

= Olive Trees (Van Gogh series) =

Vincent van Gogh painted at least 18 paintings of olive trees , mostly in Saint @-@ Rémy @-@ de @-@ Provence in 1889 . At his own request , he lived at an asylum there from May 1889 through May 1890 painting the gardens of the asylum and , when he had permission to venture outside its walls , nearby olive trees , cypresses and wheat fields .

One painting , Olive Trees in a Mountainous Landscape , was a complement to The Starry Night .

The olive tree paintings had special significance for Van Gogh . A group in May 1889 represented life , the divine and the cycle of life while those from November 1889 arose out of Van Gogh 's attempt to symbolize his feelings about Christ in Gethsemane . His paintings of olive pickers demonstrate the relationship between man and nature by depicting one of the cycles of life , harvesting or death . It is also an example of how individuals , through interaction with nature , can connect with the divine .

Van Gogh found respite and relief in interaction with nature . When the series of olive tree paintings was made in 1889 Van Gogh was subject to illness and emotional turmoil , yet the paintings are among his finest works .

= = Saint @-@ Rémy = =

In May 1889 , Van Gogh voluntarily entered the asylum of St. Paul near Saint @-@ Rémy in Provence . There he had access to an adjacent cell he used as his studio . He was initially confined to the immediate asylum grounds and painted (without the window bars) the world he saw from his room , such as ivy covered trees , lilacs , and irises in the garden . As he ventured outside of the asylum walls , he painted the wheat fields , olive groves , and cypress trees in the surrounding countryside , which he saw as " characteristic of Provence . " Over the course of the year , he painted about 150 canvases .

The imposed regimen of asylum life gave Van Gogh a hard @-@ won stability : " I feel happier here with my work than I could be outside . By staying here a good long time , I shall have learned regular habits and in the long run the result will be more order in my life . " While his time at Saint @-@ Rémy forced him to manage his vices , such as coffee , alcohol , poor eating habits and periodic attempts to consume turpentine and paint , his stay was not ideal . He needed to obtain permission to leave the asylum grounds . The food was poor ; he generally ate only bread and soup . His only apparent form of treatment were two @-@ hour baths twice a week . During his year there , Van Gogh had periodic attacks , possibly due to a form of epilepsy . By early 1890 , when the attacks worsened , he concluded that his stay at the asylum was not helping him to recover , which led him to move to Auvers @-@ sur @-@ Oise just north of Paris in May 1890 .

= = Olive trees as a subject = =

Painting the countryside , the surrounding fields , cypress trees and olive trees restored Van Gogh 's connection to nature through art . He completed at least 18 paintings in 1889 of " venerable , gnarled olive trees , " pervasive throughout southern France , of which he wrote :

" The effect of daylight and the sky means there are endless subjects to be found in olive trees . For myself I look for the contrasting effects in the foliage , which changes with the tones of the sky . At times , when the tree bares its pale blossoms and big blue flies , emerald fruit beetles and cicadas in great numbers fly about , everything is immersed in pure blue . Then , as the bronzer foliage takes on more mature tones , the sky is radiant and streaked with green and orange , and then again , further into autumn , the leaves take on violet tones something of the color of a ripe fig , and this violet effect manifests itself most fully with the contrast of the large , whitening sun within its pale halo of light lemon . Sometimes , too , after a shower I 've seen the whole sky pink and orange , which gave an exquisite value and coloring to the silvery gray @-@ greens . And among all this were women , also pink , who were gathering the fruit . "

He found olive trees , representative of Provence , both " demanding and compelling . " He wrote to

his brother Theo that he was " struggling to catch (the olive trees) . They are old silver , sometimes with more blue in them , sometimes greenish , bronzed , fading white above a soil which is yellow , pink , violet tinted orange ... very difficult . " He found that the " rustle of the olive grove has something very secret in it , and immensely old . It is too beautiful for us to dare to paint it or to be able to imagine it . "

= = Spiritual significance = =

As a young man , Van Gogh was interested in pursuing ministry to serve working people . He studied for a time in the Netherlands but his zeal and self @-@ imposed asceticism cost him a short @-@ term position in lay ministry . He became somewhat embittered and rejected the church establishment , yet found a personal spirituality that was comforting and important to him . By 1879 , he made a shift in the direction of his life and found he could express his " love of God and man " through painting .

Van Gogh painted nature , the major subject for his works in the last 29 months of his life , to bring relief from his illnesses and emotional distress . Prior to this period he had rejected what he perceived as the narrow religion of his parents , and took an almost nihilistic stance , not unlike Nietzsche 's , toward religion and God . It was among the blossoming trees , the olive orchards and fields that Van Gogh most often found " profound meaning " , because he saw in their cycles an analogy to human life . He wrote to Theo that death , happiness and unhappiness are " necessary and useful " and relative , declaring " Even faced with an illness that breaks me up and frightens me , that belief is unshaken . "

The autumn work was somewhat in reaction to the recent compositions of Christ in the Garden of Olives by his friends Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard . Frustrated by their work which he qualified with the words " nothing was observed " , Van Gogh painted " in the groves , morning and evening during these clear , cold days , but in beautiful , bright sunshine " resulting in five canvases above the three he completed earlier in the year . He wrote to his brother , Theo , " What I have done is a rather hard and coarse reality beside their abstractions , but it will have a rustic quality and will smell of the earth . " Rather than attempting to recreate what the scene might have been like , he explained " one can express anguish without making reference to the actual Gethsemane , and ... there is no need to portray figures from the Sermon on the Mount in order to express a gentle and comforting feeling . " He also commented : " I shall not paint a Christ in the Garden of Olives , but shall paint the olive harvest as one might see it today , and by giving the human figure its proper place in it , one might perhaps be reminded of it . "

= = Analysis = =

= = = Artistic style = = =

Van Gogh 's early works were made with dull , gray colors . In Paris , he met leading French artists Edgar Degas , Georges Seurat and others who provided illuminating influences on the use of color and technique . His work , previously somber and dark , now " blazed with color . " Indeed , Van Gogh 's use of color became so dramatic that he was sometimes called an Expressionist . But it was southern France that provided an opportunity for him to express his " surging emotions . " Enlightened by the effects of its sun @-@ drenched countryside , Van Gogh reported that above all , his work " promises color " . This is where he began development of his masterpieces .

Van Gogh captured the colors and moods of the trees which varied dramatically by daylight and season . He began to use the color blue to represent the divine . In both The Starry Night and his olive tree paintings , Van Gogh used the intense blue of the sky to symbolize the " divine and infinite presence " of Jesus . Seeking a " modern artistic language " to represent the divine , he sought a numinous quality in many of his olive tree paintings , such as by bathing olive trees , an emblem for Jesus , in " radiant gold light " .

Van Gogh used the Impressionist concept of broken color to give light to a work , innovatively drawing in color , giving the painting light and form , as he also did in his paintings of plowed fields , mountains , rocks , and heads and figures . The series is unified by a more refined approach , without the thick application of paint to which he was more accustomed .

= = = Meaning = = =

The National Gallery of Art summarizes this series :

" In the olive trees ? in the expressive power of their ancient and gnarled forms ? Van Gogh found a manifestation of the spiritual force he believed resided in all of nature . His brushstrokes make the soil and even the sky seem alive with the same rustling motion as the leaves , stirred to a shimmer by the Mediterranean wind . These strong individual dashes do not seem painted so much as drawn onto the canvas with a heavily loaded brush . The energy in their continuous rhythm communicates to us , in an almost physical way , the living force that Van Gogh found within the trees themselves , the very spiritual force that he believed had shaped them . "

Skye Jethani , author of *The Divine Commodity : Discovering a Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity* , asserts that in many of his paintings , the olive tree series in particular , Van Gogh conveys the redemptive quality of sorrow and that even in sorrow , there can be rejoicing . To quote Van Gogh 's sermon of 1876 :

" Sorrow is better than joy ... for by the sadness of the countenance , the heart is made better . Our nature is sorrowful , but for those who have learnt and are learning to look at Jesus Christ , there will always be reason to rejoice . It is a good word , that of St. Paul : as being sorrowful yet also rejoicing . "

= = The paintings = =

In his letters , Van Gogh specified two groupings : three paintings made in June 1889 and five completed by late November 1889 . There was also a painting in September , three olive picker paintings in December and a few others . Van Gogh made several drawings of olive trees when , as a precautionary safety measure , he did not have access to his paints .

= = = Complement to The Starry Night = = =

Of Olive Trees in a Mountainous Landscape in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) , Van Gogh wrote his brother Theo : " I did a landscape with olive trees and also a new study of a starry sky , " calling this painting the daylight complement to the nocturnal , The Starry Night . His intention was to go beyond " the photographic and silly perfection of some painters " to an intensity born of color and linear rhythms .

Within the painting , twisted green olive trees stand before the foothills of the Alps and underneath the sky with an " ectoplasmic " cloud . Later , when the pictures had dried , he sent both of them to Theo in Paris , noting : " The olive trees with the white cloud and the mountains behind , as well as the rise of the moon and the night effect , are exaggerations from the point of view of the general arrangement ; the outlines are accentuated as in some old woodcuts . "

= = = Olive pickers = = =

Van Gogh painted three versions of women picking olives . The first (F654) he described as an on @-@ the @-@ spot study " in deeper tones from nature " . The second painting (F655) is " the most resolved and stylized of the three , " intended for his sister and mother , is located at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City .

The third , in the Chester Dale collection at the National Gallery of Art , Washington , DC . (F656) he painted in his studio in December in a " very discreet color scheme " . Although the subject of the painting is immediately clear , the first tree , like a stepping stone , leads the spectator into the

scene . Here Van Gogh was more concerned about emotional and spiritual reality than literal interpretation . The women harvest olives for sustenance . The way in which the trees seem to wrap around the women and the trees and the landscape are almost one , indicates an emotional bond and interdependence between nature and people .

Another painting was made of olive pickers , this time a couple . Kröller @-@ Müller Museum 's Olive Grove with Two Olive Pickers (F587) was painted December , 1889 .

= = = Painted in May and June 1889 = = =

Van Gogh made four paintings in May and June 1889 . The first , Couple Walking among Olive Trees in a Mountainous Landscape with Crescent Moon (F704) is located at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo , São Paulo , Brazil

Van Gogh identified three olive tree paintings made in June , the second month of his stay at the asylum .

The Nelson @-@ Atkins Museum of Art 's Olive Orchard (F715) was expressed by Van Gogh in a letter of July 1889 as an orchard of olive trees with gray leaves , " their violet shadows lying on the sunny sand . " By contrast , the shadows accentuate the heat of the Provençal sun . The " repetitive , rectangular brush strokes " convey an energy that heightens the emotional impact of this work .

Van Gogh Museum 's Olive Trees : Bright Blue Sky (F709) of cool , blue daylight tones is similar to Göteborgs Museum of Art 's Olive Grove , a study in warm autumn colors . The autumn toned painting met Van Gogh 's goal of achieving a " harsh and coarse " realism to his work . He presented the painting to his friend and doctor , Dr. Gachet , with whom he would be under care and supervision in Auvers @-@ sur @-@ Oise the following year .

The Kröller @-@ Müller Museum Olive Orchard (F585) was painted in June , 1889 .

= = = Painted in September , November and December 1889 = = =

The paintings made during this period were much the artistic result of Van Gogh 's reaction to the Gauguin and Bernard Gethsemane painting , as mentioned in the " Spiritual significance " section .

The intense nature of National Gallery of Scotland 's Olive Trees (F714) likely expresses Van Gogh 's agitated state of mind when he completed this work , dramatic impact evidenced both through his brushstrokes and color use .

The vibrant oranges and yellows in Olive Trees with Yellow Sky and Sun (F710) suggest the fall season . Novelist Warren Keith Wright visited this painting at the Minneapolis Institute of Art over a 15 @-@ year period , transfixed by the painting , but unsure why . He came to realize that the fascination was that the painting represented two periods of time . The late @-@ afternoon sun lies due west above the mountains . The shadows , though , slant from the left , or the southwest , where they would fall in autumn . Not only is the painting out of sync with time , it is also out of sync with the season . It " predicts its own future , reverts to its own past . " Olive Trees with Yellow Sky and Sun symbolizes the suffering of Jesus is symbolized by a " harsh sun , barren ground , shadows , and the menacing appearance of leaf clusters . "

In November or December 1889 Van Gogh worked on the Metropolitan Museum of Art 's Olive Orchard (F708) . Another painting from this time is Olive Grove : Orange Sky (F586) which resides at the Göteborgs Museum of Art , Gothenburg , Sweden