



Tulip Field, 1889

Works Collected by Theo and Vincent van Gogh

Tulip Field

Christian Mourier-Petersen

This landscape featuring a field of tulips in the foreground is one of the most impressionistic works by the Danish artist Christian Mourier-Petersen (1858–1945). The scene is illuminated by sunlight: a brilliant blue sky stretches above, while the tree's foliage casts a cool shadow on the warm, yellow exterior of the house. This shadow is devoid of black paint, composed instead of green and blue tints. In using this technique, the artist embraced the methods of the French impressionists, whose path he had crossed previously. For the diverse elements of the composition, Mourier-Petersen employed apt brushstrokes: elongated, diagonal strokes for the sky, short horizontal strokes for the buildings and loose, free ones for the greenery, as well as for the tulips in white, yellow and red. Consequently, the tulip field assumes a decorative pattern that occupies much of the picture plane.

In Denmark

Mourier-Petersen made the painting in his native Denmark, probably in the countryside near his family estate, Holbækgaard, in Jutland. ⁰¹ He painted it shortly after a two-year tour of France. During his time there, he became friends with the Van Gogh brothers: first with Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) in Arles in early 1888 and then with Theo van Gogh (1857–1891) in Paris in the summer of the same year. He kept in touch with them after returning to Denmark in the winter of 1888–89. On 25 January 1889, he informed Vincent of his intention to send something to Theo, and in early 1890 this *Tulip Field* was finally dispatched to Paris. ⁰² Since tulips bloom in spring, it is reasonable to deduce that Mourier-Petersen painted the picture a year earlier, in the Danish spring of 1889. In the accompanying letter, dated 25 February 1890, he wrote to Theo: ‘Please accept this painting “A field of tulips” in memory of Chr Mourier-Petersen. May it please you and may the subject remind you of your country, even though I am from Denmark’, and conveyed his regards to his brother. ⁰³

To understand how this came about, we must go back in time. Mourier-Petersen trained at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen from 1880 to 1883. However, disenchanted with the institution’s conventional and nationalistic policies, he withdrew prematurely. Together with a group of like-minded students, he established the progressive Kunstnernes Frie Studieskoler (Free Study School for Artists), which championed experimentation with colour and form. He was progressive and wanted to look beyond Denmark’s borders. Thus, in October 1886, he embarked on a two-year grand tour of France in search of ‘foreign places and stronger colours’. ⁰⁴

With Vincent van Gogh in Arles

The journey began in Paris, where Mourier-Petersen wanted to apprentice in the atelier of the realist artist Léon Bonnat (1833–1922), whose work was an important model for the Kunstnernes Frie Studieskoler and countless other artists. Regrettably, Mourier-Petersen was not admitted because he was unable to demonstrate any of his own work.⁰⁵ This did not deter him from delving into the city's numerous museums, and in commercial galleries he doubtless encountered the work of Barbizon School painters. Some of the landscapes that Mourier-Petersen painted during his time in France echo the styles of Charles-François Daubigny (1817–1878) and Camille Corot (1796–1875), whether in their use of colour or their compositions featuring meandering paths (fig. 1).⁰⁶ After Paris, Mourier-Petersen proceeded via Marseilles and Fontvieille to Arles in southern France, arriving there in early summer 1887. Shortly before 10 March 1888, he crossed paths with Vincent, who had been there since 20 February.⁰⁷ Over the course of four months, the two artists interacted almost daily.⁰⁸ They often met up at a cafe or ventured outdoors to paint side by side.⁰⁹



Christian Mourier-Petersen,
French Landscape, Provence,
1888, oil on canvas, 52 × 68 cm
Loeb Danish Art Collection

The two artists rapidly forged a bond, which Mourier-Petersen articulated in a letter to his artist friend Johan Rohde (1856–1935) as follows: 'I still paint on some things and have pretty interesting company in a Dutch painter, an Impressionist, who has made his home here. Initially I considered him to be mad, but by and by I could note that there is method in what he does. He knows the friends of Jastrau: McKnight, Russell etc.'¹⁰ In turn, at the end of his intensive collaboration with Mourier-Petersen, Van Gogh wrote to Theo: 'I liked him well enough because, with his spectacles, he went naively and benignly about this wicked world, and because I presumed he had a heart that was purer than many a heart, and even with more of a leaning towards rectitude than many of the cleverest people have. And as I knew he hadn't been painting for very long it made not a bit of difference to me that his work was the very height of inanity. And I saw him every day for months.'¹¹

Painting side by side but in different styles

On occasion, the two artists depicted the same motif, as is evident in their paintings of a peach orchard on the outskirts of the town (fig. 2 and fig. 3). They probably worked side by side there, a conclusion supported by several of their paintings. Although the light and shadows bear striking resemblances in the two paintings, the viewpoints differ slightly.¹² The execution, however, diverges significantly. Whereas Van Gogh rendered the trees with a generous application of paint, Mourier-Petersen's approach was less lavish, featuring a vague background against which the branches and bright flowers are more delicately depicted.¹³ While Van Gogh's portrayal creates a potent image of a tree, Mourier-Petersen's painting is more akin to an exercise, in which he struggled to achieve a compositional balance. In addition to the orchard, both artists portrayed the same model. The girl in Van Gogh's painting and drawings, titled *Moussmé*, was also captured three times by Mourier-Petersen (fig. 4 and fig. 5).¹⁴



Christian Mourier-Petersen, *Girl from Arles*, 1888, oil on canvas, 41.2 × 33.5 cm, Hirschsprung Collection, Copenhagen

As the above quote from Van Gogh suggests, he was indeed quite critical of Mourier-Petersen's work. He initially denounced the Dane's 'dry, correct and timid' style, but saw slight improvement two months later: 'His last three studies were better and more colourful than what he was doing before.'¹⁵ It is evident that Mourier-Petersen aimed to infuse more colour into his art and embrace the style of the impressionists, as indicated by the words he wrote six months later, upon returning to Denmark: 'As for the Scandinavian painters, I found them the same as before my departure. Among the young ones there are many who want to produce something original and who are close to the Impressionists, but they've elected a reactionary and stupid jury which brings all progress to a halt.'¹⁶ These sentiments reflect a more progressive outlook on art than what is manifested in the art he actually produced.

To Theo van Gogh in Paris

When Mourier-Petersen expressed his desire to shift from Arles to Paris, Van Gogh arranged for him to lodge with his brother Theo, who after Vincent's departure welcomed company and routinely provided accommodation to artists for a modest compensation.¹⁷ Mourier-Petersen stayed there from approximately 5 June to 15 August 1888. He reportedly paid for his lodging with paintings; however, *Tulip Field* is the sole work by him to survive in Theo's collection.¹⁸ It may well be that this gift served as a belated payment. Subsequently, Mourier-Petersen reportedly referred to Theo as the 'best and most amiable person he had encountered in his long life'.¹⁹ Additionally, Theo connected him with fellow artist friends, enabling Mourier-Petersen to gain insight into the artistic endeavours of those he encountered in the French capital, including John Peter Russell (1858-1930), Edgar Degas (1834-1917) and Camille Pissarro (1830-1903).²⁰

Upon his return to Denmark, Mourier-Petersen's creations evinced a domestic intimacy and photographic cropping strongly reminiscent of Degas's approach. The light and free touch evident in *Tulip Field* can also be traced to his experiences during his time in France. However, his Danish work aligns more closely with the serene compositions, marked by clear, cool tones, typical of the Scandinavian school. This style is best represented by his Danish contemporary Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916) (fig. 6) . Both Hammershøi and Mourier-Petersen played pivotal roles in founding Den Frie Udstilling (The Free Exhibition), an artists' association that organized independent exhibitions, in 1891.²¹

Fond recollections

The painting that Mourier-Petersen sent to Theo stands out as a notable exception to that stylistic direction. Although still a hushed depiction, it exhibits bolder brushstrokes and a richer palette. Here, he appears to have adopted the style he observed in Vincent's work during their time together in Arles. A comparison with Van Gogh's *Farmhouse in a Wheatfield*, dating from May 1888, illustrates that the Dane opted for a similar composition and painting technique, inspired by his approach (fig. 7) . Consequently, upon learning of Van Gogh's death five months after sending Theo the painting, Mourier-Petersen wrote to him: 'We got on so well together during our brief acquaintance, and he showed me a very sincere and very unselfish friendship. Also his opinions on art and life have had an unquestionable influence on my development.'²²



Vincent van Gogh, *Farmhouse in a Wheatfield*, 1888, oil on canvas, 45.3 × 50.9 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

As Mourier-Petersen himself conveyed to Theo, *Tulip Field* harmoniously intertwines the lives of the three men, encapsulating a quintessentially Dutch scene within the Danish countryside.²³ Furthermore, he captured it in the colourful, impressionist manner that Vincent was eager to nurture in him during their time in the south of France, and one that he could reasonably anticipate would resonate with the Van Gogh brothers.

Renske Suijver
November 2023

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Object details

Tulip Field

Artist

Christian Mourier-Petersen (1858 - 1945)

Date

1889

Medium

oil on canvas

Dimensions

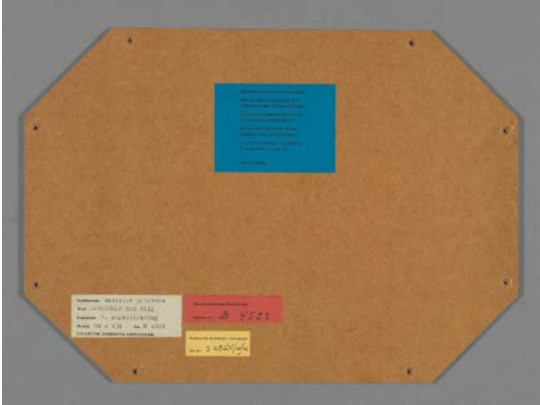
34 cm x 46 cm

Inventory Number

s0282V1962

Credits

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



Tulip Field

Front & Back



Provenance

Tulip Field

Given by the artist, Copenhagen, to Theo van Gogh, Paris, 25 February 1890; after his death on 25 January 1891, inherited by his widow, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, and their son, Vincent Willem van Gogh, Paris; administered until her death on 2 September 1925 by Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Bussum/Amsterdam/Laren; transferred by Vincent Willem van Gogh, Laren, to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam, 10 July 1962 (ratified 28 December 1970); agreement concluded between the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and the State of the Netherlands, in which the preservation and management of the collection, and its placing in the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, to be realized in Amsterdam, is entrusted to the State, 21 July 1962; on permanent loan to the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh from the opening of the museum on 2 June 1973, and at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, since 1 July 1994.



Literature

Tulip Field

- Evert van Uitert and M. Hoyle (eds.), *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1987, no. 1.321, p. 360
- Ronald de Leeuw, *Van Gogh Museum: Paintings and Pastels*, Zwolle 1993, p. 95
- Chris Stolwijk and Richard Thomson (eds.), with a contribution by Sjraar van Heugten, *Theo van Gogh, 1857-1891: Art Dealer, Collector and Brother of Vincent*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) / Paris (Musée d'Orsay), Amsterdam & Zwolle 1999, no. 185, pp. 160, 188
- Chris Stolwijk *et al.* (eds.), *The Account Book of Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger*, Leiden & Amsterdam 2002, pp. 73, 155, 200
- Sjraar van Heugten and Helewise Berger, *Van Goghs intimi: Vrienden, familie, modellen*, exh. cat., 's-Hertogenbosch (Noordbrabants Museum) 2019, no. 68, p. 90



Letters

Tulip Field

- Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Theo van Gogh, Copenhagen, 25 February 1890, [↗ 742](#).

Figures



Fig. 1

Christian Mourier-Petersen, *French Landscape, Provence*, 1888, oil on canvas, 52 × 68 cm
Loeb Danish Art Collection



Fig. 2

Christian Mourier-Petersen, *Peach Trees in Bloom, Arles*, 1888, oil on canvas, 55.2 × 45 cm, Hirschsprung Collection, Copenhagen



Fig. 3

Vincent van Gogh, *Pink Peach Trees ('Souvenir de Mauve')*, 1888, oil on canvas, 73 × 60 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo. Photo: Rik Klein Gotink



Fig. 4

Vincent van Gogh, *Mousmé, Half-Length*, 1888, pen and reed pen and ink, on paper, 31.5 × 24 cm, private collection. Photo: © 2021 Christie's Images Limited



Fig. 5

Christian Mourier-Petersen, *Girl from Arles*, 1888, oil on canvas, 41.2 × 33.5 cm, Hirschsprung Collection, Copenhagen



Fig. 6

Christian Mourier-Petersen, *Ironing Room in an Old Country Mansion*, 1891, oil on canvas, 65 × 50 cm, Loeb Danish Art Collection



Fig. 7

Vincent van Gogh, *Farmhouse in a Wheatfield*, 1888, oil on canvas, 45.3 × 50.9 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Footnotes

- 01 Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Vincent van Gogh, 25 January 1889 [↗ \[742\]](#); and Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Johan Rohde, 17 November 1888, quoted in Håkan Larsson, *Flames from the South: On the Introduction of Vincent van Gogh to Sweden*, Eslöv 1996, p. 15. According to Håkan Larsson, *Flames from the South: The Introduction of Vincent van Gogh in Sweden before 1900* (thesis), Lund 1993, p. 32, the picture was painted in the south of France, based on the fall of the light in the painting; however, this does not appear to agree with the text in the accompanying letter.
- 02 Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Vincent van Gogh, 25 January 1889 [↗ \[742\]](#). Reportedly, Vincent van Gogh had also given two drawings by his hand to Mourier-Petersen: however, after his death, his widow destroyed them along with many other possessions. Larsson 1993, p. 12, based on an interview with curator Marianne Saabye of the Hirschsprung Collection, Copenhagen.
- 03 Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Theo van Gogh, 25 February 1890, inv. no. b1328V1962, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation): ‘Daignez d’accepter cette toile “un champ de tulleps” en souvenir de Chr Mourier-Petersen. Q’uelle plaise à vous et que le sujet vous rappelle votre pays, quoi que étant de Danemark.’ On 21 April 1890, freight charges of 10 francs were recorded in the account book, see Chris Stolwijk *et al.* (eds.), *The Account Book of Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger*, Leiden & Amsterdam 2002, p. 73.
- 04 Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Johan Rohde, 7 January 1887, cited in Larsson 1993, p. 13. Mourier-Petersen initially intended to travel as far as Spain, however his plan changed along the way.
- 05 Ibid.
- 06 Suzanne Ludvigsen, entry ‘Christian Mourier-Petersen, *French Landscape, Provence (1888)*’, [↗ Loeb Danish Art Collection](#), [n.d.], accessed 20 July 2023.
- 07 The artist Dodge MacKnight (1860–1950) had probably advised him to go to Fontvieille. From there, it was only 10 kilometres to Arles.
- 08 With the exception of a short stay in nearby Les Martignes at the end of March 1888. Larsson 1993, p. 14.
- 09 They most likely went to Café du Forum: Benni Golf, ‘Van Gogh og Denmark’, *Politiken* (6 January 1938), quoted in Larsson 1993, p. 17.
- 10 Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Johan Rohde, 16 March 1888, quoted in Larsson 1996, p. 10.
- 11 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, around 15 and 16 June 1888 [↗ \[625\]](#): ‘moi je l’aimais assez parceque il allait dans ce mechant monde candidement et avec benignité avec ses lunettes et parceque je lui supposais un coeur plus vierge que bien des coeurs et meme avec plus d’inclinaison à la droiture que n’en ont bien des plus malins. Et puisque je savais qu’il ne faisait pas de la peinture depuis longtemps cela m’était bien égal que son travail etait le comble du niais. – Et je l’ai vu journellement pendant des mois.’

- 12 The watercolour *Flowering Peach Trees* (1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), inv. no. d0208V1962) also matches in terms of the angle at which the trees, fence and shadows are captured. Van Gogh also made other paintings of peach trees that spring, namely *The Pink Peach Tree* (1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), inv. no. s0025V1962), *Peach Tree in Blossom* (1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), inv. no. s0035V1962) and *Peach Trees in Blossom* (1888, private collection). Mourier-Petersen also painted a peach orchard in the background of *French Landscape, Provence* (1888, Loeb Danish Art Collection).
- 13 With thanks to conservator Devi Ormond for her observations regarding the research project on Van Gogh's studio practice, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 2011. This also shows that the artists did not use canvas from the same roll for their paintings.
- 14 Information on the number of Mourier-Petersen's portraits from an interview by Håkan Larsson with Marianne Saabye (Hirschsprung Collection), cited in Larsson 1996, p. 12. Van Gogh made his painting and drawing after Mourier-Petersen had already left the small town. According to Bernadette Murphy, this refers to Thérèse Mistral, the daughter of Van Gogh's cleaning lady. Bernadette Murphy, *Van Gogh's Ear: The True Story*, London 2016, p. 96.
- 15 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 16 March 1888 [↗ \[585\]](#): 'son travail est sec, correct et timide'; and Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 14 May 1888 [↗ \[610\]](#): 'Ses trois dernières études étaient meilleures & plus colorées que ce qu'il faisait auparavant.'
- 16 Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Vincent van Gogh, 25 January 1889 [↗ \[742\]](#): 'Quant aux peintres scandinaves je les ai trouvés les mêmes qu'avant mon départ. Parmi les jeunes il-y-en ont bien qui veulent produire quelque chose d'original et qui se rapprochent aux impressionistes, mais ils ont élu un jury reactionnaire et bête qui arrête tout progrès.' He continues: 'I think that an Impressionist exhibition would do some good in Copenhagen by ridding us of certain conventions' ('Je crois q'une exposition impressioniste ferait du bien à Copenhague en nous débarrassant de certaines conventions').
- 17 Chris Stolwijk, 'Theo van Gogh: A Life', and Sjraar van Heugten and Chris Stolwijk, 'Theo van Gogh: The Collector', in Chris Stolwijk and Richard Thomson (eds.), with a contribution by Sjraar van Heugten, *Theo van Gogh, 1857-1891: Art Dealer, Collector and Brother of Vincent*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) / Paris (Musée d'Orsay), Amsterdam & Zwolle 1999, pp. 47, 160.
- 18 Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Johan Rohde, 15 July 1888, quoted in Larsson 1993, p. 28, notes 101-2.
- 19 Benni Golf, letter to Vincent Willem van Gogh, 10 April 1937, Vincent van Gogh Foundation Archives: 'beste und liebenswürdigste Mensch, er durch seinen langen Leben begegnet hatte'. After Theo's death, Mourier-Petersen wrote to Rohde: 'He will be missed in the future by me and many other young painters.' Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Johan Rohde, 18 February 1891, quoted in Larsson 1993, p. 33. Jo van Gogh-Bonger later wrote: 'I remember my husband telling me about Mr Mourier Petersen and the free exhibition' ('Je me rappelle parfaitement que mon mari m'a souvent parlé et de Mr Mourier Petersen et de l'exposition libre'), which prompted her to generously lend works by Van Gogh to an exhibition in Denmark in 1892. Jo van Gogh-Bonger, letter to Johan Rohde, 8 February 1893, Royal Library, Copenhagen.
- 20 Suzanne Ludvigsen, entry 'Christian Mourier-Petersen, *Ironing Room in an Old Country Mansion, 1891*', [↗ Loeb Danish Art Collection](#), [n.d.], accessed 20 July 2023.

- 21 Larsson 1993, pp. 34–35.
- 22 Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Theo van Gogh, 25 November 1890, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), inv. no. b1329a-bV1962: ‘Nous étions si bien ensemble pendant notre courte connaissance, et il ma montré une amitié très sincère et très desintéressée. Aussi ses opinions sur l’art et sur la vie ont elles été d’une influence contestable [*sic*, he most likely meant *incontestable*] sur mon developpement.’
- 23 In November–December 1888, Mourier-Petersen had also visited Belgium and the Netherlands, prompted in part by the Van Gogh brothers’ accounts of their homeland. Christian Mourier-Petersen, letter to Johan Rohde, 7 August 1888, cited in Larsson 1993, p. 29. Through his letters, we know that he went to The Hague, among other places, and it is quite possible that he visited the Museum Mesdag there, which had opened one year earlier, since he writes about the work of Anton Mauve (1838–1888), Israëls [probably Isaac Israëls (1865–1934)] and George Hendrik Breitner (1857–1923).