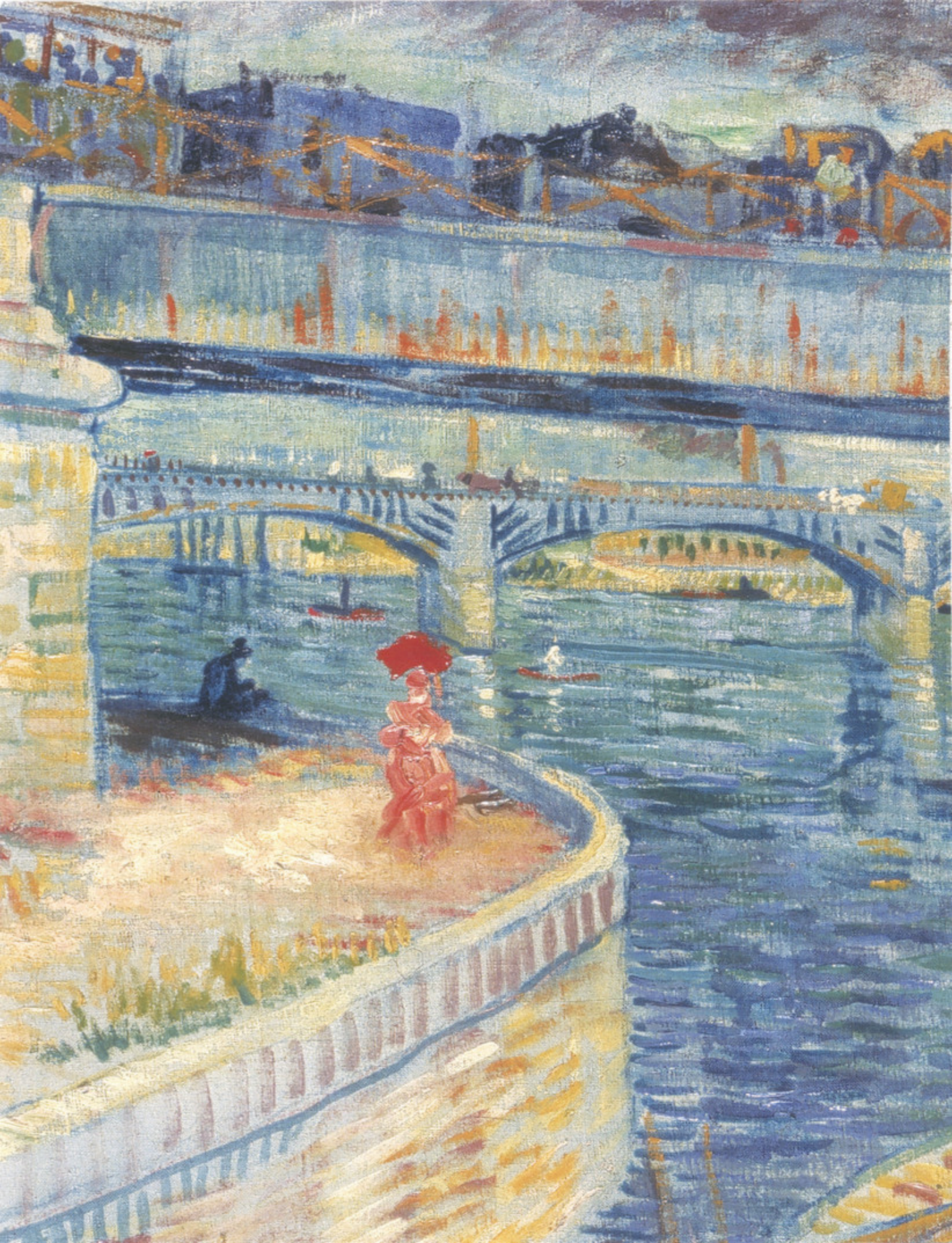
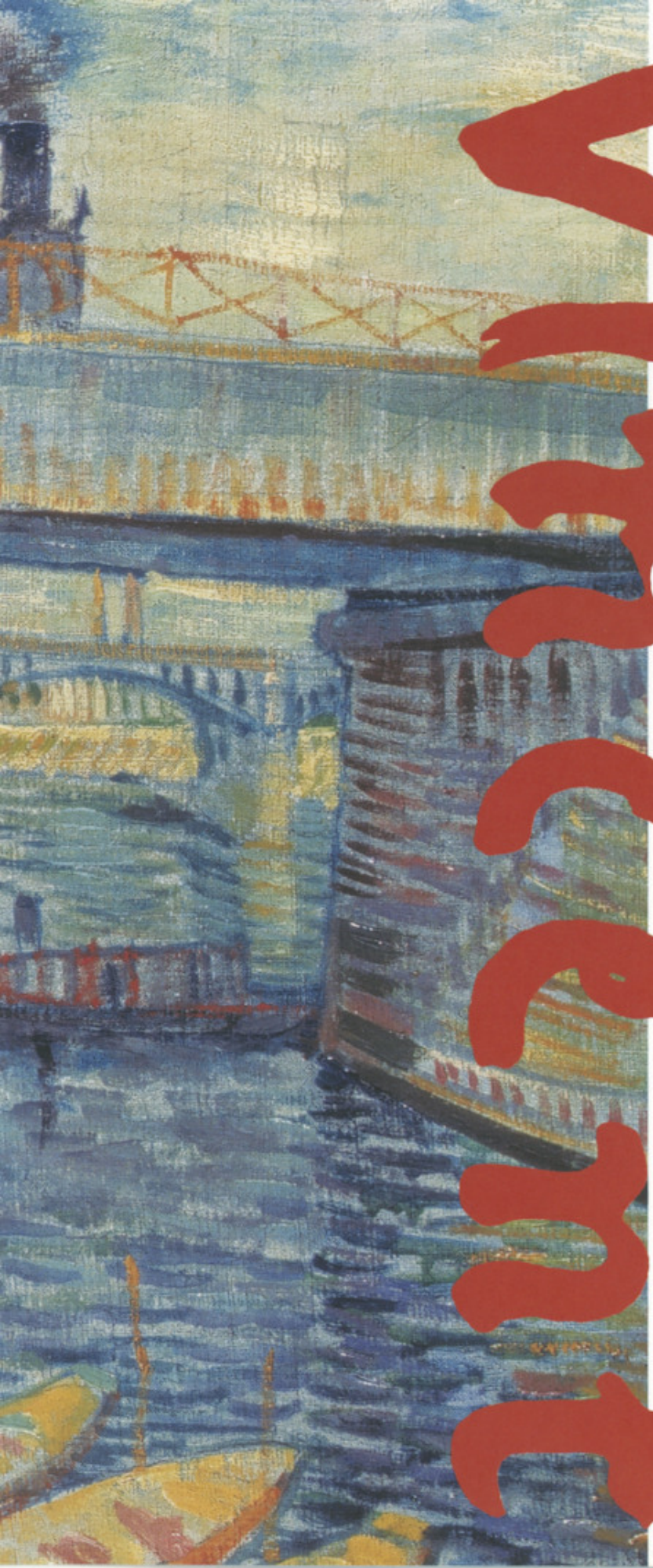
VAN GOGH and Impressionism

John House

Van Gogh Museum

Van Gogh and Impressionism





VAN GOGH
and
Impressionism

John House

Van Gogh Museum

THE APPEARANCE OF VINCENT VAN GOGH'S ART was transformed by his experience of French Impressionist painting. It was the work of the Impressionists, who sought to capture the transient effects of colour and light, that encouraged him to abandon the sombre palette of his Dutch period canvases and to adopt the rich, vibrant colour range of his most celebrated works. However, in crucial ways the aims of his art remained very different. For Van Gogh, colour in painting was essentially a vehicle for emotional expression as well as a means of conveying his visual experiences of the world around him.

Van Gogh discovered Impressionism and began to explore its implications during the two years he spent in Paris, from late February 1886 to February 1888. For him, the quintessential Impressionist painter was always Claude Monet. It may seem surprising that he knew little about the Impressionists and their manner of painting prior to his arrival in Paris in 1886. He had visited the city briefly in May 1873, attending that year's Salon exhibition, and spent time working in the Paris gallery of the art dealer Adolphe Goupil in the autumn of 1874 and again between May 1875 and March 1876. He thus narrowly missed being in Paris for the Impressionists' first two group exhibitions, in 1874 and 1876, and the auction sale that they organized in March 1875. The group and their activities were only of interest to a small minority in the art world. Goupil at that date was specializing in academic genre paintings of peasant scenes and fashionable bourgeois life, but Van Gogh's tastes before he became an artist led him more towards the work of painters of peasant subjects such as Jean-François Millet and Jules Breton and the landscape paintings of the artists who worked in and around the Fontainebleau Forest.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive grove*, 1889 (detail fig. 52) Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

In a letter of March 1876 Van Gogh mentions buying etched reproductions of works by Millet from the dealer who specialized in paintings of this type, Paul Durand-Ruel, and describes the other etched reproductions that were on sale at his gallery. These were part of a series of three hundred etchings of paintings, published by the dealer between 1873 and 1875, which included a very small number after works by Monet, Camille Pissarro and Alfred Sisley, many of whose canvases were in Durand-Ruel's stock at that date. But there is no indication that the dealer had any of their paintings on view when Van Gogh visited, and there was nothing about the black-and-white etched reproductions of their works that would have particularly attracted his attention. Nor is there any hint that he was aware of the preparations for the second Impressionist group exhibition, which opened at Durand-Ruel's gallery three days after his visit – on the day of his departure from Paris.

BEGINNINGS IN HOLLAND

After a long interlude during which he worked as a teacher and as a preacher, Van Gogh decided in 1880 to become an artist. He remained in Holland, living in 1881-83 in The Hague, and otherwise mostly with his family in the Dutch countryside, first at Etten and then at Nuenen, where his father, a pastor, was posted in 1882. By this time, his brother Theo was working for the Goupil gallery in Paris, and had become manager of its branch on Boulevard Montmartre in 1881. From Paris, he kept Van Gogh informed about artistic developments in the city, but Vincent himself remained convinced that no new developments could surpass the work of the artists he idolized, notably Millet. He read Emile Zola's writings about Edouard Manet and asked Theo for information about the posthumous Manet retrospective exhibition at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1884, but insisted that 'to me *Millet*, not Manet, is that essential modern painter who opened the horizon to many'. As for Impressionism, he admitted that, living in Holland, he knew very little about it, even wondering, shortly before he moved to Paris in 1886, whether 'we've already heard the last of *Impressionism*'.

1
Vincent van Gogh,
The potato eaters, 1885
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

At the same time Van Gogh was taking an ever-increasing interest in colour, inspired largely by his reading rather than by any direct experience of works of art. It was Eugène Delacroix's practices that most engaged him, as described in texts by Charles Blanc and Théophile Silvestre, which he quoted at length in letters to Theo. In 1884, when the colour in his paintings was still very sombre, he wrote of his ambition to paint canvases of the four seasons, each conceived in terms of a different contrast of complementary colours: spring expressed by green against pink, summer by blue against

orange, autumn by yellow against violet, and winter by black against white. The following year, he began to explore ways of putting these ideas into practice. In his major work of 1885, *The potato eaters* (1), the overall tonality is very subdued, suggestive of the colour of the potatoes the peasants are eating, but he achieved the effects he was seeking by subtle mixtures of warm and cool colours. Later in the year, he described a group of still-life paintings, including *Basket of apples* (2), in terms of the colour combinations and contrasts that made them up.

During his time living with his family, Van Gogh had little chance to study original paintings by other artists. Nonetheless, a brief trip to Amsterdam in October 1885, followed by his move to Antwerp in November, opened his eyes to the ways in which the Old Masters had used colour – notably Rembrandt van Rijn, Frans Hals and Peter Paul Rubens. These observations confirmed the ideas that he had derived from his readings, that the artist should not use colour to imitate reality, but rather to create harmonies that were parallel to nature, since, as he put it, 'Colour expresses

2
Vincent van Gogh,
Basket of apples, 1885
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

3
Eugène Delacroix,
Christ asleep during the tempest, c. 1853
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

something in itself'. The artists who had, he felt, explored these ideas most fully in recent years were Delacroix (3) and the landscapist Jules Dupré.

PARIS 1886: PAINTING THICKLY

By 1886, the Paris gallery for which Theo worked had been renamed Boussod, Valadon & Cie, following the retirement of its founder Adolphe Goupil. The new management looked more favourably on recent developments in painting, and Theo was permitted to purchase a small number of paintings by the leading Impressionists. Only one of these, a canvas by Sisley, was still in the gallery when Van Gogh arrived in Paris. At this stage Theo did not, it seems, have any direct personal contact with the Impressionist painters.

Van Gogh's first extensive exposure to Impressionist paintings came at two exhibitions in the spring and summer of 1886: the eighth and final Impressionist group exhibition, which ran from mid-May to mid-June,

4
Edgar Degas,
The tub, 1886
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

and the fifth Exposition Internationale organized by the dealer Georges Petit, from mid-June to mid-July. At the former, he would have seen recent pastels of bathing women by Edgar Degas (4), together with the first appearance of Neo-Impressionist works, executed in small 'points' of varied colour, by Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, Pissarro and others. Petit's show included recent works by Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Monet (5). Van Gogh's later memory of these initial experiences shows just how difficult he found it to assimilate modes of painting that were so startlingly different from anything he had seen before. A year later, he wrote to his sister Willemien: 'people have heard of the Impressionists, they have great expectations of them... and when they see them for the first time they are bitterly, bitterly disappointed and find them careless, ugly, badly painted, badly drawn, bad in colour, everything that's miserable. That was my first impression, too, when I came to Paris [...].' However, by the autumn of 1886 Van Gogh was beginning to find some value in their work, writing to the English painter Horace Mann Livens: 'In Antwerp I did not even know what the Impressionists were, now I have seen them and though *not* being one of the club, yet

I have much admired certain Impressionist pictures – Degas, nude figure – Claude Monet, landscape.' In the same letter, he also wrote of having the chance, once more, to study the work of Delacroix.

As this letter shows, Van Gogh already had a high regard for the Impressionists, but his paintings from the spring, summer and autumn of 1886 show no sign of the impact of Impressionist painting. The limited colour range and relatively muted tonality of *The Hill of Montmartre* (6) is strongly reminiscent of the work of landscape painters from the previous generation such as Charles-François Daubigny (7), whose pictures Van Gogh had greatly admired since his first visits to Paris; indeed, in 1884 he had noted that Daubigny was 'very *daring* in colours'.

5
Claude Monet,
Tulip field, Holland,
1886
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

>> 6
Vincent van Gogh,
The Hill of Montmartre,
1886
Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo

7
Charles-François Daubigny, *Cliffs near Villerville-sur-Mer*, 1864-72
Museum Mesdag, The Hague

At this date, the Hill of Montmartre ('La Butte'), overlooking central Paris from the north, had two very different faces. The apartment where Van Gogh lived from June 1886 onwards was on its south side, in a thoroughly urbanized area, and commanded a panoramic view over south-western Paris. By contrast, the north side was only beginning to be developed. The area shown in *The Hill of Montmartre* was still a zone of allotments and market gardens, while the mills on the hilltop carried obvious echoes of the landscapes of Van Gogh's native Holland. Even while he was painting this relatively rural scene, he was acutely aware of the incursion of suburban development. A drawing of the same view in a more panoramic format (8) is framed on the right by a sequence of apartment buildings, one under construction, which he chose not to include in *The Hill of Montmartre*.

This interest in the urban and suburban landscape was nothing new in Van Gogh's art, and many of his paintings and drawings from The Hague depicted similar sites. In a few canvases, including *The Blute-fin mill*, painted

8
Vincent van Gogh,
View of Montmartre,
1886
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

in the autumn of 1886 (9), he introduced fashionable figures, underlining Montmartre's role as a form of urban playground. The inclusion of such figures in oil paintings of urban scenes had been pioneered by the Impressionists, but by the mid-1880s many artists were exhibiting equally contemporary cityscapes at the Paris Salon; indeed, Paul François Quinsac exhibited a very similar view, though very differently treated, at the Salon in 1887 (10).

Van Gogh did not specify which of Monet's landscapes he had admired, but among those shown in Petit's exhibition were two of the latter artist's very recent views of Dutch tulip fields, which would undoubtedly have attracted Van Gogh's attention (10). However, comparison of these works with Van Gogh's landscapes of 1886 highlights the contrasts between the two. Monet's intense colour and elaborately wrought, heavily impasted paint surfaces are utterly unlike the muted tonality and simple, direct execution of Van Gogh's canvases. In Degas's pastels of women bathing,

9
Vincent van Gogh,
The Blute-fin mill, 1886
Museum de Fundatie,
Zwolle

10
Paul François Quinsac,
At the Moulin de la Galette, 1887
Private collection

>> 11
Vincent van Gogh,
Vase with Chinese asters and gladioli, 1886
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

>> 12
Adolphe Monticelli,
Flower still life, c. 1875
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

he would have been able to see possible ways of combining colour and draughtsmanship, though again this was something that had no immediate impact on his own work.

Van Gogh's other major pictorial project in the late summer and autumn of 1886 was a sequence of ambitious flower still lifes (11). Boldly and quite thickly painted, with strong contrasts of colour and texture, these are evidently indebted to the flower pieces of the Provençal painter Adolphe Monticelli, several of whose paintings the Van Gogh brothers acquired for their personal collection and who had died just that summer (12). Van Gogh's new still lifes were a continuation of his preoccupation with questions of colour during his final year in Holland. In his letter to Livens, he described his recent landscapes, presumably including *The Hill of Montmartre*, as 'frankly *green*, frankly *blue*', and explained the colour contrasts in

13
Georges Seurat,
The Seine at Courbevoie,
1883-84
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

14
Vincent van Gogh,
Boulevard de Clichy,
1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

his flower still lifes as his attempt 'to render intense COLOUR and not a grey harmony'. Art exhibitions offered Van Gogh one path to discovering the current state of painting in France; personal contacts offered another. On his arrival in Paris, he had spent about three months studying in the studio of the academic artist Fernand Cormon. There, among his fellow students, he met Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Louis Anquetin and Anquetin's friend Emile Bernard, who had recently been expelled from the studio. These acquaintanceships had no immediate effect on his art, but later in the year he got to know Bernard and Toulouse-Lautrec better, and it seems that they, rather than Van Gogh's visits to exhibitions, played the primary role in introducing him to current debates about the state of contemporary art.

EARLY 1887: FIRST EXPERIMENTS

The Impressionism of artists such as Monet was based primarily on direct visual experience – on each artist's personal way of seeing the external world (in French, *sensation*). By the 1880s, Monet was realizing this *sensation* in paint in ever more complex forms, in his richly woven harmonies of colour and touch. At the same time, younger artists were beginning

<< 15
Vincent van Gogh,
Montmartre: Windmills and allotments, 1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

16
Vincent van Gogh,
Labourer on a country road, 1887
Private collection

to explore ways of going beyond this kind of subjective vision. The Neo-Impressionism of Seurat (13) and Signac laid claims to a more objective, scientific approach, translated into the impersonal uniformity of the *petit point*, the close juxtaposition of tiny dots of colour in a technique that became known as pointillism.Toulouse-Lautrec was becoming increasingly interested in the use of line to characterize human movement and expression, while Paul Gauguin, whom Bernard first met in Brittany in the summer of 1886, was exploring ideas of 'synthesis', seeking to reintroduce memory and imagination into his art, rather than representing the external forms of nature. Bernard, in turn, together with Anquetin, began to move away from the variegated paint handling of Impressionism, in favour of sharply outlined planes of flat colour, attempting to convey the essence of a subject rather than its appearance.

Van Gogh's response to these very diverse stimuli was characteristically unsystematic. Through the first months of 1887 he explored various aspects of these approaches to painting, sometimes in unexpected combinations. In contrast to the relatively thick paint-layers of his work in 1886, he began to work very thinly, mixing his paint with *essence*, an oil-based thinning agent, and outlining many of his forms. Toulouse-Lautrec was working in a similar manner at the time. On occasion, as in *Montmartre: Windmills and allotments* (15), Van Gogh combined this with a loose scattering of little coloured touches. These clearly reflect his interest in the Neo-Impressionist *petit point*, but they are not used systematically. They enliven the paint surface and suggest the textures of the scene, rather than being combined into a single unified network of similarly sized brushmarks. Somewhat different is the technique in *Boulevard de Clichy* (14), painted around the same time in the late winter. Here, there is little outlining, but the forms are defined and modelled by crisp and quite delicate strokes in contrasting colours – predominantly green against red on the building to the left, and yellow against purple on the far side of the boulevard. In both of these canvases, much of the luminosity is generated by the light-toned canvas preparation that is left visible between the coloured touches.

17
Georges Seurat,
The bridge at Courbevoie, 1886
The Courtauld Gallery, London

18
Paul Signac,
Quai de Clichy, sunlight, 1887
Baltimore Museum of Art

ASNIÈRES AND MONTMARTRE: VAN GOGH'S IMPRESSIONISM

Van Gogh's manner of painting underwent further rapid changes through the late spring and early summer of 1887. Over a short period, seemingly in May, he used a technique much closer to Seurat and Signac, building up the entire picture surface from small flecks and dabs of colour, most strikingly in the highly finished canvas *Labourer on a country road* (16). This shift may well have been triggered by the chance that Van Gogh had, once again, to see the latest paintings by the Neo-Impressionists, including Seurat's *The bridge at Courbevoie* (17), at the exhibition of the Société des Artistes Indépendants that ran from late March until early May. Only now, it seems, could he assimilate the implications of the all-over treatment of the picture surface. A personal factor probably came into play as well, since he became acquainted with Signac. He apparently worked alongside him on the banks of the Seine at Asnières, on the western edge of Paris, where he most likely saw Signac's latest paintings, including *Quai de Clichy, sunlight* (18), executed in a fine, delicate technique very comparable to *Labourer on a country road*.

The paintings that Van Gogh himself executed at Asnières mark yet another transformation, for, paradoxically, he began to paint with a broader, more dynamic brushstroke that brought his art far closer to the Impres-

sionism of Monet. In a sense his development through the first half of 1887 followed recent developments in French painting in reverse – ending up with a manner of painting that had been the starting point for other younger artists who were reacting against Impressionism. That year he had a further chance to see Monet's recent paintings at Georges Petit's latest Exposition Internationale, which ran from early May to early June, but, more importantly, from April onwards, he had another source for knowledge of Monet's work: Theo began to buy paintings directly from Monet for Boussod, Valadon & Cie. Although we have no firm evidence that Van Gogh studied Theo's purchases for the gallery, we can take it for granted, given his voracious appetite for new pictorial experiences, that he examined them closely.

The first of these acquisitions was *Rocks at Port-Coton, the Lion Rock, Belle-Ile* (19), executed during Monet's recent stay on Belle-Ile, off the west coast of Brittany. This canvas and Monet's other paintings of the period showed how the dynamic, gestural brushstroke could be used to convey a vivid impression of the forces of nature. In a sense the brushwork remained descriptive, but at the same time it created calligraphic patterns and interwoven colour harmonies. Colour and touch were harnessed together to give an overall coherence and unity to the entire canvas. This was the fundamental

19
Claude Monet,
Rocks at Port Coton, the Lion Rock, Belle-Ile, 1886
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

20
Claude Monet,
Springtime on the Ile de la Grande Jatte, 1878
The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo

>> 21
Vincent van Gogh,
Bank of the Seine, 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

22
Vincent van Gogh,
Fishing in spring:
The Pont de Clichy,
1887
Art Institute of
Chicago

23
Vincent van Gogh,
Woman in a garden,
1887
Private collection

lesson from Monet's Impressionism that Van Gogh took with him and explored, in ever more inventive ways, for the remainder of his career.

In the late spring and summer of 1887 Van Gogh tackled some of the most typical Impressionist subjects: river scenes with bridges, boats and reflections in water, as well as gardens, meadows and fields. It seems likely that he had seen some of the Impressionists' canvases of these themes (20), perhaps in the stock of the dealer Durand-Ruel. *Bank of the Seine* (21) comes closest to one of the archetypal Impressionist river views, with a multicoloured palette depicting the diverse elements on the river bank, and richly coloured horizontal strokes suggesting their reflections in the moving water. *Fishing in spring: The Pont de Clichy* (22) treats the recurrent Impressionist subject of the contrast between boats on the river and road traffic on the bridge with a similarly varied touch, but here the boldly brushed reflections of the boats in the foreground do not follow natural appearances, but rather are used to enhance the animation of the lower zone of the

24
Claude Monet,
Springtime, 1886
Fitzwilliam Museum,
Cambridge

canvas. Van Gogh demonstrated his concern for the overall appearance of this canvas in terms of its colour, too, by adding a red painted border around the entire image, designed to heighten, by simultaneous contrast, the effect of the dominant green tonality of the picture itself.

A similar red border surrounds *Woman in a garden*, painted around the same time (23). The treatment of the figure in sunlight is particularly close to Monet's *Springtime* (24), a recent canvas that Van Gogh may very well have seen. In both men's works, the features of the faces are reduced to simple dabs of paint, and the play of light and shade on the women's dresses is depicted with streaks of varied colour. Though the grasses and foliage are painted with more vigorous strokes in Van Gogh's canvas, the richly worked textures throughout both canvases are very comparable.

The landscape themes that Van Gogh chose while painting at Asnières ranged from woodland interiors and semi-rural scenes to views that emphasized the industrialization of the area. This spectrum of subjects

25
Vincent van Gogh,
The factory, 1887
The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia

is similar to those depicted by the members of the Impressionist group in their pictures of sites in the Seine valley over the previous fifteen years. Taken together, they give a vivid sense of the diversity of this rapidly changing region on the edges of Paris, where old villages were gradually becoming absorbed into the capital's suburban and industrial fringes. In a few canvases, Van Gogh focused on the factories as his prime subject, including *The factory* (25). Signac may have been his example here, with a canvas such as *The gasometers, Clichy* (26), exhibited at the final Impressionist exhibition and with the Indépendants in 1886.

Van Gogh's portraiture at this point may also have been influenced by Monet's example. The latter artist's *Poly, fisherman at Kervillaouen* (27) was

26
Paul Signac,
The gasometers, Clichy,
1886
National Gallery of
Victoria, Melbourne,
Felton Bequest

included in the exhibition at Petit's gallery in 1887. In it, Monet transferred the bold, dynamic brushwork that he had used to represent the sea and storm-beaten rocks on Belle-Ile onto the face and hair of the fisherman whose features had been forged by those same storms. During the summer of 1887, a comparable bravura handling emerged in Van Gogh's self-portraits (28). By depicting himself in a straw hat, he was suggesting that his appearance, too, had been forged by his work out of doors, as a landscape painter. Primarily, though, Van Gogh viewed Monet as a landscapist, not a figure painter. He wrote in 1888: 'I prefer to wait for the generation to come, which will do in portraits what *Claude Monet is doing in landscape*.'

27
Claude Monet,
Poly, fisherman at Kervilaouen, 1886
Musée Marmottan-Monet, Paris

28
Vincent van Gogh,
Self-portrait with a straw hat, 1887
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Later in the summer, Van Gogh returned to the landscapes of Montmartre, and specifically to the site that he had depicted the previous year in *The Hill of Montmartre* (6). The contrast between this canvas and *Allotments in Montmartre* (29) reveals the startling distance that his art had traversed over the course of twelve months. The subject is virtually identical, but instead of the muted tones and unobtrusive brushwork of 1886, the new painting is made up of a network of short, brightly coloured brushstrokes, running in various directions. Yellows and oranges suggest sunlight and blues hint at shadow, alongside the greens of the grasses and foliage, but the colour has none of the orderly systematization of the work of Seurat and Signac. Instead, it is applied more intuitively, to maximize the intensity of the overall effect. There is little naturalistic reason, for instance, for the recurrent orange-red accents that run throughout the canvas, set off against the dominant greens.

29
Vincent van Gogh,
Allotments in Montmartre, 1887
Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam

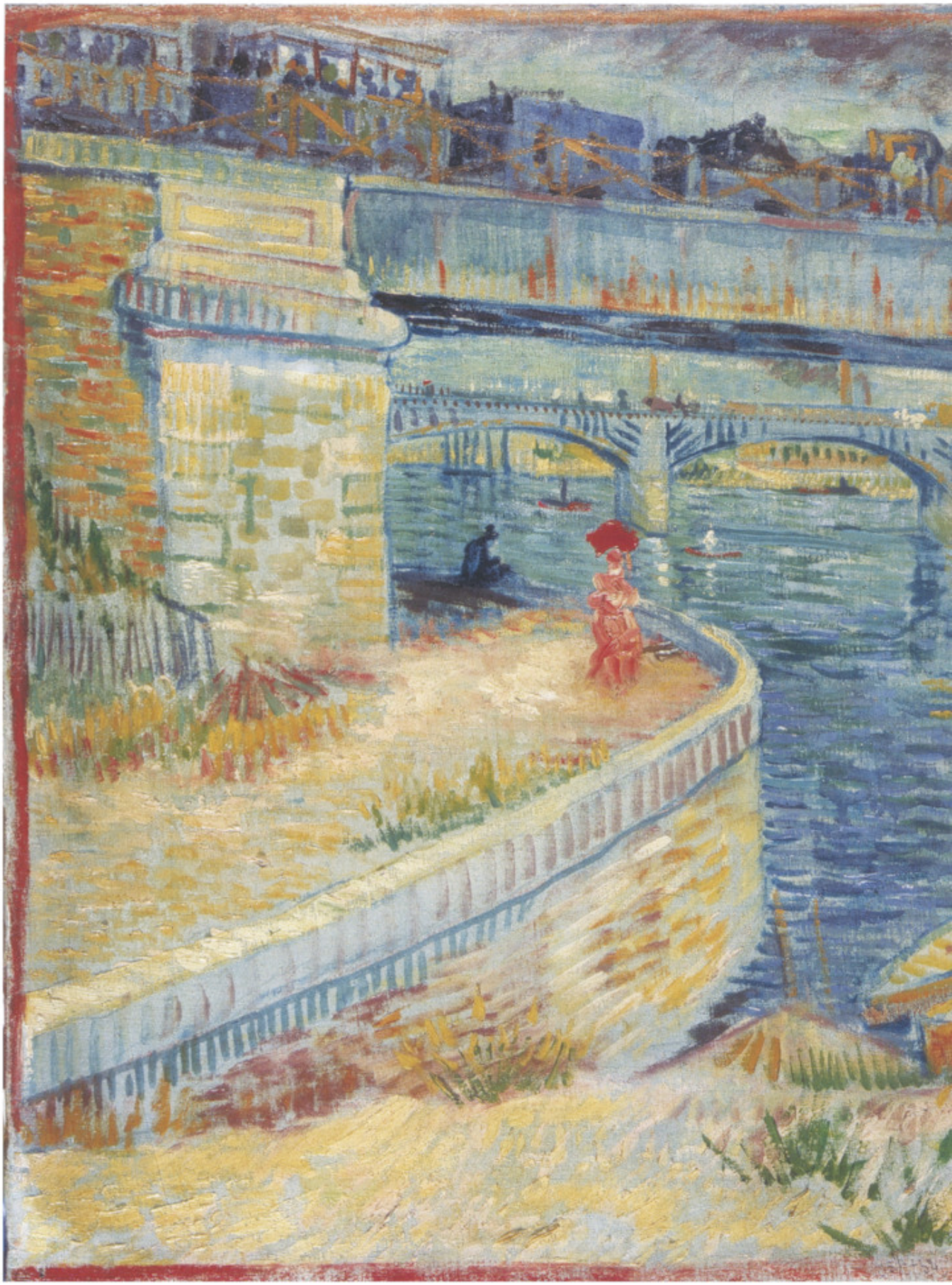
This brushwork is in one sense a continuation of the Impressionist touch that Van Gogh had been using in his work at Asnières, but it has a new clarity and precision. This emerges even more strongly in a group of watercolours that he executed in the Montmartre area around the same time, for example in *Outskirts of Montmartre* (30). Here, the pencil and ink underdrawing remain visible, and the strokes of watercolour are also strikingly graphic. Drawing had always been an integral part of Van Gogh's approach to art. Earlier in his career, there had been relatively little direct interplay between his linear work and his painting in oils; drawings (8) might act as ideas or preparations for paintings, but the final works did not display any distinctively graphic qualities (6). By this time, in the second half of 1887, he began to explore the possibilities of fusing a form of draughtsmanship with

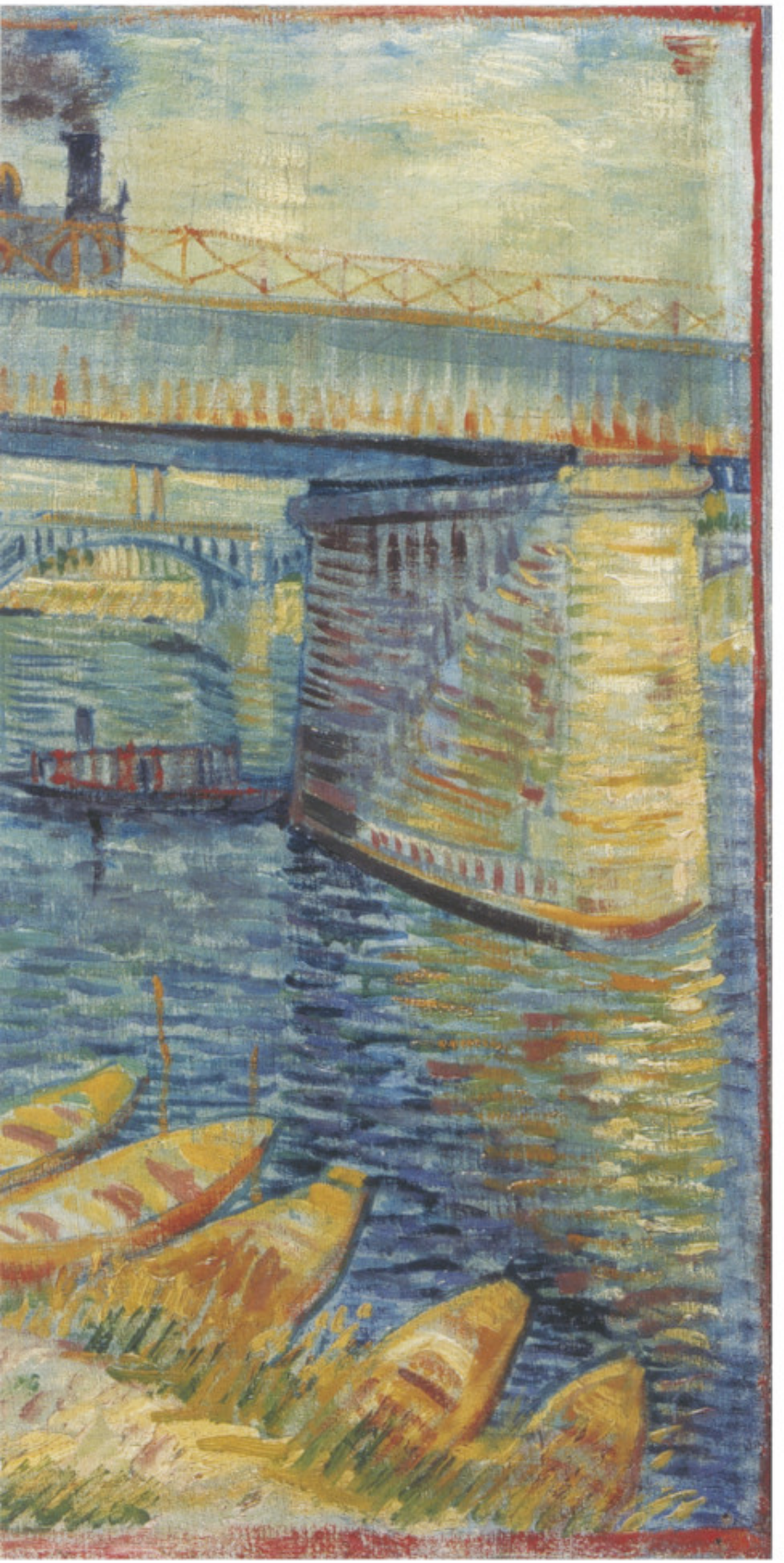
30
Vincent van Gogh, *Outskirts of Montmartre*, 1887
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

the gestural movements of the loaded paintbrush. The calligraphic brushwork of Monet's paintings of stormy seas may have played a part in this, as may the form of coloured drawing that Van Gogh would have seen in Degas's pastels. But the result was very much Van Gogh's own, and represents a comprehensive synthesis of those two elements that were categorical opposites in academic theory – *dessin* and *couleur*, line and colour.

COLOUR AND JAPAN

In the autumn of 1887 Van Gogh came into contact once again with Bernard and Anquetin, and became aware of the steps these two painters were taking to develop a radical alternative to Impressionism. In place of the free play of the brush, they began to treat their forms in flat planes of colour





31
Vincent van Gogh,
Bridges across the Seine at Asnières, 1887
Collection E. G. Bührle, Zurich

enclosed by dark outlines, as a means of conveying the inner character of the subject matter rather than its fleeting impression. During the winter of 1887-88, Van Gogh was also in touch with Gauguin, who was beginning to develop similar ideas in painting. That summer, Van Gogh had painted the bridges that crossed the Seine between Asnières and Clichy in one of his most Impressionist canvases (31). In the autumn, Bernard treated the same subject in his new manner of painting (32). Meanwhile, Anquetin had added a further dimension to this mode of painting in *The harvest: The mower at noon* (33), by treating the entire scene in a golden-yellow tonality that expressed the essence of the harvest.

It was primarily in a series of still-life paintings that Van Gogh explored the implications of these varied approaches. In the previous year, he had assimilated the lessons of Monticelli in a series of flower pieces (11); now he focused on fruit, sometimes in bowls or baskets (34), but often strewn loosely across a tablecloth (35). Once again, the example of Monet lay behind such works. A painting like his *Apples, pears and grapes* (36) treats the pictorial space in a way similar to Van Gogh's still lifes. Nonetheless, whereas Monet's picture transforms his motif into an array of varied colour, Van Gogh's canvases from the autumn of 1887 create simpler and more schematic colour arrangements – *Grapes* being predominantly a contrast between yellow/orange and purple/blue, while *Quinces, lemons, pears and grapes* is, like Anquetin's *The harvest: The mower at noon*, a painting dominated by a single colour, an effect dramatically accentuated by its surviving painted frame. Despite the simplification of their colour schemes, though, these works retain the energized, vibrant directional brushwork of Van Gogh's recent landscapes – quite unlike the flat colour-planes of the canvases by Anquetin and Bernard.

In these paintings, Van Gogh succeeded in reconciling what might appear to be three quite incompatible approaches to painting: the theoretical approach to colour of the Neo-Impressionists, the *sensation*-based Impressionism of Monet (labelled 'romantic' by the Neo-Impressionists), and the imaginative simplifications of Bernard and Anquetin (labelled

32
Emile Bernard,
The ragpickers: Iron bridges at Asnières,
1887
Museum of Modern Art, New York

33
Louis Anquetin,
The harvest: The mower at noon, 1887
Private collection

'cloisonists' by a critic the following year). In his personal contacts, too, he seems to have tried to reconcile these warring cliques in the art world. In a letter to Bernard, he sought to smooth over a quarrel between Bernard and Signac, and to persuade him of the values of pointillism.

Diverse though their approaches were, Van Gogh saw the younger artists, with their different reactions to and against Impressionism, as a group of sorts, and named them the 'painters of the *petit boulevard*' in contrast to the first-generation Impressionists of the '*grand boulevard*'. The '*grand boulevard*' painters were able to sell their work to established dealers – to Durand-Ruel, to Petit, and to Theo at Boussod, Valadon & Cie. The '*petit boulevard*' artists, by contrast, sold their work wherever they could, to any of the small back-street dealers and colour merchants who were willing to buy them very cheaply or exchange them for artists' materials. Like Van Gogh himself – who sometimes exchanged his works for other paintings – they often failed to sell their work at all.

The back-street dealer with whom Van Gogh had the closest contact was Julien 'Père' Tanguy, whose little paint shop in Montmartre was a regular meeting-place for young artists. Van Gogh made three portraits of

34
Vincent van Gogh,
Grapes, 1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

35
Vincent van Gogh,
Quinces, lemons, pears and grapes, 1887
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

36
Claude Monet,
Apples, pears and grapes, 1880
Kunsthalle, Hamburg

Tanguy, the last of which, painted late in 1887, presented the dealer as a hieratic figure, seated in front of a décor made up entirely of Japanese colour prints (37). The prints do not represent an actual décor – they are too large and out of scale in relation to Tanguy, and were evidently arranged by Van Gogh as a complement to the figure of the dealer – and they seem to reflect Van Gogh's own concerns rather than Tanguy's. Van Gogh had begun to collect Japanese prints in 1885 in Antwerp, but it was only in Paris that they became one of his central interests. He organized an exhibition of them at the Montmartre café Le Tambourin early in 1887, and bought many more prints for his and Theo's collection.

In prints like the one that he copied at the top right of the portrait of Tanguy, Utagawa Hiroshige's *Ishiyakushi: The Yoshitsune cherry tree near the Noriyori shrine* of 1855 (38), Van Gogh saw a world of light and bright colour. At the same time, he associated Japanese prints with the highly coloured landscapes of the Impressionists, well aware that they too had found inspiration in their vivid hues and unexpected compositional arrangements. It was this,

37
Vincent van Gogh,
Portrait of Père Tanguy,
1887
Musée Rodin, Paris

38
Utagawa Hiroshige,
Ishiyakushi: The Yoshitsune cherry tree near the Noriyori shrine,
1855
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

in part, that led Van Gogh to leave Paris for Arles, on the river Rhône in the south of France, in February 1888. He explained a few months later in a letter to Theo: 'Look, we love Japanese painting, we've experienced its influence – all the Impressionists have that in common – and we wouldn't go to Japan, in other words, to what is the equivalent of Japan, the south?'

A more immediate association may also have encouraged him to go. Monet, now under contract with Boussod, Valadon & Cie, set off in mid-January 1888 for an extended spell of painting at Antibes on the Mediterranean coast, and Van Gogh would have known that it would be Theo who would receive the paintings that he produced.

ARLES 1888: THE COLOUR OF THE SOUTH

Soon after Van Gogh arrived in Arles, it must have seemed as if his dream of an ideal fusion of Impressionism and Japan had come true. In the flowering orchards that were the subject of his first extended group of paintings in the south, it really appeared as if Monet (24) had been fused with Hiroshige (38), although the paint-handling of the canvases is very varied. *Pink peach trees* (39) is perhaps the most Impressionist among them. Apparently

39
Vincent van Gogh,
Pink peach trees (Souvenir de Mauve),
1888
Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo

painted in a single session, it is freely brushed throughout with bold and often quite thickly impasted strokes. However, the dark contours that highlight the structure of the tree carry echoes of the draughtsmanship in prints like Hiroshige's, in contrast with the closely integrated harmonies of colour and touch in Monet's canvas. In other paintings of the orchards, though, the handling is very different. In some, crisp, graphic marks stand out (40), emphasizing their Japanese quality, while others are animated by a scatter of *petits points*, a residue of his interest in Neo-Impressionism the previous year.

While working on the paintings, Van Gogh wrote in a letter to Bernard: '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 – reworkings, roughnesses; well, I'm inclined to think that the result is sufficiently worrying and annoying not to please people with preconceived ideas about technique.' He was clearly explaining here why he had not adopted a systematic method like Bernard's (32), yet the diversity of handling, when the orchard canvases are viewed as a whole, suggests that he was more self-conscious and deliberate in his practice than this letter suggests. The motif of the orchards offered him a sort of laboratory for exploring the potential of different types of mark as a means of conveying the light and colour of the south.

Van Gogh himself felt that *Pink peach trees* (39) was the 'best study I've made here'. He decided to dedicate it and send it to the widow of the Dutch painter Anton Mauve, his cousin by marriage with whom he had briefly studied painting and drawing in The Hague in 1881-82, who had recently died. Explaining why he had chosen this painting, he told Theo: 'It seemed to me that in memory of Mauve we needed something that was both tender and very cheerful and not a study in a more serious key than that.'

This comment demonstrates Van Gogh's growing confidence that his art could go beyond the world of visual appearances – that the subjects he painted could, by their colour and touch, convey human emotions and moods. Shortly afterwards, he explained his evolving views about colour, writing (in English) to the Australian painter John Peter Russell, whom he


Souvenir de Mauve
Vincent

had met in Paris: 'Surely Monticelli gives us not, neither pretends to give us, local colour or even local truth. But gives us something passionate and eternal – the rich coulour [*sic*] and rich sun of the glorious south in a true colourists way parralel [*sic*] with Delacroix' conception of the south. Viz. that the south be represented now by contraste simultané of colours and their derivations and harmonies, and not by forms or lines in themselves [...].' Although these ideas are very similar to those he was beginning to explore in Holland in 1885, it was only now, after the experience of Impressionist painting in Paris, that he had the visual language to express them fully.

40
Vincent van Gogh, *Orchard with apricot trees in blossom*, 1888
Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh

At the same time Van Gogh was finding echoes of his native Dutch landscape in the surroundings of Arles: 'Many of the subjects here are just – in character – the same as in Holland – the difference is in the colour.' He painted a group of canvases of a bridge across a local canal that was evidently Dutch in form (and indeed had been built by Dutch engineers), treating the scene in vibrant colour and a variegated Impressionist brushstroke, but outlining the forms of the bridge with great precision (41). He also began to explore the wide plain to the east and north-east of Arles, between the Rhône and the mountain range of the Alpilles, writing: 'I have a new subject on the go, green and yellow fields as far as the eye can see, which I've already drawn twice and am starting again as a painting, just like a Salomon [Philips] Koninck, you know, Rembrandt's pupil who made the vast flat landscapes' (42, 43, 44).

It is striking that at this point Van Gogh was so readily alternating between drawing and painting in oils. Some drawings preceded related paintings (43), some were copies of previous canvases and others were wholly independent of painted works (45). The technique that he had evolved, with its combination of bold directional strokes and defined contours, could be deployed equally readily both with pen and ink and with brush and oil colour. In this sense, his processes were radically different from Monet's form of Impressionism in paint, which had no possible graphic equivalent.

Monet came forcibly back into Van Gogh's mind in June, when Theo wrote to him to describe the exhibition of Monet's paintings of Antibes

41
Vincent van Gogh,
The Langlois bridge with washerwomen, 1888
Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo

42
Philips Koninck,
River landscape, 1676
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam

43
Vincent van Gogh,
The blue cart, 1888
Fogg Art Museum,
Cambridge, Mass.

44
Vincent van Gogh,
The harvest, 1888
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

that he was mounting at Boussod, Valadon & Cie. Van Gogh commented that 'I've only visited one part of Provence, and in the other part there's the countryside that Claude Monet does, for example', and told Russell: 'My brother has an exhibition of 10 new pictures by Claude Monet, his latest works, for instance a landscape with red sun set and a group of dark firtrees by the seaside. The red sun casts an orange or blood red reflection on the blue green trees and the ground. I wished I could see them' (46).

Van Gogh also became vividly aware of the practical problems of open-air painting as he tried to work in the wind of the mistral. He had painted *Wheatfield with setting sun* (47), he told Bernard, 'at a single sitting. [...] I deliberately went outside to make it, out in the mistral.' However, the physical act of painting in these conditions became for him an expression of a state of mind; he continued in the same letter: 'Isn't it rather intensity of thought than calmness of touch that we're looking for – and in the given circumstances of impulsive work on the spot and from life, is a calm and controlled touch always possible?' He ended by comparing the artist's work in the sun with the reaper at harvest: 'Old gold yellow landscapes – done quick quick quick and in a hurry, like the reaper who is silent under the blazing sun, concentrating on getting the job done.'

45
Vincent van Gogh,
Landscape with train, seen from Montmajour,
1888
The British Museum,
London

46
Claude Monet,
Under the pine trees at the end of the day, 1888
Philadelphia Museum of Art

47
Vincent van Gogh,
Wheatfield with setting sun, 1888
Kunstmuseum Winterthur

For Van Gogh, the intense colour of paintings such as *The harvest* (44) and *Wheatfield with setting sun* (47) was one form of synthesizing Impressionism and Japanese art. At the same time, he was also exploring another very different idea of the essence of the Japanese vision of nature, writing in July 1888 of 'two drawings of the Crau and the banks of the Rhône which don't look Japanese and which are perhaps more so than others, in fact?' (45). There is no trace of Impressionism here; rather, the quality that Van Gogh saw as Japanese in this drawing was its scrupulous attention to the everyday and seemingly trivial details of the scene.

In August, Van Gogh felt able to bring these various ideas together into a summary of his current position as an artist, as he saw it: 'what I learned in Paris is *fading*, and [...] I'm returning to my ideas that came to me in the country before I knew the Impressionists. And I wouldn't be very surprised if the Impressionists were soon to find fault with my way of doing things, which was fertilized more by the ideas of Delacroix than by theirs. Because

instead of trying to render exactly what I have before my eyes, I use colour more arbitrarily in order to express myself forcefully. He described putting these ideas into practice in a portrait of the peasant Patience Escalier (48). This was a continuation of heads that he had painted in Holland and *The potato eaters* (1), but quite different, too, since in the new painting 'the colour suggests the scorched air of harvest time at midday in the blistering heat'.

48
Vincent van Gogh, *Patience Escalier (The peasant)*, 1888
Private collection (on loan to the Kunsthaus Zurich)

Colour here was the vehicle by which Van Gogh sought to introduce further levels of suggestive meaning. Associations of a quite different kind gave wider significance to his group of paintings of the public garden near his house (49). Though this was an archetypal Impressionist subject, Van Gogh came to attribute a more generalized meaning to the garden as a site of artistic inspiration after reading an article about the Italian and Provençal poets of the Renaissance, imagining 'the Renaissance poets, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, strolling among these bushes on the flowery grass'. He named the paintings as a group 'The poet's garden'.

Van Gogh's paint-handling at this point became simpler. After completing the portrait of Escalier, he wrote: 'I'm beginning more and more to look for a simple technique that perhaps isn't Impressionist. I'd like to paint in such a way that [...] everyone who has eyes could understand it.' Describing the 'poet's garden' pictures, he commented: 'The present studies actually consist of a single *flow of impasto*. The brushstroke isn't greatly divided, and the tones are often broken. And in the end, without intending to, I'm forced to lay the paint on thickly, à la Monticelli. Sometimes I really believe I'm continuing that man's work [...].'

Yet Van Gogh broadly continued to think of himself as an Impressionist, even if only in somewhat negative terms: 'I see in Impressionism the resurrection of *Eugène Delacroix*, but the interpretations being both divergent and somewhat irreconcilable, it won't be Impressionism that will formulate the doctrine. It's for that reason that I remain among the Impressionists, because that says nothing and commits you to nothing.' More specifically, he retained a commitment to working from nature, as he explained to Bernard in October: 'I can't work without a model. I'm not saying that I don't flatly

49
Vincent van Gogh,
The public garden
(The poet's garden),
1888
Art Institute of
Chicago

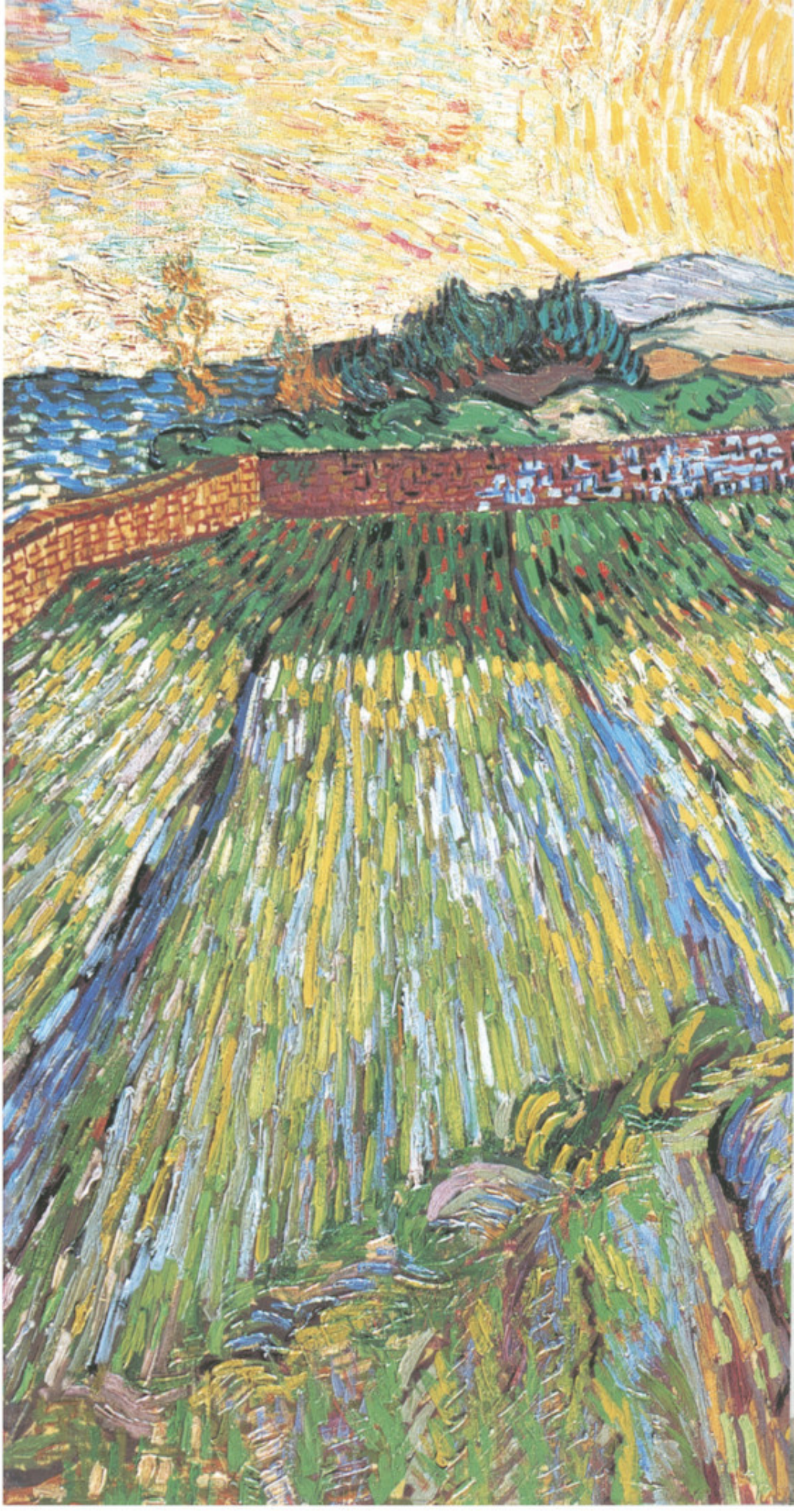
50
Vincent van Gogh, *The garden of the asylum*, 1889
Museum Folkwang, Essen

turn my back on reality to turn a study into a painting – by arranging the colour, by enlarging, by simplifying – but I have such a fear of separating myself from what's possible and what's right as far as form is concerned.'

The reason for this insistence was the challenge that Bernard and Gauguin were then posing to Van Gogh's whole approach to painting, by their continuing propaganda in favour of painting from the imagination. During the two months that Gauguin spent with Van Gogh at Arles, from late October 1888, Van Gogh briefly experimented with their methods: 'Gauguin gives me courage to imagine, and the things of the imagination do indeed take on a more mysterious character.' However, in the aftermath of their brief and disastrous period together, he realized that what he called 'abstraction' went against all his instincts and beliefs as an artist.

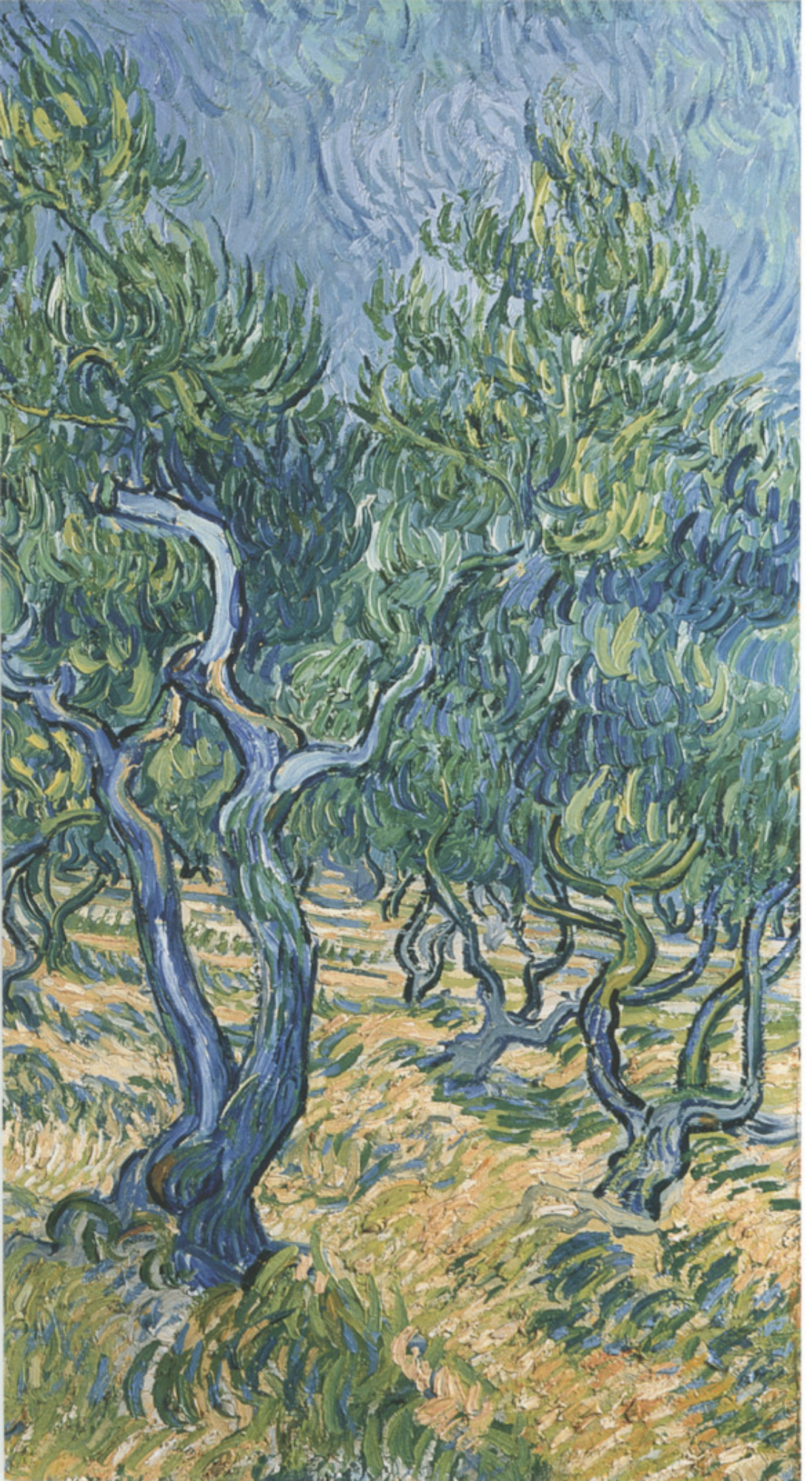
AFTERMATH

Van Gogh began to work out of doors again in 1889, at Arles and after his move to the asylum at Saint-Rémy in May. In his letters, he mentioned Impressionism far less frequently. In his first months at Arles, he had seen it as the primary point of reference in relation to which he needed to define his own art; but now he treated it as just one among many pictorial alternatives. Shortly before leaving Arles, he reiterated his own position: 'Certainly colour is making progress, *precisely by* the Impressionists, even when they go astray. But Delacroix was already more complete than they are. And my goodness, Millet, who has hardly any colour, what work his is! [...] we'll always retain a certain passion for Impressionism, but I sense that I'm returning more and more to the ideas I already had before coming to Paris.' He adopted a still longer historical perspective in a letter early in 1890: 'What the Impressionists have found in colour will develop even more, but there's a link that many forget which links this to the past, and I'll make efforts to show that I have little belief in a rigorous separation between the Impressionists and the others. I find it a very happy thing that in this century there have been painters like Millet, Delacroix, Meissonier, who *cannot be surpassed*.'



51
Vincent van Gogh,
Wheatfield at sunrise,
1889
Private collection


Vincent



52
Vincent van Gogh,
Olive grove, 1889
Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo

Despite such comments, Van Gogh continued to explore the rival claims of painting from nature and working from the imagination. He explained his point of view most vividly in a letter to Bernard from Saint-Rémy in November 1889. Criticizing the latter's recent paintings of scenes from the life of Christ, he insisted: 'I adore the true, the possible.' He described two of his own recent canvases, a view of the asylum garden in autumn, with a tree that had been struck by lightning (50), and a painting of the sun rising over a wheatfield (51), explaining that he was doing so 'to remind you that in order to give an impression of anxiety, you can try to do it without heading straight for the historical garden of Gethsemane; in order to offer a consoling and gentle subject it isn't necessary to depict the figures from the Sermon on the Mount'. In the same letter he mentions another group of recent paintings, depicting an olive grove (52); he saw these as an equivalent in the natural world to the canvases of Christ in the Garden of Olives that both Bernard and Gauguin had recently executed (53), and as a critique of their working methods: 'If I remain here I wouldn't try to paint a Christ in the Garden of Olives, but in fact the olive picking as it's still seen today, and then giving the correct proportions of the human figure in it, that would perhaps make people think of it all the same.' In these paintings, the impact is generated in part by Van Gogh's use of colour contrasts, but also by sheer energy and dynamism of the cursive brushwork, which gives an intense emotional pulse to the natural forms.

Van Gogh's return to the north of France, to live in Auvers, thirty kilometres to the north of Paris, took him back into the landscapes that had been painted by the Impressionists. He spent time with Doctor Gachet, who had been a close associate of the Impressionists during the 1870s, and saw his collection of their works, including a painting by Paul Cézanne depicting Gachet's house (54). In a number of canvases soon after his arrival, Van Gogh, in turn, painted the winding roads and houses of the village (55). However, among his predecessors who had painted at Auvers, he was most aware of Daubigny, rather than the Impressionists, producing a group of canvases of Daubigny's garden (56). Although Theo wrote to him in

53
Paul Gauguin,
Christ in the Garden of Olives, 1889
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach

54
Paul Cézanne,
Doctor Gachet's house,
1872-73
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

55
Vincent van Gogh,
Houses at Auvers, 1890
Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston,
Bequest of John T.
Spaulding

>> 56
Vincent van Gogh,
Daubigny's garden,
1890
Kunstmuseum Basel
(on loan from the
Staechelin
Foundation)

mid-July to tell him that he was about to visit Monet, this news seemingly elicited little interest from Van Gogh.

Impressionism had been a revelation to Van Gogh in Paris in 1887, when he came to appreciate the full potential of vibrant colour and dynamic brushwork to convey the forms and forces of nature. Although by the late summer of 1888 he felt that what he had learned in Paris was 'fading', these lessons remained the essential underpinning of his art for the final two years of his life. Though he returned to the ideas about emotive colour that he had begun to explore in Holland, it was his experience of Impressionism that showed him how to give full impact to these concerns in his painting. It was the Impressionist brushstroke, and particularly the effects of the brush in Monet's recent work, which provided him with the basis to develop the ever more fluid and energized touch that gives such a vivid sense, in his last works, of an underlying life force in the natural world. Without Impressionism Van Gogh would not have become the painter we know today.


le jardin de Daubigny

QUOTATIONS

The quotations from Van Gogh's correspondence are from Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh – The Letters: The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*, 6 vols., London & New York 2009. That edition is based on the English web edition which is available at www.vangoghletters.org

LITERATURE

- F. Cachin, B. Welsh-Ovcharov, *et al.*, exhib. cat. *Van Gogh à Paris*, Paris (Musée d'Orsay) 1988
- C. Homburg (ed.) *et al.*, exhib. cat. *Vincent van Gogh and the Painters of the Petit Boulevard*, Saint Louis (Saint Louis Art Museum) & Frankfurt (Städelsches Kunstinstitut and Städtische Galerie) 2001
- C. Homburg (ed.) *et al.*, exhib. cat. *Vincent van Gogh: Timeless Country – Modern City*, Rome (Complesso Monumentale del Vittoriano) 2010-11
- J. House, *Monet: Nature into Art*, New Haven & London 1986
- S. Naifeh and G. White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life*, New York & London 2011
- J. Rewald, 'Theo van Gogh, Goupil and the Impressionists', in *Studies in Post-Impressionism*, London 1986
- C. Stolwijk and R. Thomson, *Theo van Gogh 1857-1891: Art Dealer, Collector and Brother of Vincent*, exhib. cat. Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) & Paris (Musée d'Orsay) 1999
- L. van Tilborgh and E. Hendriks, *Vincent van Gogh: Paintings 2. Antwerp and Paris, 1885-1888*, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam & Zwolle 2011
- M. Vellekoop and S. van Heugten, *Vincent van Gogh: Drawings 3. Antwerp and Paris, 1885-1888*, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam 2001
- B. Welsh-Ovcharov, *Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism*, exhib. cat. Toronto (Art Gallery of Ontario) & Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 1981

AUTHOR

John House (1945-2012) was Professor Emeritus at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, where he taught from 1980-2010. His publications include *Monet: Nature into Art* (1986), *Impressionism: Paint and Politics* (2004) and *Renoir in the Barnes Foundation* (2012, co-authored with Martha Lucy). He wrote numerous articles and essays about aspects of French nineteenth-century painting, and curated or co-curated many international exhibitions, including *Post-Impressionism* (London, Royal Academy of Arts, and Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1979-80), *Renoir* (London, Hayward Gallery, Paris, Palais des Congrès, and Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1985-86), *Landscapes of France* (London, Hayward Gallery, and Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1995-96), *Monet in the Twentieth Century* (London, Royal Academy of Arts, and Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1999-2001), and *Impressionists by the Sea* (London, Royal Academy of Arts, Washington, Phillips Collection, and Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 2007-08).

VAN GOGH IN FOCUS

Van Gogh in focus is a series of books, initiated by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam on the life and work of Vincent van Gogh. Although so much has been written about this extraordinary artist, many questions still need to be answered or have been addressed only in specialist publications. These small, compact books examine the artist's oeuvre in different contexts throughout the various stages of his life. Each book focuses on specific topics in Van Gogh's art – such as his remarkable paintings of sunflowers, his passionate correspondence, or his deep love of nature – and presents many new facts and insights. The series is fully illustrated with documents, as well as paintings and drawings by Van Gogh.

Already published in this series:
Peter Hecht, *Van Gogh and Rembrandt* (2006)
Louis van Tilborgh, *Van Gogh and Japan* (2006)
Leo Jansen, *Van Gogh and his letters* (2007)
Hans Luijten, *Van Gogh and love* (2007)
Louis van Tilborgh, *Van Gogh and the sunflowers* (2008)
Leo Jansen, *Van Gogh and his letters*, second revised edition (2009)
Nienke Bakker, *Van Gogh and Montmartre* (2011)

For recent information about new and upcoming titles:
www.vangoghmuseum.com/publications

ILLUSTRATIONS

Front cover: Vincent van Gogh, detail of *Fishing in spring: The Pont de Clichy*, 1887,
Art Institute of Chicago
Title page: Vincent van Gogh, detail of *Bridges across the Seine at Asnières*, 1887,
Collection E. G. Bührle, Zurich
Back cover: Vincent van Gogh, detail of *Bank of the Seine*, 1887,
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Van Gogh in focus is published under the auspices of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Author
John House

Editorial board *Van Gogh in focus*
Maite van Dijk, Hans Luijten, Chris Stolwijk

Head of publications
Suzanne Bogman

Text editing
Kate Bell

Coordination
Hannelore Duflou, Tijdsbeeld & Pièce Montée, Ghent
Geri Klazema, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Graphic design
Griet Van Haute, Ghent

Production
Tijdsbeeld & Pièce Montée, Ghent
Ronny Gobyn and Rik Jacques (directors)

Colour separation and printing
Die Keure, Bruges

www.vangoghmuseum.com
ISBN 978 90 79310 33 3

The appearance of Vincent van Gogh's art was transformed by his encounters with French Impressionist painting. It was the work of the Impressionists, who sought to capture the transient effects of colour and light, that encouraged him during his stay in Paris to abandon the sombre palette of his earlier canvases and to adopt the rich, vibrant colour range of his most celebrated works. This book follows Van Gogh's discovery of and interaction with the Impressionism of Monet, Renoir, Pissarro and Degas as well as his observation of how artists such as Bernard, Signac, Seurat and Gauguin reacted against it. Though Van Gogh assimilated the achievements of the Impressionists, in the end he returned to the ideas about emotive colour that he had begun to explore in Holland. The Impressionists provided him with the basis to develop the ever more fluid and energized touch that gives his later paintings such a vivid sense of an underlying life force. Without Impressionism he would not have become the painter we know today.

JOHN HOUSE (1945-2012) was Professor Emeritus at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, where he taught from 1980-2010.

Van Gogh in focus

Van Gogh Museum
Amsterdam

ISBN 978-90-79310-33-3