

Vincent van Gogh

Today, Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) is one of the world's most celebrated artists, yet he was little known in his lifetime. He was born in the Netherlands but moved frequently, residing in more than twenty cities in four countries. He lived with mental illness, which made it difficult for him to hold a job or to sustain lasting relationships, and he relied on the financial and emotional support of his devoted brother Theo. Largely self-taught, he developed an emphatic style characterized by lively, colorful brushwork. His drive for creative exploration resulted in periods of intense creativity and productivity punctuated by episodes of depression and paralyzing anxiety. For Van Gogh, painting was therapeutic and restorative, offering structure and focus as well as a connection to the natural world.

Discovering the Olive Groves

In 1889, out of concern for his mental health, Van Gogh admitted himself to a psychiatric hospital in the south of France. He stayed for about a year, sketching and painting the surrounding countryside. He repeatedly returned to certain subjects, such as wheatfields and olive groves, reflecting his interest in the colors and forms that could shift by the hour as well as the limits of his life in treatment. He could see the wheatfields from his hospital window, and he took walks amid the nearby olive groves. By the time he left the hospital in May 1890, two months before his death, he had completed 15 paintings of the groves.

The paintings on view help us understand Van Gogh's creative interests and ambitions, as well as the realities of his life with mental illness. They are accompanied by the findings of a recent, groundbreaking study of the olive grove paintings, which offer new insight into Van Gogh's artistic intentions, his painting process, and the order in which he created these extraordinary artworks.