

# Artistic Process

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Following the underpainting, Van Gogh developed the main components in more detail, moving back and forth across the canvas. He adapted his brushwork to the particular element he was depicting, often using different styles for the three large areas of foreground, olive trees, and sky.

## Charcoal Underdrawing

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For *Olive Trees*, Van Gogh drew a fairly precise outline of the peaks of the Alpilles mountains, which is visible with infrared photography.

Olive Trees, November 1889. Minneapolis Institute of Art. Photos: Charles Walbridge



The dark speck near the center of this photomicrograph of *Olive Trees* is a charcoal particle from the underdrawing of the Alpilles mountain range.

Photomicrograph of Olive Trees, November 1889. Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Photo: Laura Eva Hartman

## Wet-in-Wet Painting

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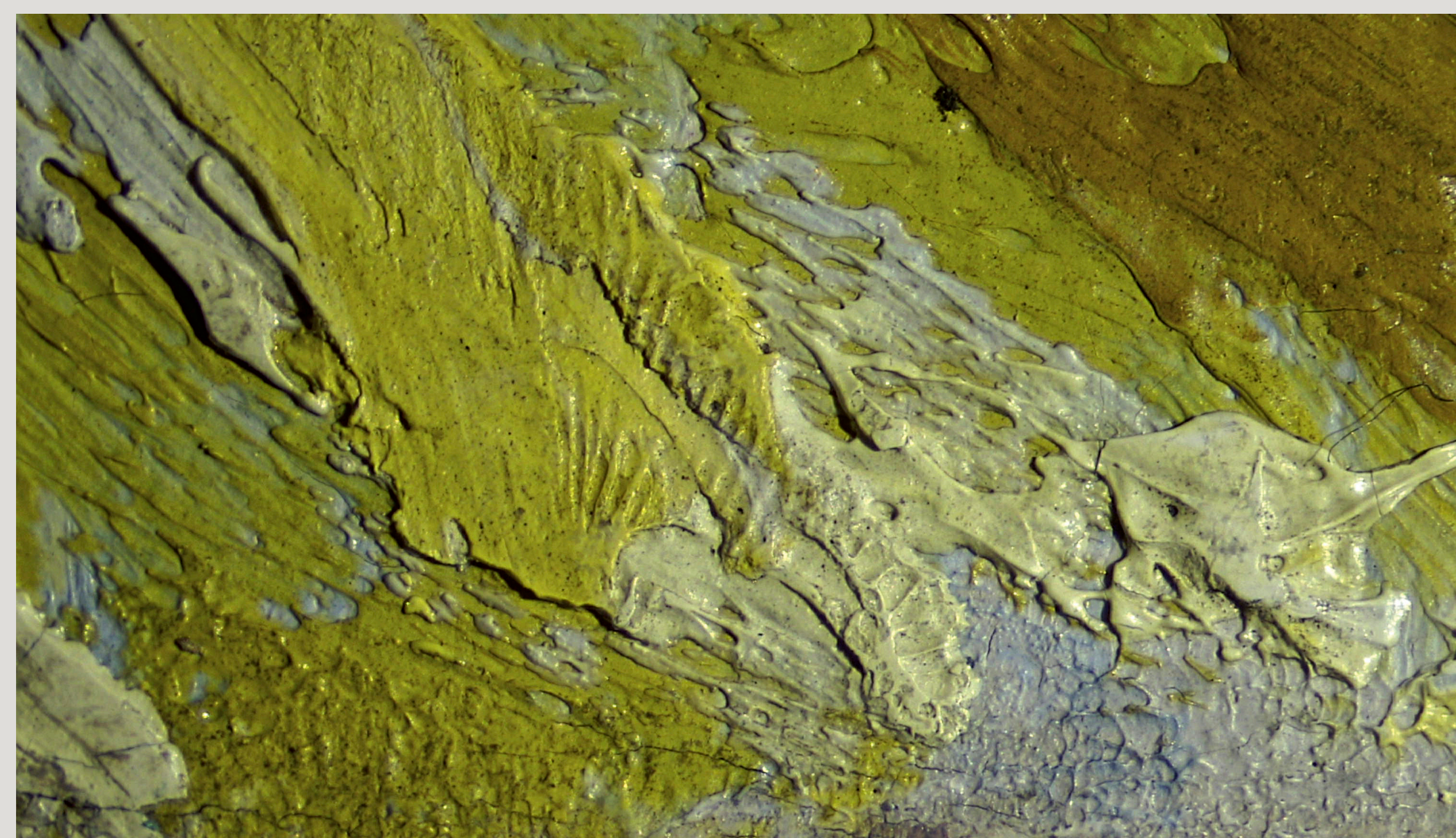


This photomicrograph shows some of the marbled brushstrokes in *Olive Trees*.

Photomicrograph of Olive Trees, November 1889. Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Photo: Laura Eva Hartman

## Drying and Storage

Partially dried paint has a clay-like consistency that easily yields to the touch. Such accidental impressions can provide clues about how Van Gogh handled and stored the olive grove paintings. We can see, for instance, that Van Gogh occasionally laid his still-wet paintings outside in the grass to speed up the drying process.



Near the center of this image are indented lines: fingerprints left along the top edge of *Olive Trees*. Van Gogh likely made these impressions when he removed the painting from the easel or moved it while the paint was still wet.

Photomicrograph of Olive Trees, November 1889. Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Photo: Laura Eva Hartman



# Plein-Air Painting

When beginning a new motif, Van Gogh typically made studies en plein air (outdoors). With the olive groves, he made preparatory drawings and loose oil sketches to capture the trees' gnarled forms and coloring. Rapidly painted in one session, his plein-air oil sketches are characterized by wet-in-wet brushwork, areas of exposed ground or canvas, minimal detail, and a sense of spontaneity.

Van Gogh's larger, more ambitious compositions were typically started en plein air and developed over the course of a few weeks in multiple painting sessions. Close examination of the paintings confirms that most of the olive groves from summer and fall were started—and at least partially painted—outdoors.

## Technique

Several olive grove paintings show the swift handling of paint associated with Van Gogh's plein-air sketches, including areas where the light-colored ground layer or canvas is actually exposed between loose brushwork.



This detailed view of *Olive Trees* has several areas where the ground layer can be seen amid the trees' foliage.

Olive Trees, November 1889. Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art.  
Photos: Charles Walbridge

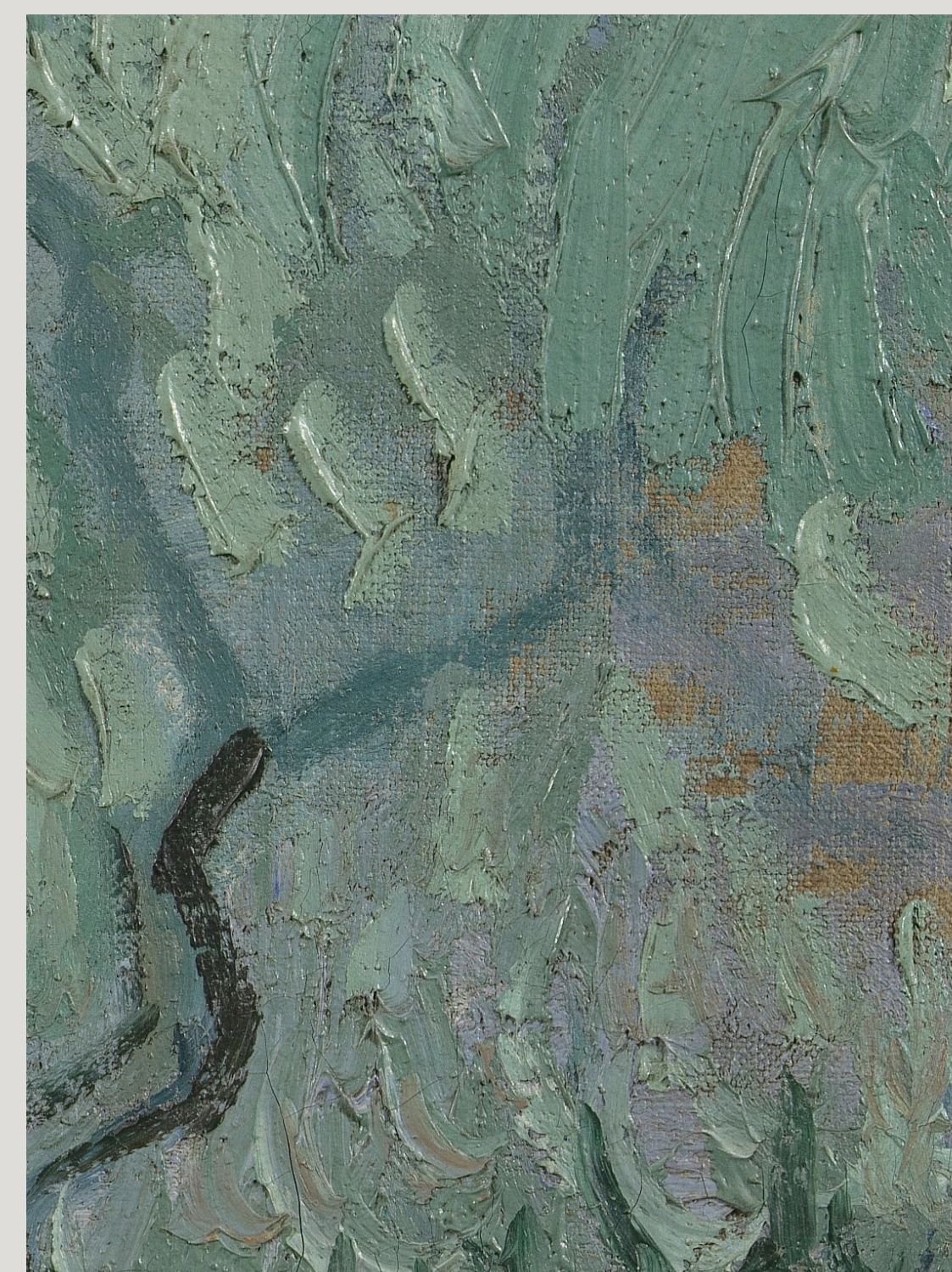


## Studio Painting

After rapidly seizing the main compositional elements and color scheme outdoors, Van Gogh built up and completed the larger olive grove paintings in his studio, in a more measured and meticulous manner. He reworked passages of the foliage, foreground, and sky over the course of several painting sessions. He also used drawings and paintings made outdoors as the basis for repetitions, variants, and imaginative experiments informed by memory and direct observation.

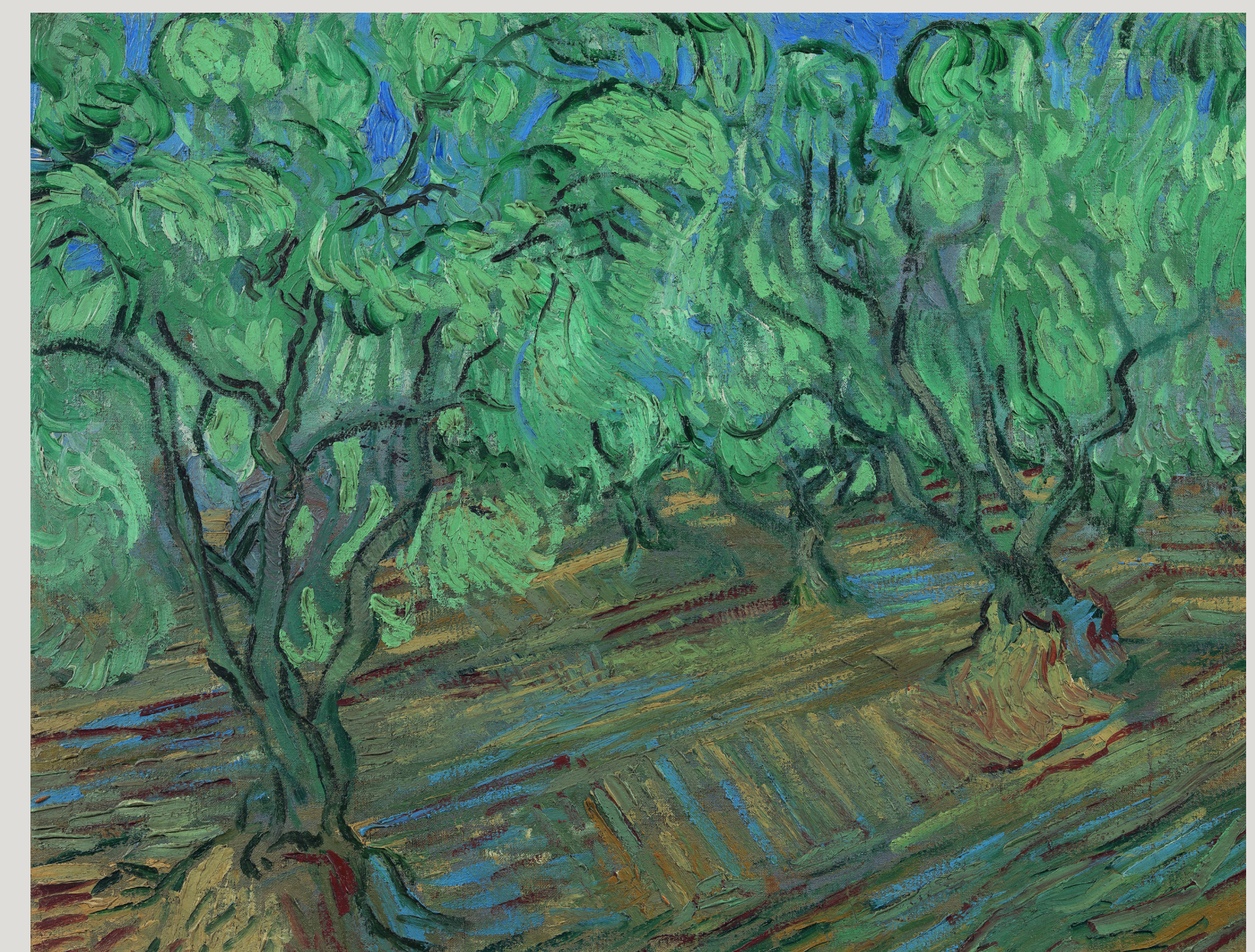
## Portable Paints and Equipment

The invention of the collapsible metal paint tube in 1841 resulted in a boom of plein-air painters. The tubes were resealable and portable, and paints no longer required complicated mixing of pigments with binders. After about 1850, merchants began selling a variety of portable equipment designed for plein-air painters. Van Gogh had a folding easel and a painter's box with tubes of paint he could easily bring outdoors.



Exposed canvas can be seen in this detail from the right side of *Olive Grove*.

Olive Grove, September 1889. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam  
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation).





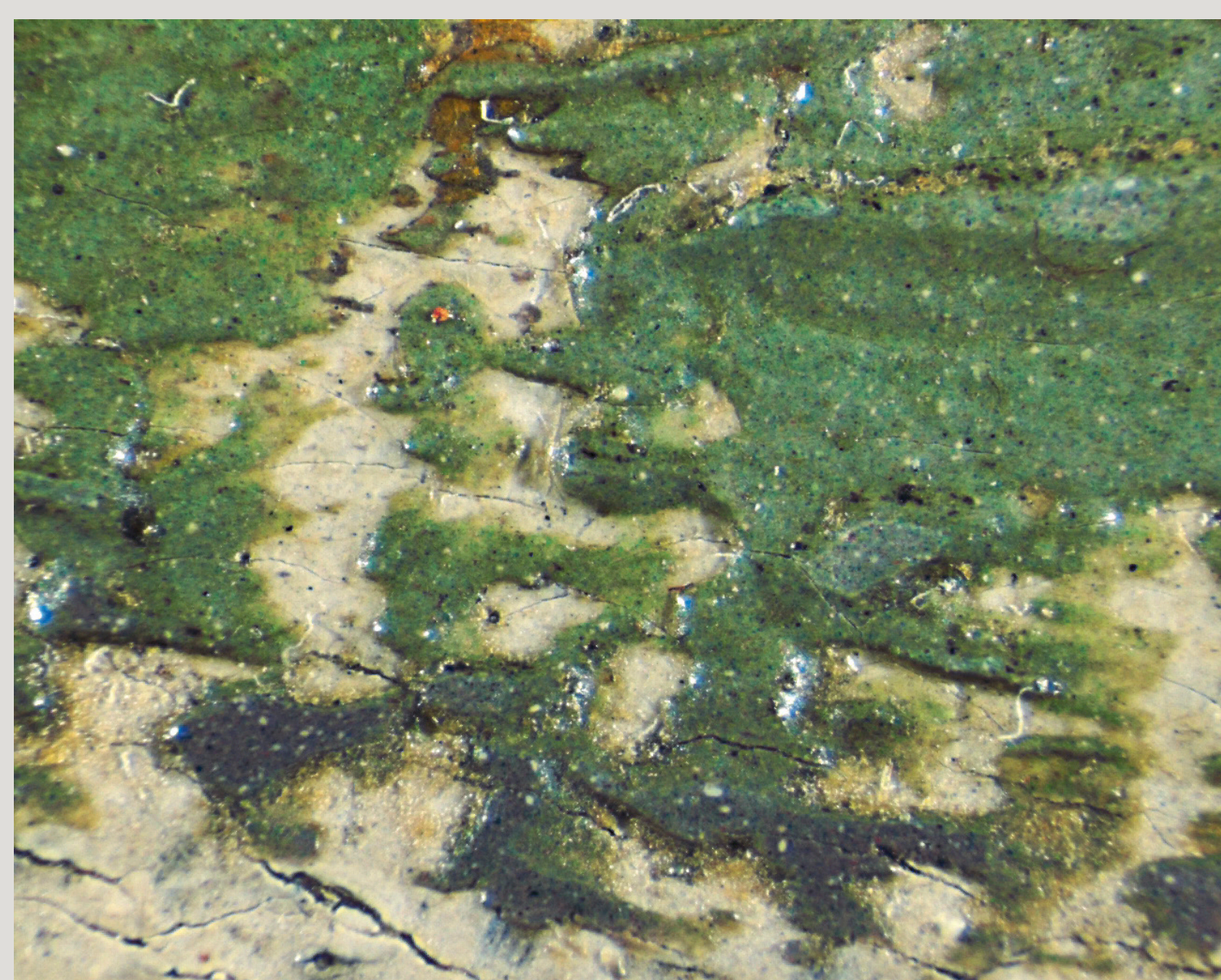
# Faded Colors

Van Gogh was very intentional in his choice of colors—he considered color a means of communicating the emotional and spiritual dimensions of his subjects. However, many of his paintings today are faded. Analyzing how and why they appear differently helps us reconstruct the paintings' appearance at the time of their creation and better understand the artist's creative vision. Van Gogh used several red paints throughout the olive grove series. Some are stable, mineral-based pigments and appear largely unchanged—even now, some 130 years after he painted them. Others, known as “red lakes,” were produced from organic dyes that faded rapidly when exposed to light.

Van Gogh applied red lake paints extensively in many of the olive tree paintings, either alone or mixed with other colors. Their severe fading has resulted in dramatic shifts in hue (color) and tone (how light or dark a color is). Passages that originally contained purple, violet, mauve, or pink now appear as different shades of blue, green, and gray.

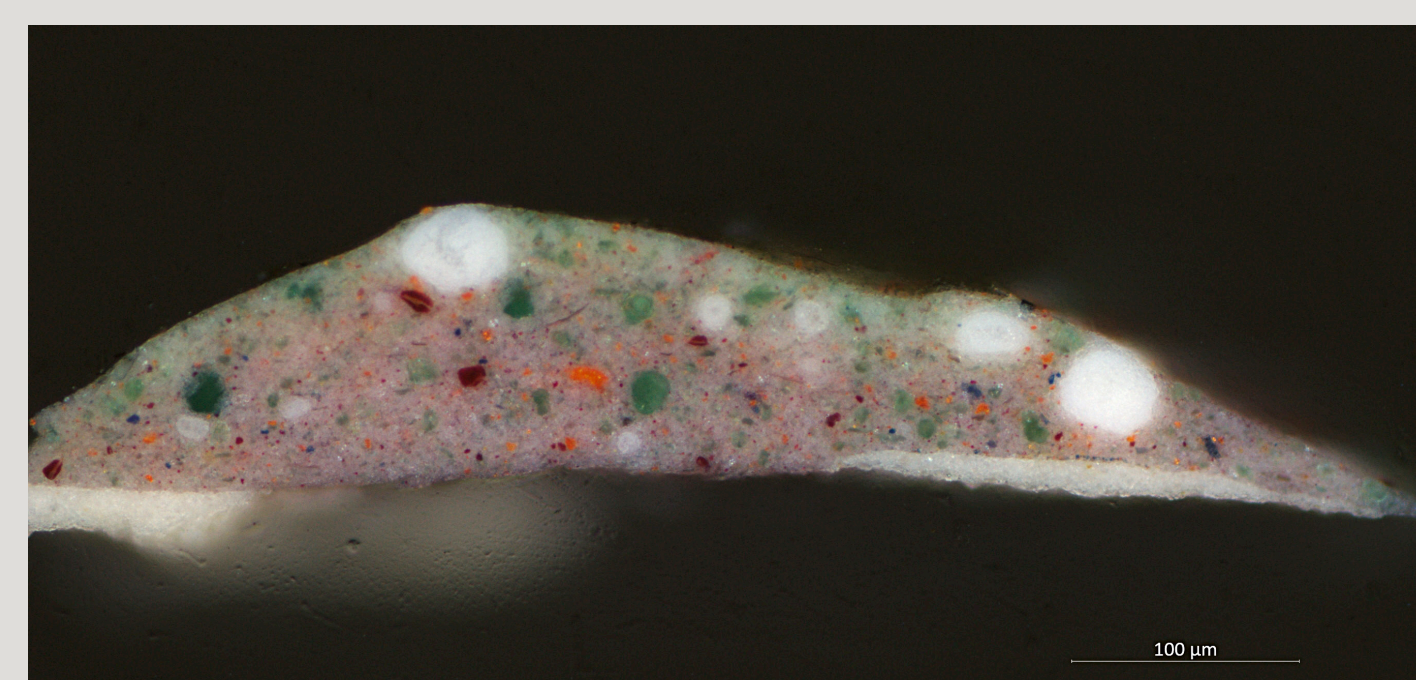
## Cross Section Detection

Cross sections (microscopic paint samples) can provide evidence of pigment shift, since colors below the surface are more protected from light and better preserved.



This photomicrograph shows the partially preserved brown-purple and lilac colors in what today appears as a grayish-green shadow along the bottom edge of *Olive Grove*.

Photomicrograph of Olive Grove, November 1889. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation). Photo: Kathrin Plitz, Van Gogh Museum

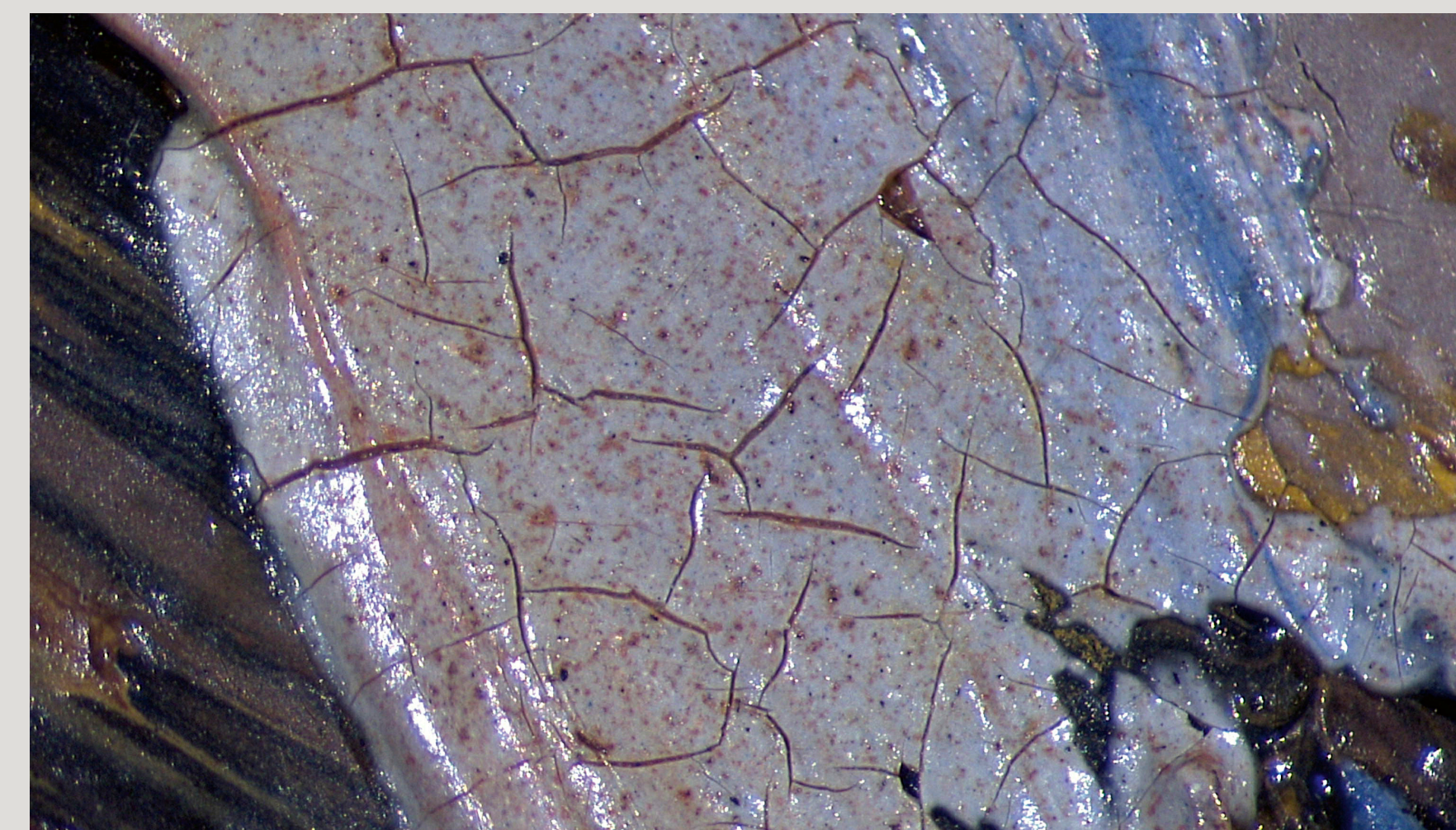


A cross-section taken from the grayish-green brushstroke reveals its discoloration; the original mauve-violet hue can be seen below the surface.

Cross-section of paint sample taken from Olive Grove, November 1889. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation). Photo: Muriel Geldof

## Partially Preserved Pigments

The mixing of red lakes into other paints greatly impacts the degree to which it fades. Traces of pure red lakes are often preserved in thicker strokes where they have not been fully blended, or where the proportion of red lake pigment is higher. They are also sometimes found preserved in the shadows of thickly applied brushstrokes.



This detail shows some red on the surface and within the cracks of a thicker brushstroke on *Olive Trees*.

Photomicrograph of Olive Trees, November 1889. Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Photo: Laura Eva Hartman

## Protected from Light

Hints of the original color schemes for the olive grove paintings are sometimes visible in places that have been protected from light. This includes the edges of a canvas previously covered by the overhang of the rabbet, or inner frame edge.



This detail from the lower edge of *Olive Grove* has retained most of its original purplish color in what is now a bluish-green brushstroke.

Photomicrograph of Olive Grove, September 1889. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation). Photo: Kathrin Plitz, Van Gogh Museum



# Technical Analysis

In 2021, an international team of curators, researchers, conservators, and scientists began an in-depth study of Van Gogh's olive grove paintings. They examined everything, from his materials, to his compositions, to his final paintings. This research has yielded important new information on how Van Gogh made each painting, whether they were painted en plein air (outdoors) or in the studio, and whether their colors changed over time. The findings help us understand Van Gogh's creative process, and why the paintings in this exhibition look the way they do today. Study of Mia's *Olive Trees* provides good examples of many components of the analysis.

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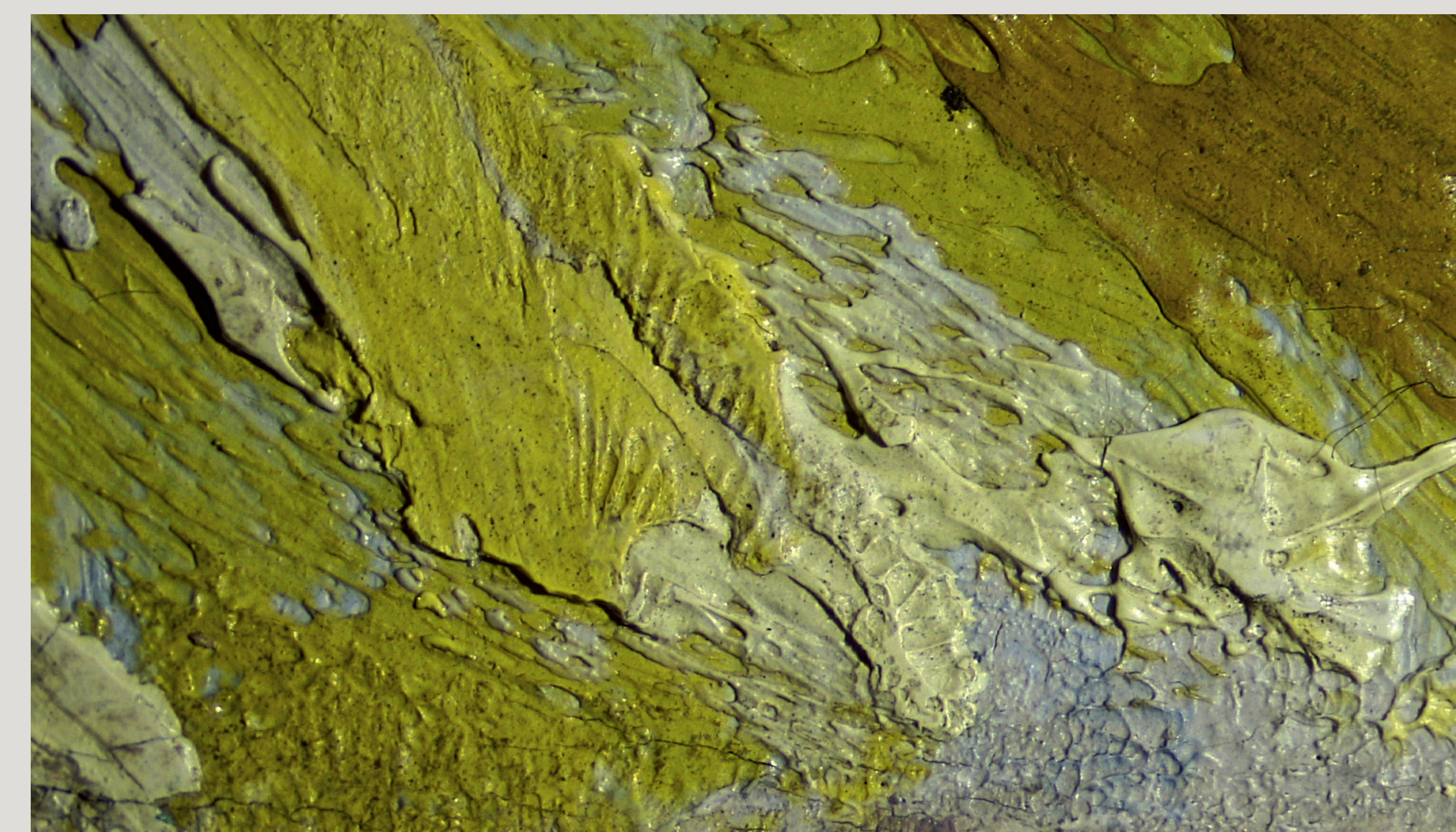


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