

Gallery texts permanent collection Van Gogh Museum

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Ground Floor: Self-Portraits

On the wall

Vincent van Gogh 5 and 6 September 1889: ‘People say that it’s difficult to know oneself – but it’s not easy to paint oneself either.’

Face to Face with Van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh is one of the most famous artists of all time. His expressive, colourful work and his eventful life move and inspire people throughout the world. The hundreds of paintings and drawings that Van Gogh produced in a mere decade (1880-1890) made an enormous impact. His art influenced generations of artists, and is still very much alive in our visual culture. With a collection of around 200 paintings, more than 500 drawings, and almost all of his letters, the Van Gogh Museum offers the largest and most representative overview of Van Gogh’s life and work.

A visit to this museum is like taking a journey with Van Gogh. We follow in the footsteps of an artist who was intent on improving himself and deeply engaged in the artistic developments of his day. He was an artist who above all strove to create a new kind of art, one in which he could give expression to our most profound existential emotions in a direct and universally comprehensible manner.

Painting: Self-Portrait

Green eyes, a red beard, a furrowed brow, a blue work smock. Sometimes he wears a hat, and at others he smokes his favourite pipe. Looking at Van Gogh’s self-portraits we stand face to face with the artist. Recognisable as Vincent, yet different each time. Van Gogh’s self-portraits were not meant to show what he was like, but were exercises in colour, brushwork, and facial expression. All except for one, that is: in *Self-Portrait as a Painter* he presents himself as an assured artist behind his easel. Later he wrote ‘It’s only in front of the easel while painting that I feel a little of life.’

Ground Floor: Timeline

1853: 30 March: born in Zundert, the Netherlands

Photo: Theodorus van Gogh, pastor. Anna van Gogh-Carbentus

Photo: Vincent van Gogh's house of birth in Zundert

1869-1876: The Hague, London and Paris.

employed at branches of the art dealer Goupil & Co.

Photo: Art dealer Goupil & Co., The Hague

Photo: Vincent's brother Theo van Gogh, 1882

Photo: Vincent's earliest known letter to Theo, 29 September 1872

Photo: Vincent van Gogh at the age of 19

1878-1880: Mining district the Borinage, Belgium

works as a lay preacher among the miners

1880: Vincent decides to become an artist at the age of 27,

practices through drawing

1881: Etten

Lives with his parents

Mainly draws

Photo: Letter sketches in a letter to Theo

1881: The Hague, the Netherlands

Takes drawing and painting lessons from Anton Mauve

1883-1885: Nuenen, the Netherlands

temporarily living with his parents again

paints The Potato Eaters

Photo: Vincent's parental home in Nuenen

Photo: Sketch of The Potato Eaters in a letter to Theo, 1885

1885: Antwerp, Belgium

studies for a brief period at the art academy

Photo: Standing female nude seen in profile, January-February 1886

1886-1888: Paris, France

lives with his brother Theo

becomes acquainted with (neo)-Impressionist painting

befriends Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Emile Bernard, Paul Gauguin

Photo: Letter to Theo, 1887

Photo: Emile Bernard and Van Gogh (seen from behind) in Asnières, n.d.

1888: Arles, southern France

paints the Sunflowers

lives briefly with Paul Gauguin

cuts off a part of his ear

Photo: The yellow house in Arles, where Van Gogh lived

Photo: Later sketches of the Sunflowers, 1890

1889 : Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, southern France

admits himself to the local mental asylum

Photo: Poster of the asylum in St.-Rémy-de-Provence

Photo: Letter sketch of three Cicadas, 1889

1890: Auvers-sur-Oise, France

produces an average of one painting per day

shoots himself in the chest

and dies two days later on 29 July

Photo: Funeral Card

Photo: The graves of Vincent and Theo van Gogh

First floor

Rural Life

Van Gogh only found his true calling as an artist at the age of 27. Without knowing whether he had any real talent, he set to work with unbridled drive and great determination. He taught himself the rudiments of the craft by studying the art of others. Because he had worked in the art trade for a few years he had already seen a great many works of art and so had trained his eye.

Van Gogh admired primarily the work of French 19th-century peasant painters, such as Jean-François Millet and Jules Breton. They portrayed life in the countryside, paying homage to this so-called honest and humble existence in the face of encroaching industrialisation and urbanisation. With these models in mind, Van Gogh decided to focus on peasant life. He could thus transform his love of nature and the rural landscape into depictions of diggers, sowers, and peasant dwellings.

1883-1885: Painter of Peasant Life

After having worked as an artist for several years in various places in the Netherlands (1880-1883), Van Gogh settled in Nuenen, the country village where his father was a pastor. From there he wrote his brother Theo: 'I desire nothing other than to live deep in the country and to paint peasant life.' Van Gogh idealised peasant life, which according to him was 'so much better in many respects than the civilised world.' Peasants and farm workers were close to nature; their life was linked to the cycle of sowing and harvesting, of life and death. He found his ideal subjects in the fields around Nuenen, in the peasants and in their humble abodes. Van Gogh had already been preparing himself well for more than a year when he decided to make a large composition with peasant figures: *The Potato Eaters*. He wanted it to be his 'visiting card' as an artist.

On the wall

Vincent van Gogh 13 April 1885: 'When I say that I'm a peasant painter, that is really so; I feel at home there.'

Painting: *The Potato Eaters*, 1885

A true peasant painting, according to Van Gogh, ought to smell of bacon, smoke, and steaming potatoes, and that is just what *The Potato Eaters* appears to do. Steam rises from the platter of potatoes, the simple meal shared by the entire family. Van Gogh saw the very essence – and primarily also the tragedy – of life in these poor peasants. He wanted to render them in all of their roughness, with coarse features and bony calloused hands. For his colour scheme he chose dark ashen tones that matched the dusty land. He prepared his final composition with many studies. Still, with no less than five figures the picture proved to be a 'formidable fight.' In the end, however, Van Gogh was very pleased with the final result. He hoped that his brother Theo, an art dealer in Paris, would exhibit the painting, but he found it much too sombre.

1885-1886: Back to Basics

Van Gogh consciously decided to train himself as an artist. He diligently studied instruction manuals and spent much time practicing. He taught himself the rudiments of perspective, anatomy, and colour. However, the lukewarm reactions to *The Potato Eaters* made Van Gogh realise that he still had much to learn. Accordingly, he finally decided to take some lessons. He first studied for a short while at the art academy in Antwerp, and then in the studio of the painter Fernand Cormon in Paris. Van Gogh did nothing other than practise, practise, practise for an entire year. He painted portraits inspired by the work of 17th-century masters. He studied the human body by drawing nudes, and copying classical sculptures. And by concentrating on still lifes he perfected his skills in painting techniques and in combining colours.

1886-1887: New Perspectives

Keen to be in step with the latest artistic developments, in 1886 Van Gogh moved to Paris, which at the time was the centre of modern art. He realised that if he wanted to get ahead he needed more intensive contact with art and artists. He found ample inspiration in galleries, museums, and at exhibitions- an impression of which can be gained on the first wall. Face to face with the Paris avant-garde, Van Gogh became aware of just how old-fashioned his Dutch work must have appeared.

He eagerly absorbed the many new impressions. He experimented with colour, brushwork, line and planes. And, he became friends with artists of his generation, including Paul Gauguin, Émile Bernard, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. They worked together and exhibited their art in the cafés of Montmartre, the artists' district. Van Gogh's time in Paris proved extremely fruitful, and thanks to his contacts with other artists he discovered possibilities for developing his own expressive style.

On the wall

Vincent van Gogh September or October 1886: 'What is to be gained is progress and, what the deuce, that it is to be found here I dare ascertain.'

Painting: Garden with Courting Couples: Square Saint-Pierre, 1887

Van Gogh himself called this sun-drenched park view 'the painting of the garden with lovers.' Amorous couples stroll beneath young chestnut trees or sit along the winding paths. Van Gogh took liberties with the Pointillist technique of coloured dots, setting airy streaks next to rapid daubs of paint. He succeeded in rendering the effect of a dazzling spring day, which in turn reinforces the sense of young love and intimacy that Van Gogh wished to express here. He too longed for a wife and a family, but he had 'the most impossible love stories.' He ultimately resigned himself to this situation; after all, he was devoted to his art.

1888-1889: Artistic Flourishing

Van Gogh's sojourn in Paris had greatly stimulated his development as a modern artist. However, he needed quiet and space to find his own direction. He therefore left the busy city behind and moved to Arles, to the countryside in the south of

France. There, struck by the bright light and shimmering colours, he threw himself into painting orchards in bloom, scenes of harvesting, and other nature themes. He also dearly wanted to be a portraitist, for he could capture the essence of his time in characteristic heads and, according to Van Gogh, this is where the future lay.

He continually strove for ‘passionate expressions, using as a means of expression and intensification of the character our science and modern taste for colour.’ In this endeavour, in Arles he reached the peak of his powers. He developed his famous style with energetic brushwork and powerful colour contrasts. Even though his subjects are always simple, they convey just how deeply Van Gogh felt the essence of life, beauty, and tragedy.

On the wall

Vincent van Gogh 18 August 1888: ‘Instead of trying to render exactly what I have before my eyes, I use colour in order to express myself forcefully.’

Painting: Sunflowers, 1889

In August 1888 Van Gogh painted a bunch of sunflowers in a vase. In spite of – or perhaps thanks to – the simplicity of the subject and the style he created a true masterpiece. With nothing more than three tints of yellow he achieved a colour harmony that shimmers like a vision. In a letter, Theo praised ‘the effect of a piece of fabric embroidered with satin and gold.’ Van Gogh, too, realised that he had made a remarkable picture and described just how deep he had had to dig in order to achieve it. He had used all of his energy and concentration ‘to sufficiently catch fire.’ Proud of the result, he proclaimed himself the painter of sunflowers. He would ultimately paint five versions, every single one an icon of modern art.

Dreaming of Japan

Van Gogh drew much inspiration from the hundreds of Japanese woodblock prints that he collected together with his brother Theo. He shared his enthusiasm for these colourful prints with most of the French modern artists of his day. They admired how the Japanese translated the world around them into decorative images by means of planes of colour, patterns, cropping, and outlines. Van Gogh began applying these features and was soon making Japonist works.

Yet Japan meant much more to him. Van Gogh identified with the image of the Japanese artist as a monk devoted entirely to his art and leading an ascetic life in nature. This is also what Van Gogh was seeking in Provence, a region in the south of France that he compared with Japan.

Second floor: letters

Family Treasures

In exchange for giving Vincent a monthly allowance, Theo became the owner of the drawings and paintings that his brother sent him. Theo was deeply distressed after Vincent's death in July 1890. More than anything else he wanted to make his brother's art known, but passed away himself a mere six months later. His widow, 28-year-old Jo van Gogh-Bonger, was left behind with their infant son Vincent Willem and a substantial art collection. She considered it her task to champion Van Gogh's art, which she did by selling his work astutely and lending it out to exhibitions. She also published a selection of Vincent's letters to Theo. Without her dedication Van Gogh would never have reaped the fame he did.

After Jo's death in 1925 Vincent Willem was charged with caring for his uncle's works. He created the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, and devoted himself to realising the Van Gogh Museum, where the family collection found a permanent home in 1973.

Van Gogh Family timeline

1891

Death of Theo van Gogh. Jo is left with their almost one-year-old son, Vincent Willem.

1905

After previous successful (sales) exhibitions, Jo organises a large Van Gogh show in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. There are 472 works on display. Many exhibitions follow.

1914

Publication of Letters to his Brother in three volumes

1925

Death of Jo van Gogh-Bonger

1931

Vincent Willem van Gogh, nicknamed 'the engineer', gives a substantial number of works by Van Gogh on long-term loan to the Stedelijk Museum. He also organises exhibitions.

1960

Vincent Willem van Gogh establishes the Vincent van Gogh Foundation to keep the collection together.

1969

Construction of the Van Gogh Museum after a design by Gerrit Rietveld begins.

1973

The Van Gogh Museum opens

A Life in Letters

Vincent van Gogh was a gifted writer. In his time and milieu, letter writing was a very common way of keeping in touch from afar; people corresponded often and extensively.

We know of 820 letters by Van Gogh, most of them addressed to his brother Theo, his greatest confidant. In them Van Gogh emerges as an intelligent, impassioned man, with a great thirst for art and literature. Sometimes his enthusiasm got the better of him, such as in his religious period (1876-1879). He could hold forth with great zeal, and in so doing lost sight of reality. We also read about his vision of life and death, of love, and the human condition. Hence, Van Gogh's letters are the most important source for understanding him as a person and an artist.

Family

Theodorus van Gogh, father

Now I must tell you that I had a very unexpected and very pleasing visit from Pa, who came to my house and to the studio.

Anna van Gogh-Carbentus, mother

Dear Mother, I didn't get round to writing because I was painting from morning till night.

Theo van Gogh, brother

We are brothers, are we not?, and friends — and we may say candidly what we think

Jo van Gogh-Bonger, sister-in-law

Jo's letter was really like a gospel for me, a deliverance from anguish which I was caused by the rather difficult hours for us all.

Willemien, sister

No, my dear little sister, learn to dance or fall in love, rather, much rather commit any number of follies than study in Holland.

Anna van Gogh, sister

Just had a good letter from Anna. Her letters are quite rare, so I'm sending you this one to read.

Cor van Gogh, brother

with a handshake for Cor I wish him the best of good luck in his enterprise.

Lies van Gogh, sister

Wil asked to be sent a painting, and I'd very much like to give one to Lies as well on the same occasion, who doesn't have any yet as far as I know.

Vincent and Theo

Vincent van Gogh grew up in a pastor's family with two brothers and three sisters. His parents instilled their children with bourgeois norms and values: working hard, amounting to something in society, and honouring the family name. That their eldest son often behaved inappropriately made their relationship extremely trying.

Vincent had a close bond with his brother Theo. As a friend, a sounding board, and a financier he was the single most important person in Vincent's life. Theo was an art dealer in Paris and earned a good living. He admired Vincent's passion and believed in his art, and supported him with a monthly allowance for ten years. Vincent often swept Theo along in his plans to promote 'the art of the future.' With this in mind, the brothers assembled a collection so that they could someday start their own art trade. They received various works from their artist friends as gifts, or in exchange for Vincent's own work.

Second floor: friends

Artistic Exchange

Van Gogh was not a solitary artist. Just as earlier in the Netherlands, in Paris, too, he made various artist friends. He also stayed in touch with them after moving to the south of France. He kept up a particularly spirited correspondence with Émile Bernard and Paul Gauguin. They were staying with a group of artists in Pont-Aven and Le Pouldu along the coast of Brittany. Van Gogh discussed modern art with them from a distance. They sent each other sketches of their work, and sometimes also paintings.

Van Gogh dreamed of founding his own artists' colony in Arles. With this idea in mind he appointed his Yellow House in order to be able to receive fellow artists. Gauguin finally accepted one of the many invitations and came to Arles in October 1888 – a visit for which Van Gogh had high hopes. Their ideas about art, however, proved to differ considerably along the way. Gauguin worked, as did Bernard, from his imagination, while Van Gogh held on to visible reality.

Painting: The Yellow House ('The Street'), 1888

Excited by the intensity of the colours, Van Gogh decided to capture his dwelling on canvas. The Yellow House with the green shutters glows 'under a sulphur sun' against a 'pure cobalt sky.' First he set up his studio on the ground floor; sometime later he moved in above it. Van Gogh wanted to turn it into an artists' house, where he could live and work together with others. In the end only Paul Gauguin came; he stayed for two months.

Friends

Emile Bernard

My dear old Bernard, don't despair and above all, don't be downhearted, my good fellow, because with your talent you'll be a hell of a good artist.

Paul Signac

The best consolation, if not the only remedy, is, it still seems to me, profound friendships. Thank you again for your visit, which gave me so much pleasure.

John Peter Russell

If you ever come to Paris, take one of my canvases from my brother's place if you wish.

Arnold Koning

If you see Breitner, you may let him read this epistle or tell him about it just as I write it.

Paul Gauguin

Thanks for your letter. Left behind alone on board my little yellow house — as it was perhaps my duty to be the last to remain here anyway.

Eugène Boch

I'd very much like to ask you to do an exchange with me of one of your studies of the coal-mines.

Anthon van Rappard

I don't want a grudging friendship. Either cordial or over. So there you have my final word.

Albert Aurier:

Thank you very much for your article in the Mercure de France, which greatly surprised me. I rediscover my canvases in your article, but better than they really are — richer, more significant.

Second floor: Illness and ear

In October 1888, the painter Paul Gauguin came to visit Van Gogh in the Yellow House in Arles. Their personalities and ideas soon clashed. ‘Vincent and I absolutely cannot live side by side without turmoil’, Gauguin wrote. On the evening of 23 December, Gauguin left the house after a quarrel. He later claimed that Van Gogh had pursued him and threatened him with a razor. After returning home, in a state of total confusion, Van Gogh cut off a piece of his left ear.

This crisis was the first in a series of mental breakdowns, often accompanied by hallucinations and severe anxiety. We do not know exactly what illness Van Gogh had. His doctor thought that he suffered from a form of epilepsy with acute mania. He himself wrote of his ‘mental or nervous fever or madness’. At first, he hoped to recover, but after a few months there, he voluntarily admitted himself to a psychiatric hospital in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Despite moments of despair, he remained confident in the healing power of painting.

1888 Arles

23.10

Gauguin joins Van Gogh in the Yellow House. Early December, Gauguin considers leaving because of the growing tension between them.

23.12

Van Gogh and Gauguin quarrel in the evening. Afterwards, Gauguin leaves and checks into a hotel. Van Gogh cuts off his left ear and brings it to a prostitute, folded up in a piece of paper. The police are called in.

24.12

In the early morning hours, Van Gogh is taken to the hospital in Arles. Gauguin sends a telegram to Vincent’s brother Theo in Paris.

25.12

In the morning, Theo arrives and visits Vincent, who is physically weak and mentally confused. Theo and Gauguin travel back to Paris together that evening.

1889

07.01

Van Gogh returns to the Yellow House. Around 4 February, he has another nervous breakdown and is admitted to hospital again (until 18 February).

26.02

Van Gogh is readmitted to hospital after another breakdown. His neighbours draw up a petition to have him expelled from his home, because he wanders about in a state of confusion.

Saint-Rémy

08.05

Van Gogh admits himself voluntarily to Saint-Paul de Mausole psychiatric hospital in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. New crises follow in July, December, January, and February. His treatment consists of cold water baths twice a week.

1890 Auvers-sur-Oise

16.05

Van Gogh leaves the psychiatric hospital. He goes to Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris, where he stays at the inn Auberge Ravoux. Dr. Gachet becomes his physician. He advises Van Gogh to paint above all else.

Second Floor: Van Gogh at work

In his letters Van Gogh often gave extensive reports on his working methods, and so we are well informed about the practical side of his craftsmanship: from the way he experimented with colour and chose his materials to his use of all sorts of tools. From his letters and technical investigation it also emerges that Van Gogh worked in a highly systematic and well-considered manner: every drawing and every painting was a conscious attempt to make headway. This is contrary to the prevalent image of Van Gogh as an impulsive and purely emotional artist.

Colour Effects

Colour preoccupied Van Gogh throughout his entire career. Already as a beginning artist he read books on colour theory and its application by the painter Eugène Delacroix. It was only when Van Gogh first saw paintings by Delacroix, and other artists, for himself in Paris, that he finally understood how to achieve the right colour effects himself. He was after strong contrasts, which he created by combining complementary colours. This not only helped Van Gogh to achieve a visually powerful result, it also lent his work an emotional charge. He believed that, 'Colour expresses something in itself.'

Perspective Frame

Van Gogh often went to work carefully, making preparatory studies and underdrawings. To assist him with the correct rendering of depth and proportions, which he found difficult, he long relied on a perspective frame. This device consisted of a wooden frame with a grid of horizontal, vertical and/or diagonal threads that was traced onto the blank canvas or paper. Grid lines are still visible to the naked eye in some of his paintings and drawings. Van Gogh only began to work more freely in Arles, as a result of which he no longer needed the perspective frame.

Discolouration

In France Van Gogh developed into a pronounced colourist. Art supply stores in Paris stocked the newest assortment of tube paint in intense colours. However, not all of them were colourfast, which explains why some of the colours in Van Gogh's paintings and drawings now look different than when he applied them. Through exposure to light, the colour of these pigments have radically changed or faded. The latter is often the case with certain types of red paint.

Under the Microscope

Discovering how Van Gogh painted begins with looking closely. Many details are visible to the naked eye, but for additional research a restorer needs technical tools, such as a microscope. Unexpected things then sometimes come to light. Look for yourself if you want to know what.

Grains of sand!

In May 1888 Van Gogh visited the fishing village Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. He must have made this painting on the spot because grains of sand from the beach blew *in* and *on* to the paint.

Thick clumps

Van Gogh is known for his pastose and swirling brushwork. He often worked quickly and ‘wet-in-wet’: he applied fresh strokes of paint onto the still wet paint. His brush picked up the various colours, which were then mixed together.

Van Gogh as a Draughtsman

Few people know that in addition to being an important painter Van Gogh was also a great draughtsman. He made close to 1100 drawings, half of which are kept in this museum. Because of their sensitivity to light, unfortunately they can only be displayed on a limited basis. Presented in this gallery are rotating displays of works on paper (1880-1890).

Van Gogh devoted the first years of his artistic training entirely to drawing because he believed that it was ‘the root of everything’ for an artist. Later, too, he continued drawing to improve his skills and develop his own style. Without the distraction of the colours of his palette he could concentrate fully on the expressive power of line.

For Van Gogh, his drawings were not only an exercise or preparation for his paintings, but often works of art in their own right that he took pride in signing. The less elaborated sketches, however, are also worthy of admiration and bring us closer to the artist.

On the wall

Vincent van Gogh 3 June 1883: ‘drawing is the root of everything, and the time spent on that is actually all profit.’

Showcase: Drawing Material

These are examples of drawing materials used by Van Gogh. Most were part of standard artists’ equipment, such as charcoal, chalk, graphite, and India ink. Van Gogh also worked with relatively uncommon materials, including natural chalk and lithographic ink. In the drawings and letters originating from Holland he frequently used iron gall ink (made from oak galls), which unfortunately turns brown and eats into the paper over time. In Arles Van Gogh cut his own pens from the reeds growing along the banks of the canals.

Sketchbooks

The least known part of Van Gogh’s oeuvre consists of four preserved sketchbooks. Van Gogh always carried small notebooks with him so that he could quickly jot down his ideas or impressions. He wrote his brother: ‘my sketchbook proves that I try to capture things first-hand’. In addition to notes and rapid scratches, forceful heads and splendid city views can be discovered in them. Page through the sketchbooks digitally [here](#).

Third floor

Painting Against All Odds

After his hospitalisation in the asylum in Saint-Rémy Van Gogh felt like a ‘broken pitcher’ that could never be mended. Even so, in between his bouts of mental illness he worked on steadily and courageously to become an even better artist. Painting and drawing, moreover, gave structure to his days and ensured that he did not fall prey to the loneliness plaguing the other patients.

If he was not able or allowed to work outside of the institution’s walls, he painted the view from his room: ‘through the iron-barred window I can make out a square of wheat in an enclosure, ... above which in the morning I see the sun rise in its glory.’ Or he explored the wild garden, where he undoubtedly found endless subjects. In addition, Van Gogh painted copies of black-and-white prints of works by other artists. He also painted a few splendid floral still lifes ‘with calm and a greater sureness of touch.’

On the wall:

Vincent van Gogh 5-6 September 1889: ‘More than ever I have a pent-up fury for work, and I think that this will contribute to curing me.’

Painting: Wheatfield with Reaper

A reaper labours in the field in the scorching heat of the sun. Rendered with thick daubs of yellow paint, the wheat ripples all around him. Van Gogh considered wheat a symbol of the eternal cycle of nature and the transience of life: after having been sown and then grown, it is now being reaped. The subject is weighty, and yet through the golden sunlight and the warm colours, it is depicted ‘almost smiling.’ Van Gogh even found it ‘funny’ that he recorded such an existential and monumental vision through the iron bars of his cell.

1890 Impassioned Nature

Van Gogh spent the final months of his life in rural Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris. He had always been a prolific artist, but here he painted as never before: he turned out approximately seventy-five paintings in just seventy days. Van Gogh portrayed primarily nature in all of its manifestations: gardens full of flowers, a close-up of waving wheat, and panoramic landscapes filled with emotion.

Van Gogh was familiar with the region from the paintings of Charles-François Daubigny. He admired the mood and the personal sensibility that this French painter managed to instil in his landscapes. Van Gogh, too, tried to convey in his work the emotions that he experienced watching the sun rise, or looking at a blade of grass, or a ploughed field, to shine through in his work. For him nature was sacred, a sanctuary from which to draw solace, or regain strength. That Van Gogh can still communicate these grand emotions to us in part explains his great artistic success.

On the wall:

Vincent van Gogh c. 10-14 July 1890: 'I'm wholly absorbed in the vast expanse of wheatfields against the hills, large as a sea.'

Painting: Wheatfield under Thunderclouds

In the final weeks of his life Van Gogh painted several impressive pictures of the wheatfields around Auvers, including this expansive field beneath a dark sky. He was worried about his financial situation and his calling as an artist; so much so, in fact, that the brush almost fell from his hand while he was working, he wrote. In this ambitious work he thus also attempted to express 'sadness, and extreme loneliness.' Quite notably, the powerful emotions that Van Gogh experienced in nature had a salutary effect on his own unsteady state of mind. He described the effect of these landscapes on his constitution as 'healthy' and 'invigorating.'

Third floor: Death and recognition

On 27 July 1890, Van Gogh shot himself in the chest with a pistol in a field near Auvers. Although Van Gogh no longer had great ambitions because of his illness, he did show a tremendous appetite for work. Nevertheless, he was mentally unbalanced. Signs of this are found in his letters. For example, his brother Theo planned to go into business for himself, and uncertainty about his financial situation and his future left Vincent in low spirits: 'my life, too, is attacked at the very root, my step also is faltering'.

Van Gogh died two days later, with Theo at his side. His coffin was covered with yellow flowers and surrounded by his last paintings. A number of his artist friends came to the funeral. One of them, Émile Bernard, wrote to his friend, the art critic Albert Aurier, 'We climbed the hill outside Auvers talking about him, about the daring impulse he had given to art.' Not long before, Aurier had written an article in praise of Van Gogh, calling him a 'great and desperate genius'. This was the first official recognition of Van Gogh's talent.

1890 Auvers-sur-Oise

16.05

Van Gogh leaves the psychiatric hospital. He goes to Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris, where he stays at the inn Auberge Ravoux. Dr Gachet becomes his physician. He advises Van Gogh to paint above all else.

27.07

In the afternoon, Van Gogh leaves the inn Auberge Ravoux, where he lodges, to go out and paint. He shoots himself in the chest and returns in the evening, wounded.

28.07

Theo receives word of Vincent's injury and travels to Auvers.

29.07

Vincent dies of his injury, with Theo at his side; he is 37 years old. About twenty of his acquaintances and artist friends attend his funeral, which is held in Auvers on 30 July. His family in the Netherlands is unable to come at such short notice.

1891

25.01

Theo's health grows worse as a result of syphilis. In October, he suffers a mental and physical breakdown and is admitted to hospital. He dies in Utrecht on 25 January 1891.

1914

14.04

Theo's widow Jo has his remains buried next to Vincent's in Auvers.

Van Gogh Inspires

After Van Gogh's death, his work attracted growing admiration. His strong colours, rhythmic brushstrokes and the emotional charge of his work had a great impact on other artists. Soon, Van Gogh came to be seen as one of the great pioneers of modern art.

After 1900, artists became more and more interested in Van Gogh's daring colour combinations and his use of colour as a means of expression. Artists such as Munch and Von Stuck used colour to emphasize the symbolism in their paintings. Painters like Van Dongen and De Vlaminck went one step further: to give their work greater emotional power, they painted large, simplified fields of sharply contrasting colours.

After his brief artistic career, Van Gogh had an enduring influence on the art world. To this day, his life and art continue to inspire artists around the globe.

On the wall:

Albert Aurier on Vincent van Gogh, 1890: 'a Messiah, a sower of truth'

Painting: The Sower

This small painting is brimming with meaning and expression. The forms are powerful and the colours emotionally charged. The greenish yellow of the sky in combination with the purple of the field lend the painting an almost incandescent overtone. For Van Gogh the sower was a key symbol in the ongoing cycle of life and death: through sowing he creates new life. The setting sun behind his head resembles a halo, and transforms him into a saint. The French art critic Albert Aurier identified Van Gogh with the sower, 'a Messiah, a sower of truth.' For Aurier – and many others – the painter was a visionary who would jolt the art world awake.