

OLIVE TREES-- JUNE OOM

Oil on Canvas, 1899, 51-7 G355

Vincent Van Gogh, Dutch, 1853-1890

When Vincent Van Gogh painted, he used more than paint and a brush, he also used his heart and his emotions. Painters in earlier times wanted to paint landscapes as realistically as possible. Impressionists made light the dominant subject of their landscapes. Van Gogh, a post-impressionist, sought to paint the emotions that he felt as he stood among nature and observed it.

WHO WAS VINCENT VAN GOGH?

Born March 30, 1853 in Holland, Vincent was the oldest of six children. But he was not the first child in the family. His parents welcomed their first child one year earlier to the day, but tragically that baby was stillborn. The name of their first child was also Vincent Van Gogh. His father was a pastor and his mother took care of the family home. He had two brothers and three sisters. Theo was his closest brother in age, and much of what we know of Van Gogh's life and art is from their correspondence. Between 1860 and 1880, Van Gogh worked as a clerk in the Goupil art galleries (in The Hague, Brussels, London and Paris), and was briefly a teacher (in London). He was zealous in his Christian beliefs and decided to pursue the ministry, but failed the examination to enter the seminary. He completed a short training to become a lay minister and found work in a poor mining district in Belgium. It was there that he began to draw, reproducing the works of Millet using the miners as models. He admired Millet for his ability to capture the spiritual essence of his subjects.

In 1880, at twenty-seven years of age, Van Gogh began his career as an artist. He remained briefly in Belgium to study art. The works of this early period are somber, sharply lit, genre paintings of which the most famous is "The Potato Eaters". In 1885 Van Gogh went to Antwerp where he discovered the works of Rubens and Japanese prints. In 1886 he went to Paris to join his brother Theo, who was managing Goupil's gallery. In Paris, he was exposed to the Impressionists and became friendly with Pissarro, Monet and Gauguin. He was influenced by their work and began to lighten and brighten his very dark palette and to paint in the short brushstrokes. In search of more light and for his health, he moved to Arles in the south of France where he hoped his artist friends would join him and help found a school of art. Gauguin did join Van Gogh in October of 1888, but departed in December, a move precipitated by Van Gogh's breakdown, where he ended up cutting off part of his own left ear. Van Gogh then admitted himself to the asylum in Saint-Remy for treatment where he alternated between fits of madness and lucidity.

In May of 1890, he was feeling much better and went to live near Paris in Auvers-sur-Oise under the care of Dr. Gachet. Seventy days later, he was dead, having shot himself at the age of thirty-seven. He had painted for ten years and produced over 900 paintings of which only one had sold. Regarding his love life, history notes two unrequited loves and one live-in relationship with a woman of questionable reputation. He never married and had no children.

Although Van Gogh's life story is dramatic, and museum visitors will surely inquire about aspects of it, Debbi said it best one day in class:

“... WHEN HE PAINTED.....HE WAS AT HIS BEST!”

Van Gogh was anxious and psychologically fragile. At that time, doctors didn't know what we know today about treating mental and emotional problems. He painted during times of mental stability. During periods of not feeling well, he usually couldn't paint. So when we look at his paintings, we are not necessarily looking at the work of a madman.....on the contrary, we are looking at the work of an exceptionally sensitive, spiritual and intelligent man. With Van Gogh, we have not only his paintings to inform us, but also hundreds of letters written to his brother where he gives a highly lucid commentary on his work.

TOUR QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES:

1. Standing at a distance, just in front of the bench:

This painting, entitled Olive Trees by Vincent Van Gogh is one of our museum highlights. Let's first explore it from this distance. Let your eyes wander for a few moments within the four corners of this painting.

Q: Besides the olive trees, what else has Van Gogh included in this landscape? Sun, mountains, shadows/water, earth, yellow sky, etc. (I like to get the discussion out of the way as to whether we are seeing shadows or water on the ground).

Q: What colors has Van Gogh used? In which elements are the colors realistic or unrealistic? Why do you think he made the sky yellow? What season might he be depicting in this landscape?

- Why olive trees? Van Gogh painted 15 paintings of olive trees in the last two years of his life. He had expressed in his letters to his brother Theo, a fascination with them and a desire to do a series of paintings of the olive trees and other aspects of the St. Remy landscape, just as he had done with Sunflowers while in Arles. In May/June of 1889, he painted three versions of Olive Trees in a blue/green palette consistent with the colors of the season. Prop suggestion: [The Olive Trees MOMA](#). Our painting and others painted in the Fall of that year, feature an autumnal color palette.
- His return to the subject of the olive trees that Fall may have been inspired by his knowledge of paintings that his friends Emile Bernard and Paul Gauguin had

completed which depicted Christ in the Garden of Olives. Van Gogh was bothered by their literal depictions of the scene and set forth to capture the essence of the divine in his rendering of the live orchards. Indeed, our Van Gogh painting is both emotionally and spiritually charged and wrought with symbolic meaning.

Q: To illustrate this point, I invite you to imagine this painting in black and white. Focus on the composition of the painting and the use of outlining. Notice how Van Gogh outlines the objects that are closest to the viewer and how these objects have an almost ominous energy to them. Now notice how, as your eye moves deeper into the painting, the frenetic outlining disappears. Okay, now I invite you to bring your painting back into color. Notice how as we stand in this painting, the olive trees throbbing, their dark brown trunks and gray-green silvery leaves surround us. Something is not right here? There is an exaggeration at play in these olive trees.....something menacing in the undulating earth, so alive we can almost smell it. Notice the sun, how it pulsates with heat and light. It fills the sky with its rays. Now, notice the shadows. They do not come straight at us, as we might expect from the placement of the sun. Instead they seem to be in the way of our path as we move through the grove toward the mountains in the distance. Scholars have suggested that the foreground in this painting represents Van Gogh's reality, the known, the dark and threatening here-and-now in which fear of another mental breakdown is always looming. To Van Gogh, green represented conflict, and gray resignation. As the trees diminish into the background, our eyes discover the mountains, which Van Gogh rendered in blue, the color which for him symbolized the divine and infinity. Lastly, in the distance, Van Gogh placed the sun and a yellow sky, his favorite color, symbolizing for him light and love.

Rhetorical Q: In Olive Trees, does Van Gogh paint a path out of our daily existence to the source of life and salvation, a retort to his friends' realistic paintings of the biblical Garden of Olives? Or, is Van Gogh simply painting, not the landscape before him, but the spiritual life force within it?

Q: Let's move in closer to the painting. I invite you to come as close to the painting as Van Gogh would have been to it as he worked on it....remembering the one foot rule. Let's take a quiet moment for our eyes to once again wander the four corners of the canvas. (Step out of the way and allow time to look....let the visitors have their time with it!). What more can you see now that you are up close?

- The forms in Van Gogh's paintings don't blur into each other as they do in Impressionist works. Using blocks of color and outlining, as seen in Japanese woodblock prints, the forms remain separate entities.
- His brushstrokes are energetic, often short straight lines or swirling strokes of thick paint (impasto). His dynamic brushstrokes and dazzling color choices are what help him to depict the universal life force that is the hallmark of his style. At

times, he didn't even use a brush, but applied the paint straight from the tube or with his palette knife.

Questions visitors have asked on tours:

1. Why didn't Van Gogh sign this work? In the nineteenth century, artists usually did sign their work, but Van Gogh was such a perfectionist about his painting that he often thought of them as simple, unfinished studies. Most of his paintings are unsigned. When he did sign a work, he usually wrote only his first name, Vincent. In addition to his approachable subjects and his almost childlike execution of painting, it is said that his simple and friendly signature is among the reasons why many people feel such a connection to him and his work. There is no question as to the authenticity of this painting.....it is a Van Gogh! He described it in one letter to his brother, stating "I am working on twelve large canvases, especially olive orchards...one with a big yellow sun." Among the olive tree paintings, ours is the only one that includes the sun.

2. Why is it under glass? Aren't oil paintings supposed to be left uncovered? It's true that the average oil painting does not need to be framed under glass. This, however, is not an average oil painting! Museums use glass for oil paintings of this caliber as extra protection from vandalism and from damage from exposure to light or the occasional sneeze! (The last Van Gogh painting to sell on the open market, "Portrait of Dr. Gachet," sold at auction at Christie's for \$82.5 million dollars in 1990.)

3. Is the frame original? This replica of a 17th century frame from Bologna, Italy, was carved by hand, like the original. It features an inner molding of olive leaves and an outer border of acanthus leaves. These patterns accentuate the textures of the terrain and the olive foliage in Van Gogh's landscape. Van Gogh would have sent his paintings to his brother Theo unframed.

4. When and how did the MIA acquire this painting? This painting has always been known, having been mentioned in Van Gogh's letters as it was being created. Its first private owner was a collector in Germany where Van Gogh became popular about 1901. The compiler of *The Complete Works of Van Gogh*, de la Faille, lists the canvas as no. 710, and provides a list of all the collectors and dealers through whose hands it has passed. It was last owned by Mrs. Ralph H. Booth of Detroit. It was purchased by the MIA in 1951 courtesy of The William Hood Dunwoody Fund.

