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Choosing Vincent

The Van Gogh Museum houses the largest collection of paintings, drawings, prints and letters by Vincent van Gogh. It also keeps the collection of art by contemporaries that Vincent assembled together with his beloved brother Theo. Thanks to the brothers' family, the entire collection stayed together, but things could have turned out differently. After Theo's death just six months after Vincent's demise, his young widow Jo van Gogh-Bonger faced an important decision: what was she to do with the brothers' estate?

This exhibition marks the 50th anniversary of the Van Gogh Museum.

The driving force behind the founding of the museum was engineer Vincent van Gogh, the son of Theo and Jo, who was named after his uncle.

Vincent painted the Almond Blossom as a gift for his newborn nephew. And so this painting connects Vincent, Theo, Jo and engineer Vincent. The choices they made were all-important for the collection – this is their story.

Follow the timeline on the floor and walls to discover how Vincent and Theo's collection found its way to the Van Gogh Museum via Jo and engineer Vincent.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

That Vincent van Gogh would become an artist was hardly imaginable in his youth. Vincent grew up in the southern province of Brabant, in a Protestant minister's family.

At sixteen, he went to work as a junior clerk in the Goupil & Cie art gallery in The Hague.

He learned a great deal about art there and developed his own taste. He collected prints of works by artists he admired. This time also marks the beginning of an intense correspondence between Vincent and his brother Theo. The two had a close relationship, which proved indestructible. After failing at numerous jobs,

Vincent decided to become an artist spurred on by Theo. Finally, at the age of 27 he found his true calling.



Did you know?

This painting shows a village in Brabant, in the south of the Netherlands. But it was not made on location: Vincent painted the work in the South of France, 1,000 kilometres away. Completely from memory. He was thinking of happy times from his childhood, when he lived in Brabant.



Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890)

Still Life with Bible, 1885

Vincent painted this still life soon after the sudden death of his father Theodorus. His father's hefty Bible and his own modern French novel symbolise their different views on life.

Did you know?

Nowadays, we use our smartphones to take photographs, and we can share them straight away.

It was a lot different in Vincent's time. If you wanted to give someone a photograph of yourself, you first had to visit a photographer.



Did you know?

When Vincent and his little brother Cor went on a long walk together, they drew a map of their wanderings. They sent the map to Theo, who lived in Paris, so that he could see where his brothers in the Netherlands had been.



Anna Cornelia van Gogh-Carbentus (1819 - 1907)

Still Life of Basket of Flowers, 1844

Vincent's mother Anna instilled in her children a love of nature and of drawing. This is one of her surviving flower still lifes.



Did you know?

These photographs were taken in the same year: 1873. Vincent (left) was about to turn twenty, Theo (right) was fifteen. Theo's photograph wasn't discovered for many years. When the portrait was found, people thought that it showed a young Vincent. Hardly surprising, as Vincent and Theo looked very alike.

The Hague 1869

Theo stays with his older brother Vincent in The Hague. At the time, they are fifteen and nineteen years old. During a long walk to the windmill at Rijswijk, they agree to stay friends for life.



Jules Dupré (1811 - 1889)

Autumn, c. 1865

The vast amount of art Vincent saw while working in the art trade was the seedbed of his later artistry.

Vincent collected inexpensive prints and illustrations from magazines. He pinned them to the wall for inspiration. He constantly exchanged prints with Theo. In this way, the brothers felt connected, all the while learning a great deal about art.

Would you like to know more about these prints? Then read and have a look at the letter Vincent wrote to Theo on 6 July 1875 (letter 37) at

www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let037/letter.html

What would you do?

In December 1875, Vincent is conflicted. He now works in Paris at one of the Goupil & Cie's art galleries, and Christmas is the busiest time of the year. Christmas is the busiest time of the year at Goupil & Cie, the art dealer in Paris where he works. There's no chance of getting time off, but he is keen to travel to Brabant to celebrate Christmas with his family.

What would you do if you were Vincent? Stay or go home?

It would probably have been sensible for Vincent to have stayed at work. But he decides to go home without permission. When he returns to work, he is dismissed.

Now unemployed, Vincent travels back to the Netherlands and moves back in with his parents. Shortly after his return, he makes a drawing of the vicarage where they live.

Follow the line on the floor and walls to find out what happens to Vincent next.

1876-1880

Vincent finds his way and ...

tries being an assistant teacher

is a bookshop clerk for a while

takes Greek and Latin lessons as he prepares to study theology

briefly trains to become an evangelist

works as a lay preacher

in the summer of 1880, decides to become an artist

Theo van Gogh (1857-1891)

Theo van Gogh supported his brother unconditionally, both personally and financially. In return for a monthly allowance, Vincent sent his work to him. Theo started working at the same art gallery as Vincent when he was fifteen and by 1881 he had made it to branch manager of one of Goupil & Cie's galleries in Paris. Here he traded the work of both established names and emerging, modern artists. He himself also collected art and when Vincent came to live with him in 1886, they began doing this together. Strongly influenced by the contemporary art he saw in Paris, Vincent underwent a major artistic development. Theo began to believe ever more in the potential of Vincent's work. His greatest wish was that his brother would gain recognition.



Théophile de Bock (1851 - 1904)

Lake with a Boat, c. 1880

Theo knew the artist Théophile de Bock personally; perhaps this was why he might have been able to acquire this painting for a song. It was one of the first purchases for his own collection.



Edouard Manet (1832 - 1883)

The Rabbit, 1866

Edouard Manet was already so well-known in Theo's time that a painting by him was simply too expensive. Prints, however, were quite affordable and he could add them to his collection.



Did you know?

Theo didn't only sell art, he also collected it together with Vincent. Paintings, prints and drawings by artists whom they admired. Or by artists in their circle of friends. John Russell for example, an Australian artist. He painted this portrait of Vincent.

Just imagine ...

What if Theo had set up his own business? He often toyed with the idea, and nearly went for it. As an independent art dealer, would he have been able to financially support Vincent?



Émile Bernard (1868 - 1941)

Breton Woman with a Parasol, 1888

Vincent regularly exchanged his own work with that of artist friends, such as Émile Bernard. In this way, he too was able to contribute concretely to the expansion of the collection.

What would you do?

It is winter 1887, and Vincent and Theo have been living together in Paris for about a year. Theo is on the verge of despair. Vincent can be very difficult to live with and Theo is unsure whether he still wants to share an apartment with his brother. But what will become of Vincent if Theo asks him to leave?

What would you do if you were Theo?
Throw Vincent out or try to improve the situation?

Theo is close to asking Vincent to move out, but he ultimately talks things through with his brother. As a result, they become even closer and Theo continues to support his brother as an artist. As a token of his appreciation, Vincent dedicates the still life Quinces, Lemons, Pears and Grapes to his brother.



Did you know?

'A mon frère Theo' is written on this painting. It's French for 'To my brother Theo'. But Theo was not just Vincent's brother, he was also his best friend. Vincent made this still life for Theo because he was always there for him.



Hendrik Vrijdag (1763 - 1832)

Theo van Gogh's Cabinet, c. 1790-1800

Theo kept prints and drawings in this cabinet, and later Vincent's letters were stored in it as well. It had been made by his great-grandfather and occupied a prominent place in Theo's home.

Jo van Gogh-Bonger (1862-1925)

In April 1889, Jo Bonger married her great love Theo. Her happiness was short-lived for Theo died less than two years later. Jo was left devastated with their infant son and an apartment full of works of art. She decided to continue Theo's dream. She arranged for the works to be exhibited and strategically sold to collectors and art dealers worldwide. She also oversaw the publication in 1914 of the first volume of Vincent's letters to Theo. Thanks to Jo's years of tireless dedication and efforts, Vincent's work gained recognition. At the same time, she was keenly aware of what she did not want to sell and kept much of the collection together.

In the months between their engagement and marriage, Theo and Jo sent each other many letters and several photographs. A recurring topic was Theo's search for the perfect apartment and how they would furnish it.



Did you know?

Theo sent this piece of fabric to Jo in Amsterdam. He wanted to show her what he thought would be nice curtains for their new home in Paris. They were planning on moving there after they got married. If you look closely, you'll see a bird in the design.

31 January 1890

Vincent, Jo and Theo's son, is born.

29 July 1890

Jo's brother-in-law Vincent dies, with Theo at his side.

What would you do?

After Theo's death in 1891, Jo faces a dilemma. She has to decide what to do with the hundreds of works by Vincent, and the rest of the estate. It was Theo's dream to promote Vincent's work, but can that also become her purpose? What would you do if you were Jo? Part with Vincent's works or pursue Theo's dream?

The loss of Theo crushes Jo, as she describes in her diary. And yet in this difficult period, she decides to follow in Theo's footsteps. She resolves to do all she can to promote Vincent's work. Continue on to discover how she approaches this.



Meijer de Haan (1852 - 1895)

Portrait of Theo van Gogh, 1889

Theo's friend, the artist Meijer de Haan, drew him while writing a letter to his beloved Jo. Theo sent the drawing along with the letter.



Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890)

Fountain in the Garden of the Asylum, 1889

According to Jo, this was Theo's favourite drawing by Vincent. She therefore never wanted to sell it. She did submit *Fountain in the Garden of the Asylum* for an exhibition soon after Theo's death



Did you know?

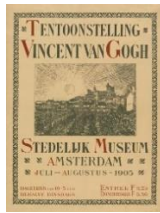
Some things you never want to part with. It was the same for Jo. She never wanted to sell some of Vincent's paintings, like *The Harvest*. The work hung above the piano in the home where she lived with Theo, shortly after they got married.



Foto: Bernard Eilers, 1910-1911

Jo, together with young Vincent and her second husband Johan Cohen Gosschalk, in the dining room of their house in Amsterdam, surrounded by artworks from the collection.

Jo understood just how important it was for as many people as possible to see and appreciate Vincent's work. She sold nearly 200 of his paintings and more than 50 drawings.



1905

1905 Jo organised the largest Van Gogh exhibition ever, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam

Soon after Vincent's death, Theo said he wanted to compile his beautiful letters. Jo took on this enormous task. *Letters to his Brother* was published in 1914.

Just imagine ...

What if Jo had never published the letters because she considered them too personal? Would Vincent have become as famous if we knew less about his struggles, dreams and ideas?

Engineer Vincent van Gogh (1890-1978)

From an early age, Jo and Theo's son Vincent grew up among works of art by his increasingly famous uncle and namesake. When he came of age at 21, he gained control of his half of the inheritance, which until then had been administered by his mother. Following in his parents' footsteps was anything but a given. He longed for a life of his own, separate from art. He chose to study mechanical engineering, earning him the title 'engineer.' After 1945, he became more proactive as guardian of the collection. He founded the Vincent van Gogh Foundation to accommodate the entire estate.

This is how the world's largest collection of Van Gogh's works was preserved and kept together.

What would you do?

Vincent grows up knowing that he will gain control of his share of his father's estate when he turns 21. The major question is what he will do with this responsibility.

He would love to choose his own path, but he cannot just abandon the collection. What would you do if you were Vincent?

Choose your own path or devote yourself to the collection?

At the age of seventeen, Vincent decides to follow his heart and study mechanical engineering. He builds a successful career, but never loses sight of the collection. Continue on to find out more.



Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890)

Seascape near Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, 1888

This seascape hung in Vincent's student room in Delft. It was one of his favourite works.

1930

Engineer Vincent stops selling his uncle's works in the late 1920s. He gives a large part of the collection on indefinite loan to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.



Interior of the underground vault in the dunes near Castricum

During the Second World War, almost the entire collection was safely housed in a bunker in the dunes near Castricum.

Just imagine ...

What if engineer Vincent had not been able to find a safe place for the collection during World War II? Just imagine if Vincent's work had been lost in a bombing...

Engineer Vincent had distinct ideas about how his uncle's work could be shown in the best way possible in the museum. Artificial light or daylight? Which colour on the wall? What type of frame around the painting? All of these choices impact the presentation of an artwork.

Try for yourself. Select the frame, wall colour and light intensity that you think best suits Field with Irises near Arles and Self-Portrait with Felt Hat.

Engineer Vincent thought that grey walls and natural light would work best. He also favoured simple frames.



Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890)

Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen, 1884-1885

Engineer Vincent bought this painting from his cousin in 1958 and transferred it to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation. Artist Vincent had painted it in 1884 for his mother when she had broken her leg. It is therefore a true family heirloom.

A new museum

Engineer Vincent reached an agreement with the Dutch State to make the collection permanently accessible to everyone in a new museum. In 1960 he established the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and transferred the estate to it two years later. This was matched by the government's commitment to build a museum. In addition to family members, the Vincent van Gogh Foundation's board always includes a representative of the Dutch State. The grand opening of the Van Gogh Museum took place on 2 June 1973. At the age of 83, Vincent's dearest wish had been fulfilled.

Did you know?

Official openings are often attended by famous and important people. The Van Gogh Museum was opened in 1973 by Queen Juliana, the grandmother of King Willem-Alexander.

There has always been a special connection between the family and the collection. To this day, descendants of engineer Vincent are closely involved with the museum.