

Gallery texts second floor permanent collection Van Gogh Museum

Inhoud

Van Gogh as a Draughtsman	1
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.'	2
Showcase: Drawing Material.....	2
Sketchbooks	2
Van Gogh at work.....	2
Perspective Frame.....	2
Letter sketch of a perspective frame in a letter to Theo van Gogh	2
Discolouration	3
Painting: Portrait of Etienne-Lucien Martin, 1887	3
Detail of the edge of Portrait of Etienne-Lucien Martin	3
Under the Microscope.....	3
Grains of sand!	3
Thick clumps.....	3
Colour Effects	3
Colour wheel from Charles Blanc's <i>Grammaire des Arts du Dessin</i> , Paris 1870	4
Painting: Basket of Apples, 1885.....	4
Painting: Apollo Slays Python, 1850.....	4
Apples, 1887.....	4
Painting: Quinces, Lemons, Pears and Grapes, 1887	4
Breton Girl Spinning, 1889	4
Woodwork: Bretons Dance, 1893-1894.....	5
Painting: Red Pines, 1894-1895.....	5
Painting: Farm in Brittany, c. 1890.....	5
Painting: Self-Portrait with Portrait of Bernard ('Les misérables'), 1888.....	5
Painting: Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers.....	5
Painting: Still Life with a Profile of Mimi, 1889	5
Illness and ear.....	6

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.

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.

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.

Letter sketch of a perspective frame in a letter to Theo van Gogh

The Hague, 5 August 1882

Vincent van Gogh

In this letter sketch Van Gogh showed his brother how he used his perspective frame. He had gone to the beach to make a seascape, but was dissatisfied with the tool: 'This is why I'm having a new and, I hope, better perspective frame made, which will stand firmly on two legs in uneven ground like the dunes.'

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.

Painting: Portrait of Etienne-Lucien Martin, 1887

Vincent van Gogh

Research has revealed that the colours in this portrait of the Parisian restaurant owner Martin were much more vivid at first. Van Gogh decided at some point to tone them down, whereby the painting gained a calmer quality. The originally purple coat and hat have turned a soft greyish-blue due to the fading of the red pigment (cochineal lake), which was mixed with blue and white. This further dulled the colours of the painting, which thus unintentionally looks even more subdued than Van Gogh intended.

Detail of the edge of Portrait of Etienne-Lucien Martin

The edges of this painting, being under the frame, have been protected from light, so that the original colours there have been fairly well preserved. This shows that the man's jacket was once much purpler; a colour that must have made a fine contrast with the yellowish-orange colour of his face.

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.

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.'

Colour wheel from Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin*, Paris 1870

In the book by Charles Blanc, Van Gogh read about the theory of complementary colours. In the colour wheel are the primary colours – red, yellow, and blue – with their secondary colours. To create a complementary contrast, a primary colour is set opposite its secondary colour (a mixture of the other two primary colours): for instance, red opposite green, and blue opposite orange. When placed side by side, these colours reinforce each other.

Painting: Basket of Apples, 1885

Vincent van Gogh

In Nuenen Van Gogh experimented with colour contrasts. He painted still lifes in which he tried out different colour combinations. However, instead of placing them next to one another, Van Gogh mixed the complementary colours into shades of brownish-grey, as in this still life. He did paint contrasting colour accents over the dry paint layer. Even though Van Gogh systematically applied colour theory, he did not yet achieve any strong and bright colour effects.

Painting: Apollo Slays Python, 1850

Eugène Delacroix

This is a preliminary study by Eugène Delacroix for his ceiling painting in the Louvre. Van Gogh was deeply impressed by the use of colour in that painting. The bright yellow and orange in the sky around Apollo contrast with the dark purple in which Python – and the smoke the monster puffs out – are painted. These complementary colours reinforce each other's power and significance.

Apples, 1887

Vincent van Gogh

Virtually all of the shades of blue and green in Van Gogh's palette are included in the background of this still life. Over them he applied contrasting yellow, orange, red, and pink strokes of paint. He used the same colour combinations for the apples in the foreground, but then in reverse: first the warm tones and then the green and blue accents. This is how he introduced unity in the picture.

Painting: Quinces, Lemons, Pears and Grapes, 1887

Vincent van Gogh

Instead of contrasting colours, here Van Gogh used mostly shades of the same colour, namely yellow. This creates what is called a 'tonal' effect. Van Gogh wanted to demonstrate that he was a true colourist, and that a tonal painting could also be colourful. He used the balls of wool in the display case to test out both tonal and contrasting colour combinations before beginning to paint. Van Gogh dedicated the work to his brother Theo: underneath the signature it says 'à mon frère Theo'.

Breton Girl Spinning, 1889

Paul Gauguin

In the winter of 1889 Gauguin wrote Van Gogh that he was decorating the dining room of the inn in Le Pouldu. Together with the artist Meijer de Haan, he painted the walls, doors, and even a window with Breton country motifs, and self-portraits. *Breton Girl Spinning*, painted on plaster, was one of these wall paintings. The angel floating above the shepherdess may be a reference to the omnipresent Catholicism in this region.

Woodwork: Bretons Dance, 1893-1894

Georges Lacombe

Lacombe depicted a traditional Breton dance on this huge piece of wood. Such dances were still regularly performed at the time. The dancers form a graceful chain against a coastline of decorative waves and aquatic plants. There is a certain childlike quality and naiveté about the scene, just as Lacombe intended. The head of the old man at the lower left, with his masterfully carved hair, imbues the work with something mysterious or mystical.

Painting: Red Pines, 1894-1895

Georges Lacombe

In the *Red Pines*, slender, brightly coloured tree trunks stand out against a bay. Lacombe painted a decorative coastline full of movement with sketchy and rhythmic strokes of paint. The clouds, waves and trees seem to dance on the canvas. Lacombe's use of intense colours garnered immediate praise when he exhibited the work at an important exhibition in Paris in 1896. The picture is in superb condition. Everything is still in exactly the same state as when Lacombe painted it.

Painting: Farm in Brittany, c. 1890

Paul Sérusier

Like other artists of the Pont-Aven School, Sérusier wanted to capture Brittany's pastoral simplicity. The undulating field of grass with a farmyard, and the clouds in the sky have been reduced to basics, creating the impression of a colourful patchwork quilt. To achieve this effect Sérusier used brightly coloured, flat forms demarcated by wavy lines. He was not interested in faithfully depicting the landscape, but rather in conveying its timelessness. It is the first painting by Sérusier to enter our collection. Together with Paul Gauguin, he was the leading member of the Pont-Aven artists' colony.

Painting: Self-Portrait with Portrait of Bernard ('Les misérables'), 1888

Paul Gauguin

While Van Gogh resided in Arles, Gauguin and Bernard worked together in Brittany. Van Gogh asked them to make portraits of one another in exchange for a work by him, but instead they each sent him a self-portrait. In the background Gauguin and Bernard did, however, include a likeness of the other. Van Gogh found Bernard's work 'as stylish as [a] real, real Manet' and Gauguin's 'more studied, taken further.' Laval also took part in the exchange. He sent Van Gogh a self-portrait, which Vincent described as 'very self-assured, very distinguished.'

Painting: Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers

Paul Gauguin

While staying with Van Gogh in Arles, Gauguin stimulated his friend to work from his imagination rather than from reality. This is what he himself did. Gauguin has here portrayed Van Gogh painting sunflowers. This was not based on reality since Van Gogh did not paint any sunflowers in this period. He thought his portrait was a fairly good resemblance, as he wrote: 'My face has lit up a lot since, but it was indeed me, extremely tired and charged with electricity as I was then.'

Painting: Still Life with a Profile of Mimi, 1889

Meijer de Haan

Meijer de Haan's style changed radically under Gauguin's influence. The artists worked together in the seaside town of Le Pouldu in 1889-1890. They stayed at Marie Henry's inn. Her young daughter Mimi is portrayed in this painting. The strongly cropped figure, the pronounced colours, and the

daring composition – with the table tipping forward – are typical of the experimental work of the group of artists around Gauguin, also called the Pont-Aven School.

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.