

## **Vincent van Gogh**

Dutch, 1853–1890

### **River Bank in Springtime, May–July 1887**

Oil on canvas

Dallas Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. And Mrs. Eugene McDermott  
in memory of Arthur Berger 1961.99

Van Gogh's earliest work was dominated by somber-hued depictions of hard-working farmers and laborers. But after moving to Paris in 1886, he began to produce images of cafes, boulevards, and, as seen here, the countryside along the Seine—using much brighter colors. He was influenced by other artists working in Paris—Claude Monet, Emile Bernard—but also by the imported Japanese woodblock prints that he and his brother Theo voraciously collected. In truth, nature had long been important to Van Gogh: As a youth, he went on long walks through the fields and woods near his hometown. After moving to the south of France in 1888, he spent hours wandering the countryside in search of a view to paint. He once advised Theo, “Always continue walking a lot and loving nature, for that is the real way to learn to understand art better and better.”

## Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese, 1797–1858

### **The Outskirts of Koshigaya in Musashi Province,**

1858, 4th month

Woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper

Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of Louis W. Hill Jr. P.75.51.607

Vincent van Gogh began collecting Japanese prints in Antwerp, in 1886. When he came to Paris that same year, he discovered the wonderful selection of Japanese prints at Siegfried Bing's Art Nouveau gallery. Van Gogh sold ukiyo-e prints on commission for Bing and encouraged his friends to come to the gallery to study Japanese art. In 1887, Van Gogh and his brother Theo organized an exhibition of Japanese prints at the Café Volpini, which attracted considerable attention. Van Gogh was fascinated by both the stylistic conventions of Japanese art—especially the large areas of unmodulated color and daring compositions—and what he saw as its utopian ideals. He stated that all his work was founded on the example of the Japanese, writing in a letter to Theo:

*I envy the Japanese for the enormous clarity that pervades their work. It is never dull and never seems to have been made in haste. Their work is as simple as breathing and they draw a figure with a few well-chosen lines with the same ease, as effortless as buttoning up one's waistcoat.*

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## **Old Woman Sewing, 1881**

Watercolor and black chalk on paper

Minneapolis Institute of Art, extended loan from Alida Messinger

Vincent van Gogh became an artist relatively late in life, after a series of failed attempts at other careers: art dealer, bookseller, teacher, minister. In 1880, his brother Theo suggested he pursue art, and Vincent quickly turned his focus to drawing and painting. In November 1881, at age 28, he wrote to Theo from the sleepy Dutch town of Etten, where he had been living with his parents for several months. Most of the letter describes his romantic troubles, but he closes with this update on his art: “I’m drawing a great deal and think it’s getting better. I’m working much more with the brush than I used to. Now it’s so cold that practically all I do is draw figures inside, seamstress, basket-maker, etcetera.” Indeed, Van Gogh produced several precise, finished drawings in black chalk around this time, mostly focusing on the plight of hardworking farm folk, and in this example he also brushed on subtle passages of watercolor.

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**Olive Grove**, September 1889

Oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

After a prolonged period of mental illness and recovery that kept him within the hospital's walls, Van Gogh ventured outside in September 1889. The olive trees were the first subject he tackled. This small study, with its sketchy execution and modest format, was probably Van Gogh's first attempt to regain his footing. "[T]his is a pretty awful little part of the world, everything's hard to do here, to disentangle its intimate character," he wrote to fellow artist Emile Bernard in early October. "The olive trees down here ... I haven't been fortunate this year in making a success of them, but I'll go back to it, that's my intention."

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## **Olive Trees on a Hillside**, October 1889

Oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

In October 1889, Van Gogh ventured further from the grounds of the hospital where he was staying, heading into the nearby Alpilles mountains in search of new subjects and perspectives. He produced six small-scale studies, including this bird's-eye view of an olive grove featuring earth tones, which reflect the shift from summer to fall. Bands of greenish-yellow vegetation alternate with rows of olive trees set against exposed red earth, producing a somewhat abstract effect that is unique within the series.

# Vincent van Gogh

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**Olive Grove**, November 1889

Oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Van Gogh's November olive tree paintings are distinguished by their remarkably unified compositions and aesthetic. By applying individual colors in a series of dabs, dashes, and dots, Van Gogh aligned himself with Claude Monet, Georges Seurat, and other artists seeking to record reality through the impressionistic use of light and color. "You'll see that there are no more impastos [thick paint] in the large studies," he wrote to his brother. "This imparts atmosphere and uses less paint." Van Gogh also attributed this shift in technique to "the calm life of seclusion I'm leading, and I feel I'm better for it." By adopting a more scientific, orderly style, he sought to fend off abstraction as well as mental illness.

## Vincent van Gogh

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### **Olive Trees**, November 1889

Oil on canvas

Minneapolis Institute of Art, The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 51.7

*Olive Trees* is unique within Van Gogh's olive grove series for its inclusion of the sun, which blankets the morning sky in vivid yellow. A traditional emblem of the divine, the sun often appears in the artist's spiritually symbolic paintings as allusions to God and/or Christ. Van Gogh became increasingly religious as a young man and even served as a lay preacher in a Belgian mining town 10 years earlier. Painting seemed a suitable medium for expressing his spiritual beliefs. The rising sun in *Olive Trees* demonstrates how Van Gogh sought to create a "consoling and gentle subject" that evokes religious sentiments without depicting Biblical figures. Despite Van Gogh's commitment to working directly from nature, the shadows cast by the trees do not correspond with the position of the sun, suggesting imagination still played a role in his approach.

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## **Wheatfield with a Reaper**, September 1889

Oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Van Gogh glimpsed this view of a walled-in wheatfield through the iron bars of his bedroom window at the psychiatric hospital. Over the course of his yearlong stay, it became one of his most repeated motifs as he captured the field's transition from summertime reaping to autumn sowing. Writing to his brother Theo, he described the reaper as “the image of death ... in this sense that humanity would be the wheat being reaped. ... But in this death nothing [is] sad, it takes place in broad daylight with a sun that floods everything with a light of fine gold. ... It's all yellow except for a line of violet hills—a pale, blond yellow.”



The view from  
Van Gogh's window  
at the psychiatric  
hospital.

Van Gogh Museum,  
Amsterdam, Archives.



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## View of the Field behind Saint Paul's Mental Hospital in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, 1889

Graphite on buff wove paper

Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 2001.144

Vincent van Gogh voluntarily entered the hospital of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole at Saint-Rémy in the spring of 1889, after suffering from increasingly acute attacks of mental illness. The facility was in a monastery built in the 1100s, in the countryside near Arles, in southern France. This view of wheat fields was likely the one Van Gogh saw from his small room in the hospital. He focused on the sparseness of the environment and the texture of the wheat grass. Using the field's walled enclosure and distant horizon, he convincingly structured the space in perspective and simultaneously evoked the vastness and the loneliness of the rural landscape.



The psychiatric hospital Saint-Paul-de-Mausole at Saint-Rémy.

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Archives.

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### **Portrait of Dr. Gachet (Auvers-sur-Oise),**

May 15, 1890

Etching

Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of Bruce B. Dayton, 1962 P.13,251

After Van Gogh's release from the hospital at Saint Rémy, he was still in need of care. On the recommendation of fellow artist Camille Pissarro, his brother Theo enlisted Paul Gachet, a physician to many Impressionist painters and an artist himself. Van Gogh moved to Auvers-sur-Oise, a suburb of Paris, where Gachet looked after him in the final months of his life. Van Gogh was skeptical of Gachet at first, but the two became very close and Van Gogh wrote, "I have found in him a complete friend, even something like a new brother." He painted two portraits of the doctor and produced his one and only etching—this image of Gachet—before ending his life six weeks later on July 29, 1890.