boundary between human settlement and cosmic movement.

Further reading notes: page 51.

Close Reading: Sunflowers



Annotated details adapted from the matching Van Gogh article.

1 Upper flower

The upper sunflower reaches into the open background and prevents the bouquet from feeling static.

2 Left bloom

The left bloom helps spread the arrangement across the vase rather than stacking it centrally.

3 Right petals

The right-hand petals show Van Gogh using yellow on yellow without losing form.

4 Central blooms

The clustered central heads make the bouquet dense, varied and almost sculptural.

5 Lower flower

The lower flower bridges the bouquet and vase, keeping the arrangement compact.

6 Vase

The vase steadies the composition while the inscription and contour keep the object handmade and intimate.

Further reading notes: page 53.

Close Reading: Bedroom in Arles



Annotated details adapted from the matching Van Gogh article.

1 Wall pictures

The pictures on the wall turn the room into a small self-portrait of artistic life, friendship and memory.

2 Yellow bed

The heavy yellow bed dominates the room, making rest and enclosure the painting's emotional centre.

3 Green window

The green window is a small opening in an otherwise enclosed room, balancing privacy with the world outside.

4 Table and washstand

The table and washstand make the room practical and lived-in, not merely symbolic.

5 Left chair

The empty chair gives the room a human scale and quietly anticipates Van Gogh's chair paintings.

6 Tilted floor

The sloping floorboards make the simple bedroom feel constructed, compressed and emotionally charged.

Further reading notes: page 55.

Close Reading: Wheatfield with Crows



Annotated details adapted from the matching Van Gogh article.

1 Stormy sky

The sky is built from heavy blue strokes that give the field a pressurized atmosphere.

2 Crows

The crows animate the sky without proving any single symbolic meaning.

3 Central path

The path drives into the wheatfield and then seems to lose certainty inside it.

4 Left wheat

The left field is made from compact strokes that give the wheat weight and direction.

5 Right wheat

The right field pushes back against the path, making the composition feel compressed.

6 Middle field

The middle band holds the colour contrast between yellow field and blue sky.

Further reading notes: page 57.

Continue Reading Online

This PDF is a portable starting point. The full Van Gogh section online includes longer articles, annotated close-reading images, object identifiers, source references and the complete English page group.

Vincent van Gogh	/vincent-van-gogh/
Biography	/vincent-van-gogh/biography/
Paintings	/vincent-van-gogh/paintings/
Landscapes	/vincent-van-gogh/landscapes/
Flowers	/vincent-van-gogh/flowers/
Self Portraits	/vincent-van-gogh/self-portraits/
Letters	/vincent-van-gogh/letters/
Quotes	/vincent-van-gogh/quotes/
Death	/vincent-van-gogh/death/
Starry Night	/vincent-van-gogh/starry-night/
Sunflowers	/vincent-van-gogh/sunflowers/
The Potato Eaters	/vincent-van-gogh/the-potato-eaters/
Bedroom In Arles	/vincent-van-gogh/bedroom-in-arles/
Irises	/vincent-van-gogh/irises/
Wheatfield With Crows	/vincent-van-gogh/wheatfield-with-crows/
Cafe Terrace At Night	/vincent-van-gogh/cafe-terrace-at-night/
Dr Gachet	/vincent-van-gogh/dr-gachet/
The Church At Auvers	/vincent-van-gogh/the-church-at-auvers/
Almond Blossom	/vincent-van-gogh/almond-blossom/

Sources, Image Credits and Further Reading

- This guide is adapted from the source-backed Vincent van Gogh pages prepared for TheHistoryOfArt.org.

- The online articles draw on the Van Gogh Museum, Van Gogh Letters, Kroller-Muller Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, National Gallery London, Musee d'Orsay and other institutional object records and research pages.

- Images come from the existing Van Gogh collection and the matching annotated close-reading illustrations used in the corresponding articles.

- For full references, catalogue/object identifiers and article-specific source links, use the online Van Gogh pages listed above.

Photographic identification

The bearded photograph reproduced in this guide is an unconfirmed likeness associated with Van Gogh. It should not be read as an authenticated portrait. The Van Gogh Museum identifies a photograph of Vincent aged 19 as his established photographic portrait. Plantureux discusses the bearded image under "Un portrait au Canada ?" (2024, p. 139).

Van Gogh Museum, "Mistaken Identity: Vincent and Theo", 23 April 2019.

Serge Plantureux, Vincent van Gogh entoure de ses amis artistes, Nicephore 3 (2024), p. 139, "Un portrait au Canada ?".

Explore the collection online

Follow a title to open its article. Browse artworks, biography, places and themes.

- A Lane in the Public Garden at Arles
- A Lane near Arles
- Adeline Ravoux by Vincent van Gogh
- Agostina Segatori Sitting in the Café du Tambourin
- Almond Blossom by Vincent van Gogh
- Almond Branches in Bloom by Vincent van Gogh
- Arles, View from the Wheat Fields
- At Eternity's Gate by Vincent van Gogh
- Autumn Landscape with Four Trees
- Avenue of Poplars in Autumn
- Beach at Scheveningen in Stormy Weather
- Bedroom in Arles by Vincent van Gogh
- Blossoming Chestnut Branches
- Bulb Fields
- Cafe Terrace at Night by Vincent van Gogh
- Church at Auvers by Vincent van Gogh

Online directory, continued

- Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen
- Crab on its Back
- Daubigny's Garden by Vincent van Gogh
- Doctor Gachet's Garden in Auvers
- Eugene Boch by Vincent van Gogh
- Farmhouse in Provence
- Farmhouses Among Trees
- Farms near Auvers
- First Steps after Millet by Vincent van Gogh
- Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries
- Flowering Plum Tree after Hiroshige
- Gauguin's Chair by Vincent van Gogh
- Girl in White
- Girl in White in the Woods
- Green Wheat Field with Cypress
- Houses at Auvers
- Imperial Fritillaries in a Copper Vase

Online directory, continued

- Irises by Vincent van Gogh
- Jo van Gogh-Bonger
- L'Arlésienne
- La Berceuse by Vincent van Gogh
- La Mousmé
- Landscape with a Carriage and a Train
- Landscape with Snow
- Le Moulin de Blute-Fin
- Marguerite Gachet by Vincent van Gogh
- Memory of the Garden at Etten
- Olive Trees with Yellow Sky and Sun
- Paul Gauguin's Armchair
- Peasant Burning Weeds
- Peasant Woman Digging
- Poppy Field
- Poppy Flowers
- Portrait of Dr Gachet by Vincent van Gogh

Online directory, continued

- Portrait of Joseph Roulin
- Portrait of Père Tanguy
- Portrait of the Artist's Mother
- Portrait of the Postman Joseph Roulin
- Potato Eaters by Vincent van Gogh
- Prisoners Exercising by Vincent van Gogh
- Road with Cypress and Star by Vincent van Gogh
- Rooftops, View from the Atelier The Hague
- Roses by Vincent van Gogh
- Seascape near Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer
- Seine
- Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe
- Self Portrait without Beard
- Self-Portrait (Dedicated to Paul Gauguin)
- Self-Portrait by Vincent van Gogh
- Self-Portrait in Front of the Easel
- Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat by Vincent van Gogh

Online directory, continued

- Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear by Vincent van Gogh
- Self-Portrait with Dark Felt Hat at the Easel
- Self-Portrait with Grey Felt Hat
- Sheaves of Wheat in a Field
- Shoes
- Siesta after Millet by Vincent van Gogh
- Skull of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette by Vincent van Gogh
- Sorrow by Vincent van Gogh
- Sower with Setting Sun by Vincent van Gogh
- Starry Night over the Rhone by Vincent van Gogh
- Still Life - Vase with Pink Roses
- Still Life with Apples
- Still Life with Glass of Absinthe and a Carafe
- Still Life with Open Bible
- Still Life, Vase with Irises Against a Yellow Background
- Sunset at Montmajour
- Thatched Cottages by Vincent van Gogh

Online directory, continued

- The Church at Auvers by Vincent van Gogh
- The Courtyard of the Hospital at Arles
- The Death of Vincent van Gogh
- The Garden of Saint-Paul Hospital
- The Harvest
- The Langlois Bridge by Vincent van Gogh
- The Mulberry Tree by Vincent van Gogh
- The Night Cafe by Vincent van Gogh
- The Old Cemetery Tower at Nuenen
- The Old Mill
- The Parsonage Garden at Nuenen
- The Potato Eaters by Vincent van Gogh
- The Raising of Lazarus (after Rembrandt)
- The Reaper by Vincent van Gogh
- The Red Vineyard by Vincent van Gogh
- The Red Vineyard by Vincent van Gogh
- The Roulin Family Portraits by Vincent van Gogh

Online directory, continued

- The Sower by Vincent van Gogh
- The Starry Night by Vincent van Gogh
- Tree Roots by Vincent van Gogh
- Trees by Vincent van Gogh
- Two Crabs
- Undergrowth with Two Figures by Vincent van Gogh
- Van Gogh and Religion
- Van Gogh Facts
- Van Gogh Family
- Van Gogh in Antwerp
- Van Gogh in Drenthe
- Van Gogh in London
- Van Gogh in Nuenen
- Van Gogh in The Hague
- Van Gogh Influences
- Van Gogh Legacy and Reputation
- Van Gogh Orchards

Online directory, continued

- Van Gogh Timeline
- Van Gogh Watercolours
- Van Gogh Wheat Fields
- Van Gogh's Chair
- Van Gogh's Cypresses
- Van Gogh's Olive Trees
- Van Gogh's Sunflowers
- Van Gogh's Yellow House in Arles
- Van Gogh, Millet and The Sower
- Van Gogh's Last Painting
- Vase with Cornflowers and Poppies
- Vase with Fourteen Sunflowers
- Vase with Irises by Vincent van Gogh
- Vase with Poppies
- Vase with Twelve Sunflowers
- View of Arles, Flowering Orchards
- View of Paris from Vincent's Room in the Rue Lepic

Online directory, continued

- Vincent van Gogh
- Vincent van Gogh and Colour
- Vincent van Gogh and Japanese Art
- Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin
- Vincent van Gogh and Theo van Gogh
- Vincent van Gogh Biography
- Vincent van Gogh Brushwork and Technique
- Vincent van Gogh Drawings
- Vincent van Gogh Early Life
- Vincent van Gogh Flowers
- Vincent van Gogh in Arles
- Vincent van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise
- Vincent van Gogh in Paris
- Vincent van Gogh in Saint-Remy
- Vincent van Gogh in the Borinage
- Vincent van Gogh Landscapes
- Vincent van Gogh Letters

Online directory, continued

- Vincent van Gogh Night Paintings
- Vincent van Gogh Paintings
- Vincent van Gogh Peasants and Workers
- Vincent van Gogh Portraits
- Vincent van Gogh Posters
- Vincent van Gogh Prints
- Vincent van Gogh Quotes
- Vincent van Gogh Self-Portraits
- Vincent van Gogh Still Life Paintings
- Vincent van Gogh Works
- Vincent van Gogh's Ear
- Vincent van Gogh's Mental Health and Illness
- Ward (Sick-ward) in the Hospital in Arles
- Wheat Field with Cypresses by Vincent van Gogh
- Wheatfield under Thunderclouds by Vincent van Gogh
- Wheatfield with Crows by Vincent van Gogh
- Wheatfield with Cypresses by Vincent van Gogh

Online directory, continued

- Where to See Van Gogh
- White House at Night
- Willows at Sunset
- Women Mending Nets in the Dunes

Further reading: The Starry Night

These reading notes complement the numbered visual key. Follow a heading for the full article.

Saint-Remy: the asylum, the window and the working artist

Van Gogh entered Saint-Paul-de-Mausole at Saint-Remy in May 1889, after the crisis-filled end of his Arles period. It is tempting to treat the asylum only as a biographical explanation for The Starry Night , but that would flatten both the painting and Van Gogh's life. The Saint-Remy year was marked by illness, fear of relapse, treatment, restriction and recovery. It was also a year of extraordinary work.

The invented village

The village below the sky looks so settled that it can seem documentary. Houses cluster in the valley. A church steeple rises near the centre. Dark roofs and small yellow lights give the scene human scale. But MoMA notes that the village could not be seen from Van Gogh's asylum window.

The cypress: more than a death symbol

The dark cypress at the left is one of the painting's most important inventions. It rises from the foreground almost to the top of the canvas, cutting across the sky and linking the lower world to the stars. MoMA notes the tree's visual and symbolic force, including its possible association with graveyards and mourning. Those associations are worth mentioning, but they should not be allowed to swallow the motif.

Introduction

Vincent van Gogh's The Starry Night is one of the most recognised paintings in modern art, but its familiarity can make it deceptively easy to oversimplify. Painted at Saint-Remy in June 1889, while Van Gogh was staying at the asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole, it is a constructed night landscape: partly observed, partly remembered, partly invented, and wholly transformed by paint.

Further reading: The Starry Night (continued)

Where is The Starry Night ?

The Starry Night is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. MoMA lists it as an oil painting on canvas, made at Saint-Remy in June 1889, and records the work under object number 472.1941. The museum acquired it in 1941 through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest, by exchange.

Further reading: Sunflowers

These reading notes complement the numbered visual key. Follow a heading for the full article.

How many Van Gogh Sunflowers are there?

The answer depends on what is being counted. The different groups need to be distinguished.

Paris before Arles: cut sunflowers, 1887

Van Gogh first made sunflowers important before he went to Arles. In Paris in 1887, he painted still lifes of cut sunflower heads. These works belong to the period when he was absorbing the lessons of Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, Japanese prints and the colour of the modern Paris art world. They are smaller and more intimate than the later Arles vase paintings, but they matter because they show the motif entering Van Gogh's artistic vocabulary before the Yellow House project existed.

Painting against time: flowers that wilt

Sunflowers are not patient studio objects. They change quickly. Petals curl, heads droop, colour shifts and the structure of the bloom collapses. Van Gogh knew this, and the letters make the urgency clear.

The London Sunflowers: yellow on yellow

The National Gallery's Sunflowers , inventory NG3863, is one of the best-known versions of the series. It is the 1888 yellow-background version catalogued as F454 / JH1562.

Further reading: Sunflowers (continued)

The Amsterdam Sunflowers: repetition and identity

The Van Gogh Museum's Sunflowers , object s0031V1962, is dated to Arles, January 1889. The museum records the catalogue number as F0458 and the JH number as JH1667. This picture is a repetition after the London version, but the word repetition should not imply weakness.

Lost and private Sunflowers

The seven-picture Arles count includes works that are not easily visible to the modern public. Three Sunflowers in a Vase , F453 / JH1559, is recorded as privately held. Still Life: Vase with Five Sunflowers , F459 / JH1560, is recorded as destroyed or lost in Japan during or after the Second World War.

Further reading: Bedroom in Arles

These reading notes complement the numbered visual key. Follow a heading for the full article.

The three versions of The Bedroom

Bedroom in Arles exists in three painted versions. The Amsterdam painting is the October 1888 Yellow House original. The Chicago painting is the full-size September 1889 repetition made at Saint-Remy. The Orsay painting is the smaller September 1889 family version made for Van Gogh's mother and sister Willemien.

Why Van Gogh painted his bedroom

Van Gogh described the painting almost immediately. In Letter 705, written to Theo on 16 October 1888, he sent a sketch of the composition and explained the idea behind it. The subject was simply his bedroom, but he said colour had to do the work. He wanted the painting to rest the mind and imagination, to suggest sleep or repose rather than narrative drama.

Annotated Details from Bedroom in Arles

This annotated close reading follows six details in Bedroom in Arles, using the painting as a visual guide to Van Gogh's colour, structure, brushwork and subject matter.

Yellow bed

The heavy yellow bed dominates the room, making rest and enclosure the painting's emotional centre.

Green window

The green window is a small opening in an otherwise enclosed room, balancing privacy with the world outside.

Further reading: Bedroom in Arles (continued)

Introduction

A wooden bed, two chairs, a small table, a washstand, closed shutters, towels and pictures on the wall: Vincent van Gogh made one of modern art's most famous rooms from the plainest domestic objects. Bedroom in Arles , also known as The Bedroom , is not a grand history painting or a panoramic view of Provence. It is a painting of a room he had prepared for himself inside the Yellow House in Arles.

Further reading: Wheatfield with Crows

These reading notes complement the numbered visual key. Follow a heading for the full article.

What does Wheatfield with Crows show?

The scene is simple at first glance: a wheatfield, a sky, several paths and a flock of black birds. The longer one looks, the less simple it becomes.

Was Wheatfield with Crows Van Gogh's last painting?

No. It is safer and more accurate to say that Wheatfield with Crows is one of Van Gogh's last paintings, not his final painting.

The road and the three paths

The roads in Wheatfield with Crows have generated some of the painting's strongest symbolic readings. They are often interpreted as dead ends, lost routes, or choices without resolution. Those readings are understandable, but they should remain in the realm of interpretation.

The crows

The black birds in the sky are among the most memorable details in the painting. They have often been called crows, and the painting's standard English title makes them central. Their jagged silhouettes animate the upper sky, interrupting the blue-black weather with sharp, living marks.

Wheatfields in Van Gogh's work

Wheatfields run through Van Gogh's art long before Auvers. They connect rural labour, seasons, harvest, sowing, reaping, biblical imagery, cycles of growth and death, and the visual challenge of open land under strong skies. For Van Gogh, fields were not empty scenery. They were places where nature, work and human feeling could be joined.

Further reading: Wheatfield with Crows (continued)

Wheatfield with Crows and Tree Roots

Tree Roots is essential to understanding why the old last-painting claim needs correction. For decades, Wheatfield with Crows was the more famous candidate because it looked like a final image. It seemed to fit the tragic story people expected: storm, birds, road, field, death. But finality is not decided by emotional fit.