

Van Gogh in America at the Detroit Institute of Arts

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Van Gogh in America, *October 2, 2022–January 22, 2023 at the Detroit Institute of Arts*

In its *Van Gogh in America* exhibition (through January 22, 2023), the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) is celebrating 100 years since the museum acquired the first Vincent van Gogh painting by an American museum.

In 1922, the Dutch van Gogh was virtually unknown in the United States, although his work had long been recognized in Europe, particularly by fellow artists. The acquisition for \$4,200 at an auction of his *Self-Portrait* (1887) by the DIA was considered risky at the time. It has since become one of the iconic images of the DIA itself.

Van Gogh (1853–1890) has been called the “most famous and best-loved of all painters,” “a legendary hero ... with his soul in torment.” It was many years after his tragic death by suicide in July 1890 that the legend became lodged in popular consciousness. His career as an artist spanned a mere decade. He died having sold only a few works, and was only able to work as an artist thanks to the generous support of his brother Theo. One of the intentions of the current exhibition at the DIA is to disabuse us of the myths surrounding van Gogh, and allow us to see and appreciate the fact that he was a meticulous artist who achieved greatness through intellectual and physical perseverance, and very hard work.

The current exhibition showcases 74 paintings, sketches and etchings by the artist, all of which have been shown in America, or purchased by an American institution or collector. Every work on display here dispels the mythology surrounding van Gogh’s life and death. The works themselves reveal an artist thoroughly familiar with earlier artistic schools and masters, one who created dozens of sketches before executing a final painting, and a sensitive individual driven relentlessly to show nature and humanity in their most vivid and vulnerable moments.

The curators also include reference to Vincent’s sister-in-law (Theo’s wife), Jo van Gogh-Bonger, who made it her life’s work to see that Vincent’s art work received the widest possible audience. She was instrumental in including 21 of Vincent’s paintings in the famed New York Armory exhibition of 1913. While none were sold from that show, she persisted. A newly translated biography of van Gogh-Bonger explains:

First and foremost, she wanted, come what may, to complete the task that Theo had set himself in 1890—publicising Vincent’s art. Secondly, and no less importantly to her, she supported the socialist view that looking at art could elevate people.

In this, she shared Vincent’s world outlook, which embraced the commonplace, and strove to convey to viewers the true inner life of his subject, whether a postman, a vase of flowers, a peasant sowing a field, or a pair of his own worn-out boots.

In early 1882 Vincent wrote to his brother Theo, “I feel that my work lies in the heart of the people, that I must keep close to the ground, that I must delve deeply into life and must get ahead by coping with great cares and difficulties. I can’t imagine any other way...”

The works on display at the current exhibition are filled with movement, dynamism, bold color and brushstrokes, as the times themselves in Europe and America were bursting with energy through the industrial revolution and the beginning of the end of the pastoral French landscape.

There is something in each of his works that is boldly optimistic—expressed through his unique, turbulent brushwork and brilliant color palette, yet conveys as well a certain melancholy, in some cases even foreboding. In one of the first paintings in the current exhibition, *Undergrowth with Two Figures* (1890), a distant couple strolls through the brilliant green, yellow and white forest floor, with blue, purple and pink tree trunks—no boughs visible—tilting, seemingly swaying, hovering precariously over the pair. The foreground undergrowth is bright, loose and flowing as it recedes into a murky deep blue-black indication of uninterrupted and impenetrable forest.

In a letter to his brother Theo, not long after embarking on his career as an artist and while still in the Netherlands, he wrote:

Nature always begins by resisting the draughtsman, but he who truly takes it seriously doesn’t let himself be deterred by that resistance, on the contrary, it’s one more stimulus to go on fighting, and at bottom nature and an honest draughtsman see eye to eye. Nature is most certainly ‘intangible’ though, yet one must seize it, and with a firm hand. And now, after spending some time wrestling and struggling with nature, it’s starting to become a bit more yielding and submissive, not that I’m there yet, no one is less inclined to think so than I, but things are beginning to go more smoothly. The struggle with nature sometimes resembles what Shakespeare calls “Taming the shrew” i.e., to conquer the opposition through perseverance, willy-nilly). In many things, but more particularly in drawing, I think that delving deeply into something is better than letting it go. (October 1881)

The DIA exhibition includes an early lithograph—one of 20 he had printed to sell at a reasonable price—done from his first major painting, *The Potato Eaters* (1885). The lithograph, a mirror image of the painting (which is not included here), was harshly criticized in its time as too dark and “coarse.” But Vincent considered it his first masterpiece. His affinity for the difficult life and meager rewards of the peasants is apparent in the single light illuminating the worn faces, the sharing of the simple meal.

Also on display are several paintings of peasant field laborers, or “sowers.” According to the curators’ notes, van Gogh “had an affinity for the sower as a symbol of regeneration, life, and the spread of Christianity.” But in these two paintings from 1888, what becomes clear is that the pastoral life of these sowers is being encroached upon by the distant rise of industry, with tall smokestacks and grey-blue blocks of buildings distantly emerging on the horizon, contrasting with the sun-drenched sloped roof of the farmhouse and fields.

A full decade before the DIA purchased the self-portrait of 1887, American artist and patron of the arts Katherine S. Dreier bought the 1890 *Portrait of Adeline Ravoux*—a pensive study of bright skin and hair against a dark background. Dreier declared that seeing van Gogh’s art was like “stepping out of a stuffy room into glorious bracing air.” The portraits van Gogh painted, always of ordinary people—the homeless, prostitutes, peasants, the well-known series of the family of the postman Joseph Roulin in Arles—while swirling with liveliness in color and technique, convey the difficulties of life borne by the workers and their families. Eyes are always averted or downcast, the subjects appear sad, or at best, in a moment of reflection. Vincent’s sensitivity and profound empathy with those who sat for him infuse every stroke.

Because this exhibition draws on works either purchased by or shown in America, and does not purport to present a comprehensive retrospective, we are able to see the changes in van Gogh’s work over his brief career. In late 1885, Vincent enrolled for the first time in an art academy, in Antwerp. The experience was not a happy one, apparently. Vincent longed for collaboration and solidarity among his fellow art students, artists and art dealers. He sought a “friction of ideas,” but found the artistic climate dull and depressing. It was in January 1886 that Theo convinced Vincent to move to Paris, where he was immersed in bohemian artistic circles of younger artists who rejected Impressionism, the predominant “avant-garde” artistic movement at the time. They embraced Japanese painting and drawing, and embarked in a new direction driven by the industrial revolution.

The pieces on display from that period demonstrate Vincent’s determination to immerse himself in the styles of earlier masters as well as his contemporaries. There are works that remind us of Pieter Bruegel’s *The Wedding Dance* (1566), which is also in the DIA’s collection; the still-lives of Cézanne; the pointillist style of Seurat; and the drawings of Rembrandt. His favorite artist was Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875), who first painted peasants working in the wheat fields.

Van Gogh is now acknowledged as the artist, next to Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), who epitomized the revolution in painting from the Impressionist school to Cubism and Expressionism in the early 20th century. The Impressionists painted their ephemeral sensations of the subject, preoccupied with the movement of light. Van Gogh rejected the subjectivity of Impressionism, and although a prolific painter of landscapes, saw the depiction of nature, including tree roots and people, as “taming the shrew.”

In 1937, art historian Meyer Schapiro wrote of the estrangement

from society felt by van Gogh and other younger artists of the 1880s: “The reactions against Impressionism, far from being inherent in the nature of art, issued from the responses that artists as artists made to the broader situation in which they found themselves, but which they themselves had not produced.”

The “broader situation” in which van Gogh found himself is palpable not only in the tension between vibrant foreground and ominous background, but in his use of intense complementary colors and tumultuous swirls of thick paint, in which everything is in motion, as the engines of burgeoning capitalism itself.

Following two years in Paris, van Gogh moved to Arles, in the south of France in 1888. Many of the pictures in the DIA exhibition were painted there. During his 15-month stay in Arles he completed an astonishing 200 paintings and over 100 drawings and watercolors. It is here that he painted the two works each called *The Sower* (1888), as well as the portraits of the Roulin family, *The Bedroom* (1889), and an astonishing painting of thick impasto with a brilliant orange sunset reflecting the distant industrial town on the horizon in the river, called *The Stevedores of Arles* (1888).

We are very fortunate to be able to visit this extraordinary exhibition here in Detroit.

But it is important to bear in mind that this unique opportunity might have been aborted had the philistines and thieves involved in the bankruptcy of the city of Detroit had their way. In 2013, the Socialist Equality Party initiated an aggressive campaign to prevent the sale of millions of dollars of precious artwork, and to explain why workers should defend the cultural heritage embodied in the DIA. In lieu of selling works of art outright (including an 1886 van Gogh still-life) to raise funds to pay the city’s creditors, on December 10, 2014, under the direction of the unelected Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, the museum’s collection and its building were handed over to a private non-profit, the Detroit Institute of Arts, Inc.

Despite working under the oversight of a private board of millionaires and corporations, it is to the credit of the curators and the dedicated efforts of the museum staff that this exhibition is available only in Detroit. If you are able to visit, you must. Educators are particularly encouraged to bring their students, as they will not have an opportunity like this again for a long time. New generations will be inspired by one of history’s most influential artists.

If we want to understand why we continue to be drawn to the work of van Gogh, we can turn again to Schapiro’s words: “a part of the popular attraction of van Gogh and Gauguin [is] that their work incorporates ... evident longings, tensions and values which are shared today by thousands who in one way or another have experienced the same conflicts as these artists.”



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