

# Van Gogh:

# Still Lifes

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# Tradition and Adaptation: The Reception of the Dutch Old Masters in Van Gogh's Still Lifes

Michael Philipp

Vincent van Gogh's letters provide detailed information about his intense artistic involvement with seventeenth-century Dutch painting. He wrote to his brother Theo not only about his visits to museums in London, Dordrecht, Amsterdam, Paris, and Antwerp<sup>1</sup> but also of having read *Les maîtres d'autrefois* (The Old Masters), Eugène Fromentin's standard work,<sup>2</sup> and seen photographic reproductions of old-master paintings such as Rembrandt's *Saskia as a Girl* (1633, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister).<sup>3</sup> Rembrandt and Frans Hals were the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century Van Gogh revered most. In October 1885, after a visit to the recently-opened Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, he wrote enthusiastically to his brother of "how necessary it is at this time to look at old Dutch paintings now and again!"<sup>4</sup> What interested him was less the subjects depicted than the manner of depiction, the artistic procedure itself. Thus he admired in Rembrandt and Hals as well as in Jacob van Ruisdael how they worked "*du premier coup*," on the first try, with a fast painting style and confident brushwork.

None of these masters had made a name with still life; Ruisdael was a landscape painter, Hals a portraitist, and Rembrandt made history paintings and at best used still lifes as accessories.<sup>5</sup> No direct line can thus be drawn from their work to Van Gogh's still-life oeuvre. There is in any case little evidence of Van Gogh having made a detailed study of seventeenth-century still life, despite the fact that still-life painting was a primary genre of Dutch painting at the time. A rare reference to it can be found in passing in a letter Van Gogh wrote to Theo van Gogh in October 1885, in which he praised a still life by Maria Vos of 1870 as "actually Van Beijeren-esque."<sup>6</sup> Apparently, the work of Abraham van Beijeren (ca. 1620/21–1690), a painter renowned for his fish still lifes, was familiar enough to Van Gogh that he could refer to him as a matter of course.

How this apparently natural fluency with the genre connects with Van Gogh's own still-life painting has not thus far been researched.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have given due attention to such topics as Van Gogh's artistic development<sup>8</sup> and his study of seventeenth-century painters more generally.<sup>9</sup> This essay looks closely at the question of how Van Gogh's still lifes relate to those of the Dutch masters. After outlining the similarities and differences in the choice of motifs in the three central types—meal, vanitas, and flower still lifes—it explores the different forms of composition and representation Van Gogh employed in his own still lifes. Finally, it draws possible parallels in the scope of their interpretation. The seventeenth-century paintings I refer to here represent an immense quantity of works in the various still-life genres.

The exercise is not about identifying individual old-master still lifes that Van Gogh may have seen during the six years he spent working for the art dealer Goupil & Cie.,<sup>10</sup> studied in museums, or admired as reproductions in books. Nor does it ask whether he took any concrete inspiration from these individual encounters.<sup>11</sup> We can assume that Van Gogh moved in a cultural space well acquainted with the visual tradition of the golden age,<sup>12</sup> just as he would have been acquainted with the distinct Dutch tradition of emblematics, which flourished in the seventeenth century and became popular again in Dutch Protestantism during the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, religious emblems were ever-present for Van Gogh due to the influence of his Protestant upbringing.<sup>14</sup> This essay limits its scope to the as yet unexplored topic of Van

Gogh's relationship with seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting, omitting (for reasons of space) a consideration of emblematics in his oeuvre. Just as it is not possible to examine here the influence of his contemporaries on Van Gogh's still lifes—not only the impressionists<sup>15</sup> but also Adolphe Monticelli and Ernest Quost,<sup>16</sup> so too the general reception of the old masters by nineteenth-century Dutch painters cannot come under scrutiny; Van Gogh's views on the golden age were anything but unique, and such considerations belong to a larger study.<sup>17</sup> But first, a brief excursus will describe the essentials of Dutch still-life painting.

*The Old Masters' Art of Imitation*

Still-life painting has its origins in the market and kitchen scenes painted by Pieter Aertsen and Joachim Beuckelaer in Antwerp in the middle of the sixteenth century.<sup>18</sup> In such paintings, figures still predominated, providing references to moral admonitions or biblical stories, as for example, in Pieter Aertsen's *Christ in the House of Martha und Mary* of 1553 (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam). Soon after 1600, however, the autonomous still life developed in Antwerp in a variety of forms. A vast number of *pronkstilleven*—“sumptuous,” or “ornate” still lifes—emerged showing meals, fruit, fish, game, vanitas motifs, flowers, seashells, or books. While the diversity of subjects was determined by the different wishes of buyers, it was also crucial for the painters working in this genre to demonstrate their technical skills—their craftsmanship as well as their mastery of imitation.<sup>19</sup> In his *Schilder-boeck* (Book of Painters) of 1604—the first history of Dutch art—Karel van Mander had already emphasized the mimetic quality of oil painting. The painter and art theorist Philips Angel, in his *Lof der schilder-konst* (Praise of the Art of Painting) of 1642, celebrated the “*schijn eyghentlike kracht*,” the power of imitation that painting embodied.<sup>20</sup> Still-life painters augmented the illusionism of their reproductions of a wide variety of objects to the point of optical illusion and *trompe-l'oeil*. Although popular with buyers and the public, some contemporary art theorists disdained the genre, disparaging it as inferior to history painting. Rembrandt's student Samuel van Hoogstraten, for example, stated in his *Introduction to the Academy of the Art of Painting* of 1678 that still-life painters were “ordinary soldiers in the field camp of art” who painted only “things, which even if they are perfectly nice, are merely warm-up exercises for art.”<sup>21</sup>

If still lifes enjoyed lower esteem than grander genres of painting, they were nonetheless present in Dutch museums of the nineteenth century. In 1858–1860 the French art critic Théophile Thoré, describing the museum Van der Hoop in Amsterdam in *Musées de la Hollande*, noted that “the painters of flowers and fruits, of game and birds, should not be missing in a collection of Dutch art.”<sup>22</sup> In this museum, Thoré saw still lifes by Melchior de Hondecoeter, Jan van Huijsom, Abraham Mignon, Rachel Ruysch, and Jan Weenix. Thoré noted that the Rijksmuseum, housed at the time in the Amsterdam Trippenhuis, displayed still lifes by at least eight painters, among them Abraham van Beijeren, while the Mauritshuis in The Hague presented works of five still-life painters.<sup>23</sup> The 1886 catalogue of the newly opened Rijksmuseum, which united the Van der Hoop collection with the works that had until 1885 been displayed at the Trippenhuis, lists about thirty still lifes from the seventeenth century.<sup>24</sup>

The flourishing of Dutch still life in the seventeenth century can be understood historically within the context of changes in the contemporary mindset and prevalent social conditions. Theologically, an easing of the medieval fear of the hereafter opened up space for an increased orientation toward the world of things. Another factor, in the northern Netherlands, was the cessation of new church commissions after the Reformation. Economically, the capitalist embrace of trade promoted a view of the world as a commodity, as well as tendencies to reify wealth, and fetishize material objects (see the essay of Michael F. Zimmermann, pp. 116–131). Finally, the rise of the still life is connected to the rise of the well-to-do bourgeoisie and the new desire for representation.

Whatever the socio-historical meaning of Dutch still life in its own times—whether it is to be interpreted chiefly as a medium of moral guidance with profound allusions,<sup>25</sup> as mimetic “art of describing,”<sup>26</sup> as socio-economic documents of early capitalism,<sup>27</sup> or as a semiotic competition between linguistic and visual forms of discourse<sup>28</sup>—these interpretive approaches play no part in the contemplation of the genre’s relationship to Van Gogh’s still lifes. Among the seventeenth century’s different still life sub-genres, three important types bear fruitful parallels to Van Gogh’s own world of motifs: still lifes of meals, representations of vanitas, and floral pictures.

### *A Visual Memory of Motifs*

Van Gogh took most of the motifs for his still lifes from the everyday world. In addition to branches and various floral arrangements—the largest group of his still lifes in terms of quantity—Van Gogh also depicted fruit and vegetables, fish, books, bottles, and pots. Nearly all of his motifs had already been painted by the seventeenth-century still-life masters with two exceptions: the baskets of potatoes (fig. p. 59, 123) and shoes (fig. p. 126).

Potatoes were by no means unknown in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century; the first plant reached the botanical garden in Leiden in 1593. However, it took a long time before potatoes became a common food. In 1676, Jan van Somer created a mezzotint depicting an interior with a young maid peeling potatoes,<sup>29</sup> but the dark tubers did not otherwise find their way into the still lifes of the golden age.<sup>30</sup> Van Gogh for his part turned to the subject early in his career. In December 1881 he included them with other objects in his first painting (1; cat. 1) and in September 1885 deemed them a worthy main subject for a series of still lifes (20, 22, 30, 32, 33).

As for footwear, a certain inherent lack of dignity may perhaps explain its relative absence from Dutch art, although one of the great Flemish masterpieces—Jan van Eyck’s *Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife* of 1434 (The National Gallery, London)—does include a very prominent pair of shoes—unworn—in the foreground. Still life, a genre that placed its subjects primarily *on* the table and not underneath it, would of course have had little use for the earthbound shoe, generally associated with the floor. If a seventeenth-century still life is not set on a table but on a bench, as with the *Sleeping Dog* by Gerrit Dou (1650, Museum of



1 Jacob van Hulsdonck:  
*Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and a Pomegranate*, ca. 1620–40  
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



2 Vincent van Gogh:  
*Basket of Lemons and Bottle*, 1888 (137; cat. 22)  
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

# “He is Painting Flowers Mostly”: Van Gogh’s Parisian Floral Still Lifes

*Stefan Koldehoff*

On the walls of the room where his body was laid out all his last canvases were hung making a sort of halo for him and the brilliance of the genius that radiated from them made this death even more painful for us artists who were there. The coffin was covered with a simple white cloth and surrounded with masses of flowers, the sunflowers that he loved so much, yellow dahlias, yellow flowers everywhere. It was, you will remember, his favourite colour, the symbol of the light that he dreamed of as being in people’s hearts as well as in works of art.

—Émile Bernard on Vincent van Gogh’s funeral, July 31, 1890<sup>1</sup>

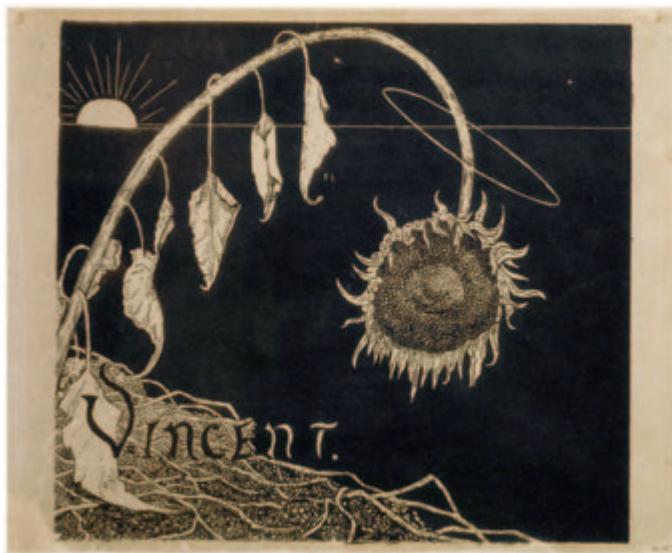
The flower motif has been associated with Vincent van Gogh for many years—ever since his death, in fact, as the testimony of Van Gogh’s friend, the artist Émile Bernard, reveals. The cover of the catalog for the very first Van Gogh exhibition, when works from the estate went on show at Amsterdam’s Kunstzaal Panorama in December 1892, sports a symbolist print of a wilting sunflower, its hanging stem bathed in a halo (fig. 1). This set a course for readings of Van Gogh that would continue for many decades, even if the painter and lithographer Richard Nicolaüs Roland Holst, the originator of the illustration, had already pointed out in his preface: “Art has become a commodity like any other, and a highly speculative commodity at that.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the early monographs about Van Gogh’s life and work that appeared after 1900 were often illustrated by his paintings of flowers, and not only the famous sunflowers.<sup>3</sup> The original seven variations on sunflowers in a vase, painted in the south of France over a period of six months, now rank among the icons of modern art (142–45, 153–55; figs. p. 88). It was not long before they turned up at exhibitions, and they established Van Gogh’s reputation for colour. Paul Gauguin depicted Van Gogh on canvas in the act of painting sunflowers; the blossoms are standing right in front of him in a blue vase (fig. 2). Alongside the portraits made of him by colleagues who knew him, this painting specifically shows Van Gogh as a painter of flowers.

And yet Van Gogh did not paint as many floral still lifes as his public image suggests. The oeuvre he left behind amounts to some 2,150 paintings, drawings, and studies. If we discount the pictures of flowers in gardens or in the wild, there are only sixty works devoted to deliberate arrangements of floral still life—less than three percent of his entire output.

More than half of those were painted during the twenty-three months between March 1886 and February 1888 when Van Gogh was living with his brother Theo in Paris. In just under two years, his style underwent a profound change. It was a decisive time in Van Gogh’s artistic development; he put the painterly traditions of his Dutch homeland behind him and shifted closer to contemporary modernism, a phenomenon that he had read about in the Netherlands but only saw for himself once he arrived in the French capital.

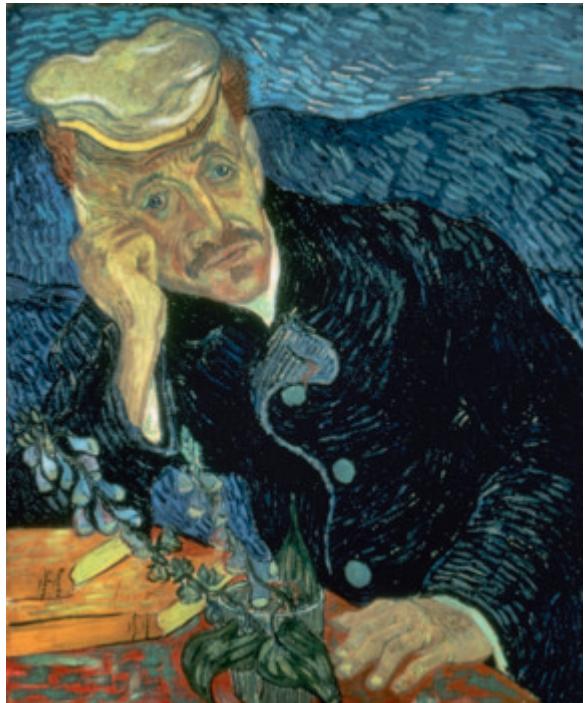
We can trace this development by observing the floral still lifes he created over those months. As he worked on those floral still lifes during his stay in Paris, Van Gogh was evolving in a decisive way as an artist. Several times he referred to this cycle of work as a testing ground for his understanding and application of colour. Although Van Gogh’s Parisian floral still lifes are often classified as studies, they also reveal other



1 Richard Nicolaüs Roland Holst:  
Lithograph on the cover of the catalogue for the Van Gogh  
exhibition at Kunstzaal Panorama, Amsterdam, 1892



2 Paul Gauguin:  
*Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers*, 1888  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



7 Vincent van Gogh:  
*Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 1890 (F 753)  
Private collection



6 Vincent van Gogh:  
*Vase with Oleanders and Books*, 1888 (147)  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

complete than they are.”<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Theo van Gogh supported his brother in this hierarchy of artistic importance, exhorting him to “think of the still lifes and of the flowers Delacroix did when he went to the country to stay with G[eorges] Sand.” And, “Those who hold up the best at the big exhibition are [Camille] Corot, Manet, Delacroix, Millet . . .”<sup>20</sup> On September 19, 1889 in Saint-Rémy Van Gogh wrote to Willemien: “I don’t much like seeing my own paintings in my bedroom, so I’ve copied one by Delacroix and a few by Millet. The Delacroix is a Pietà.”<sup>21</sup> The letter goes on to describe in detail the *Pietà*, a dramatic image in which nothing is still (figs. 8, 9).

In a flower still life by Delacroix such as *Still Life with Dahlias* (fig. 10), thought by some to be unfinished, we see a more generalized treatment of each flower. Van Gogh brought to his still lifes precisely that power of suggestion and rejection of painstaking detail which Delacroix had so eloquently and famously expressed in a letter to Constant Dutilleux in 1849. Here Delacroix described two old master still lifes of flowers:

As soon as I received your letter I went to see the two flower paintings [by old masters]; and I entirely agree with what you say of them. They show great talent; the brushwork is particularly remarkable; their only fault seems to be that which is common to almost all works of this sort, painted by specialists; the study of details, highly elaborated, somewhat detracts from the effect of the whole. . . . [This] “dispersal of interest” . . . rather spoils the general effect. . . . I have been working in exactly the opposite way to the two works in question, and I have subordinated details to the whole as far as possible. . . . I have tried to paint bits of nature as we see them in gardens.<sup>22</sup>

In his magnificent *Bouquet of Flowers* of circa 1850 (Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille), Delacroix’s agitated, restless brushwork is matched by a palette that he referred to as an instrument that played what he wanted it to play. Certainly Van Gogh’s admiration for Delacroix had started as early as 1885, when he had written about him, “What I find so fine about Delacroix is precisely that he reveals the liveliness of things, and the expression and the movement, that he is utterly *beyond the paint*.”<sup>23</sup> Five years later, on January 13, 1890, he described Delacroix as an artist who is “modern” and as one “who *cannot be surpassed*.”<sup>24</sup>

#### *Monumental Portraits of Flowers*

Upon first arriving in May 1889 at the asylum Saint-Paul de Mausole in Saint-Rémy, Van Gogh was inspired to paint a large clump of bearded irises from very close up, allowing them to fill the canvas from edge to edge, and to these voluptuous blossoms on their sturdy stems he brought a canvas equal to the size of a landscape: 71 by 93 centimeters (fig. 11). The following May, on the verge of leaving Saint-Rémy for Auvers-sur-Oise, Van Gogh returned to the subject of irises, and of roses, with the ambition to create a decorative series of still lifes on a large scale such as he had not attempted since the Sunflowers in Arles.

To these paintings he brought all that he had learned about complementary colours during the three previous years and sought to employ these principles of colour harmony in a bold way.<sup>25</sup> Because some of the pigments that he used were susceptible to fading, the paintings as we see them today are altered

*Still Life with Five Bottles*

Nuenen, September–mid-October 1885

Oil on canvas, 49.5 × 57.4 cm

Not signed  
Belvedere, Vienna  
Inv. no. 7762  
F 56, JH 530  
>37Lit.  
Walther/Metzger 1994, 57 (ill.), 116–17  
Metzger/Walther 1995, 24 (ill.)  
Vienna 1996, no. 80; 205  
Coyle 2007, 203, 537 (ill.)<sup>1</sup> See Letter 536, ca. October 20, 1885.  
See the appendix, 202–23.

It is not known whether Van Gogh himself drank the contents of the five bottles depicted in this work, but it is likely he had them close to hand, for such items were typically found in Dutch households. The bottle to the left likely held wine or cognac, while the others are stoneware bottles with distinctive circular handles typically used for Dutch gin. This juniper-flavored liquor distilled in Amsterdam and Schiedam from the 1600s on is a Dutch specialty. The Dutch seventeenth-century masters of still life had enjoyed portraying vessels of various materials in order to demonstrate their ability to capture in paint the unique properties and surface qualities of each material. But here Van Gogh, like other realist painters of his time, had other goals.

As in his other still lifes from the autumn of 1885 (>17–21, 28–36; cat. 3, 4), Van Gogh limited his palette to a few muted colours of chiefly brown tones, sometimes mixed with red or green. He set himself the challenge of depicting light and shadow in a composition that demanded special attention. The bottles are placed directly before a window that comprises roughly half the background. The window in turn looks directly onto a visibly mortared wall that blocks the view. Yet it admits enough light to illuminate the objects; this is a much brighter still life than any other painting Van Gogh completed during this period. Light shines through the empty glass bottle, which is reflected in its neighboring stoneware bottles and also bounces off their glazed surfaces, forming highlights.

In a letter written at the time, Van Gogh stressed the focused way he worked with colour.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it was this focus that led him to neglect here an orderly, systematic approach to space, form, and volume. The bottles were painted rapidly, with less attempt to give precise depiction to the forms, and Van Gogh seemed unconcerned with achieving a stable or unified composition. The surface of the table in the foreground tilts so steeply toward the viewer that the bottle lying there could well roll off at any moment. The stark shadows thrown into the foreground and the evident brushstrokes accentuate an impression of instability that forms a tension with the monolithic, isolated cylinders. Here already we see hints of the intrinsic value that colour would have for the artist as well as the visible brushwork that characterized his later work. In the later still lifes, too, one finds isolated objects and a monumentalizing close-up perspective often seen from an angle (cat. 22, 24). VH (sg)







Oil on canvas, 46.3 × 38.4 cm  
 Signed lower right: Vincent 87  
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam  
 (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)  
 Inv. no. S0020V1962  
 F 340, JH 1239  
 >107

Lit.  
 Welsh-Ovcharov 1976, 108  
 Essen 1990, no. 13  
 Walther/Metzger 1994, 226 (ill.)  
 Brucher 2006, 120–22  
 Feilchenfeldt 2009, 57  
 Amsterdam 2011, no. 89  
 Denver 2012, no. 64; 35  
 Naifeh/Smith 2012, plate-section 1, fig. 11

<sup>1</sup> See Amsterdam 2011, 284, esp. note 8.

Compared with the floral still lifes he painted during his first summer in Paris (cat. 10–15), Van Gogh's still lifes from early 1887 showed new motifs and techniques.

He had turned to other subjects on seasonal grounds. Now he painted bulbs (> 97, 99, 100), books (> 98), plaster statuettes (> 101–04), and also three arrangements with citrus fruit or glass carafes (> 105–07), including this work, which features both. The comparatively exotic oranges and lemons may have expressed the urban lifestyle with which he was by now familiar, but they also provided interesting subject material, not least for their intense colour. Édouard Manet had painted citrus fruit in his later years, including *The Lemon* of 1880 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

Van Gogh's earlier floral works had been painted in a robust impasto, but here he experimented with thinner paint and a lighter, brighter palette. In certain passages the paint is so thin that we can see the canvas, reinforcing the work's delicate feel. Like many painters of his day, including Claude Monet, Van Gogh was also an enthusiastic collector of Japanese prints at the time. In this still life, unlike in the coloured woodcuts, however, traces of the brush are still visible. Van Gogh uses fine hatching to convey the volume of the lemons in the dish instead of modeling them out of the paint. With the carafe, he is more interested in reproducing the immaterial effects of refracted light and the reflections of colour in the glass than in imparting a sense of spatial solidity.

The complex background with its vertical orange ornamental ribbons is uncharacteristic for a still life by Van Gogh. He approached the wall decoration—perhaps wallpaper or a tapestry<sup>1</sup>—by setting complementary contrasts of red and green, blue and orange. The fine dots and dashes in the pale bands are rather too dispersed to be a pointillist technique, but they hint at the texture of paper or woven fibers. A slightly earlier still life, *Flowerpot with Garlic Chives* (> 100), has the same striped background pattern, although the detail in it is less elaborate. The background in the painting *French Novels with a Rose* (> 131; fig. p. 23) shows a similar pattern, but it is in a horizontal format.

Around this time Van Gogh began to impart more vitality to the space surrounding his objects. Here short, parallel brushstrokes add dynamism to the smooth, rather nondescript green-and-blue tablecloth. This technique would become more and more important in his oeuvre (cat. 20). Space gradually begins to dissipate in the airiness of colour. In addition—as already in his earlier works (cat. 5)—the perspective is distorted. This, combined with the very active hatching, generates an impression of vibrancy, as if Van Gogh were using his brush to breathe soul into the motionless genre of still life. VH (kv)



**Basket of Lemons and Bottle**

Arles, May 1888

Oil on canvas, 53.9 × 64.3 cm  
 Not signed  
 Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo  
 Inv. no. KM 111.196  
 F 384, JH 1425  
 >137

Lit.  
 Otterlo 1966, no. 216  
 Amsterdam 1990, no. 80  
 Walther/Metzger 1994, 340 (ill.)  
 Welsh-Ovcharov 1999, 60 (ill.)  
 Otterlo 2003, 217–20  
 Feilchenfeldt 2009, 123  
 Milan 2014, no. 36

After arriving in Arles on February 20, 1888, Van Gogh, fascinated by the southern spring, turned his attention primarily to landscapes, painting numerous views of the Langlois bridge, for example, and blossoming fruit trees. Sprigs of flowering almonds are among the few still-life motifs he painted in this period (>134, 135). Only two paintings executed that spring pick up the thread of his Parisian still lifes with fruit: *Basket of Oranges* (>136) and this *Basket of Lemons and Bottle*. As with the Paris works (see cat. 20) and still lifes he did in Nuenen (cat. 2–5), Van Gogh continued to use everyday objects and fruit to undertake formal experiments with colour and texture.

As in *Carafe and Dish with Citrus Fruit*, painted in February–March 1887 (cat. 16), the fruit here is paired with a glass container. Oranges and lemons are regional to the south of France, where they ripen in spring. The wine in the unlabeled bottle probably came from a barrel. The half-full bottle, its cork almost touching the upper frame, draws our gaze upward. The back edges of the table approach each other diagonally across the picture space, delineating the situation. Another dynamic factor in this composition is the slightly elevated, oblique angle of the perspective; those lemons could start rolling toward the viewer at any moment. More movement is injected by the pale brushstrokes of the tablecloth as they fan out in different directions. They also lend structure to a broad monochrome surface. The delicate pattern of white dots on the green background performs a similar function.

Although Van Gogh introduces other colours—the greens in the background and the wine bottle, the oranges in the cork and the oranges—this still life is above all an experiment in monochrome surfaces. Van Gogh had been working to achieve this for a long time. The tablecloth, the structure of the basket, and the volumes of the lemons are formulated in different grades of yellow. Around some of the contours, however, Van Gogh adds narrow lines of blue—as if to indicate shadow, except that they cannot have been generated by a light source, as they fall on different sides. Subtle blue traces can also be detected along the edge of the table and in the suggestion of a pattern in the background. Perhaps Van Gogh was trying to give more concrete definition to the objects. Only three months later, in August 1888, he managed to confine his palette almost entirely to yellow for a version of the *Sunflowers* (>145; fig. p. 88). *Basket of Lemons and Bottle* is a major step along the long and painstaking road to accomplishing a monochrome technique. MPH (kv)



*Blossoming Chestnut Branches*

Auvers-sur-Oise, late May 1890

Oil on canvas, 72 × 91 cm

Not signed

Emil Bührle Collection, Zurich

F 820, JH 2010

&gt;165

Lit.

Walther/Metzger 1994, 640 (ill.)

Metzger/Walther 1995, 233 (ill.)

Bumpus 1998, no. 39

Welsh-Ovcharov 1999, 255 (ill.)

Riehen 2005, no. 51; 36, 69 (ill.)

Budapest 2006, no. 71

Feilchenfeldt 2009, 246

Ottawa 2012, 254 (ill.)

Koldehoff 2015, 58–61, 183–85

Arles 2016, 119, 118 (ill.)

Melbourne 2017, 58, 56 (ill.)

Paris 2019, no. 46

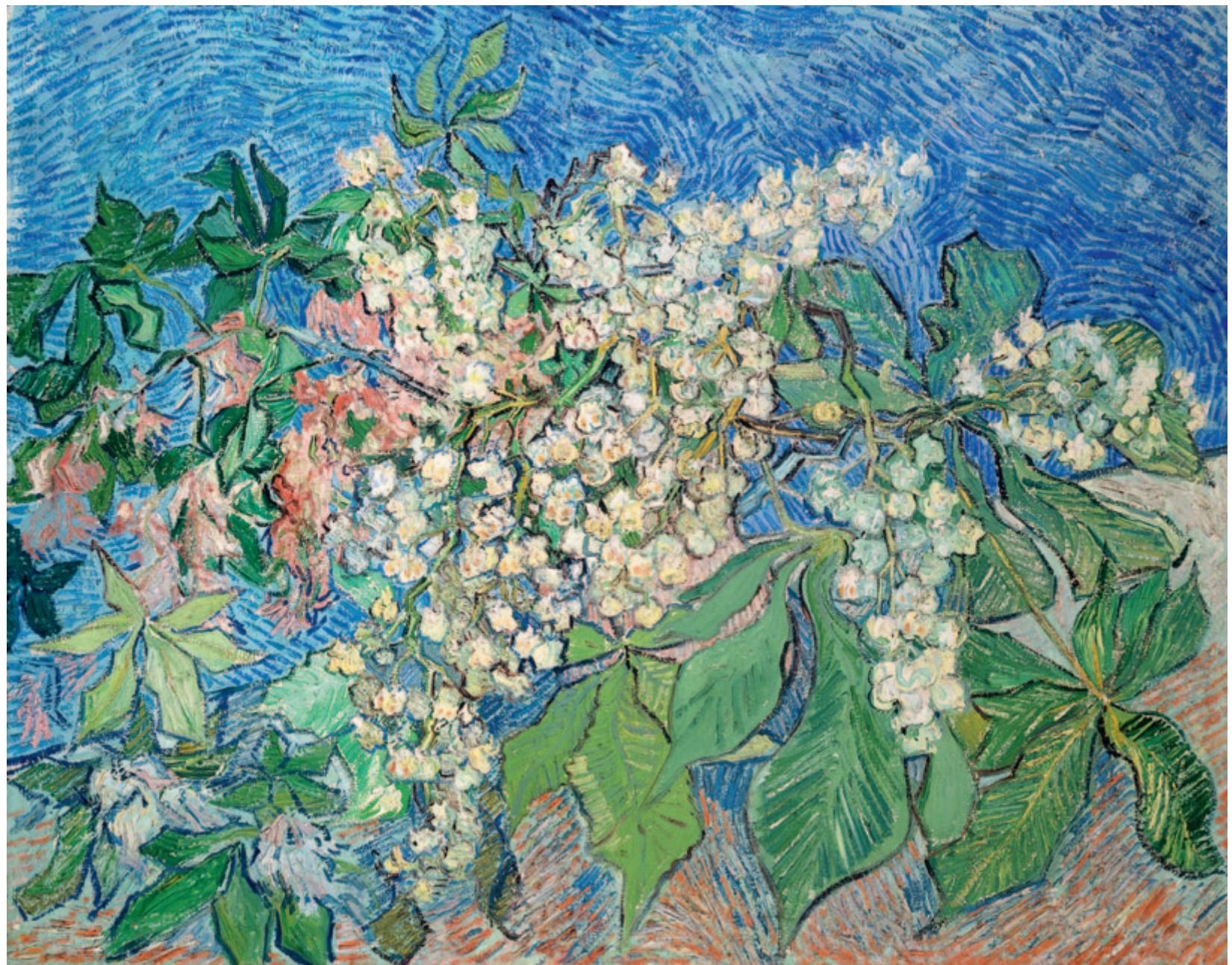
<sup>1</sup> Letter 877, June 3, 1890.

*Blossoming Chestnut Branches* is the largest of Van Gogh's late still lifes and at the same time the most expressive. It was painted at the end of May 1890, just after Van Gogh moved to Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris. After his one-year hospital stay in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, the blossoming chestnut trees—a powerful expression of the life force of spring—must have given a feeling of vitality to Van Gogh, who throughout his life was receptive to the impressions of nature. He painted two views of chestnut trees in full bloom (F 751, private collection; F 752, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo); he must have broken off a branch to use for this work. It is one of nearly eighty paintings—including ten still lifes (>163–72)—Van Gogh produced in the uninterrupted, two-month burst of extraordinary creativity that was cut short by his death on July 29.

“And I also hope that I’ll continue to feel much surer of my brush than before I went to Arles,” Van Gogh wrote to his brother on June 3, 1890.<sup>1</sup> *Blossoming Chestnut Branches* shows this confidence. With a great sense of self and an unfettered brush, he continued his use of colour and painting technique that he had forged ahead with in the south of France. Set against a luminous blue background, several chestnut branches with white panicles and blossoms project toward the viewer. They fill the entire picture without creating illusionistic pictorial space. One can just make out the contours of a bright vase under the leaves. The edge of a table slanting upward, an optimistic gesture focused on the future (see cat. 26), divides the composition diagonally into an orange-brown table area and a blue area suggestive of sky. The chestnut branches mediate compositionally between the two levels of complementary colour.

Angular forms and the moving structure of the wide brushstrokes determine the painting’s pulsating character, while the hatching around the leaves creates an elusive, atmospheric impression and emphasizes the heavy materiality of the paint. On the one hand, the clear visibility of the brushwork conveys proximity to the act of painting and thus to the person of the artist. On the other hand, it is oriented toward the perception of the viewer. The labour of the artist is laid bare, the craft of painting emphasized.

With this, Van Gogh left behind for once and for all the ideas of the impressionists, who strove toward the dissolution of forms. The significance of his work for the expressionists at the beginning of the twentieth century lies in the immediacy and passion of his later pictures. Van Gogh revived the supposedly static genre of the still life, as if the painter’s emotions had been assimilated into the things depicted and as if colour in his paintings led a life of its own. VH (gb)



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## 1853–1868

Vincent Willem van Gogh was born in Zundert (fig. 3) in the Dutch province of Brabant on March 30, 1853 to the parson Theodorus van Gogh (fig. 1) and Anna Cornelia van Gogh-Carbentus (fig. 2), the daughter of a bookbinder.

Vincent was the oldest of six children in the family.

Vincent attended schools in Zevenbergen and Tilburg without attracting notice for any particular creative talent (fig. 4). He left school at the age of fourteen for unknown reasons.

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## 1869–1876

In the summer of 1869 Van Gogh joined the art dealers Goupil & Cie., where his uncle was a partner; his first position was as a trainee at the branch in The Hague (figs. 5, 6).

In 1873, his training completed, he moved to the London branch. At the city's museums he saw and admired the work of artists like Jean-François Millet (figs. pp. 87, 120) and Jules Breton.

In the same year his brother Theo, four years his junior, began working at the Brussels branch of Goupil & Cie., which strengthened their relationship. The first letters in their prolific correspondence—a principal source of information about Van Gogh's life and work—date from this period (fig. 7).

In 1875 Van Gogh was transferred to the Paris branch, but his troubling behavior began to attract attention at work. In April 1876 his position was terminated.

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## 1876–1880

After leaving the art business Van Gogh tried working in various fields, first as an assistant teacher in the English towns of Ramsgate and Isleworth and later as a bookseller in Dordrecht near Rotterdam.

In addition to art and literature, Van Gogh started taking an interest in religion. After abandoning his plan to study theology in 1877, he moved to Belgium and was active as a lay preacher in the Borinage district near the hamlet of Mons.



3 Van Gogh's birthplace, the house in Zundert, photo ca. 1900



1 Van Gogh's father,  
Theodorus van Gogh



2 Van Gogh's mother,  
Anna Cornelia  
van Gogh-Carbentus



4 The class at the King William II secondary school in Tilburg,  
1866; Van Gogh is seated in the first row, third from right



5 Van Gogh at the age of nineteen,  
ca. 1872

Theo van Gogh had sent his brother a description of Édouard Manet's *The Dead Toreador* (1863–64, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC). It is probable that Van Gogh painted *Still Life with Bible* (45; fig. p. 39) in response to the death of his father (see the essay by Michael Philipp, pp. 28–51).

**ca. October 28, 1885, to Theo van Gogh (537)**

**In reply to your description of the study by Manet, I'm sending you a still life of an open, hence an off-white Bible, bound in leather, against a black background with a yellow-brown foreground, with an additional note of lemon yellow.**

**I painted this in one go, in a single day. This to show you that when I say that perhaps I haven't swotted entirely for nothing I mean it, because these days it really comes quite readily to me to paint a given object, whatever the shape or colour may be, without hesitation.**

**ca. November 17, 1885, to Theo van Gogh (542)**

**I imagine, though, that in order to get models, as many as I want and good, I won't be done all at once, but will have to find the money for it by making other things. Be it landscapes, be it townscapes, be it portraits, as I said—or—even if it were signboards and decoration. Or—something I didn't mention in my last letter among the things that I could do “on the side”—give lessons in painting, letting them begin by painting still lifes—which I believe is a different method from that of the drawing masters.**

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**Antwerp 1885–86**

It is impossible to ascertain precisely which still lifes Van Gogh is referring to here. He took *Still Life with Bible* (45; fig. p. 39) to Antwerp. He might be referring to many other paintings (21, 29, 34, 36, 40, 43, 44; cat. 3, 4, 6; fig. p. 59).

Charles Verlat (1824–1890) was an artist and directed the art academy in Antwerp, where he taught figure painting. Van Gogh had shown him *Still Life with Bible* (45; fig. p. 39).

**November 28, 1885, to Theo van Gogh (545)**

**It's curious that my painted studies look darker here in the city than in the country—is this because the light isn't as bright anywhere in the city? I don't know—but it might differ more than one would say on the face of it. It struck me, and I could understand that things that are with you also appear darker than I thought they were in the country. Still, the ones I've brought with me now don't look bad all the same—the mill—avenue of autumn trees and still life, and a few small ones.**

**January 19 or 20, 1886, to Theo van Gogh (553)**

**Wanted to tell you that Verlat has seen my work at last, and when he saw the two landscapes and the still life that I brought with me from the country, he said—“yes, but that doesn't concern me”—when I showed him the two portraits, he said—“that's different, if it's the figure you can come.”**



3 Sketch of a bird's nest, Letter 533, October 4, 1885,  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

1881

Note:

The abbreviation F refers to the 1970 edition of Jacob-Baart de la Faille's catalogue raisonné: *The Works of Vincent van Gogh: His Paintings and Drawings*, revised, augmented and annotated edition (Amsterdam, 1970).

The abbreviation JH refers to the catalogue raisonné by Jan Hulsker: *The New Complete Van Gogh: Paintings, Drawings, Sketches* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1996).

A dash (F –, JH –) indicates the absence of an F or JH number.



1  
*Still Life with Cabbage and Clogs*  
 The Hague, November–December 1881  
 Oil on paper on panel,  $34 \times 55$  cm  
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam  
 (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)  
 F 1, JH 81  
 cat. 1



2  
*Still Life with Straw Hat*  
 The Hague, late November–mid December 1881  
 Oil on paper on canvas,  $36.5 \times 53.5$  cm  
 Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo  
 F 62, JH 922



3  
*Still Life with Clogs*  
 The Hague, late November–mid December 1881  
 Oil on canvas mounted on panel,  $39 \times 41.5$  cm  
 Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo  
 F 63, JH 920

1884



4  
*Flying Fox*  
 Nuenen, October–November 1884  
 Oil on canvas,  $41.5 \times 79$  cm  
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam  
 (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)  
 F 177a, JH 1192



5  
*Still Life with Clogs and Pots*  
 Nuenen, November 1884  
 or shortly later  
 Oil on canvas on panel,  $42 \times 56$  cm  
 Centraal Museum, Utrecht, on loan from the Van Baaren Museum Foundation, Utrecht  
 F 54, JH 536



6  
*Still Life with Bottle and Bags*  
 Nuenen, November 1884  
 or shortly later  
 Oil on canvas on panel,  $31.7 \times 42$  cm  
 Private collection  
 F 55, JH 532



7  
*Still Life with Pottery, Beer Glass, and Bottle*  
 Nuenen, November 1884  
 or shortly later  
 Oil on canvas on panel,  $31 \times 41$  cm  
 Private collection, United States  
 F 58, JH 531



8  
*Still Life with Paintbrushes in a Pot*  
 Nuenen, November 1884  
 or shortly later  
 Oil on canvas on panel,  $31.5 \times 41.5$  cm  
 Private collection  
 F 60, JH 540



**9**  
*Still Life with Bottles and a Cowrie Shell*  
 Nuenen, November 1884  
 or shortly later  
 Oil on canvas on panel,  
 31.8 × 41.3 cm  
 Noordbrabants Museum,  
 Den Bosch  
 F 64, JH 537



**10**  
*Still Life*  
 Nuenen, November 1884  
 or shortly later  
 Oil on canvas, 35.5 × 45 cm  
 Gemeentemuseum, The Hague  
 F 178r, JH 528  
 (Verso: *Self-Portrait*, F 178v)



**11**  
*Still Life with a Bearded-Man Jar*  
 Nuenen, November 1884–  
 April 1885  
 Oil on cardboard on panel,  
 33.7 × 42.7 cm  
 Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo  
 F 52, JH 535  
 cat. 2



**12**  
*Still Life with Bottles and Earthenware*  
 Nuenen, November 1884–  
 April 1885  
 Oil on canvas, 31.5 × 41.8 cm  
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam  
 (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)  
 F 61r, JH 533  
 (Verso: *Self-Portrait*, F 61v)



**13**  
*Vase with Dead Leaves*  
 Nuenen, autumn 1884  
 Oil on canvas, 41.5 × 31 cm  
 Private collection  
 F 200, JH 541



**14**  
*Vase with Honesty*  
 Nuenen, autumn–winter 1884  
 Oil on canvas, 42.7 × 31.7 cm  
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam  
 (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)  
 F 76, JH 542



**138**  
*Blue Enamel Coffeepot, Earthenware, and Fruit*  
Arles, May 1888  
Oil on canvas, 65 × 81 cm  
Basil and Elise Goulandris Foundation, Athens  
F 410, JH 1426



**139**  
*Still Life*  
Arles, May 1888  
Oil on canvas, 55.1 × 46.2 cm  
The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia  
F 600, JH 1424



**140**  
*Bowl with Daisies*  
Arles, summer 1888  
(or Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890)  
Oil on canvas, 33 × 41.9 cm  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon  
F 591, JH 1429



**141**  
*Shoes*  
Arles, August 1888  
Oil on canvas, 45.7 × 55.2 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, The Annenberg Foundation Gift, 1992  
F 461, JH 1569



**142**  
*Sunflowers*  
Arles, August 1888  
Oil on canvas, 73 × 58 cm  
Private collection  
F 453, JH 1559



**143**  
*Sunflowers*  
Arles, August 1888  
Oil on panel, 98 × 69 cm  
Destroyed by fire during WW II  
F 459, JH 1560



**144**  
*Sunflowers*  
Arles, August 1888  
Oil on canvas, 92 × 73 cm  
Neue Pinakothek, Munich  
F 456, JH 1561



**145**  
*Sunflowers*  
Arles, August 1888  
Oil on canvas, 92.1 × 73 cm  
The National Gallery, London, acquired 1924, Courtauld Fund  
F 454, JH 1562



**146**  
*Vase with Zinnias*  
Arles, August 1888  
Oil on canvas, 64 × 49.5 cm  
Private collection  
F 592, JH 1568  
cat. 23

1889



**147**  
*Vase with Oleanders and Books*  
 Arles, August 1888  
 Oil on canvas,  $60.3 \times 73.7$  cm  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
 New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs.  
 John L. Loeb, 1962  
 F 593, JH 1566



**148**  
*Vase with Oleanders*  
 Arles, August 1888  
 Oil on canvas,  $56 \times 36$  cm  
 Missing since 1944  
 F 594, JH 1567



**149**  
*Gauguin's Chair*  
 Arles, November 1888  
 Oil on canvas,  $90.5 \times 72.7$  cm  
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam  
 (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)  
 F 499, JH 1636



**150**  
*Van Gogh's Chair*  
 Arles, November 1888  
 Oil on canvas,  $91.8 \times 73$  cm  
 The National Gallery, London,  
 acquired 1924, Courtauld Fund  
 F 498, JH 1635



**151**  
*Still Life with a Plate of Onions*  
 Arles, early January 1889  
 Oil on canvas,  $49.6 \times 64.4$  cm  
 Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo  
 F 604, JH 1656  
 cat. 24



**152**  
*Still Life of Oranges and Lemons  
with Blue Gloves*  
 Arles, January 1889  
 Oil on canvas,  $48 \times 62$  cm  
 National Gallery of Art,  
 Washington, DC, Collection of  
 Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon  
 F 502, JH 1664  
 cat. 25



**153**  
*Sunflowers*  
 Arles, January 1889  
 Oil on canvas,  $92.4 \times 71.1$  cm  
 The Philadelphia Museum of Art,  
 The Mr. and Mrs. Carroll S. Tyson,  
 Jr., Collection, 1963  
 F 455, JH 1668



**154**  
*Sunflowers*  
 Arles, January 1889  
 Oil on canvas,  $100.5 \times 76.5$  cm  
 Sompo Japan Nipponkoa Museum  
 of Art, Tokyo  
 F 457, JH 1666



**155**  
*Sunflowers*  
 Arles, January 1889  
 Oil on canvas,  $95 \times 73$  cm  
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam  
 (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)  
 F 458, JH 1667