



Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers, 1888

Works Collected by Theo and Vincent van Gogh

# Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers

## Paul Gauguin

In the first week of December 1888, by which time Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) and Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) had spent some six weeks together in the Yellow House in Arles, Vincent wrote to his brother Theo van Gogh (1857–1891): '[Gauguin] is working on a portrait of me which I don't count as one of his undertakings that don't come to anything.'<sup>01</sup> Gauguin had probably just begun his painting, because in a letter written around 20 December, he told Theo that he had finished the portrait.<sup>02</sup>

## Convergence of elements

The portrait shows Van Gogh bringing his brush to the canvas, which stands on a field easel, as he works on a still life of five sunflowers in a vase. The colour scheme in the background seems to represent a painting by Gauguin. The use of larger areas of colour with no recognizable, atmospheric perspective is comparable to what we see in *Blue Trees: Your Turn Will Come, My Beauty!* (fig. 1) and *Arlésiennes (Mistral)* (1888, Art Institute of Chicago). Moreover, the depiction of blue and red roofs is reminiscent of several works that Gauguin painted in Pont-Aven in early 1888, such as *Landscape of Brittany* (fig. 2) .<sup>03</sup> Even so, the supposed painting in the background cannot be linked to any of Gauguin's known works.<sup>04</sup>

Other elements in this portrait, such as the chair with a wicker seat and the dark blue vase standing on it, are objects in the Yellow House that Van Gogh had previously depicted himself. The chair, for example, appears in both *Van Gogh's Chair* (fig. 3) and *The Bedroom* (fig. 4) ); the vase can be seen in a number of Van Gogh's flower still lifes, such as *Still Life (Nature morte)* (fig. 5) . Even the painter's coat Van Gogh wears is familiar from his own *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Gauguin* (fig. 6) .<sup>05</sup> Yet despite these striking similarities, it cannot be stated unequivocally that Gauguin intended to incorporate allusions to Van Gogh's paintings in his portrait. After all, these objects were simply among the household effects.



Vincent van Gogh, *The Bedroom*, 1888, oil on canvas, 72.4 × 91.3 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

# Sunflowers

This does not hold true, however, for the sunflowers in the vase. Gauguin could not have painted these flowers from life, because they do not bloom in December. In fact, the flowers are a reference, painted from memory, to the series of still lifes that Van Gogh had produced at the end of August 1888. The eye that Gauguin painted in the largest sunflower appears to be an explicit reference to the version depicting fourteen sunflowers against a yellow background, which is now in the National Gallery in London (fig. 7) . He later described this work by Van Gogh as ‘some sunflowers, with crimson eyes’.<sup>06</sup> Van Gogh had in fact endowed these flowers with a kind of eye.



Vincent van Gogh, *The Sunflowers*, 1888, oil on canvas, 92.1 × 73 cm, The National Gallery, London. Bought, Courtauld Fund, 1924. Photo: © The National Gallery, London

While awaiting Gauguin’s arrival, Van Gogh had made these sunflower paintings to decorate the Yellow House. He knew that Gauguin had been quite taken with the sunflower still lifes he had painted in Paris, two of which he had exchanged for *On the Banks of the River, Martinique*.<sup>07</sup> In Arles, too, these paintings had made an impression on Gauguin, who reportedly said, shortly after his arrival, ‘that – ... that’s ... the flower’, referring to the true essence of the sunflower, which he thought Van Gogh had captured beautifully.<sup>08</sup> After his stay with Van Gogh, Gauguin continued in this vein, describing these pictures as ‘your sunflowers on a yellow background which I regard as a perfect page of an essential “Vincent” style’.<sup>09</sup>

In Gauguin’s eyes, *The Sunflowers* were the most powerful expression of Van Gogh’s artistry, works that encapsulated the essence not only of the sunflowers but also of Van Gogh’s personal style of painting. Gauguin therefore wished to immortalize his companion as ‘the painter of sunflowers’.<sup>10</sup> His aim was not to produce a perfect likeness of his friend but rather to portray him in a symbolic setting that said something about his artistry. And just as Van Gogh’s paintings of sunflowers expressed the essence of both its subject and his personal style, Gauguin in turn captured the essence of Van Gogh the artist. As Gauguin wrote to Theo once he had completed the painting: ‘From a geographical viewpoint, perhaps it doesn’t resemble very much, but I think it conveys something intimate of his.’<sup>11</sup>

## Preparation and painting technique

In preparation for the painting, Gauguin took up the sketchbook he had with him in Arles and made two schematic studies: a sketch of Van Gogh's facial features and another of the composition as a whole (fig. 8 and fig. 9 ).<sup>12</sup> A comparison of the latter drawing with the painting shows that Gauguin actually deviated little from his initial plan. From the very beginning, the composition of the piece was completely thought-out, which makes it unlikely that Van Gogh ever really posed in this position. That Gauguin devised his compositions beforehand and hardly deviated from his conception during the painting stage is confirmed by infrared images of *Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers*, which reveal hardly any *pentimenti*.<sup>13</sup> It has been alleged that Gauguin must have made, in addition to the above-mentioned sketches, a more detailed study, both because no underdrawing can be detected either by the naked eye or by means of infrared reflectography, and because the composition was applied to the canvas in one go, with hardly any modifications.<sup>14</sup> No such study is known, however.

For this portrait of Van Gogh, Gauguin first applied a thin ground layer containing lead white to a piece of burlap and then painted the composition very thinly.<sup>15</sup> After arriving in Arles, Gauguin had bought a twenty-metre roll of this cloth, and during his stay with Van Gogh, both artists used it.<sup>16</sup> Gauguin found the coarse, inexpensive cloth well suited to his 'primitive' approach to painting, and tended to leave the structure of the fabric visible in his paintings.<sup>17</sup> Owing to the thin ground containing lead white, the subsequent paint layers were easily absorbed by the loosely woven, fibrous support. Not only did this produce a matte effect, but the structure of the cloth remains clearly visible.<sup>18</sup> Gauguin's intentions and his working method are easy to study in this work, because - by way of exception - it was never varnished or relined. The surface is therefore rather dirty, but matte, not darkened, and the work has generally not suffered from harmful interventions.<sup>19</sup>

## Differences between Gauguin's and Van Gogh's painting techniques

Van Gogh used the burlap too, but found its coarse structure a hindrance.<sup>20</sup> In most of the works he painted on it, he drenched his brush and smeared paint over the cloth until its open structure was largely covered up, so that the network of threads is less visible than in Gauguin's works.<sup>21</sup> A prime example is Van Gogh's portrait of Gauguin (fig. 10), which originated at almost the same time as *Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers*. Van Gogh's rather messy application of a large amount of paint could not be more different from the thin, matte layer applied by Gauguin, who used less paint and finer brushes. The brush that Van Gogh wields in the portrait was probably not his own but of the kind that Gauguin preferred. Gauguin's paint layers are not entirely without texture, however. Raking light reveals some light impasto in *Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers*, although it is much less pronounced than in Van Gogh's work (fig. 11).<sup>22</sup>



Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of Gauguin*, 1888, oil on canvas, 38.2 × 33.8 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

The artists' disagreement about the application of paint emerges from the letters that Gauguin sent to Emile Bernard (1868–1941) during his stay in the Yellow House: 'As to the colour, he [Van Gogh] sees the fortuitous effect of impasto in Monticelli's [work], and me, I hate fiddling around, fabricating it, etc.'<sup>23</sup> In his portrait of Van Gogh, Gauguin demonstrated his disapproval of thick impasto, preferring instead to portray his companion in a finely executed and carefully thought-out composition.

## Differing ideas about art

Van Gogh and Gauguin argued not just about technique but also about artistic concepts. Van Gogh preferred to paint from life, whereas Gauguin drew inspiration from the imagination and from his memory. The use of preparatory studies and previously made drawings and paintings was indispensable to his working method, of which *Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers* is an excellent example. During the time they spent together in the Yellow House, Gauguin encouraged Van Gogh to abandon the visible world and to work from memory instead. To this end, Van Gogh ventured to make several paintings from the imagination, such as *Memory of the Garden at Etten* (1888, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg) and *The Novel Reader* (1888, private collection). He also asked Theo to return works he had sent to him earlier, in order to follow Gauguin's example and build up an archive of motifs for use in future work.<sup>24</sup>

Towards the end of November 1888, when it appeared that Van Gogh was having difficulty painting from the imagination, the problems that had been brewing between the two artists rose to the surface.<sup>25</sup> Van Gogh abandoned his imaginary compositions and dedicated himself fully to a series of portraits of the Roulin family.<sup>26</sup> With portraiture, at least, he was on a more secure footing. It became clear that their artistic ideas differed fundamentally, and their discussions about art became increasingly heated. Van Gogh refused any longer to adopt Gauguin's approach, in which the visualization of an idea was almost more important than the image this produced. It was precisely at this tense time of increasing friction that Gauguin embarked on his portrait of Van Gogh.



## Excessively electric

In a letter to Theo, Vincent described the tense atmosphere in the Yellow House as ‘excessively electric’ (*électricité excessive*). He went on to say that after arguing, they were as empty as ‘an electric battery after it’s run down’.<sup>27</sup> Nine months later Van Gogh referred to the portrait in a letter to Theo: ‘Have you seen that portrait he did of me painting sunflowers? My face has lit up after all a lot since, but it was indeed me, extremely tired and charged with electricity as I was then.’<sup>28</sup> As mentioned earlier, Gauguin’s aim in making that portrait had been to convey ‘something intimate’ about his companion. Vincent’s letter to Theo confirms that Gauguin had achieved his goal.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, Gauguin captured not only Van Gogh’s mood but also the reason for it, namely Gauguin’s criticism of his ideas about art and their resulting quarrels. In the portrait, Van Gogh seems not just on edge but downright obsessed. He is completely engrossed in his motif, the sunflowers, which he stares at intensely with narrowed eyes. The sunflowers could well stand for reality and the canvas behind Van Gogh for the imagination, the starting point of Gauguin’s art. Seen in this light, it can be said that Gauguin portrayed Van Gogh as obsessed with the prosaic motif right in front of his nose, while ignoring the spiritual and intellectual depths to be plumbed in the inner self.

Gauguin emphasized his point through the convergence of Van Gogh’s hand, brush, canvas and a sunflower petal.<sup>30</sup> This seems to suggest that Van Gogh is re-creating his sunflowers, as it were, but neglecting to produce an original work of art. In this period, moreover, Van Gogh painted a copy of his own *Sunflowers* (1888, Sompō Museum of Art, Tokyo), thus providing Gauguin with another reason to paint his companion re-creating instead of creating. Gauguin, by contrast, did not need real sunflowers or even a painting of sunflowers to create the specimens in this painting.<sup>31</sup> In fact, there were no sunflowers available in December, when Gauguin painted this portrait. One of his sunflowers displays an eye, which, as mentioned earlier, could have been borrowed from Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*, though it might also refer to Odilon Redon’s (1840–1916) lithograph *There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower* (fig. 12) . Gauguin owned an impression of this lithograph, which in his view stood for dreaming and for visualizing in the mind’s eye. A reference to Redon would fit in perfectly with the series of critical symbols that Gauguin incorporated in his composition.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, it is remarkable that Gauguin chose *The Sunflowers* as the vehicle of his supposed criticism of Van Gogh. As mentioned above, Gauguin had praised this work as ‘a perfect page of an essential “Vincent” style’.<sup>33</sup> Later he even tried to get hold of one of the versions Van Gogh had made in Arles.<sup>34</sup> Could the portrait have been intended both to celebrate and to criticize Van Gogh’s artistry? This dichotomy seemed to surface again in 1901, when Gauguin painted sunflowers again. Even though these paintings are seen as a homage to Van Gogh, Gauguin again painted several flowers with an eye, which could be one more reference to their great bone of contention (fig. 13) .



Paul Gauguin, *Sunflowers in a Chair*, 190, oil on canvas, 73 × 92.3 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



# Present for Theo

The tension between the two artists finally came to a head on the evening of 23 December 1888, when Van Gogh, after yet another highly charged argument with Gauguin, suffered a nervous breakdown and, in a psychotic state, cut off his ear. Gauguin informed Theo, who travelled post-haste from Paris to Arles on 24 December to see with his own eyes the state his brother was in. Because of the Christmas rush at Boussod, Valadon & Cie, Theo had to return to Paris the next day. Gauguin hastily packed his things and went with him. Sometime after they departed, Gauguin presented Theo with his portrait of Vincent.

It is possible that feelings of guilt prompted Gauguin to give this work to Theo. After all, he was partly to blame for the fact that Theo, who was already overburdened with responsibility, now had even more worries. Moreover, Gauguin could certainly be counted on to calculate the strategic value of this gift. After all, Theo, in his capacity as branch manager at Boussod, Valadon & Cie had successfully marketed Gauguin's work since 1887, and if he were to discontinue this business relationship because of what had happened in Arles, Gauguin would suffer a significant loss of income. With this gift Gauguin hoped to repair the rift, and he succeeded. A week later Theo wrote to his fiancée, Jo Bonger (1862-1925): 'Gauguin painted a portrait of Vincent during the last days he spent with him & gave it to me as gift. It is a great work of art & the best portrait that's been made of him in terms of capturing his inner being.'<sup>35</sup> Nine months later, Vincent expressed a similar opinion of Gauguin's portrait, admitting that 'it was indeed me'.<sup>36</sup> If in fact the portrait had been intended as criticism of Van Gogh, Gauguin would have concealed this from Theo, who apparently thought it better than the successful portraits of Vincent by John Peter Russell and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec - indeed a great compliment.

## The portrait in Gauguin's writings

In some of his later articles and manuscripts, Gauguin discussed his portrait of Van Gogh, but presented the work as testimony of Van Gogh's mental state and not as a product of the artistic schism between the two.<sup>37</sup> In the manuscript 'Avant et après', in which Gauguin gave a lengthy account of his stay in the Yellow House, he wrote the following about the portrait: 'I had the idea to portray him while painting the still life, [he] loved sunflowers so much. And [when] the portrait [was] finished, he said to me: "This is me, certainly, but me gone mad".'<sup>38</sup> Whether Van Gogh actually said this cannot be verified. In an earlier essay, titled 'Natures Mortes' (Still Lifes), Gauguin did not put these words into Van Gogh's mouth, but wrote plainly in the first person: 'And me ... I became him - Vincent - who suddenly drew with his yellow brush on the purple wall: I am the Holy Spirit ... whole in spirit. Definitely, this man was mad.'<sup>39</sup> The anecdote about Van Gogh writing on the wall occurs more than once in Gauguin's writings. He used it as an illustration of the tipping point in Van Gogh's mental health, which worsened until he finally became the 'mad man' whom Gauguin portrayed.

To distance himself from his own role in the events that marked - and marred - their time together in Arles, Gauguin described a situation in which Van Gogh's mental health steadily deteriorated, while he himself merely observed and analysed. In this context, he therefore presented the portrait as an analytical likeness and invariably kept silent about any criticism it might have contained. In his narrative, Gauguin led the discussion away from the original intention of the portrait, which was at once a celebration and a critique of Van Gogh's artistry.

Joost van der Hoeven  
March 2023

## Citation

Joost van der Hoeven, 'Paul Gauguin, *Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers*, 1888', catalogue entry in *Contemporaries of Van Gogh 1: Works Collected by Theo and Vincent*, Joost van der Hoeven (ed.), Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2023.

[↗ doi.org/10.58802/MXAD1425](https://doi.org/10.58802/MXAD1425)

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### Object details

Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers

### Artist

Paul Gauguin (1848 - 1903)

### Location

Arles

### Date

1888

### Medium

oil on canvas

### Dimensions

73 cm x 91 cm

### Inscriptions

P. Gauguin 88

### Inventory Number

s0225V1962

### Credits

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



## Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers

### Front & Back



### Provenance

#### Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers

Given by the artist to Theo van Gogh, Paris, on or after 25 December 1888; 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; 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.



## Exhibitions

### Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Tentoonstelling Vincent van Gogh*, 15 July-1 September 1905, no. b, *Schilderij, door Paul Gauguin*

Cologne, Städtische Ausstellungshalle am Aachener Tor, *Internationale Kunstausstellung des Sonderbundes westdeutscher Kunstfreunde und Künstler zu Cöln 1912*, 25 May-30 September 1912, no. 154, *Vincent van Gogh vor der Staffelei mit Sonnenblumen*

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Moderne Kunst Kring: Oeuvres de peinture, sculpture, dessin, gravure: exposée au Musée Municipal Suasso*, 6 October-7 November 1912, no. 19, *Le peintre des tournesols (Vincent)*

Antwerp, Feestzaal Meir, *L'art contemporain*, 29 April-28 May 1922, no. 271, *Zonnebloemen - schilder (Arles) / Le peintre des tournesols (Arles)*

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, *Exposition rétrospective d'art français*, 3 July-30 September 1926, no. 56bis, *Portrait de Van Gogh*

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Vincent van Gogh en zijn tijdgenooten*, 6 September-2 November 1930, no. 156, *De schilder van de zonnebloemen (Vincent van Gogh)*

New York, Museum of Modern Art (New York), *Vincent van Gogh*, 5 November 1935-5 January 1936, no. 68, *Van Gogh, Painter of Sunflowers*

Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Vincent van Gogh*, 11 January-10 February 1936, no. 68, *Van Gogh, Painter of Sunflowers*

Boston, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, *Vincent van Gogh*, 19 February-15 March 1936, no. 68, *Van Gogh, Painter of Sunflowers*

Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art, *Vincent van Gogh*, 25  
March-19 April 1936, no. 68, *Van Gogh, Painter of Sunflowers*

San Francisco, California Palace of the Legion of Honor,  
*Vincent van Gogh*, 28 April-24 May 1936, no. 68, *Van Gogh,  
Painter of Sunflowers*

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Vincent van Gogh*,  
14 September-1 December 1945, *Portret van Van Gogh*

Basel, Kunstmuseum Basel, *Ausstellung Paul Gauguin zum 100.  
Geburtsjahr*, 26 November 1949-29 January 1950, no. 22,  
*Vincent van Gogh Sonnenblumen malend*

Lausanne, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, *Gauguin:  
exposition du centenaire*, 16 February-16 April 1950, no. 2,  
*Vincent van Gogh peignant des tournesols*

Enschede, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, *Vincent van Gogh*, 20  
February-16 March 1952, no. 79, *portret van vincent door  
gauguin*

Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, *Vincent van Gogh*, 22 March-4  
May 1952, no. 80, *portret van vincent door gauguin*

Antwerp, Zaal Comité voor Artistieke Werking, *Vincent van  
Gogh*, 7 May-19 June 1955, no. 8, *Portret van Vincent van Gogh*

Edinburgh, Royal Scottish Academy, *Paul Gauguin : paintings,  
sculpture and engravings*, 30 September-26 October 1955, no.  
26, *Van Gogh painting Sunflowers*

Palm Beach (Florida), Society of the Four Arts, *Paul Gauguin  
1848-1903*, 4 February-4 March 1956, no. 11, *Van Gogh painting  
Sunflowers*

Coral Gables, Lowe Gallery of the University of Miami, *Paul  
Gauguin, 1848-1903*, 8-28 March 1956, no. 9, *Van Gogh painting  
Sunflowers*

New York, Wildenstein & Company, *Loan exhibition, Gauguin: for the benefit of the Citizen's Committee for Children of New York City*, 5 April-5 May 1956, no. 11, *Van Gogh painting Sunflowers*

Mons, Museum voor Schoone Kunsten, *Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). Son art et ses amis*, 22 March-5 May 1958, no. 90, *portrait de vincent*

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Collectie Theo van Gogh*, 29 January-29 February 1960, no. 48, *Portret van Vincent, de zonnebloemen schilderend*

Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum, *Collectie Theo van Gogh*, 12 March-29 May 1960, no. 48, *Portret van Vincent, de zonnebloemen schilderend*

London, Marlborough Fine Art, *Van Gogh Selfportraits*, October 1960, *Portrait of Vincent van Gogh*

Paris, Institut Néerlandais, *Les amis de Van Gogh*, 9 November-17 December 1960, no. 41, *Portrait de Vincent, peignant des tournesols*

Humblebaek, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, *Stedelijk Museum besøger Louisiana*, 28 October-3 December 1961, no. 39

Stockholm, Moderna Museet, *Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam besöker Moderna Museet, Stockholm*, 26 December 1961-28 January 1962, no. 36, *Portätt av Vincent*

Hamburg, Hamburger Kunstverein, *Wegbereiter der modernen Malerei. Cézanne, Gauguin, van Gogh, Seurat*, 4 May-14 July 1963, no. 43, *Vincent van Gogh, Sonnenblumen malend*

London, Tate Gallery, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven group*, 7 January-13 February 1966, no. 15, *Van Gogh Painting Sunflowers*



Zurich, Kunsthaus Zürich, *Pont-Aven : Gauguin und sein Kreis in der Bretagne*, 5 March-11 April 1966, no. 14, *Van Gogh peignant des Tourne-sols*

Amsterdam, Museum Fodor, October-December 1969

Munich, Haus der Kunst, *Europäischer Expressionismus*, 7 March-10 May 1970, no. 4, *Bildnis Vincent van Gogh mit Sonnenblume*

Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, *l'Expressionnisme Européen*, 26 May-27 July 1970, no. 4, *Portrait de Van Gogh aux tournesols*

Cincinnati Art Museum, *The early work of Paul Gauguin : genesis of an artist*, 18 March-26 April 1971, no. 17, *Van Gogh Painting Sunflowers*

Paris, Orangerie des Tuileries, *Vincent van Gogh. Collection du Musée National Vincent van Gogh à Amsterdam*, 21 December 1971-10 April 1972, no. 110, *Portrait de Vincent, peignant des tournesols*

Paris, Institut Néerlandais, *Oeuvres écrites de Gauguin et Van Gogh*, 14 May-29 June 1975, no. 119, *Van Gogh peignant des tournesols*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Van Gogh en Gauguin. Het atelier van het zuiden*, 9 February-2 June 2002, no. 46, *De zonnebloemenschilder (Le peintre de tournesols)*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *De keuze van Vincent. Van Goghs Musée imaginaire*, 14 February-15 June 2003, no. 173, *Portret van Van Gogh zonnebloemen schilderend*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Van Goghs brieven. De kunstenaar aan het woord*, 9 October 2009-3 January 2010

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Van Gogh aan het werk*, 1 May 2013-13 January 2014, *Vincent van Gogh zonnebloemen schilderend*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *De waanzin nabij. Van Gogh en zijn ziekte*, 15 July-25 September 2016, no. 4, *Vincent van Gogh zonnebloemen schilderend*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Van Gogh en de Zonnebloemen*, 21 June-1 September 2019, no. 2.12, *Vincent van Gogh zonnebloemen schilderend*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *In the Picture. Kunstenaarsportretten*, 21 February-30 August 2020, *Vincent van Gogh zonnebloemen schilderend*



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Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers

- Paul Gauguin, 'Natures mortes', *Essais d'Art Libre* 4 (January 1894), pp. 273–275; TS 1102
- Paul Gauguin, *Diverses choses*, manuscript from 1896–1898, in the collection of the Louvre Cabinet des dessins, Paris RF 7259, pp. 261–262
- Paul Gauguin, *Avant et après*, manuscript from 1903, p. 13, in Emile Gauguin (ed.), *Gauguin's Intimate Journals*, 1936, p. 33; BVG02544
- George-Daniel de Monfreid, 'Sur Paul Gauguin', *L'Ermitage* (December 1903), p. 270
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- Rouvile, 'De retrospectieve Fransche tentoonstelling te Amsterdam', *Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad* (11 August 1926), p. 2
- Hans Ludwig Cohn Jaffé and Werner Munsterberger, *Vincent van Gogh: een documentaire tentoonstelling*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Stedelijk Museum) 1945, p. 4; BVG05331
- Äke Meyerson, 'Van Gogh and the School of Pont-Aven', *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 15 (1946), p. 139; TS 536 c

- John Rewald, *Gauguin*, Paris 1949, p. 15; T01280
- Lee van Dovski, *Paul Gauguin oder die Flucht vor der Zivilisation*, Bern 1950, no. 109, p. 342; BVG00079
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- René Huyghe, *Le carnet de Paul Gauguin*, Paris 1952, pp. 53, 99, 103; T01334 I
- Charles Estienne, *Gauguin*, Geneva 1953, p. 45; T01313
- Douglas Cooper and Philip James, *Gauguin: An Exhibition of Paintings, Engravings and Sculpture*, exh. cat., London (Tate Gallery) 1955, no. 26, p. 23; BVG01634
- Lawrence Hanson and Elisabeth Hanson, *The Noble Savage: A Life of Paul Gauguin*, London 1955, pp. 156-157; T01312
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- Abraham Marie Hammacher, *Exposition les amis de van Gogh: catalogue*, exh. cat., Paris (Institut Néerlandais) 1960, no. 41, p. 33; BVG06079
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- Henri Perruchot, *Gauguin*, Paris 1961, p. 131; T01285
- Hans Platte, *Wegbereiter der modernen Malerei: Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Seurat*, exh. cat., Hamburg (Hamburger Kunstverein) 1963, no. 43, s.p.; BVW00053

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## Letters

### Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers

- Paul Gauguin, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 20 December 1888, in Douglas Cooper (ed.), *Paul Gauguin: 45 lettres à Vincent, Théo et Jo van Gogh: collection Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam, The Hague & Lausanne 1983*, no. 12, pp. 87-89; BVG04939
- Theo van Gogh, letter to Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Paris, 3 or 4 January 1889. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), b2023V1982
- Paul Gauguin, letter to Vincent van Gogh, between 8 and 16 January 1889, in Douglas Cooper (ed.), *Paul Gauguin: 45 lettres à Vincent, Théo et Jo van Gogh: collection Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam, 1983*, no. 34, pp. 251-255; BVG04939
- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, 10 September 1889, [↗ 801](#)

# Figures



**Fig. 1**

Paul Gauguin, *Blue Trees. Your Turn Will Come, My Beauty!*, 1888, oil on canvas, 92 × 73 cm, Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen. Photo: Anders Sune Berg



**Fig. 2**

Paul Gauguin, *Landscape of Brittany*, 1888, oil on canvas, 92 × 73 cm, National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo. Photo: NMWA/ DNPartcom



**Fig. 3**

Vincent van Gogh, *Van Gogh's Chair*, 1888, oil on canvas, 93 × 73.5 cm, The National Gallery, London. Bought, Courtauld Fund, 1924. Photo: © The National Gallery, London



Fig. 4

Vincent van Gogh, *The Bedroom*, 1888, oil on canvas, 72.4 × 91.3 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



Fig. 5

Vincent van Gogh, *Still Life (Nature morte)*, 1888, oil on canvas, 55 × 46 cm, The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia



**Fig. 6**

Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin*, 1888, oil on canvas, 61.5 × 50.3 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, MA. Bequest from the Collection of Maurice Wertheim, Class of 1906. Photo: © President and Fellows of Harvard College

**Fig. 7**

Vincent van Gogh, *The Sunflowers*, 1888, oil on canvas, 92.1 × 73 cm, The National Gallery, London. Bought, Courtauld Fund, 1924. Photo: © The National Gallery, London

**Fig. 8**

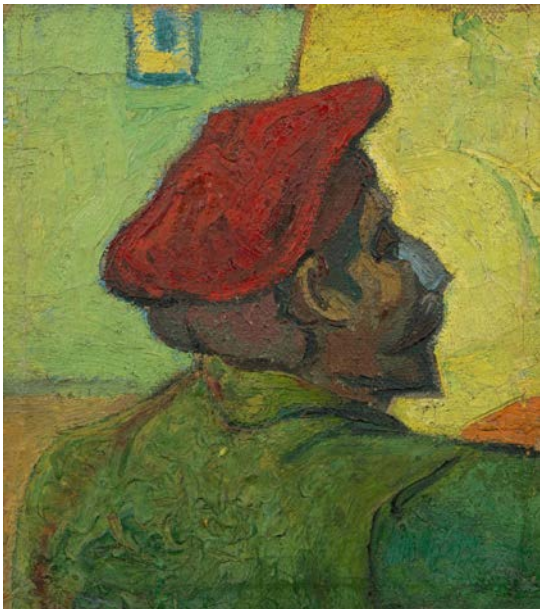
Paul Gauguin, *Study for Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers*, from the 'Carnet Huyghe', 1888, black chalk on paper, 10.5 × 17 cm. Published in and reproduced from René Huyghe's facsimile *Le Carnet de Paul Gauguin*, 1952





**Fig. 9**

Paul Gauguin, *Studies for Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers*, from the 'Carnet Huyghe', 1888, black chalk on paper, 17 × 10.5 cm. Published in and reproduced from René Huyghe's facsimile *Le Carnet de Paul Gauguin*, 1952



**Fig. 10**

Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of Gauguin*, 1888, oil on canvas, 38.2 × 33.8 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



**Fig. 11**

Detail of *Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers* under raking light



**Fig. 12**

Odilon Redon, *There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower*, plate 2 of 8 from 'Les Origines', 1883, lithograph, 22.4 × 17.6 cm, Art Institute of Chicago



**Fig. 13**

Paul Gauguin, *Sunflowers in a Chair*, 190, oil on canvas, 73 × 92.3 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

## Footnotes

- 01 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 1 December 1888 [↗ \[723\]](#): 'Il [Gauguin] a en train un portrait de moi que je ne compte pas dans ses entreprises sans issue.'
- 02 Paul Gauguin, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 20 December 1888, in Douglas Cooper (ed.), *Paul Gauguin: 45 lettres à Vincent, Théo et Jo van Gogh: collection Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam, The Hague & Lausanne 1983*, no. 12: 'I recently made a portrait of your brother as the subject of a picture (the painter of sunflowers) no. 30 canvas.' ('J'ai fait dernièrement un portrait de votre frère comme motif de tableau (le peintre de tournesols) toile de 30.')
- 03 Another work by Gauguin that comes close to this is *Cottages on Mount Sainte-Marguerite* (1888, private collection).
- 04 Daniel Wildenstein, Sylvie Crussard and Martine Heudron, *Gauguin: premier itinéraire d'un sauvage: catalogue de l'œuvre peint (1873-1888)*, 2 vols., Milan 2001, vol. 2, no. 326.
- 05 Van Gogh had sent this work to Gauguin in Pont-Aven at the beginning of October 1888, in exchange for his *Self-Portrait with Portrait of Emile Bernard (Les Misérables)*. See Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 4 or 5 October 1888 [↗ \[697\]](#).
- 06 Paul Gauguin, 'Natures mortes', *Essais d'art libre* 4 (January 1894), p. 273: 'des fleurs de soleil, aux yeux pourpres'.
- 07 In exchange for his painting, Gauguin received *Sunflowers* (1887, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and *Sunflowers* (1887, Kunstmuseum Bern). This exchange took place towards the end of 1887.
- 08 About an impression on Gauguin: Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 29 October 1888 [↗ \[715\]](#): 'I don't yet know what Gauguin thinks about my decoration in general; I only know that there are some studies that he really does like, namely, the Sower, the Sunflowers, the Bedroom.' ('Ce que pense Gauguin de ma décoration en général je ne le sais pas encore, je sais seulement qu'il y a déjà quelques études qu'il aime réellement, ainsi le semeur, les tournesols, la chambre à coucher.') About the flower: Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 22 January 1889 [↗ \[741\]](#): 'cà - ... c'est ... la fleur'.
- 09 Paul Gauguin, letter to Vincent van Gogh, between 8 and 16 January 1889 [↗ \[734\]](#): 'vos tournesols sur fond jaune que je considère comme une page parfaite d'un style essentiellement Vincent.'
- 10 Paul Gauguin, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 20 December 1888, in Cooper 1983, no. 12. See n. 2 above.
- 11 Ibid.: 'Au point de vue géographique il n'est peut-être pas très ressemblant mais il y a je crois quelque chose d'intime de lui'.
- 12 See the 'Carnet Huyghe', p. 225, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. The 'Carnet Huyghe' is the sketchbook that Paul Gauguin had with him when he was staying with Van Gogh in Arles. It was published by René Huyghe in 1952 in facsimile under the title *Le Carnet de Paul Gauguin*. The pages of the sketchbook are numbered. The studies for the facial features and the composition as a whole are to be found on p. 40 and p. 70, respectively.

- 13 With thanks to René Boitelle, paintings conservator Van Gogh Museum, 19 July 2021.
- 14 H. Travers Newton Jr, 'Observations on Gauguin's Painting Techniques and Materials', in Cornelia Peres, Michael Hoyle and Louis van Tilborgh (eds.), *A Closer Look: Technical and Art Historical Studies on Works by Van Gogh and Gauguin*, Zwolle 1991, p. 106.
- 15 Kristin Hoermann Lister, Cornelia Peres and Inge Fiedler, 'Tracing an Interaction: Supporting Evidence, Experimental Grounds', in Douglas W. Druick, Britt Salvesen and Peter Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South*, exh. cat., Chicago (Art Institute of Chicago) / Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), New York 2001, pp. 358-59 (Table 2: Support and Ground analysis).
- 16 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 3 November 1888 [↗ \[717\]](#).
- 17 Although there is still no complete picture of the situation, Carol Christensen's ongoing research suggests that Gauguin painted more frequently on self-made grounds only from 1887 on, although even before then he must have preferred thin – albeit commercially produced – grounds that left the texture of the canvas sufficiently visible beneath the paint layers. See Carol Christensen, 'The Painting Materials and Technique of Paul Gauguin', *Conservation Research (Studies in the History of Art)* 41, Monograph Series II, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (1993), pp. 63-103.
- 18 Travers Newton, pp. 106-7.
- 19 With thanks to René Boitelle, paintings conservator Van Gogh Museum, 19 July 2021.
- 20 Once the burlap was used up, Van Gogh never again painted on such a support.
- 21 Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński and H. Travers Newton Jr., *Technique and Meaning in the Paintings of Paul Gauguin*, Cambridge 2000, p. 117.
- 22 With thanks to René Boitelle, paintings conservator Van Gogh Museum, 19 July 2021.
- 23 Paul Gauguin to Emile Bernard, 3rd or 4th week of November 1888, in Victor Merlhès (ed.), *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin: documents, témoignages: tome premier, 1873-1888*, Paris 1984, no. 182: 'Au point de vue de la couleur il voit les hasards de la pâte comme chez Monticelli et moi je déteste le tripotage de la facture etc.'
- 24 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 19 November 1888 [↗ \[721\]](#): 'Gauguin, in spite of himself and in spite of me, has proved to me a little that it was time for me to vary things a bit – I'm beginning to compose from memory, and all my studies will still be useful to me for that work, as they remind me of former things I've seen.' ('Gauguin malgré lui et malgré moi m'a un peu démontré qu'il était temps que je varie un peu – je commence à composer de tête et pour ce travail-là toutes mes études me seront toujours utiles lorsqu'elles me rappelleront d'anciennes chûses vues.')
- 25 Paul Gauguin, letter to Emile Bernard, 3rd or 4th week of November 1888, in Merlhès 1984, no. 182: 'In Arles I feel completely alienated, I find everything so small, shabby, the landscape and the people. Vincent and I are seldom in agreement in general, especially with regard to painting.' ('Je suis à Arles tout dépaysé, tellement je trouve tout petit, mesquin, le paysage et les gens. Vincent et moi nous sommes bien peu d'accord en général, surtout en peinture.')

- 26 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 1 December 1888 [↗ \[723\]](#): ‘Only I’ve spoiled that thing I did of the garden at Nuenen and I feel that habit is also necessary for works of the imagination. But I’ve done the portraits of *an entire family*, the family of the postman whose head I did before – the man, his wife, the baby, the young boy and the 16-year-old son, all characters and very French, although they have a Russian look. No. 15 canvases. You can sense how in my element that makes me feel.’ (‘Seulement j’ai raté cette chose que j’ai faite du jardin à Nunen et je sens que pour les travaux d’imagination il faut aussi l’habitude. Mais j’ai fait les portraits de *toute une famille*, celle du facteur dont j’ai déjà précédemment fait la tête – l’homme, la femme, le bébé, le jeune garçon et le fils de 16 ans, tous des types et bien français quoique cela aie l’air d’être des russes. Toiles de 15. – Cela tu sens combien je me sens dans mon élément.’)
- 27 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 17 or 18 December 1888 [↗ \[726\]](#): ‘Gauguin and I talk a lot about Delacroix, Rembrandt &c. The discussion is *excessively electric*. We sometimes emerge from it with tired minds, like an electric battery after it’s run down.’ (‘Gauguin et moi causons beaucoup de Delacroix, Rembrandt &c. La discussion est d’une *électricité excessive*. nous en sortons parfois la tête fatiguée comme une batterie électrique après la décharge.’)
- 28 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 10 September 1889 [↗ \[801\]](#): ‘As tu vu ce portrait qu’il avait fait de moi peignant des tournesols. Ma figure s’est après tout bien éclairée depuis mais c’était bien moi, extrêmement fatigué et chargé d’électricité comme j’étais alors.’
- 29 Paul Gauguin, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 20 December 1888, in Cooper 1983, no. 12. See n. 12.
- 30 Dario Gamboni, *Paul Gauguin: The Mysterious Centre of Thought*, London 2014, p. 165.
- 31 Druick, Salvesen and Zegers 2001, p. 240.
- 32 Ibid., p. 242.
- 33 Paul Gauguin, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 20 December 1888, in Cooper 1983, no. 12; Paul Gauguin, letter to Vincent van Gogh, between 8 and 16 January 1889 [↗ \[734\]](#). See n. 10.
- 34 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 17 January 1889 [↗ \[736\]](#): ‘I find it quite odd that he’s claiming a painting of sunflowers from me, offering me in exchange I suppose, or as a gift, a few studies that he left here. [...] But for the moment I’m keeping my canvases here, and I’m categorically keeping those sunflowers of mine. He already has two of them, let that be enough for him.’ (‘Je trouve assez étrange qu’il me réclame un tableau de tournesols en m’offrant en échange je suppose ou comme cadeau quelques études qu’il a laissé ici. [...] Mais pour le moment je garde mes toiles ici et catégoriquement je garde moi mes tournesols en question. Il en a déjà deux, que cela lui suffise.’)
- 35 Theo van Gogh, letter to Jo van Gogh-Bonger, 3–4 January 1889, in Leo Jansen, Jan Robert and Han van Crimpen (eds.), *Brief Happiness: The Correspondence of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bonger*, Amsterdam & Zwolle 1999, no. 13: ‘Gauguin heeft in de laatste dagen dat hij met Vincent was zijn portret geschilderd & heeft het mij cadeau gemaakt. Het is een groot kunstwerk & het beste portret wat innerlijke gelijkenis aangaat wat van hem gemaakt is.’
- 36 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 10 September 1889 [↗ \[801\]](#). See n. 29.

- 37 Paul Gauguin, 'Natures mortes', *Essais d'art libre* 4 (January 1894); Paul Gauguin, 'Diverses choses', manuscript from 1896-98, in the collection of the Louvre Cabinet des dessins, Paris, RF 7259; Paul Gauguin, 'Avant et après', manuscript from 1903, p. 13, in Emile Gauguin (ed.), *Gauguin's Intimate Journals*, New York 1936.
- 38 Gauguin 1903, pp. 19-20: 'J'eus l'idée de faire son portrait en train de peindre la nature morte aimait tant des Tournesols. Et le portrait terminé il me dit: "C'est bien moi, mais moi devenu fou".'
- 39 Paul Gauguin, 'Natures mortes', *Essais d'art libre* 4 (January 1894), pp. 273-75: 'Et moi ... je fis lui, - Vincent - qui tracait avec son pinceau jaune, sur le mur violet soudain: Je suis Saint-Esprit, ... Sain d'Esprit. Décidément, cet homme était Fou.' Gauguin jotted down the words 'Sain d'esprit, Saint esprit' (in the opposite order) in the sketchbook he had with him in Arles. See Druick, Salvesen and Zegers 2001, pp. 234-35.