

35

## The Stevedores, 1888

'I saw a magnificent and very strange effect this evening. A very large boat laden with coal on the Rhône, moored at the quay. . . . On the boat, small workmen . . . were coming and going, carrying the cargo ashore. It was pure Hokusai.' Van Gogh's description of a scene that reminded him of the celebrated Japanese printmaker later resulted in this remarkable picture. The sunset is captured in orange, yellow and turquoise streaked with lilac.

Oil on canvas

Private collection

37

## The Courtyard of the Hospital at Arles, 1889

In the spring of 1889, Van Gogh spent extended time in the hospital in Arles, where he was given a room as a studio. He painted when well enough and carried on seeking ways to imbue observed details with emotion. 'So it's a painting chock-full of flowers and springtime greenery,' he wrote to his sister, Willemien (1862–1941). 'However, three black, sad tree-trunks cross it like snakes, and in the foreground four large sad, dark box bushes.'

Oil on canvas

The Swiss Confederation, Federal Office of Culture,  
Oskar Reinhart Collection 'Am Römerholz', Winterthur

36

## The Trinquetaille Bridge, 1888

At Arles, a modern bridge crossed the Rhône to connect the old town with the new Trinquetaille quarter. As in *The Stevedores* (35), Van Gogh explores the expressive potential he could achieve using an observed, modern-life subject. The plunging perspective and exaggerated colours, including the river and sky being 'the colour of absinthe', had a specific aim that he outlined in a letter to his brother: 'I'm attempting something more heartbroken and therefore more heartbreaking.'

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Wynn Fine Art

38

## View of Arles, 1889

The bare trunks of three poplars, cropped by the edges of the canvas, form a foreground screen through which the more distant skyline of Arles and its flowering orchards can be seen. Van Gogh must have hoped his inventive combination of daring geometry and rich surface texture would impress other artists. He sent the picture to two high-profile, avant-garde exhibitions in early 1890: the Salon des Indépendants in Paris and Les XX in Brussels.

Oil on canvas

Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Neue Pinakothek,  
Munich

39

## Field with Poppies, 1889

In early June 1889, Van Gogh focused on the landscapes beyond the grounds at Saint-Rémy. This dense patchwork of fields, in which the bright reds of poppies catch the eye, was among the first paintings he made. In what was now becoming his practice, the work was only partially painted outdoors. Back in the studio, Van Gogh adjusted the view to suit his expressive aims: the two houses were inserted, the layout of the fields altered, and the cypresses added.

Oil on canvas

Kunsthalle Bremen – Der Kunstverein in Bremen

40

## The Large Plane Trees (Road Menders at Saint-Rémy), 1888

Van Gogh witnessed this scene while walking through Saint-Rémy in the autumn of 1889. Inspired to make a painting, he used a piece of fabric printed with tiny red diamonds (visible in the rocks, bottom left). Van Gogh made a second version on traditional canvas, but it was this picture that he had Theo send to the Salon des Indépendants exhibition in Paris in 1890.

Oil on fabric

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the Hanna Fund,  
1947.209

41

## Portrait of a Peasant (Patience Escalier), 1888

Van Gogh was convinced he could transform the likeness of Patience Escalier, an old gardener he met in Arles, into the image of a quintessential peasant through his use of exaggerated colour and the handling of paint. In a letter to his brother, he compared it to the way he intended to paint *The Poet* (3), in which a deep blue background would express 'the infinite'. Here, he used blazing oranges and glowing gold tones to communicate 'the very furnace of harvest time, deep in the south'. The portrait formed part of his decoration.

The loan of this extraordinary work is the result of a special exchange partnership between the National Gallery and the Norton Simon Museum, which most recently involved the presentation of *Picasso Ingres: Face to Face* in 2022.

Oil on canvas

Norton Simon Art Foundation, Pasadena, California

42 ∩

## Sunflowers, 1888

One of the first of the *Sunflowers* Van Gogh painted in Arles, this picture was hung in the guest bedroom of the Yellow House in preparation for welcoming Paul Gauguin to his 'artist's home'. Although the two men disagreed on many things over the two months they lived and worked together, Gauguin greatly admired the *Sunflower* paintings, and later wrote to Van Gogh describing them as a 'perfect page of an essential "Vincent" style'.

Oil on canvas

The National Gallery, London.

Bought, Courtauld Fund, 1924

43

## La Berceuse (The Lullaby), 1889

Van Gogh painted Augustine Roulin and her children on several occasions before creating this symbolic depiction of her as an ideal of motherhood, a rope to rock an unseen cradle in her lap. With a title that could be translated as *The Lullaby*, this canvas was one of several versions, the first of which was begun in Gauguin's company in late 1888. Its flattened areas of colour, bounded by firm outlines, show Van Gogh contributing new ideas to the latest artistic developments in Paris.

Oil on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Bequest of John T. Spaulding

44

## Sunflowers, 1889

Van Gogh realised the importance of the *Sunflowers* and painted additional versions of them in early 1889, such as this one with its blue background. Later, in May, he elaborated a daring new scheme for their display in a letter to his brother. Describing it as a 'triptych' (three-panelled work), he imagined two *Sunflower* pictures flanking *La Berceuse* (43) which, if hung in a ship, might bring comfort to sailors travelling far from home.

Oil on canvas

Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Mr. and Mrs. Carroll

S. Tyson, Jr., Collection, 1963



Van Gogh's sketch of the triptych in his letter to Theo, 22 May 1889



45

## Oleanders, 1888

In Arles, free-flowering oleanders grew in profusion in the park Van Gogh designated 'the poet's garden'. He associated the plant with love affairs. The two books placed next to the vase in this picture include one of Van Gogh's favourites. This was Emile Zola's 1884 novel *La Joie de Vivre* (The Joy of Living), a tale of optimism in the face of relentless difficulty.

Oil on canvas

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John L. Loeb, 1962 (62.24)

46

## Still Life with Coffee Pot, 1888

In a letter to Emile Bernard, Van Gogh described this still life as 'a variation of blues enlivened by a series of yellows ranging all the way to orange'. The description barely does justice to the bold arrangement of forms and colours and does not mention the highly conceptual game Van Gogh plays by giving the work a painted, fictional red inner frame set within the expanse of white painted canvas.

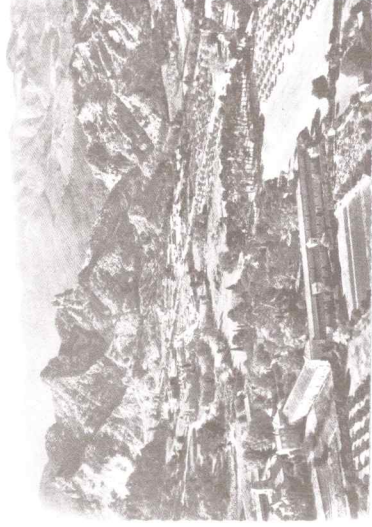
Oil on canvas

Basil and Elise Goulandris Foundation Collection, Athens

## Room 6

### Variations on a Theme

The landscape surrounding Saint-Rémy, with its olive groves and the craggy limestone of the Alpilles mountain range, provided Van Gogh with rich material for creating works in series. Developing ideas he had established in Arles, he fixed on subjects and explored their expressive possibilities through variations. At times, he imaginatively pitched his own work against that produced by Gauguin and Bernard. Van Gogh now often created his work in the studio, a room provided for him at the hospital, which led him to produce some of the most stylised art of his career. He also used the studio to continue creating 'repetitions' of existing works and new portraits.



Aerial view of the Saint-Paul de Mausole hospital in Saint-Rémy with the Alpilles in the background. Postcard. Private collection

© Courtesy the owner



49 ∩

## The Arlésienne, 1890

Oil on canvas

Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea,  
Rome

48

## The Arlésienne, 1890

Oil on canvas

Private collection

In popular culture of the time, the women of Arles were celebrated for their raven-haired beauty. Van Gogh painted five versions of this Arlésienne (woman from Arles). The model, Marie Ginoux (1848–1911), who ran the local café, had originally posed for Van Gogh and Gauguin in November 1888. Later, when in Saint-Rémy, Van Gogh based his quintessential Provençal on the simplified lines of a charcoal drawing Gauguin had made during the sitting. He added two of his favourite books: Charles Dickens's *Christmas Stories*, 1843–8, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's now controversial anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852. In a letter to Gauguin, Van Gogh called the image 'a synthesis of an Arlésienne'. He presented one (47) to his friend Emile Bernard, one to Theo and another to Gauguin himself, thus ensuring the paintings would be seen by artists in Paris.

49 ∩

## A Wheatfield, with Cypresses, 1889

With swirling and rippling strokes of paint, Van Gogh captures the summer mistral wind sweeping through a landscape at the foot of the Alpilles mountains. He had first made an outdoor painting of this view in late June 1889. But in this studio version of September, he stylised the sky to create a decorative pattern that finds echoes in the mountains, cypresses and vegetation below.

Oil on canvas

The National Gallery, London.

Bought, Courtauld Fund, 1923

50

## Landscape with Ploughman, 1889

Van Gogh's view from his room at the hospital was a wheatfield enclosed by a wall. By painting it repeatedly, both from indoors and out, he created a series through which he tried to capture different moods and the essence of the Provençal seasons. The intensity of this autumnal scene in low sunlight is achieved through the bold articulation of his brushwork and a radically simplified and partially invented background.

Oil on canvas

Private collection

51 ∩

## Landscape at Saint-Rémy (Enclosed Field with Peasant), 1889

Writing to the artist Emile Bernard, Van Gogh described this scene as 'nothing but rough ground and rocks, with a thistle and dry grass in a corner, and a little violet and yellow man'. To increase the expressive potential of the image, Van Gogh chose to emphasise the barren heights of the Alpilles in the background, which he painted rising to the top of the picture.

Oil on canvas

Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, Gift of James W. Fesler in memory of Daniel W. and Elizabeth C. Marmon, 44.74

53

## The Olive Trees, 1889

When Van Gogh worked beyond the hospital at Saint-Rémy in early summer 1889, he was delighted by the olive trees seen against the Alpilles. They became a focus in his aim to capture his 'Impressions of Provence' – a series of pictures through which he would transform reality into an expressive ideal. The rhythmic stylisation of the earth, trees and mountains and the form of a massive cloud above were probably all painted in the studio.

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Mrs John Hay Whitney Bequest, 1998

52

## Landscape from Saint-Rémy (Wheatfield behind Saint-Paul Hospital), 1889

Observing the enclosed field after a storm had 'ravaged and knocked to the ground' the crop of wheat, Van Gogh created this composition in which a large cloud hovers above the scene. 'It's a landscape of extreme simplicity', he noted to Theo and, thinking about his decoration, suggested it would make a good contrasting pair to his first version of *The Bedroom*.

Oil on canvas

Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen

54

## The Olive Trees, 1889

Van Gogh made this drawing after the painting alongside (53) and chose to push its abstract, decorative qualities to even greater heights. The virtuosity of his cursive and calligraphic use of the quill and reed pen puts this work on a par with the Montmajour drawings of the previous summer. Theo van Gogh, however, was surprised at this direction in his brother's work and tried to discourage its further pursuit.

Pencil, quill and reed pen and brown ink on wove paper  
Promised gift of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder  
to the Museum of Modern Art, New York

55 

## Mountains at Saint-Rémy, 1889

Taking an actual view as a starting point but choosing not to reproduce it faithfully, Van Gogh painted this highly abstracted landscape using mobile, heavy outlines that he happily acknowledged had little to do with nature. In a further remove from observation, he invented the foreground hut and sunflowers inspired by a scene in *Le Sens de la vie* (The Meaning of Life), an 1889 novel by Edouard Rod (1857–1910).

Oil on canvas

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.  
Thannhauser Collection, Gift, Justin K. Thannhauser, 1978

56

## Olive Trees, 1889

Looking down onto the earth and shadows cast by a grove of olives, Van Gogh began this picture working outdoors in June 1889. But in September, he reworked and changed it in the studio to intensify the work's highly textured surface. Although the yellows, pinks and reds, which heightened the colour contrasts throughout, have since degraded and almost disappeared, the picture remains remarkably expressive.

Oil on canvas

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri  
(Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust) 32-2

57

## Olive Trees, 1889

The prominent placement of an intensely yellow sun recalls Van Gogh's painting of *The Sower* (23) of the year before, in which the disc of the sun became a natural halo for the figure. Here the disc hovers above a grove of highly stylised olive trees. At the time Van Gogh wanted to prove to Gauguin and Bernard that an expressive work of art could be made without quoting directly from the Bible.

Oil on canvas

Lent by the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis.  
The William Hood Dunwoody Fund

58

## Olive Grove, Saint-Rémy, 1889

Recent technical analysis has suggested that Van Gogh painted this olive grove largely outdoors as natural materials have been found in its paint layers. It is exceptionally well preserved in terms of its colour. In other works, such as *Olive Grove with Two Olive Pickers* (59) hanging alongside, Van Gogh experimented with paints that were new on the market and which have since faded. For this luminous picture he used more stable pigments.

Oil on canvas

Gothenburg Museum of Art



59

## Olive Grove with Two Olive Pickers, 1889

In the studio, Van Gogh repeated the composition of *Olive Grove, Saint-Rémy* (58) to which he added imagined figures, a smiling woman in the foreground and a man in blue. Their presence adds to what was already a highly composed and stylised depiction of a grove beneath a sky flecked with wisps of red and blue clouds – all painted using drifts of brushstrokes.

Oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands

60

## Tree Trunks in the Grass, 1890

Applying paint in calligraphic strokes reminiscent of his reed pen drawings, Van Gogh revels in the textures and colours of this view of flowering weeds growing among the trees in the garden at Saint-Rémy. In contrast to the sadness and suffering he aimed to convey in depictions of the hospital grounds the previous autumn, his paintings of the garden in spring 1890 suggest joy and hope.

Oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands

61

## Long Grass with Butterflies, 1890

By the spring of 1890 Van Gogh was acting on plans to leave the South of France and return north. He was, however, captivated yet again by signs of burgeoning life, such as butterflies among the grass and details of the undergrowth he found in the garden at Saint-Rémy.

Oil on canvas

The National Gallery, London.

Bought, Courtauld Fund, 1926

'The painter of the future  
is a colourist such as  
there hasn't been before.'

Van Gogh wrote these words to his brother in the early months of his stay in Arles, and strove to achieve this goal throughout his time in Provence. In just over two years, he developed ways of using intense colour and technique to create poetic subjects filled with emotion.

On 16 May 1890 Van Gogh left Saint-Rémy to return to northern France. He settled in Auvers-sur-Oise, not far from Paris, and created an extraordinary body of new work. Two paintings from this period can be found in the Main Collection in Room 43.

# Chronology

**1853**

**30 March**

Vincent Willem van Gogh is born in Zundert, the Netherlands.

**1869–75**

Van Gogh works for the art dealers Goupil & Cie at The Hague, London and Paris. His brother Theo (1857–1891) works for the same company from 1873.

**1876–9**

Van Gogh takes a teaching post in England, where he also becomes a Christian lay preacher. He works as an evangelical preacher in the Borinage, a coal-mining region in Belgium.

**1880–5**

Theo begins to provide financial support. Van Gogh decides to become an artist and spends a brief time at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Brussels, but over the next years he works chiefly on his own. He lives in The Hague for two years, where he receives painting lessons, and at the end of 1885 he moves to Antwerp. Throughout this time, in a repeating pattern, Van Gogh is forced home to live with his parents due to lack of funds.

**1886**

**End of February**

Van Gogh moves to Paris to live with Theo, who is now an art dealer. He remains in Paris for the next two years.

**Early March–early June**

Van Gogh attends the studio of the painter Fernand Cormon (1845–1924). He becomes friends with the artists Emile Bernard (1868–1941), Louis Anquetin (1868–1932) and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), among others.

**Autumn**

Van Gogh exhibits works at a small number of informal venues, including the shop of the colour merchant Père Tanguy (1825–1894).

**1887**

**About February–March**

He organises an exhibition of Japanese prints from his own collection at the Montmartre café Le Tambourin.

**May**

Van Gogh meets and works with Paul Signac (1863–1935) in the suburbs of Paris.

**November–December**

He organises an exhibition at a restaurant on the Boulevard de Clichy including works by Bernard, Anquetin, Toulouse-Lautrec and himself. He meets the painters Georges Seurat (1859–1891) and Paul Gauguin (1848–1903).

**1888**

**20 February**

Van Gogh arrives in Arles and starts working right away. Throughout his time in the South of France he sends his work to Theo.



### **1 May**

Van Gogh rents the Yellow House and uses it as a studio during the summer while lodging elsewhere in the town. He creates the drawings from Montmajour and views of the public garden in Arles.

### **17 September**

He moves into the Yellow House where he aims to create an artist's home.

### **23 October–23 December**

Paul Gauguin lives and works with Van Gogh at the Yellow House.

### **23 December**

Van Gogh has his first mental breakdown, cuts off his left ear and is admitted to the hospital in Arles the next day.

### **1889**

### **7 January**

Van Gogh leaves the hospital and resumes work.

### **February**

He experiences repeated crises and hospitalisations.

### **March and April**

Residing at the hospital in Arles, Van Gogh is assigned a room where he continues to work.

### **23–24 March**

The painter Paul Signac pays Van Gogh a visit.

### **8 May**

Van Gogh admits himself to the mental health hospital in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. He experiences two further crises in July/August and December. They do not deter him from continuing to work at a very high level, first in

the hospital's grounds and then also in the countryside. He is assigned a room to use as a studio and continues to send his work to his brother.

### **Autumn**

Van Gogh resumes correspondence with his friends Paul Gauguin and Emile Bernard. Theo sends two of Van Gogh's works to the Salon des Indépendants exhibition in Paris.

### **1890**

Following a renewed crisis at the end of January, Van Gogh falls ill again in February for almost two months.

### **February**

Van Gogh shows six paintings at the annual avant-garde exhibition of Les XX in Brussels.

### **March/April**

He exhibits ten paintings at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris.

### **16 May**

Van Gogh leaves Saint-Rémy and, after a stop in Paris, arrives in Auvers-sur-Oise, north-west of the city, on 20 May. He immediately takes up work, creating an impressive body of paintings, drawings and prints.

### **27 July**

Van Gogh shoots himself in the chest and dies from his wounds two days later.

*For more information about Van Gogh's life, as well as all his letters, visit [vangoghletters.org](http://vangoghletters.org). All letter quotes in the exhibition are taken from this source.*

# Events

## Creative Workshops

### Ordinary Arts: Life Drawing

Friday 20 September, 6.15–7pm and 7.15–8pm  
Room 32

Booking essential

Ordinary Arts return for a colourful life drawing session inspired by Van Gogh

### 2B Or Not 2B Collective: Life Drawing

Friday 18 October  
6.15–7pm, 7.15–8pm, Room 32

Booking essential

2B Or Not 2B Collective return to the Gallery for life drawing sessions sparked by *Van Gogh: Poets & Lovers*

### The Poetry of the Mark

Thursday 14 November, 4–5pm, Room 34  
(Meet in Central Hall)

Free, drop-in

Join us for a creative workshop inspired by Van Gogh that explores the poetry of mark-making

## Music and Performance

### Lunchtime Listen: Creature & Machine

Friday 25 October, 1–2pm, Room 32  
Free, drop-in

Alt-pop singer-songwriter Creature & Machine will be playing a selection of acoustic arrangements of her own material, including several new compositions written in response to *Van Gogh: Poets & Lovers*

## Talks and Lectures

### Friday Lates: Michael Glover, ‘Vincent’s Poets’

Friday 20 September, 6–6.40pm, Room 45  
Free, drop-in

Author and poet Michael Glover reads from his new volume of poetry inspired by Van Gogh’s artwork

### British Sign Language Tour:

#### Van Gogh and Post-Impressionism

Friday 22 November, 6.30–7.30pm, Room 43  
Free, drop-in

Join Deaf lecturer Alan Murray for a tour in BSL exploring the work of Van Gogh and other artists working in France at the end of the 19th century

## Online Events

### Drawing like Van Gogh:

#### Mark-Making and Movement

Tuesday 8 October 2024  
6:30–7:30pm, £10, online only

Join us for an online artmaking session focused on mark-making and movement in drawing inspired by Van Gogh’s time in Provence

### The Blinding Light: Van Gogh in Provence

Thursday 17, 24, 31 October 2024  
3:30–5:30pm, £45, online only

Join Carlo Corsato and Jo Conybeare for a focused three-session exploration of Van Gogh’s dynamic paintings and pivotal time in the South of France

For more information and bookings please visit  
[nationalgallery.org.uk/events](https://nationalgallery.org.uk/events)

## Information

### Exhibition Opening Hours

Open daily 10am–6pm (last admission 5.15pm)  
Friday until 9pm (last admission 8.15pm)  
No re-admission

### Exhibition Catalogue

A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies this exhibition: £35 hardback

### Shops

Open daily 10am–5.45pm, Fridays until 8.45pm  
[nationalgallery.co.uk](http://nationalgallery.co.uk)

### Eating and Drinking

#### Espresso Bar

Level 0, Getty Entrance  
Daily 10am–5.30pm, Fridays until 8.45pm

#### Muriel's Kitchen

Level 0, Getty/St Martin's Place entrances  
Daily 10am–5.45pm, Fridays until 8.45pm

#### Ochre Restaurant

Level 0, Getty/St Martin's Place entrances  
Sunday–Wednesday 12 noon–6pm  
Thursday–Saturday 12 noon–11pm

### [nationalgallery.org.uk](http://nationalgallery.org.uk)

Information: 020 7747 2885  
[information@nationalgallery.org.uk](mailto:information@nationalgallery.org.uk)  
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