

# 'Van Gogh and Nature' Review: A Stunning Connection

By Lance Esplund  
Aug. 12, 2015

*Williamstown, Mass.*

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), as viscerally as any representational painter, expressed not just what he saw in nature but also what he felt before nature. This is made abundantly clear in "Van Gogh and Nature," an extraordinary, surprisingly original and deftly handled exhibit at the Clark Art Institute.

Organized by Richard Kendall, the Clark's curator at large, with co-curators and Van Gogh scholars Chris Stolwijk and Sjraar van Heugten, "Van Gogh and Nature" comprises only 40 paintings and 19 prints and drawings. But we aren't shortchanged. The show feels much larger and offers a wider vista than its compact scale suggests. And it does more than merely shift our attention to Van Gogh's landscapes. Exploring his relationship to nature in the fullest sense -- from Van Gogh the natural scientist to Van Gogh the ardent poet -- it illuminates aspects of the Dutch master we may have overlooked in bigger, broader-based exhibitions.

A genre painter, Van Gogh produced still lifes, portraits, interiors and, chiefly, landscapes, in which he conveyed specific light, weather and temperature, species of trees, shrubs and birds, movements of wind and times of day. One of his sisters recalled that even as a child, Van Gogh knew the Latin names of the insects, rare flowers and birds that he preserved in little boxes.

And he continued to study and record the world with the mind and eye of a devoted naturalist for the rest of his life. Not unlike Leonardo da Vinci, Van Gogh produced intricate, realistic life-size paintings and drawings of plants, birds, insects and nests (some of which are on view here), even as he blossomed into the artistic visionary who liberated and revolutionized color. But we never feel that Van Gogh was a slave to nature or that his heart was absent. At the height of his powers, during the last two years of his brief decade-long career -- ended by a self-inflicted gunshot wound in a wheat field in Auvers-sur-Oise -- Van Gogh's landscapes convey the charged, emotive power and knowing specificity of family portraits.

In the rich, meaty oil painting "Undergrowth" (1887), dappled light rushes toward us like a swarm of bees. In "The Sower" (c. June 17-28, 1888), a muscling chrome-yellow sun radiates a volley of lemon yellow and lime green as it sets on a rustling field of golden wheat beyond an expanse of plowed soil -- furrows bejeweled in dazzling ochers, whites and violets. The sun itself is brilliant, dense and opaque, heavy with brush-worked impasto. Van Gogh gives us heat and light as force and mass -- acidic pressures that make you squint.

Van Gogh's writhing strokes -- akin to looking into a snake pit, a world aflame -- carry us in "Hospital at Saint-Remy" (1889), in which enormous trees dance, dwarfing ambling patients who ride the roiling russet foreground like surfers on uneasy seas. And in the vigorously pelted landscape "Rain-Auvers" (1890), sunlight is veiled by cloud and wind, and all but negated by slashing blue-violet showers. More slow and subtle is "Wheat Fields With Reaper, Auvers" (1890), in which creamy clouds are moored in a turquoise sky over a

green and yellow field; and sluggish heat is felt through the softening and settling of forms, as if earth, sky, reaper and sheaves of wheat were all made of warm butter.

What's exciting and instructive here is that we accompany Van Gogh on his path to these astounding late landscapes. The chronological show begins discreetly, in an almost subterranean vein, with paintings, prints and drawings in natural, somber tones by Van Gogh and landscape artists he admired, such as Theodore Rousseau and Charles-Francois Daubigny. We experience a variety of approaches and materials, as Van Gogh -- largely self-taught -- establishes his footing.

Sometimes, it's as if Van Gogh is taking inventory, afraid to leave any detail -- seen or felt -- behind. In the remarkable pen-and-ink drawing "The Swamp" (1881), stippled with tiny, finely woven crosshatched intricacies, every quivering reflection and blade of grass has been bitten into the paper. The drawing "Winter Garden" (1884) is blunter, sparer, more sinister. Its gnarled barren trees crowd and loom over a lone woman. And in paintings "Vase With Honesty" (1884-85) and "Terrace in the Luxembourg Gardens" (1886), light and forms are handled gently, with a pliancy and silvery delicacy reminiscent of Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot.

About 1886, when Van Gogh moves to Paris, he begins to interpret the world as if it were made up primarily not of things but of energies and forces. Or at least as if form and dynamics were interchangeable. He also dramatically improves as a colorist -- a bringer of light. He'd been wrestling with the tonal color of artists like Jean-Francois Millet. In Paris, Van Gogh would encounter the Impressionists Monet and Renoir; Cezanne, Gauguin and Toulouse-Lautrec; the canonic painters in the Louvre, as well as Japanese artists such as Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige. He seems to have absorbed them all.

Midway through the show is the still life "Imperial Crown Fritillaries in a Copper Vase" (1887), the first signature Van Gogh at the Clark. The golden vase, as vivid as a Byzantine Madonna, swells and rotates; the tabletop shifts and erupts; and the deep-blue wall plane -- like a starlit sky -- rushes toward the viewer. Van Gogh's painted air and space are as vibrant and solid as the objects themselves.

In "The Wheatfield Behind Saint Paul's Hospital With a Reaper" (c. 1889), yellow sun and field and chartreuse sky are blindingly bright -- like staring into a chest of gold. And in the turbulent "Cypresses" (1889), weight, form wind and swirling brushwork all merge into pure sensation. In these transcendent late landscapes, Van Gogh jolts us with his experience of nature. Moreover, he shocks us to life.