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Gogh & Lovers

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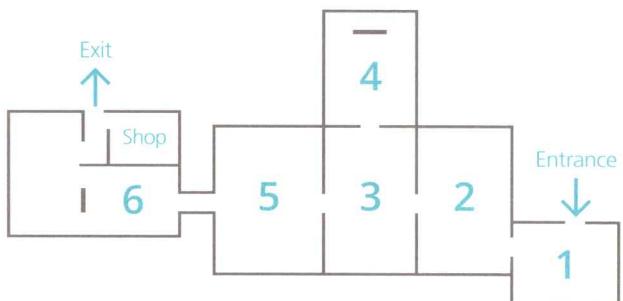
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Within the exhibition, light levels are kept low to protect the works. If you have difficulty reading this booklet or the information on the walls, please pick up a large-text version from the dispenser at the exhibition entrance.

Works within the exhibition are numbered but may not always appear in sequence.

The exhibition has been made possible by the provision of insurance through the Government Indemnity Scheme. The National Gallery would like to thank HM Government for providing Government Indemnity and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Arts Council England for arranging the indemnity.

Exhibition plan



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Room 1

Introduction

In February 1888, the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) went to live and work in the South of France. Over the next two years, in both Arles and Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, he created an extraordinary and innovative body of work in which he transformed the people and places he encountered in life. Parks, landscapes and corners of nature became highly expressive, idealised spaces full of literary and poetic references. Similarly, Van Gogh chose individuals from his new surroundings to create portraits of symbolic types, such as *The Poet* or *The Lover*.

The careful planning behind Van Gogh's art extended to creating works in groups or series, and to thinking about how these might be displayed both at his home in Arles and for exhibition in Paris. By gathering a selection of

these paintings – many of which are among his most famous and beloved creations – and showing them alongside his carefully developed works on paper, a less familiar Van Gogh emerges: an intellectual artist of lucid intention, deliberation and great ambition.

This first major exhibition devoted to Van Gogh in the National Gallery's history is chief among the events celebrating the Gallery's bicentenary. It also marks 100 years since the Gallery purchased the *Sunflowers* and *Van Gogh's Chair* for the Collection.

A brief chronology of Van Gogh's life, with a focus on his time in the South of France when he experienced periods of mental illness, can be found at the end of this booklet.

1

The Lover (Portrait of Lieutenant Milliet), 1888

Milliet's success with women, about which Van Gogh was both amused and envious, made the lieutenant the perfect model for *The Lover*. Van Gogh depicts Milliet in the dashing uniform of the Zouaves – one of the infantry units linked to North Africa – whose star and crescent regimental emblem Van Gogh reverses (for reasons unknown) in the background. The men became friends in Arles, with Van Gogh giving Milliet drawing lessons.

Oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands

2

The Poet's Garden (Public Garden in Arles), 1888

The unremarkable public garden in front of Van Gogh's home in Arles was the starting point for many views in which he used artistic licence and his imagination to create idealised worlds. He described the site in which young lovers stand in the shade of a spreading fir tree as 'the poet's garden' and imagined it as a place frequented by artists and writers of the past.

Oil on canvas

Private collection

3

The Poet (Portrait of Eugène Boch), 1888

Van Gogh had detailed plans for how he would depict a poet some time before he found Eugène Boch (a painter) to be his model. Van Gogh felt Boch was ideal as he had a narrow face that reminded him of the 13th-century poet Dante. The deep blue sky behind the figure, intended to express a man 'who dreams great dreams', was essential to the symbolism of the work.

Oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris, bequest of Eugène Boch, 1941

Room 2

The Garden: Poetic Interpretations

Van Gogh chose a great variety of motifs from the public garden in front of his home in Arles and later within the confines of the grounds of the hospital of Saint-Paul de Mausole at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. In his paintings and works on paper, he selected specific viewpoints and varied his approach to style and use of colour to explore wide-ranging emotional and poetic possibilities, often with a literary or artistic source in mind. In aiming to convey meaning rather than accurately record nature, Van Gogh took a free hand in adjusting or recomposing what he observed to achieve his desired effects.

4

The Public Garden, Arles, 1888

Van Gogh repeatedly drew and painted views of the gardens in Arles over the summer of 1888. On 22 October he wrote to his brother Theo (1857–1891) to say that, despite promising himself not to work, he could not resist painting the park's autumn colours. 'But it's like that every day, sometimes in passing I find such beautiful things that in the end you have to try to do them anyway.'

Oil on canvas

Private collection

5

Entrance to the Public Garden in Arles, 1888

The gardens in Arles inspired contrasting moods. Van Gogh depicted this view of the park as an everyday scene. He described the locals as 'something out of Daumier come to life', a reference to the French artist famous for his caricatures. There is a comical edge to figures such as the man in worker's blue transfixed by his newspaper – possibly Van Gogh himself – and the squat woman labouring up the path.

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. Acquired 1930

6

Path in the Park, Arles, 1888

The park in front of the Yellow House, Van Gogh's home in Arles, was close to the town's station. Yet in this view the groups of colourfully dressed figures moving beneath the trees appear less like passers-by than participants in a *fête galante*, or elegant outdoor entertainment, as imagined by the artists Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) and Adolphe Monticelli (1824–1886). Van Gogh admired both artists.

Oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands

7

Undergrowth, 1889

Van Gogh became fascinated by the large, neglected garden of the hospital at Saint-Rémy, to which he admitted himself in May 1889 after a series of mental breakdowns in the preceding months. In this innovative composition, he looks directly down into the dense undergrowth and ivy that climbs the nearby trees. The richly textured, swirling paint evokes the dense vegetation as well as the dappled light that breaks into open sunlight at the top of the canvas.

Oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

8

The Garden of the Asylum at Saint-Rémy, 1889

This was one of the first works Van Gogh painted after arriving at the hospital at Saint-Rémy. During his first weeks, Van Gogh was not allowed beyond the hospital garden but found delight in its overgrown and intimate corners, which he associated with 'nests of greenery for lovers' – continuing a poetic theme he had explored in the park in Arles.

Oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands



The courtyard of the Saint-Paul Cloister in Saint-Rémy

Fotocollectie Van de Poll © Dutch National Archives, 2.24.14.02 / 252-1828

9

Flowering Shrubs, 1889

Chalk, brush, diluted oil paint and pencil on paper
Colección Pérez Simón, Mexico

10

Tree and Bushes in the Garden of the Asylum, 1889

Chalk, brush and oil paint and ink, on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

These close-up views of shrubs and flowers were made during Van Gogh's first weeks at Saint-Rémy in May–June 1889. His assured, rapid application of bold dashes, hatching, dots and swirls capture the different textures of the vegetation to create richly patterned surfaces. The works on paper belong to a small and unique group in diluted paint in which Van Gogh sought to capture the vibrancy and profusion of spring growth, as well his excitement at the artistic possibilities offered by his new environment.

11

A Corner of the Garden of Saint-Paul's Hospital at Saint-Rémy, 1889

Using soft graphite and ink on pinkish paper, this ambitious drawing is the most finished of a group Van Gogh made of this corner of the hospital garden. Above a fence, a row of pines with irregular, windswept growth shelters the overgrown grass below, which is dotted with flowers such as the foreground irises. The bending gardener or labourer may have been someone Van Gogh observed, but could equally have been invented.

Graphite and ink on paper

Tate: Bequeathed by C. Frank Stoop 1933

12

The Garden of the Asylum with Sawn-Off Tree, 1889

By the autumn of 1889, Van Gogh turned from his initial interpretation of the hospital's garden as a 'nest for lovers' to seeing it as a site of suffering. In this drawing, related to the painted work that hangs alongside (13), Van Gogh attempted to convey this sense of anguish via the intensity of his pen strokes. These capture the dense growth of the pine trees and the rain puddles on the path.

Black chalk, quill and reed pen and brown ink on paper
Private collection

13 ♂

The Park of the Hospital at Saint-Rémy, 1889

Melancholy permeates this powerful depiction of the garden at Saint-Rémy, which is dominated by a sawn-off pine tree that had been struck by lightning. In a letter to his friend, the painter Emile Bernard (1868–1941), in November 1889, Van Gogh described the tree as a 'dark giant – like a proud man brought low' and detailed how he combined composition, colour and technique to convey the anxiety felt by his fellow patients at the hospital.

Oil on canvas

Museum Folkwang, Essen

14

Hospital at Saint-Rémy, 1889

Van Gogh chose a vertical format to give full height to the massive pine trees that dwarfed the male wing of the hospital building. The reddish soil, highly stylised tree trunks and interlocking branches overhead produce a vibrant but oppressive environment within which Van Gogh arranges a number of figures, including perhaps himself, just left of centre. The women are an invention; female patients were not allowed in this part of the grounds.

Oil on canvas

The Armand Hammer Collection, Gift of the Armand Hammer Foundation, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

15

Trees in the Garden of the Asylum, 1889

Two curving tree trunks, cropped at the top and bottom of the picture, frame a view towards one of the terraced lawns at the edge of the hospital gardens. Van Gogh greatly admired and collected Japanese woodblock prints, in which such dramatic compositional devices were common. This work's graphic quality is counterbalanced by his choice to paint a densely worked sky.

Oil on canvas

Private collection

17

Roses, 1889

Van Gogh's attention was caught by the profusion of pink blooms on this rose bush in the overgrown garden at Saint-Rémy. Manipulating thickly applied paint with a wide variety of brushstrokes, from the swirling to the spiky, he captures the differing textures of the soft rose petals amid the surrounding grasses, flowers, shrubs and weeds.

Oil on canvas

The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.

Matsukata Collection

16

Iris, 1890

Irises grow in profusion in the South of France and there were many in the garden at Saint-Rémy. Van Gogh isolated this single plant, just coming into full bloom, almost as if he were painting a portrait. He used cardboard as a support as he was running short of canvas at the time.

Oil on cardboard, later thinned and mounted on canvas
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1954

18

Park at Arles with a Corner of the Yellow House, 1888

Van Gogh drew this meandering path in the park at Arles shortly after he began renting the Yellow House in May 1888. A corner of the house can be glimpsed in the upper right. Van Gogh felt he could probably have found a better place to rent, but wrote 'the delightful thing about this studio is the gardens opposite'.

Quill and reed pen and brown ink on paper
Private collection

19

Garden with Weeping Tree, Arles, 1888

Diagonal stripes of hay wilting on a newly mown lawn create an almost abstract pattern in this extraordinary view onto a small patch of the public gardens at Arles. A great variety of marks evoke cut grass, shadows, foliage and gravel. This drawing was made after an oil painting that Van Gogh hailed as a 'new subject'. In this and other works on paper he explored the subject further, aiming for more 'clarity of touch'.

Ink with traces of graphite on paper
The Menil Collection, Houston

20

Weeping Tree, 1889

'Today I've made one of those drawings which became very dark and quite melancholic for springtime', Van Gogh wrote to his brother in May 1889. Depicting the same tree and round bush he had often captured in drawings the previous year (18 and 19), Van Gogh created an entirely different composition. He also made more vigorous use of one of his own hand-cut reed pens and other media to give the work its emotional charge.

Reed pen and black-brown ink, with black chalk on off-white wove paper
The Art Institute of Chicago,
Gift of Tiffany and Margaret Blake, 1945.31

Room 3

The Yellow House: An Artist's Home

Initially Van Gogh only used the Yellow House, which he rented in early May 1888, as a studio because it needed both renovation and furniture. By September he moved in and had bold plans to turn the modest house into an 'artist's home' and a communal 'studio of the South' in which his artist friends from Paris could join him to work. He devised a decoration for the house that included his major paintings. This then evolved into carefully conceived ideas about how to present his art to the public. The works in this gallery were part of his ambitions.



The Yellow House (right) on the Place Lamartine at Arles

© Album / Alamy Stock Photo

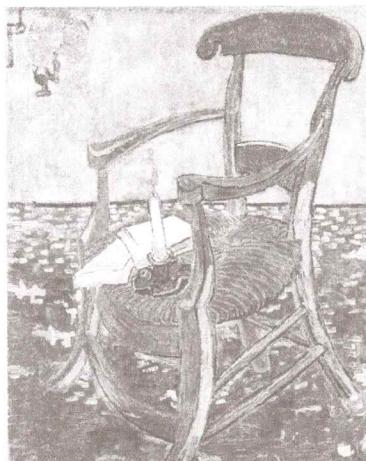
21

Van Gogh's Chair, 1888

A rustic chair on which Van Gogh has placed his pipe and tobacco stands as the artist's surrogate self portrait, while the terracotta tiles and limewashed walls give a glimpse of the Yellow House's simple interior. Painted in late 1888, when the painter Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) had come to stay in Arles, it is one of a pair – the other flatteringly representing Gauguin via an armchair with two novels and a candle on its seat.

Oil on canvas

The National Gallery, London.
Bought, Courtauld Fund, 1924



Vincent van Gogh, *Gauguin's Chair, Arles*, November 1888. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

© Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

22 🔊

Starry Night over the Rhône, 1888

'The starry sky at last, actually painted at night, under a gas-lamp' was how Van Gogh described this view of Arles from across the River Rhône. Despite painting it largely outdoors and in real time, he made compositional choices to achieve the effect he was after by positioning the constellation of Ursa Major above the scene and inventing the foreground lovers. Their presence was essential to his conception of the picture's status as a 'poetic subject'.

Oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris, Donation of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Kahn-Sriber, in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Fernand Moch, 1975

23

The Sower, 1888

By the artist's estimation, this depiction of a sower silhouetted against an enormous sun was among his most important works from Arles. Mostly working in the studio, he fused motifs from other artists and Japanese prints with his own observations of nature. By placing the huge disc of the sun behind the figure of the sower, he created a powerfully expressive image with symbolic content and Christian overtones.

Oil on canvas

Sammlung Emil Bührle,
on long-term loan at Kunsthaus Zürich

24

The Yellow House (The Street), 1888

The Yellow House, with its bright green shutters and door, forms part of an urban view of Arles, which includes a steam train passing over a bridge and mounds of earth for roadworks. Van Gogh was proud to have a home and studio of his own in Arles, and was enamoured by the vibrant palette of colours the Provençal light, weather and even building materials allowed him to explore.

Oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

26

Self Portrait, 1889

Holding up his palette and brushes, Van Gogh reaffirms his identity as an artist. He painted the work 'on the first day I got up' following a long recovery from the mental breakdown he experienced in July/August 1889. Although noting that he was 'thin' and 'pale as the devil', he was pleased with the contrast of blue with his 'whitish' face and 'yellow hair'. The image appeared in his imagined display of paintings in *The Bedroom* (25) shortly after.

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney, 1998.74.5

25

The Bedroom, 1889

The decoration of the Yellow House included Van Gogh's bedroom. This picture, the second of three versions, was painted in Saint-Rémy in September 1889 and shows him imaginatively changing the display of art on the walls. Over the bed he replaced *The Poet* (3), visible in the first version, with a recent self portrait (26), and swapped *The Lover* (1), which hung alongside, with an unidentified portrait of a woman. His choice of images perhaps expressed his yearning for love and companionship.

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago,
Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, 1926.417

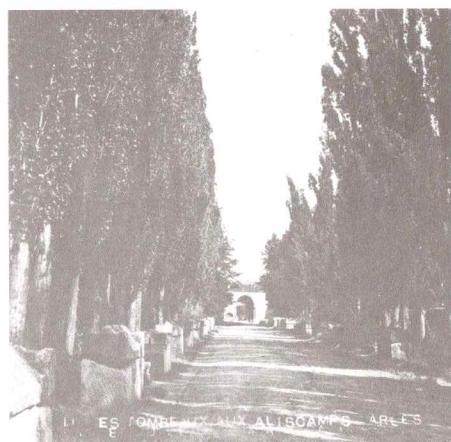
27 🔊

The Alyscamps, 1888

The colour of the autumn trees in a lane lined with old Roman and medieval sarcophagi captivated Van Gogh and prompted this view of Arles, in which he imagined a pair of lovers taking a promenade. It also provided a perfect balancing of opposites, which the artist felt created harmony in a picture. Here the remnants of the ancient world are contrasted with modern factories glimpsed between the trees, while young lovers walk among the dead.

Oil on canvas

Basil and Elise Goulandris Foundation Collection, Athens



The tombs at Alyscamps, Arles

© Ganne (fonds) / Centre des monuments nationaux

28

The Green Vineyard, 1888

Painted mostly outdoors, this landscape is remarkable for its impasto (thickly applied paint) and rich colour. Van Gogh probably finished it in the studio, complaining to Theo that he sweated blood and tears over it. He was pleased with the finished result, however, and listed it among his 'poetic subjects', which included *Starry Night over the Rhône* (22) and a picture on the theme of *The Poet's Garden*, all intended as decorations for the Yellow House.

Oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands

Room 4

Montmajour: A Series

Van Gogh marvelled at the landscapes surrounding Arles, some of which put him in mind of places mentioned in his favourite novels. Among the most evocative were the grounds surrounding the ruined 12th-century Montmajour Abbey, a well-known landmark north of Arles. After making a number of drawings of Montmajour in May 1888, he returned in July to create a series of large-scale works on paper. These remarkable drawings depict a hybrid place; at once the result of meticulous observation and the artist's imagination.

29

View of Arles from Montmajour, 1888

The distinctive skyline of Arles, with the smoking chimneys of the town's factories on the far left, was recorded by Van Gogh as he stood on the heights of Montmajour Abbey. He described the scene to his brother as a contrast between 'the wild and romantic foreground – and the broad, tranquil distant prospects with their horizontal lines'. He considered it the first image in a series he dedicated to the site.

Reed and quill pen and ink and pencil on paper
The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design,
Oslo

30

Trees, Montmajour, 1888

In July 1888 Van Gogh returned to the rough and rocky grounds of Montmajour in the company of Lieutenant Milliet (1). The terrain put the artist strongly in mind of the abandoned garden 'Le Paradou' (a Provençal word for 'Paradise'), which featured in Emile Zola's novel *The Sin of Abbé Mouret* (1875). The importance of the Montmajour drawings to Van Gogh was reflected in his choice of large-format Whatman paper.

Pen, reed pen on wove paper
Collection du Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tournai

31

The Rock of Montmajour with Pine Trees, 1888

Montmajour's rocky outcrops, with small pine trees and shrubs clinging wherever they could, inspired some of 'the best' reed-pen drawings of Van Gogh's career. In this dramatic view, he includes an obscured glimpse of Arles on the far left. In Zola's novel, the Abbé, who has forgotten his vows of chastity due to amnesia, occupies the wild paradise of Le Paradou with his lover, distanced from the realities of daily life.

Pencil, pen, reed pen, brush and black ink, on wove paper
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

32 ♂

Hill with the Ruins of Montmajour, 1888

In this extremely bold composition, the ruined abbey is dwarfed by an enormous foreground rock. Van Gogh told Theo he had journeyed to Montmajour 50 times and remained enamoured despite the heat, the fierce mistral wind and the mosquitoes. 'If a view makes one forget those little vexations, there must be something in it.'

Chalk, ink, pencil on paper
Rijksmuseum. Purchased with the support of the
Vereniging Rembrandt and the Prins Bernhard Fonds

33

View of La Crau from Montmajour, 1888

Van Gogh contrasts a steam train with a horse-drawn carriage in this sweeping panorama across the plain of La Crau. The vista recalls the pivotal scene in Zola's *The Sin of Abbé Mouret* when the priest's amnesia lifts as he sees the landscape below Le Paradou dotted with people living ordinary lives. Van Gogh considered this the last drawing of the Montmajour series and among 'the best I've done with my pen'.

For conservation reasons, this work is on display for the first month of the exhibition only

Pen and reed pen on paper

The British Museum. César Mange de Hauke Bequest,
1968,0210.20



Around Arles – Montmajour – The Ruins of the Abbey,
around 1900

© Reproduction Benjamin Gavaudo / CMN

34

A Trunk of a Tree, 1888

Using the top edge of the paper to crop this virtuoso depiction of a tree, Van Gogh adopts the bold compositional devices found in Japanese woodblock prints. He had been collecting such prints during his time in Paris, and greatly admired the Japanese approach to drawing and mark-making in translating the natural world onto paper.

Pen and sepia ink on buff paper

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond,
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 95.33

Room 5

Decoration

Van Gogh developed his decoration of the Yellow House into a concept for the presentation of his work that could stand alongside the paintings of his contemporaries, and even be transferred for exhibition in Paris. Throughout his time in Provence, he dispatched his work to his brother in the capital and submitted pictures to exhibitions in Paris and Brussels. Visitors also came to Theo's flat to see Vincent's work. After Van Gogh's first mental breakdown at the end of 1888, and subsequent crises in the following spring, during which time he lost possession of the Yellow House, he carried on developing his ideas for the decoration. One of his most famous groupings, devised during the spring of 1889 when he was in Saint-Rémy, is recreated in this room: two *Sunflower* pictures flanking *La Berceuse*.

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

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

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



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

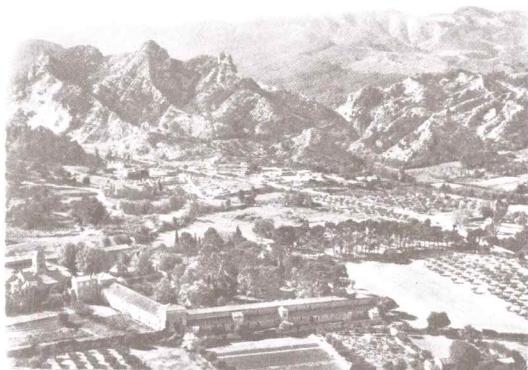
Room 6

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



47

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 Provençale 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

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

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

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

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

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

'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. All letter quotes in the exhibition are taken from this source.

Events

Creative Workshops

Orignary Arts: Life Drawing

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

Orignary 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

Information

Exhibition Opening Hours

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

Exhibition Catalogue

A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies this exhibition: £35 hardback

Shops

Open daily 10am–5.45pm, Fridays until 8.45pm
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

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