

**MELBOURNE
WINTER
MASTERPIECES**

VAN GOGH AND THE SEASONS

Artwork labels

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Van Gogh and the Seasons

For Vincent van Gogh the changing seasons not only represented the ever-continuing cycle of nature but also the passage of human life. The seasons demonstrated for him the greatness of nature and the existence of a higher force. Van Gogh was a very religious person as a young man, but saw the spiritual everywhere in nature during his years as an artist.

Throughout his career he produced depictions of the seasons in the form of landscapes representing spring, summer, autumn or winter, as well as portrayals of people engaged in seasonal work, such as reaping the wheat (summer), sowing a crop and harvesting the grapes (autumn) and gathering wood in the snow (winter). Van Gogh's flower still lifes of spring or summer bouquets, and compositions featuring the bounty of the autumn harvest, including potatoes, apples and pumpkins, are also often clearly connected with particular seasons.

Van Gogh chose the theme for a series of watercolours and other paintings while working as an artist in The Hague (1881–83). He made paintings and drawings depicting the seasons and life of the peasants throughout his later career, and the subject remained important in the highly avant-garde paintings he made after moving to France in 1886 of fruit orchards in bloom (spring); the wheat harvest, the reaping of the wheat (summer); sowers, the grape harvest, the olive harvest (autumn); and a plough and harrow on bleak fields (after Jean-François Millet, winter).

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Van Gogh experienced a feeling of eternity in the passing of the seasons, a sentiment that would become essential to his work. *Van Gogh and the Seasons* is the first exhibition devoted to this central aspect of his art.

Curated by Sjraar van Heugten, *Van Gogh and the Seasons* is the first exhibition to be devoted to this central aspect of Van Gogh's extraordinary creativity and artistic vision. This exhibition has been organised by the NGV and Art Exhibitions Australia, with generous loans from the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, and the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, as well as numerous public and private lenders.

Van Gogh's collection of prints

In 1869, when Vincent van Gogh started working as an office clerk in his uncle's art business at age sixteen, a new visual world opened up for him. The Hague branch of Goupil & Cie operated a busy trade in reproductive prints after popular historical and contemporary paintings. As well as absorbing an encyclopedic mental image bank of art history at Goupil & Cie, Van Gogh also developed a passion for collecting reproductions of works that sparked his imagination. As he became an artist, his ever-growing collection of prints, begun as a teenager's hobby, acted as a virtual museum that he could study daily. Etchings, wood engravings and lithographs were pinned up around each of his makeshift studios, and hundreds more stacked in piles and portfolios that were consulted constantly.

Van Gogh's correspondence with his brother Theo and others allows us to track his changing tastes and influences. During the artist's period of Christian fervour in the late 1870s, prints after religious works by the Romantic painter Ary Scheffer adorned his walls. Following his commitment to becoming an artist in 1880, works by seventeenth-century Dutch masters such as Rembrandt and Jacob van Ruisdael joined reproductions after his favourite French landscape painters Jean-François Millet, Jules Breton and Charles Jacque as constant fixtures in his studios. In June 1882 he told Theo that he had 'at least a thousand prints' in his studio in The Hague, including wood engravings after numerous

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English artists from *The Graphic*, *The London Illustrated News* and other periodicals. Van Gogh cut the images out of the magazines, mounted many of them on sturdy paper and kept them in portfolios arranged by subject. This selection of reproductive prints with seasonal subjects is drawn from Van Gogh's own collection, now housed in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Clément Édouard Bellenger engraver

French 1851–98

Léon-Augustin Lhermitte (after)

The sower

1885

wood-engraving

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t0228V1962

Ferdinand Lefman engraver

French active late 19th century

Marie Collart (after)

The old oak of Beersel (Winter)

late 19th century

wood-engraving

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t0741V1962

Octave Edouard Jean Jahyer engraver

French 1826–90s

Charles Émile Jacque (after)

In the forest in winter

1870s

hand-coloured wood-engraving

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t0338V1962

Mason Jackson engraver

English 1819–1903

Edward Duncan (after)

A winter's morning

1854

wood-engraving

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t0902V1962

Frederick Juengling engraver

American 1846–89

George Inness (after)

A summer landscape

c. 1885

wood-engraving

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t0380V1962

Unknown lithographer
Victor Gabriel Gilbert (after)

Summer

c. 1875

colour lithograph

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t1334V1962

Louise Abbema

French 1858–1927

**Illustration to Emile Goudeau's
*Song to hasten the return of spring***

illustration for *Le Courrier français*, vol. 4, no. 7, published
13 February 1887

1887

lithograph

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t1382V1962

Charles Émile Jacque

French 1813–94

Thrashing

1859

wood-engraving

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t0903V1962

Charles Émile Jacque

French 1813–94

Harvesters resting

c. 1875

wood-engraving

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t0013V1962

Eugène Louis Pirodon lithographer

French 1824–1908

P. de Comte lithographer

French active 1870s

Emile Adélarde Breton (after)

A Sunday morning in winter

1873

lithograph

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t0637V1962

Camille Bernier

French 1823–1902

Autumn

c. 1875

etching

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t1361V1962

Unknown engraver
Charles Émile Jacque (after)

Gleaning

1859

wood-engraving

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t0908V1962

P. de Comte engraver

French active 1870s

Charles Émile Jacque (after)

The apple harvest

1870s

cliché plate

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t0773V1962

S. Gap lithographer
Léon-Augustin Lhermitte (after)

The rest

1888

lithograph

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t0625V1962

Charles Fermin Gillot engraver

French 1853–1903

Charles Henri Pille (after)

Harvest

before 1888

colour gillotage

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t1364V1962

Unknown lithographer

Harvests

illustration for *Le Courrier français*, vol. 4, no. 39,
published 2 October 1887

1887

offset lithograph

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

t1384V1962

Japanese prints

Few influences were more important to Vincent van Gogh's late paintings and drawings than Japanese woodblock prints. Their flat colours and dramatic compositions lie behind the artist's famous glowing, tilted and close-focus images of his surroundings at Arles, Saint-Rémy and Auvers-sur-Oise, painted from 1888 to 1890. Yet for all the startling immediacy and modernity of the pictures Van Gogh completed, his interest in Japanese aesthetics grew gradually. While studying in Antwerp during the winter of 1885 Van Gogh acquired a number of original Japanese prints that he found 'very diverting'. Immersed at this time in the Orientalist writings of the Goncourt brothers, Van Gogh saw the busy Belgian docks of his temporary new home as 'one huge Japonaiserie', where everything appeared 'fantastic, singular and strange'.

The fad for Japanese art, called Japonism, was only one of several aesthetic lenses through which Van Gogh tried looking at the world following his arrival in Paris in 1886. He also considered the anti-naturalistic lens of Adolphe Monticelli, characterised by blurred and thickly painted motifs on panel, and the light-inflected perspective of the Impressionists, with their pale grounds and broken colour. Ultimately, though, it was Japanese woodblock prints that inspired a new clarity and variety in his drawings and a dazzling use of colour and abstract patterning in his painting.

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Japan for Van Gogh was more than the sum of these visual characteristics; it was primarily a sensibility, which he discovered paradoxically in the bright sun of southern France. As he wrote to his brother Theo, in Arles 'one's sight changes. You see things with an eye more Japanese, you feel colour differently'. Van Gogh's own collection of some 500 Japanese woodblock prints is now held by the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. The works displayed here are from the NGV Collection, and are representative of what fascinated Van Gogh about Japanese woodblock prints.

Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese 1797–1858

Mount Fuji from the fields of Ōtsuki

from the *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* series

1858 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock

Purchased, 1961

887-5

Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese 1797–1858

Catching sweetfish in Tama River under the autumn moon

from the *Snow, moon and flowers at famous places* series
1844–48 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

523-2

Katsushika Hokusai

Japanese 1760–1849

Emperor Tenchi

from the *One hundred poems explained by the nurse*
series

1835–36 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

416-2

Katsushika Hokusai

Japanese 1760–1849

Poem by Tenchi Tennō (Fujiwara no Tadahira)

from the *One hundred poems explained by the nurse* series

1835–36 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

417-2

Utagawa Toyokuni I

Japanese 1769–1825

Parody of act four of the play *The Genji and Heike at Nunobiki Waterfall*

1795–1801 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

414.a-c-2

Utagawa Toyokuni II

Japanese 1777–1835

Harvest time in autumn

1826–35 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

458-2

Utagawa Toyokuni II

Japanese 1777–1835

Washing by the river in autumn

1826–35 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

457-2

Kikugawa Eizan (attributed to)

Japanese 1787–1867

Autumn moon at Ishiyama

from the *Fashionable beauties for the Eight views of Ōmi*
series

c. 1814–17, Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

404-2

Utagawa Kunisada (Utagawa Toyokuni III)

Japanese 1786–1865

Yoshino in Yamato Province

from the *Beauties compared with scenic spots of our country* series

c. 1835 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

452B-2

Utagawa Kunisada (Utagawa Toyokuni III)

Japanese 1786–1865

Actor Iwai Hanshiro as Oyasu

1810–42 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Gift of Dr Lilian Alexander, 1934

208H-4

Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese 1797–1858

Mountains and rivers of the Kiso Road

1857 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

443.a-c-2

Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese 1797–1858

Gion Shrine in snow

from the *Famous places in Kyoto* series

1834 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

528-2

Keisai Eisen

Japanese 1790–1848

**Distant view of Sumida River in the
snow**

from the *Views of Edo* series
1830–44 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

439-2

Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese 1797–1858

Monkey bridge in winter

1843–45 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

521-2

Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese 1797–1858

Snowy morning on the Sumida River, Musashi Province

from the *Famous views of the sixty odd provinces* series
1853–56 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

508-2

Katsushika Hokusai

Japanese 1760–1849

Togetsu Bridge at Arashiyama in Yamashiro Province

from the *Views of famous bridges in various provinces*
series

c. 1834 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

421-2

Keisai Eisen

Japanese 1790–1848

**The embankment in front of Inari
Shrine**

from the *Three regions of Edo* series

1830–44 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

436-2

Utagawa Hiroshige II

Japanese 1826–69

Nakanocho in the Yoshiwara

from the *Famous places in the eastern capital* series

1862 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

517-2

Keisai Eisen

Japanese 1790–1848

Plum Garden in Edo

from the *Views of Edo* series
1830–44 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

438-2

Utagawa Kunisada II

Japanese 1823–80

A bustling place by Sumida River

1856 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodcut

Purchased, 1961

894.a-c-5

Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese 1797–1858

Sakurajima, Ōsuma Province

from the *Famous views of the sixty odd provinces* series
1853–56 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

505-2

Utagawa Toyokuni II

Japanese 1777–1835

Bride in springtime

1826–35 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

459-2

Torii Kiyonaga

Japanese 1752–1815

**The third month, cherry blossom
viewing at Mt Asuka**

1784 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock

Purchased, 1941

1090-4

Kawanabe Kyōsai

Japanese 1831–89

Views of Edo, evening view at Tsukiji breakwater

1864 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

444.a-c-2

Torii Kiyonaga

Japanese 1752–1815

Drum Bridge and wisteria at Kameido Tenjin Shrine

c. 1785–90 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

407.a-b-2

Katsukawa Shunsho

Japanese active 1780–95

Evening at the shrine gate

c. 1785 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

400-2

Katsukawa Shunsho

Japanese active 1780–95

Picnic at Oshiage Village

1787–89 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock, (right panel of a triptich)

Felton Bequest, 1909

401-2

Utagawa Kuniyoshi

Japanese 1797–1861

Daikokuten: Actor Ichikawa Danjūrō VIII

from *The seven Gods of Good Fortune on the Sumida River* series

1853 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock

Gift of Dr Lilian Alexander, 1934

208G-4

Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese 1797–1858

Rough Sea at Naruto, Awa Province

from the *Famous views of the sixty odd provinces* series
1853–56 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

507-2

Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese 1797–1858

Seven mile beach, Sōshū Province

c. 1858 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

529.a-c-2

Autumn

During his brief but prolific career, Vincent van Gogh revealed a true fascination for the cycle of the seasons in many of his paintings and drawings. A lifetime's habit of studying nature equipped Van Gogh to observe the smallest changes within the landscape, and a strongly religious upbringing endowed those changes with particular significance. Even before he became a painter, Van Gogh reflected deeply about the way artists over the centuries had depicted the seasons, and showed surprise at how certain seasons seemed to go in and out of artistic fashion. In 1873 he observed that 'it's striking that the old painters almost never painted the autumn and that the moderns have such a particular preference for it'. Autumn was Van Gogh's favourite season, and every year of his painterly career the approaching fall would greatly excite him and fill him with the desire of rendering its colours and distinctive atmosphere. 'How beautiful it is outside', Van Gogh wrote in the autumn of 1882. 'I sometimes yearn for a country where it would always be autumn, but then we'd have no snow and no apple blossom and no corn and stubble fields.'

The atmosphere of a number of Van Gogh's early autumnal paintings gains extra force through being set at dusk. The allusion to life being a pilgrimage through the seasons of time is developed in evocative and often gently melancholic depictions of autumnal landscapes in which a figure, often alone, walks along a tree-lined path or road. Still lifes that display the fruits of the harvest, such

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as apples and pumpkins, suggest the atmosphere of the countryside and autumn with their dark earth tones and robust manner of painting. Images of autumn labour also evoke the approaching winter, the promise of new life in the spring and a summer harvest, in an eternal cycle.

Avenue of poplars in autumn

late October 1884 Nuenen

oil on canvas on wood panel

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Purchased with support from the Vincent van Gogh Foundation
and the Rembrandt Association

s0141M1977

Van Gogh's painting of a lone woman dressed in mourning attire walking along a tree-lined road virtually illustrates stanzas from 'Tristement' ('Sadly'), a melancholic poem expressing a widow's grief by the French poet François Coppée (1842–1908). Van Gogh owned a well-thumbed 1880 edition of Coppée's poems, which were first published in 1874. It is testament to the breadth of Van Gogh's interests that he would embrace contemporary French poetry as a source of inspiration for his art. A later stanza of 'Tristement' evocatively links sorrow to the turning of the seasons from autumn to winter, a sentiment often expressed in Van Gogh's art.

Potato digging (Five figures)

August 1883 The Hague
oil on paper on canvas

Private collection

With their complex moral, spiritual and art-historical implications, images of peasants working in the field became a thematic obsession for Van Gogh. His early practice was careful and the realisation of his ideas evolved slowly. For instance, he explored and refined images of the harvest in hundreds of drawings and paintings as he sought very elusive perfection. Each study had a distinct purpose, and in this oil sketch the workers' faces have only been blocked in, making it more an exercise in colour harmonies, structure and composition than an effort to perfect details.

The sower

December 1882 The Hague
pencil, brush and ink, watercolour

P. and N. de Boer Foundation, Amsterdam

inv. no B26

In early 1882, Van Gogh told Theo a reproduction of Jean-François Millet's *The sower* was prominent among the 'very beautiful' prints he hung in his studio. By December he had formulated a plan for a low-cost series of thirty prints depicting 'figures *from the people for the people*', which he had become convinced was 'desperately needed here in Holland'. The series would show 'working types, say – sower, digger, woodcutter, ploughman, washerwoman, plus on occasion a cradle or orphan man'. A week after writing to Theo, Van Gogh had produced two drawings of a sower, emblematic of autumn, one of which is believed to be the present drawing.

Shepherd and his flock

September 1884 Nuenen

oil on canvas on cardboard

Soumaya Museum, Mexico City

Van Gogh was not short of ideas for subjects and motifs for the commission from Antoon Hermans, having built up a store of sketches and memories from the seasonal activities he had observed during his walks through the countryside. In the previous November, for example, when he was in the rural province of Drenthe, Van Gogh had encountered at dusk 'a shepherd with a flock of sheep coming along the hedge', which may have inspired his panel representing autumn. The project also enabled Van Gogh to engage models, which directly aided his desire to improve his drawing of the human figure.

While living in Nuenen with his parents between 1883 and 1885, Van Gogh met Antoon Hermans, a wealthy retired goldsmith, devout Catholic and amateur painter whom Van Gogh also took on as a pupil. In early August 1884, Hermans decided to decorate rooms of his newly built house in Eindhoven with large murals of saints and other images with Christian themes. However, for the dining room, Van Gogh suggested he consider scenes of local peasant life that would symbolise the four seasons and promote the virtues of the northern work ethic. Van Gogh proposed six motifs: *Sower*, *Ploughman*, *Shepherd*, *Wheat harvest*, *Potato harvest* and an *Ox-cart in the snow* (a winter scene he would later replace with *Wood gatherers in the snow*). Hermans agreed, and commissioned Van Gogh to produce the models which Hermans himself would enlarge to hang on his walls. Because the murals went missing from Hermans's house after his death in 1897, they are only known from Van Gogh's preliminary drawings and oil studies. Three of Van Gogh's large oil sketches are in the current exhibition, including this autumnal scene, *Shepherd and his flock*.

Still life with apples and pumpkins

September 1885 Nuenen
oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 102.578

Underpinning this rustic still life are the early lessons Van Gogh received from the realist painter Anton Mauve (1838–1888). Mauve encouraged him to study an array of items of everyday peasant life, including pumpkins, cabbages and apples. These objects had narrative and symbolic possibilities for Van Gogh, being steeped in the allusion to the annual harvest. In October 1885 Van Gogh told Theo that he planned to send a batch of his latest paintings to Paris, conceding that with their dark colours they would be 'hard to sell', but that the exercise of painting them had been 'damned useful, and I shall continue to paint them this winter'.

Autumn landscape at dusk

October–November 1885 Nuenen
oil on canvas on wood panel

Centraal Museum, Utrecht

13968

Autumn in Brabant delighted Van Gogh and he relished painting its effects in the successive autumns of 1884 and 1885. He was then grappling with several technical challenges at once, one of them being the representation of darkness – full of mystery, colour and meaning. Van Gogh was also determined to capture the special character of local life around Nuenen. His fascination with the traditional Brabantine people and customs is revealed in this depiction of a woman making her way along the path. She wears a headdress known as a 'poffer' that not only expresses her social rank but also reveals her village of origin, instantly recognisable to passers-by.

Vase with honesty

autumn–winter 1884 Nuenen
oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

s0009V1962

Van Gogh's earliest still lifes mark the start of his journey towards colour. Here the silvery seed pods and coloured foliage harmonise with a muted ground of greys, browns and tarnished whites. This work also conforms to a centuries-old Dutch custom of nature studies as vehicles of moral truths. The oak and bay leaves that symbolise strength and posterity inject pensiveness into the painting's already sombre autumnal palette. Gloomier again is the silvery lunaria, known in the Netherlands as 'coins of Judas' due to the resemblance of its leaves to pieces of silver. Van Gogh's depiction of exactly thirty leaves underscores this disturbing allusion to Judas's betrayal of Christ to the Romans for thirty pieces of silver.

Olive grove with two olive pickers

December 1889 Saint-Rémy
oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 104.796

Writing from Arles in April 1889, Van Gogh was at pains to convey to his brother Theo the wonders of the olive tree in its natural setting: 'It's something much different from what one thinks of it in the north – it's a thing of such delicacy – so refined ... the murmur of an olive grove has something very intimate, immensely old about it. It's too beautiful for me to dare to paint it or be able to form an idea of it'. Undeterred, however, Van Gogh grappled with this subject and completed around thirty paintings of olive orchards, also recording the autumnal olive harvest, as in this painting.

The green vineyard

2–3 October 1888 Arles
oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 104.607

Autumn was the season for harvesting grapes in the fields around Montmajour, five kilometres to the north of Arles, providing Van Gogh with a fresh motif of rural work that followed on from his summer studies of the wheat harvest. 'I have to go to work in the vineyard, near Montmajour', he wrote at this time. 'It's all purplish yellow green under the blue sky, a beautiful, colour motif.' Although painted quickly, *The green vineyard* cost Van Gogh a considerable effort intellectually. 'Ah – my study of the vineyards – I sweated blood and tears over it', he told Theo on 3 October, 'but I have it – another square no. 30 canvas'.

Terrace of a Café in Montmartre

La Guinguette à Montmartre

October 1886 Paris
oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris
Bequest of Pierre Goujon, 1915

RF 2243

After briefly studying drawing at the Royal Academy of Art in Antwerp, Van Gogh arrived in Paris around 28 February 1886. He soon moved with his brother Theo into spacious premises on the fourth floor at 54 rue Lepic in Montmartre. Van Gogh was well aware of the already enormous popularity of images of Montmartre's pleasure resorts as souvenirs for tourists, as well as the adoption of such subjects by the Impressionists, and this view of a *guinguette* (an open-air drinking establishment) may well have been painted to tap into that market. He still resisted taking up the Impressionist palette here, however.

The stone bench in the asylum at Saint-Rémy

November 1889 Saint-Rémy
oil on canvas

Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand
Purchase 1954

Inv. 115 P

Van Gogh had been living in the mental health asylum in Saint-Rémy for six months before he painted this work. Soon after arriving there in May 1889, he expressed enthusiasm for his new residence with its one-hectare garden. The round stone fountain, ancient trees and monumental benches provided him with source material for a great many paintings and drawings. He was inspired by what became familiar surroundings that also changed markedly with the seasons. Van Gogh has given this scene incredible energy through his use of rhythmical brushstrokes that make the ground appear to undulate, and the fountain and benches seem animated and heaving with life.

Pine trees at sunset

December 1889 Saint-Rémy
oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 102.808

Only six months before his death, Van Gogh painted this stand of blasted pine trees, ravaged by storms, with limbs no doubt broken by high winds and lightning strikes. It was painted during his stay in the Saint-Rémy hospital, when he made no fewer than twenty paintings and sketches of the pine trees in and around the asylum. Trees held a special resonance for Van Gogh, and in numerous letters he expressed his belief in their spiritual and anthropomorphic qualities. Occasionally he saw his own state of mind being reflected in their fate, and he found their strength and capacity to endure nature's fury inspiring.

Winter

Winter, often conceived in art and literature as the least hospitable of the seasons, held a more complex position within Vincent van Gogh's seasonal representations – one associated not only with the harshness of the elements and the end of the natural life cycle, but also with the idea of hope and beauty, of a world asleep, blanketed by snow, dormant but poised for rebirth. In 1877, several years before embarking on his artistic career, Van Gogh made a watercolour drawing after a lithograph by Jozef Israëls, *Winter, in life as well*, which depicts a one-legged man with a crutch, stumbling with difficulty through the snow. Here 'winter' refers both to the season and to the man's wretched life.

In 1882 Van Gogh chose the subject of miners in the snow, an evocation of the rural labour associated with the contemporary Walloon coal mining industry in the Borinage region of Belgium that was closely related to his recently ended period of evangelical work there (1878–80). Van Gogh, with his interest in the life and labours of the working class, was impressed by the hard lives of miners. Mining work, which was also done by children, was extremely demanding under the best of circumstances, but in the winter cold it was close to unbearable. Van Gogh's portrayal of the miners in the snow was therefore intended to highlight the workers' harsh working lives. Images of peasant women working in snow-covered fields also remind us that Van Gogh saw rural workers as being closer to nature, and their seasonal

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work as highly symbolic of nature's cycle of life. Peasant labour was less intensive during the winter months when nature seems dormant, and therefore winter subjects are relatively rare in Van Gogh's oeuvre.

The parsonage garden at Nuenen in the snow

January 1885 Nuenen
oil on canvas on wood panel

Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

The Armand Hammer Collection, gift of the Armand Hammer Foundation

This winter scene of the walled garden of the parsonage at Nuenen, where Van Gogh lived with his parents for two years, was painted during a period of great tension. He felt unwelcome in the family home and while he saw great beauty in winter, he was frustrated at not being able to paint out of doors. Despite these challenges, there is an atmospheric stillness in this view from a room on the first floor. The eye is drawn to the garden, then led to the distant church tower. The lone figure in the foreground evokes the cycle of work and life in harmony with God and nature that continues throughout winter.

Hendrik Adriaan Christiaan Dekker

lithographer

Dutch 1836–1905

Jozef Israëls (after)

Winter, in life as well

1863

lithograph

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

p0785M1973

Vincent van Gogh

Dutch 1853–90, worked in France 1886–90

Jozef Israëls (after)

Winter, in life as well

1877

pencil, watercolour and ink

Private collection

A lithograph after Jozef Israëls's painting *Winter, in life as well* had been published in the journal *Kunstchronijk* in both 1863 and 1866. Israëls was a leading figure in The Hague School, an art movement centred on painting out of doors that privileged mood and atmosphere over bright colour. Van Gogh made this copy after Israëls three years before embarking upon a career as an artist. While not entirely accomplished, it is remarkable nonetheless for the manner in which the black-and-white lithograph has been sensitively interpreted with a range of brown and green watercolour hues.

Sketch of miners in the snow: Winter

8 October 1882 The Hague

watercolour, pen and ink

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

d0278V1971

The two signed sketches displayed here were sent by Van Gogh to his brother Theo in October 1882. Delicately executed in a combination of watercolour, gouache and pen, they were apparently intended to have an 'impressionistic' quality, in the sense of capturing a mood or atmosphere. In their accompanying letter Van Gogh mentioned his desire to further attempt a churchyard or peasant funeral in the snow: 'In short an *effect* like the enclosed scratch [sketch] of the miners'.

Sketch of orchard in blossom with two figures: Spring

8 October 1882 The Hague
watercolour, pen and ink

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

d0277V1971

The pair of tiny drawings seen here are the only surviving images of a quartet Van Gogh made depicting the seasons that he enclosed in a letter to his brother Theo from The Hague in October 1882. They were made during a period when he was in acute need of money, and were in response to Theo's assurances that watercolours sold better than black-and-white drawings. Van Gogh wrote to Theo that 'to complete the seasons I am sending you a small rough sketch of the spring and another of the autumn; they came to mind as I was making the first one'.

The parsonage garden at Nuenen in winter

mid March 1884 Nuenen

pen and brown ink with white heightening

Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest
Gift of Pál Majovszky, 1934

1935-2791

Van Gogh was pleased with the group of six drawings of the garden and surrounds of his father's parsonage that he made in the winter of 1884. The drawings are quite large, highly finished, richly atmospheric. In this work, the old gnarly trees have a tremendous sense of life and energy, despite being leafless around mid March. Their spindly limbs are like tentacles, which is reinforced by Van Gogh's strong linear technique. He considered the group quite marketable, drawing a framing border on each drawing and signing them 'Vincent'. He sent them to Theo in the hope they would sell, which sadly did not eventuate.

Landscape with a church

December 1883 Nuenen

pencil, pen and ink

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

d0010V1962

During the first winter that he spent in Nuenen, Van Gogh explored neighbouring villages as well. The seventeenth-century church of Saint Clement in nearby Gerwen caught his eye and in *Landscape with a church* it looms up behind an imposing array of pollarded trees, their upper branches removed to produce a dense central cluster of growth. A year earlier, in December 1882, Van Gogh had written to Theo about how 'in all of nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul, as it were. A row of pollard willows sometimes resembles a procession of orphan men'.

Churchyard in winter

December 1883 Nuenen

pencil, pen and brush and ink, chalk, paint

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

d0284V1962r

In December 1883 Van Gogh returned home to live with his parents at Nuenen, and not surprisingly he was drawn to sketch the abandoned tower and churchyard that his brother Theo had described to him the year before. The smaller version of *Churchyard in winter*, displayed adjacent, is a 'close-up' of the composition shown in this drawing, in which the base of the tower and its heavy buttresses are clearly recognisable. 'Don't you think they're beautiful, those pen drawings of the old tower that Vincent sent you?', wrote Van Gogh's father, Theodorus, to Theo on 8 December. 'It comes to him so easily.'

Churchyard in winter

December 1883 Nuenen

pen and ink, pencil

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

d0285V1962

In August 1882 Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo about his parents' move to Nuenen in East Brabant, expressing curiosity about their new locale: 'What you say about their new surroundings is most interesting. I certainly would like to try doing that kind of old church and churchyard with sandy graves and old wooden crosses. I hope it will happen one day'. The old church tower in Nuenen, a romantic ruin at this time that was demolished in 1885, stood next to a churchyard populated with wooden crosses, making for a picturesque and somewhat melancholy work.

Melancholy

Mélancolie

December 1883 Nuenen
pencil, pen and ink

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

d0087V1962

After returning to live in Nuenen in December 1883, Van Gogh was drawn to the garden immediately behind his father's parsonage. The denuded, skeletal forms of trees and hedges here, limned with frost and snow, now inspired a series of drawings to some of which Van Gogh appended French titles, suggesting that these were intended for sale by Theo on the French market. In *Melancholy*, the brooding figure of a woman and the desolate church tower are offset against one another, and the distance between them, defined by bare vegetation and a snow-topped stone wall, creates a sense of isolation that matches the title given to this introverted composition.

Snow-covered field with a harrow (after Millet)

January 1890 Saint-Rémy
oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

s0175V1962

Between September 1889 and January 1890, while staying in the Saint-Rémy asylum, Van Gogh painted twenty copies after his collection of monochrome reproductions of works by the French painter of rural life Jean-François Millet, brightening them with improvised colour. The majority of these copies after Millet depicted field labourers. This composition, *Winter: The plain of Chailly*, was unusual within Millet's oeuvre for its absence of farming figures, whose tools – a harrow and a plough – lie untended on a chilly winter's morning. In Van Gogh's copy, Millet's farm implements and barren fields lie under a layer of frost.

Winter landscape with couple walking

March–April 1890 Saint-Rémy

pencil

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

d0235V1962r

This sketch of a man and woman striding through a snow-filled landscape is one of six winter landscapes which the artist drew from memory with pencil on a single sketchpad. The same couple appears in several briskly rendered winter and spring sketches, delineated with straight and wavy parallel strokes and shaded in parts by a smudging or 'stumping' technique. Van Gogh's dramatic use of unfilled space to evoke thick, blanketing snow exemplifies the simplicity of Japanese aesthetics, which he had recently assimilated, as well as his lifelong interest in black-and-white illustration.

Woman with a fork in a winter landscape

December 1883 Nuenen
chalk

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

d0283V1962r

While staying with his parents in Nuenen in December 1883, in the parsonage where his father Reverend Theodorus van Gogh worked as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, Van Gogh made a number of studies of rural activity. *Woman with a fork in a winter landscape* seems to show a local resident digging in the snow, possibly spreading manure with her fork. In January 1884 Van Gogh wrote to his surveyor friend Antoine Furnée: 'Things are going quite well for me here in Brabant, anyway I find the countryside here very stimulating'.

Spring

In February 1890 Vincent van Gogh wrote to his mother from the South of France: 'Today it was a real spring day, and the fields of young wheat and the lilac hills in the distance so beautiful, and the almond trees are beginning to blossom everywhere'. In his early years as an artist Van Gogh had frequently depicted the rural labour of ploughing as emblematic of spring, a time when the fields were prepared for planting. In Nuenen Van Gogh had vigorously defended his use of dark colours in such works. After his move to Paris at the end of February 1886, however, he painted numerous still lifes of spring and summer flowers in a deliberate campaign aimed at brightening his palette. Other still lifes showing newly germinating bulbs symbolised the new life that spring invariably brings. The brightly hued landscapes depicting the fresh vegetation along the banks of the Seine that Van Gogh painted in the spring and summer of 1887 are clearly Impressionist in character, drawing inspiration from Claude Monet in particular.

Van Gogh's move to Arles in the South of France in February 1888 was shortly before the arrival of spring in the region. He set out to capture the spring in a motif that looms large in Japanese art and which he had attempted to paint previously, though on a modest scale: trees and orchards in blossom. In keeping with the solace that he noted such images could offer, Van Gogh planned to combine them into diptychs and triptychs, a form of presentation inseparably linked to religious art and church interiors and which, in Van Gogh's case, represented a kind of nature-worshipping variant of the Christian multi-panelled altarpiece.

Planting potatoes

September 1884 Nuenen
oil on canvas

Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal, Germany

G 1136

While working on the commission from Antoon Hermans, Van Gogh used a wealth of source material for inspiration. As well as the workers and models he encountered, he drew upon his stock of reproductions of rural labourers by eminent realist artists Camille Corot, Jules Breton, Jules Bastien-Lepage and others. He also wrote to Theo about pictures of farm workers by the English painters Charles Pinwell and Frederick Walker. But it was probably the gift of the monograph *J. F. Millet*, by Alfred Sensier, that stirred him most. In what Van Gogh described as 'a magnificent book', Millet's set of panels named the *Four Seasons*, 1868–73, is richly described.

While living in Nuenen with his parents between 1883 and 1885, Van Gogh met Antoon Hermans, a wealthy retired goldsmith, devout Catholic and amateur painter whom Van Gogh also took on as a pupil. In early August 1884, Hermans decided to decorate rooms of his newly built house in Eindhoven with large murals of saints, and other images with Christian themes. However, for the dining room, Van Gogh suggested he consider scenes of local peasant life that would symbolise the four seasons and promote the virtues of the northern work ethic. Van Gogh proposed six motifs: *Sower*, *Ploughman*, *Shepherd*, *Wheat harvest*, *Potato harvest* and an *Ox-cart in the snow* (a winter scene he would later replace with *Wood gatherers in the snow*). Hermans agreed, and commissioned Van Gogh to produce the models which Hermans himself would enlarge to hang on his walls. Because the murals went missing from Hermans's house after his death in 1897 they are only known from Van Gogh's preliminary drawings and oil studies. Three of Van Gogh's large oil sketches are in the current exhibition, including this spring scene, *Planting potatoes*.

Peasants planting potatoes

August–September 1884 Nuenen
oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 105.684

The subject of peasants working in the fields recurs constantly in Van Gogh's art, and particularly his letters, from 1884 onwards. In August, shortly before Van Gogh commenced working on the studies for Antoon Hermans, he told Theo he had recently been 'in the fields every day during the wheat harvest', and he closely observed all stages of the cycle of farm life. He admired the workers immensely and in his mind associated their labours with an honesty and purity that he strove to express in his art. Van Gogh's desire for authenticity saw him ideally only use real workers as models for these subjects.

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Nursery on Schenkweg

April–May 1882 The Hague

black chalk, graphite, pen and brush and ink, heightened with white

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971

1972.118.281

This work is from the second of two groups comprising eighteen drawn landscape and city views of The Hague that were commissioned by Van Gogh's uncle Cornelis Marinus van Gogh. Made between March and May of 1882, they constitute Van Gogh's first professional undertaking as an artist. He was happy with his progress, telling Theo, 'I continue drawing similar small townscapes nearly every day and I'm getting the hang of it'. Even as a novice artist Van Gogh strove to capture particular seasonal effects on the landscape. He told his artist friend Anthon von Rappard that this drawing 'expresses, I think, "spring", and a gentle stillness'.

Roses and peonies

June 1886 Paris

oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 109.371

This is one of the earliest of Van Gogh's flower pictures painted in Paris. Its date coincides with his discovery of the lusciously textured still lifes of Marseilles painter Adolphe Monticelli (1824–1886). The motif itself is thought to have been possibly inspired by Édouard Manet's *Peonies in a vase*, 1864 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). Van Gogh told his friend the English painter Horace Mann Livens in autumn 1886 that he had been experimenting with pink and white roses in the bid to 'render intense colour and not a grey harmony'. This signifies Van Gogh's growing tendency to use bold colour, and the loosening of his technique.

River bank in springtime

June 1887 Paris

oil on canvas

Dallas Museum of Art, Texas
Gift of Mr and Mrs Eugene McDermott
in memory of Arthur Berger

1961.99

Many of the landscapes that Van Gogh painted in and around Paris during 1887 were experimental in nature, influenced by the artistic and cultural life of the city. However, his individuality increasingly emerged, exemplified by works such as this. How he layered the colours here is almost in defiance of typical Impressionist or Post-Impressionist methods. While the work is predominantly green, the dabs of reddish pink and long strokes of contrasting colours interrupt optical mixing.

Patch of grass

April–June 1887 Paris
oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 105.264

Van Gogh's first year in Paris coincided with the emergence of Neo-Impressionism (or Divisionism), a new movement in art whose adherents abandoned the wet-on-wet application of harmonious tones favoured by Impressionism, placing instead strong, opposing blocks of colour side by side. New works made in this manner by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac created controversy at this time. Both the lively, flickering brushwork and vivid hues of this joyous celebration of spring flowers are indebted to Van Gogh's study of paintings by Claude Monet, Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, as well as to his close study of Japanese art during his stay in Paris.

Basket of hyacinth bulbs

January–February 1887 Paris

oil on wood panel

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

s0063V1962

Van Gogh sometimes used rhythmic brushstrokes to reinforce the shape of the principal motif in a painting. This work is highly textural and the bulbs are deliciously tactile and voluminous. The short, sharp elongated brushstrokes he used are Neo-Impressionist in technique, a style that he was warming to in Paris. He also occasionally used compositional devices to echo the outlines of his subjects. However, in *Basket of hyacinth bulbs* he has gone to the extreme of using a wooden oval support that repeats the shape of the basket. Only three other paintings by Van Gogh have survived in this format.

Bank with trees

spring 1887 Paris
oil on canvas

P. and N. de Boer Foundation, Amsterdam

inv. no. B19

Despite his resistance to the use of colour in his work, Van Gogh had become preoccupied with the question of colour since his short stay in the port city of Antwerp in late 1885, where he had first come across brightly hued Japanese woodblock prints. After his move to Paris in February 1886, a combination of influences contributed to both a brightening and lightening of his art. In the spring and summer of 1887 he painted dozens of outdoor studies of Parisian scenes. This painting exemplifies Van Gogh's shift in 1887 to embrace the open brushwork and bright palette he had observed in the works of Claude Monet and other Impressionist painters.

Orchard in blossom

April 1889 Arles
oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

s0038V1962

As the winter of 1889 was drawing to a close, Van Gogh wrote to Theo from Arles of his wish to 'set to work in the orchards'. By early April, Van Gogh was again setting up his easel beside flowering trees. However, he was growing tormented by the rain and wind threatening to destroy the fragile blossoms of his fruit trees. He was also running out of paint and wrote to Theo in a tone of panic asking him to send more materials, reporting in mid April that he had '6 spring studies, including two large orchards. It's very urgent, because these effects are so fleeting'. This painting is one of the six mentioned in the letter.

The garden of the asylum at Saint-Rémy

May 1889 Saint-Rémy
oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 101.508

In May 1889, after several periods of treatment in the Arles hospital, Van Gogh admitted himself to the Saint-Paul de Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, some twenty-four kilometres north-east of Arles. Van Gogh settled in well at first, and around 23 May, just over two weeks after his admission, told Theo about 'the 4 canvases of the garden I have on the go'. Van Gogh here depicted a shaded pathway running along the outside of the north wing of the men's quarters in the asylum, where he had been allowed to establish a studio at this time.

Orchard bordered by cypresses

April 1888 Arles
oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 108.685

Van Gogh was captivated by fleeting moments of great beauty seen in nature. As the winter of 1888 thawed and spring blossoms emerged, he worked feverishly to complete a series of paintings of orchards near Arles before the weather turned and the fruit trees dropped their flowers. Van Gogh then was experimenting with an approach inspired by both Impressionism and Japanese art, believing this was apt for the colourful blossoming trees. Yet, in a letter of 12 April 1888 to fellow artist Émile Bernard he confessed: 'I follow no system of brushwork at all; I hit the canvas with irregular strokes which I leave as they are, impastos, uncovered spots of canvas – corners here and there left inevitably unfinished'.

Horse chestnut tree in blossom

mid May 1887 Paris
oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

s0126V1962

The time Van Gogh spent in Paris from February 1886 until February 1888 was a period of intense experimentation and learning. The influences on his art broadened considerably, signifying a generational shift away from older tonal artists towards the young avant-garde painters of Paris. This work is a masterful combination of Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist techniques, and a demonstration of his understanding of modern colour theories. This study of a single tree has been linked with more extensive landscapes Van Gogh painted around the same time, enabling him to execute larger and more laboriously painted landscapes in the studio.

View of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer

1–3 June 1888 Arles

oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 106.327

At the end of May 1888, Van Gogh travelled briefly to the coastal town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. He was drawn to this village by a desire to find an even more remarkable experience of light and colour than he had already encountered in Arles. Although short, Van Gogh's visit to this village is credited with significantly reinforcing his view of the South of France as a coming to life of the brilliantly coloured Japanese woodblock prints he so admired. The foreground is populated by rows of vivid blue-flowering flax plants and possibly grapevines.

Tree trunks in the grass

late April 1890 Saint-Rémy
oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 100.189

In April 1890 Van Gogh was still at the Saint-Paul de Mausole asylum, where for the previous month he had been in deep psychological crisis, unable to cope with the outside world. This landscape is thought to be the first painting he attempted once he was well enough to venture from his room. His eye seems arrested by extreme detail. Looking into the grass, he observes the bright greens of new spring grass competing with the flickering whites and yellows of meadow grasses and dandelions. He also depicts, with something like wonder, the base of a forked pine tree. His eye translates its rough bark as a geometric pattern of coloured stripes.

Blossoming chestnut trees

22–23 May 1890 Auvers-sur-Oise
oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 105.479

Van Gogh painted this work just days after he left Saint-Rémy and travelled some seven hundred kilometres north to the village of Auvers-sur-Oise. His first ventures in recording this new locale were understandably tentative. However, in a typically productive surge, he worked on this view of the street near his lodgings, three other paintings and two drawings in the four days after his arrival. This indicates that he quickly became attuned to the possibilities of his new environs, where he would paint around seventy paintings in the seventy days he lived there.

Summer

Vincent van Gogh considered summer, the season for harvesting wheat, to have a profound symbolic meaning. The yearly growth cycle of wheat – its sowing, young growth, maturity and summer harvest – symbolised the eternity of nature for Van Gogh, and all of his harvest scenes can be seen in that light. In July 1884, while living in the Dutch province of Brabant, he wrote to Theo of how he saw the seasons in terms of colour, and defined summer as ‘the opposition of blues against an element of orange in the golden bronze of the wheat’. This was still a very applicable description four years later, when the harvest of the wheat greatly impressed him in Provence, and he used this colour scheme to make works that capture the essence of a hot summer day in the South of France.

Van Gogh perceived in nature and in the life of the peasants a higher force, which he described as ‘quelque chose là-haut’ (‘something on high’). Depictions of reapers and of sheaves of wheat from the mid 1880s are thus imbued with religious meaning. Later, in Arles in 1888, Van Gogh would express in clear terms the deeper meaning these harvest-related subjects held for him, testifying to his perception of a higher force inherent in the eternal cycle of life. In June 1888 he wrote to his painter friend Émile Bernard about how ‘yearnings for that infinite of which the Sower, the sheaf, are the symbols, still enchant me as before’. ‘I even work in the wheatfields at midday’, he told Bernard, ‘in the full heat of the sun, without any shade whatever, and there you are, I revel in it like a cicada’.

Wheatfield

June 1888 Arles
oil on canvas

Honolulu Museum of Art, Hawaii
Gift of Mrs Richard A. Cooke and family
in memory of Richard A. Cooke, 1946

377.1

For two weeks in June of 1888 Van Gogh was engrossed with drawing and painting the golden wheatfields around Arles. As he wrote to Émile Bernard at this time, 'yearnings for that infinite of which the Sower, the sheaf, are the symbols, still enchant me as before'. The energetic and radiant paintings he created include quickly made sketches such as this one. Although Van Gogh would have considered *Wheatfields* to be a study, he meticulously planned its composition. With almost half the canvas given over to stubble and earth in the foreground, he then layered horizontal bands that recede in seven carefully demarcated strips that climb towards the sky.

Reaper

July–September 1885 Nuenen
chalk

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

d0419V1962

In mid 1885 Van Gogh resolved to master once and for all the physicality of the farm labourers whom he witnessed toiling daily in the fields around Nuenen. He approached his new self-imposed challenge systematically, recruiting models to his two-roomed studio. This study of a reaper attests to the great seriousness of Van Gogh's project. These individual studies were ultimately intended for amalgamation into larger, multi-figured compositions.

Sheaves of wheat

July–August 1885 Nuenen
oil on canvas

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

KM 102.692

The sheaves of wheat here have an iconic status that has a meaning beyond an exercise in technique or a study for a more ambitious painting. Van Gogh saw the toil of the peasants, striving towards the harvest, and even his own endeavours, as carrying out God's designs through hard work. He perceived the harvest as the joyous fruits of humanity's never-ending cycle of life, work and death. Thus *Sheaves of wheat* has a profound meaning, as do his other images of the harvest. It is telling that although Van Gogh's style changed markedly over the next five years, the narrative and symbolism altered little.

Bowl with zinnias and other flowers

summer 1886 Paris

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Purchased 1951

no. 5808

Impressionism was not the only pathway available to Van Gogh in Paris in 1886 for achieving luminous colour in his painting. In that year Van Gogh painted a number of studies of flowers in a straight-sided, green vase, in which the flowers are presented as a dense mass against a wood-like umber ground and where the light source seems to issue from the very colour contrasts among the flowers themselves. A fidgety and heavy application of paint further distinguishes this group of flower paintings, weighting every leaf and petal in a manner alien to Impressionist painting. Van Gogh drew inspiration here from the Marseilles-born painter Adolphe Monticelli (1824–1886).

Still life with wildflowers and carnations

summer 1887 Paris

oil on canvas

Triton Collection Foundation

When Van Gogh was in Paris during the summer of 1887, he painted around thirty-five flower pictures, including this work featuring seasonal blooms. With its high-keyed colour contrasts, it reveals the results of Van Gogh's two-year quest for chromatic brilliance. By 1887 Paris had recovered from the economic crash of 1882 and flowers had become an obsession in the capital. Van Gogh had formed a romantic friendship with Agostina Segatori, owner of a local restaurant-cabaret named Le Tambourin. He set about covering the walls of the cabaret with his still lifes, such as this painting, in hopes of selling them, while they also doubled as love tokens to Madame Segatori.

Trees and undergrowth

July 1887 Paris

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

s0066V1962

By summer 1887 Van Gogh's focus on colour studies of flowers and undergrowth was paying off, bringing him closer to the light-filled visual language of the Impressionists. He was in a sense catching up with Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Camille Pissarro, who had all trodden the same artistic path a decade earlier. Their influence can be seen in this painting in a new freedom of brushwork, absence of black, chinks of light between leaves and a reliance on colour contrasts. The occasional companionship of the younger pioneers of Neo-Impressionism may also have contributed to Van Gogh's simultaneous deployment of coloured dots and dashes that create structure in this work.

A wheatfield, with cypresses

early September 1889 Saint-Rémy
oil on canvas

The National Gallery, London
Bought, Courtauld Fund, 1923

G3861

In June 1889 Van Gogh was permitted to work outside the Saint-Paul de Mausole asylum, and while he was still enamoured of the region's wheatfields, he discovered a new motif: the evergreen cypress trees planted throughout Provence to protect crops from the ferocious mistral winds. 'It's beautiful as regards lines and proportions, like an Egyptian obelisk', he wrote to Theo about the cypress tree. 'And the green has such a distinguished quality. It's the *dark* patch in a sun-drenched landscape.' Here sun-warmed wheat and windswept cypresses are combined with olive trees, another feature of the local landscape in Provence, under a sky filled with swirling clouds.

Wheatfield

June 1888 Arles
oil on canvas

P. and N. de Boer Foundation, Amsterdam

inv. no. B21

In 1888 Van Gogh discovered a view of the fertile plain of La Crau by climbing an escarpment known as Montmajour, near Arles. Taken with this view, he walked across the plain to record this painting that looks back to Montmajour. Unlike the grey climate of the north, Arles and its environs offered intoxicatingly bold contrasts of colour, where golden fields met clear blue skies. Van Gogh here has achieved a composition of remarkable energy by combining flat expanses of bright colour with interlocking diagonals. These features, along with his application of paint in short, stiff lines, are signs of the painter's conscious 'Japonisation' of his landscapes in this period.

Farmhouse in Provence

June 1888 Arles

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection

1970.17.34

In February 1888 Van Gogh moved from Paris to Provence where after a few months he thrived amid the sun-drenched crops and the warmth and strong light that is unique to the South of France. He wrote enthusiastically about the bright flowers that enabled him to place key accents in his works, such as the red poppies that so strikingly charge *Farmhouse in Provence*. Van Gogh's move followed the dramatic stylistic shift that took place in Paris when he began to use primary colours and unmixed paint straight from the tube which he applied in short, sharp strokes. The summer harvest is the central theme of this sun-filled painting.

Self-portrait

autumn 1887 Paris

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Donation Jacques Laroche with life interest, 1947

RF 1947 28

With its thick stripes of vivid colour laid down across the face, this is one of the most expressive of the many self-portraits that Van Gogh made while living in Paris, and was painted with the aid of a mirror. Van Gogh did have access to models, so his choice to paint himself was akin to the psychologically penetrating self-portraits by Rembrandt and other seventeenth-century Dutch masters whom Van Gogh so greatly admired. In a letter to Theo written in December 1885, Van Gogh wrote of the power of painting: 'Painted portraits have a life of their own that comes from deep in the soul of the painter'.