

Brussels which, beginning in 1887 with the *Grande-Jatte*, presented to the Belgian public the latest works of Seurat, as well as of Signac. Immediate evidence of the impact of Neo-Impressionism can be seen in the early paintings of Signac's exact contemporary Henry van de Velde (1863–1957), who would later reach international prominence as a master of architecture and the decorative arts. In his *Woman at the Window* of 1889 (fig. 408), which was shown the following year both in Brussels at Les XX and in Paris at the Salon des Indépendants, there is nothing particularly modern about the subject, in which the indoor-outdoor contrast of a peasant woman and an open window view of the simplest country houses has deep echoes that go back to seventeenth-century genre painting in the Netherlands. Even more to the point, it restates a familiar motif of his older compatriot Henri de Braekeleer (1840–88), who, also from Antwerp and a student of Leys (see fig. 252) at the local academy, was steeped in nostalgic memories of art and life in the Low Countries before the Industrial Age. In his view of the *Place Teniers in Antwerp* of 1878 (fig. 409), a modern woman looks out from behind one closed window at the old, historic quarter of the city, crowned in the distance by the unfinished, late medieval church of St.-Jacques, a repository of paintings by Rubens and of Flemish tomb monuments. The subtly melancholic mood, a Realist restatement of Friedrich's *Woman by the Window* (see fig. 165), is almost an elegy for a dead and distant world, thoroughly effaced in the next decade by Seurat's pervasive modernity of style and subject. Van de Velde's painting implicitly maintains the quiet, passive tone of this contemplation of a vanishing past; but it also obliterates, as it were, Braekeleer's old-fashioned style in favor



Fig. 408 **Henry van de Velde**, *Woman at the Window*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 43¾ × 49¼". Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts/Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.



Fig. 409 **Henri de Braekeleer**, *Place Teniers in Antwerp*, 1878. Oil on canvas, 31⅞ × 25¼". Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts/Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.

of a progressive new technique which, as he demonstrates here, can even record, as did his Realist predecessors, reflections on glass.

Quickly transformed into a symbol of pictorial modernity, Neo-Impressionism spread both inside and outside French borders, and its life-span, in varying guises, extended even into the domain of radical new directions in early twentieth-century art, speckling the canvases of Fauvists, Cubists, Futurists, and Orphists. And in the decade of its birth, the 1880s, its impact could be discerned even in the work of artists as anti-scientific in spirit as Gauguin and Van Gogh, those two masters who, together with Seurat and Cézanne, would become for later historians of modern painting a strangely dissimilar quartet of artist-heroes who could be categorized in chronological terms, if in no other way, as Post-Impressionists, artists, that is, who felt the need to construct private pictorial worlds upon the foundations of Impressionism.

Vincent van Gogh

Of these four artist-heroes, whose names would later be canonized in the legends of the founding fathers of modern art, it was the Dutchman Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) who

reached mythic proportions in popular culture, in good part because of his tragic life, which could be seen as representing the very paradigm of the great prophet-artist so victimized by a philistine society that suicide appeared to be the only solution. Although Van Gogh's turbulent biography may well have become for many a substitute for his art, there is nevertheless no doubt that the two are often so closely connected as to be almost inseparable. Already as a teenager in a small Dutch village, he was attracted simultaneously to religion and to art, feeling an evangelical mission to communicate his feelings and his beliefs about life and death, the individual and society, through the traditional means of the Bible and through the kind of art that, from Rembrandt up to many modern painters of the 1870s, showed an overt concern for the plight of humanity. Indeed, had he been successful in pursuing a career in the ministry, he might have delayed indefinitely the full-time commitment to drawing and painting that he began to make in 1880, after spending two years in a Belgian coal-mining area proselytizing the Christian faith to the poor souls who spent most of their lives below the earth.

In his wish to record and therefore in some way to call public attention to the suffering of the lower classes, Van Gogh was hardly alone. In the lifelong correspondence of six hundred and fifty-two letters to his brother Theo, who supported him both morally and financially, he often wrote passionately of such major artists as Millet or minor ones as Herkomer (see fig. 361). They, too, had evidenced concern with the lives of the anonymous poor of Europe, in both city and country. And it is characteristic that even in his last year, 1890, he painted a free copy after one of the most depressing illustrations from Doré's 1872 publication about London, a round of prisoners exercising in the confines of a courtyard. In both Belgium and Holland, such subjects were equally familiar. One of Van Gogh's early enthusiasms was the most famous Dutch artist of his century, Jozef Israëls (1824–1911), the leader of the so-called Hague School, whose painters specialized in representing rural landscapes and the simple, often poignant lives of peasants. His work may be typified by a painting of c. 1878, *When One Grows Old* (fig. 410), in which loneliness, a clock, and the chill of winter symbolize in intelligible, popular terms the imminent passing of a poor old woman whose gnarled hands and crude wooden chair evoke a life of hardship in a world where murky shadows offer a spiritualizing, old-master resonance associated with Rembrandt. One wonders, too, if Van Gogh knew the far more original work of his Belgian contemporary Baron Léon Frédéric (1856–1940), who already in the early 1880s was winning fame and prizes with such imposing paintings as *The Chalk Sellers* (fig. 411), a large triptych of 1881–83, whose central panel was shown and acclaimed at the 1882 Brussels Salon. Evoking, with its side panels, the format of many Christian narrative paintings, it displays a

poverty-stricken family of vagrants who huddle on the ground with their food and children against a wintry background of leafless trees, creating a relentlessly grim and socially aware counterpart to the pleasures of an 1860s *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. On the horizon, replacing the heavenly city of Jerusalem, is the ugly suburban fringe of Brussels, where a church tower enters into an ironic dialogue with a factory smokestack. The allegorical implications of this secularized scene of a modern calvary are made more explicit in the side panels. At the left, a disconsolate trio of family members move toward us at dawn, on their way to work; and, at the right, they trudge away from us at dusk, as they return to their resting place. Within the context of a Realist documentation of the working-class misery that accelerated under the regime of Léopold II, Frédéric also proposes an almost religious statement about the cycles of life and death within the natural context of morning, noon, and night, a statement whose symbolic, emblematic character is further implied by the compositional and narrative



Fig. 410 Jozef Israëls, *When One Grows Old*, c. 1878. Oil on canvas, 64 × 40½". Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.



Fig. 411 **Baron Léon Frédéric**, *The Chalk Sellers*, 1881–83. Oil on canvas, triptych, center panel 6' 8" × 8' 11", side panels 80 × 46". Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts/Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels.

symmetry, and whose insistence on eliciting the viewer's sympathy is underlined by the startling proximity of the figures in the funneling spaces of the side panels.

It was with a comparable fusion of the immediate truths of modern poverty and the ever more remote ideals of Christian faith and morality that Van Gogh himself turned to the daily life of the peasants whom he knew firsthand during a two-year sojourn (December 1883–November 1885) at his family's vicarage in the Dutch village of Nuenen. In his struggle to record this agricultural world of

toiling peasants, simple churches, and crude cottages, the work of Millet was a constant inspiration, as clearly evidenced by an earnest, but unpretentious view of two women digging for potatoes, executed in August 1885 (fig. 412). Like Seurat in his own early paintings of farm women harvesting (see fig. 395), Van Gogh found Millet's *Gleaners* (see fig. 223) an image of powerful authority. Despite the craggy clumsiness of the brushwork, Van Gogh's little picture manages to translate the grandly rhyming scheme of its source. Yet the crudity of Van Gogh's painting,

Fig. 412 **Vincent van Gogh**, *Two Peasant Women Digging Potatoes*, August 1885. Oil on canvas, 12½ × 16¾". Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.





Fig. 413 **Vincent van Gogh**, *The Potato Eaters*, April–May 1885. Oil on canvas, $32\frac{1}{4} \times 44\frac{7}{8}$ ". Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam.

especially as applied to so coarse a subject, could also become a virtue, avoiding the softened haze of sentimentality that in the work of Israëls and many belated followers of Millet obscured the harsh truths of their themes. Here, the grueling physical labor is immediately perceived in the strained angularity of elbows and shoulders and the tough grasp of hands on shovels. Peasantry is no longer a remote fiction, nor is it, as in Seurat, an almost diagrammatic element in a lucid design.

It would become even more starkly and inescapably real in Van Gogh's best-known and most complex painting of the Nuenen years, *The Potato Eaters* (fig. 413), created in April–May 1885 as the culmination of drawings and painted sketches of both the individual heads and the entire composition. Here, we are thrust directly into one of the peasant homes Van Gogh knew so well, and participate, at the closest range, in their frugal evening repast (the clock at the left reads 7:00) of potatoes and coffee. Far from depicting generalized peasant types, Van Gogh presents these heads with a startling candor, their knobby, furrowed features almost becoming physiognomic equivalents of the potatoes that provide the sole sustenance for the table and that, in other paintings of the period, Van Gogh would isolate in the most humble and earthy of still lifes. Cloistered in an interior as dark as a coal mine, illuminated only

by the solitary flame of the lamp that hovers above their nightly repast, the potato eaters project a mood of utmost gravity and gloom. They seem to watch each other silently without actually exchanging glances, while the distribution of potatoes and coffee takes on an almost ritualistic sobriety inherited from sacred prototypes. Christianity is here given a token representation in the small framed image of the Crucifixion next to the clock; but the hushed aura of the scene conveys the effect of a Supper at Emmaus, in which the most humble folk at table recognize a sacred presence. The fusion of a peasant meal and a Christian ritual had become an artistic commonplace in nineteenth-century scenes that represented the lower classes saying grace, and in the Low Countries, De Groux's earlier painting of this theme (see fig. 239) is an example which Van Gogh may well have known. But the uncommon potency and conviction of Van Gogh's scene are marks of a unique genius, and of an artist whose empathy with every human being he painted as well as with the inanimate objects that formed an intimate part of their lives is instantly communicated to the spectator.

By any standards, including those of 1885 in Holland, *The Potato Eaters* is impossibly awkward, rivaling the early work of Cézanne for unprofessional clumsiness of drawing and brushwork and for unrefined emotion; but it is exactly

these qualities that give it such conviction. The gnarled, restless contours that caricaturely define faces and clothing; the warped, animate compression of what might have been the simplest one-point perspective scheme; the coarse, thick application of brushstrokes that create a grimy environment of somber earthen tones—such crudities transform a commonplace scene into one of passionate immediacy of feeling, unmitigated by the felicities of the technical skill so impersonally acquired in the academies. Van Gogh emerges here almost as a naïve, primitive artist of such honesty and force that we believe his every brushstroke.

To measure this unexpectedly potent achievement, we may turn to another painting of 1885, by the Munich artist Fritz von Uhde (1848–1911), who made his name with sentimental genre. Titled alternatively “*Come, Jesus, Be Our Guest*” or *Saying Grace* (fig. 414), it was immediately exhibited in Germany as well as at the Paris Salon of 1885. Here, the subliminal character of the supernatural in *The Potato Eaters* is made explicit, and the painting also meets, like the work of Uhde’s Dutch counterpart Israëls, the professional standards of the day. Again, we are taken to the humble dining room of a peasant’s home, with its low ceilings and crude wooden furniture; but now the sacramental act of saying grace before a meal has conjured up the invited presence of Christ himself, who, as in the Supper at Emmaus, enters this lowly but pious home and suggests that even for the most destitute stratum of nineteenth-century souls, salvation through Christianity is possible. This mixture of the natural and the supernatural in Uhde’s

work of the mid-1880s was at first controversial, and attacked by the orthodox wing of the Protestant clergy, but its pieties were soon absorbed by popular taste, easily transformed into religious kitsch. Compared with Van Gogh’s hard-earned evocation of Christian faith in the darkest of circumstances, Uhde’s fusion of these contradictory worlds seems a simplistic solution, as much an artificial formula as his tidy, hygienic representation of a peasant interior.

Even without such explicit Christian references, the aura of sanctity which Van Gogh had intuited in the miserable lives of the poor had become a commonplace in later nineteenth-century painting, providing for middle-class spectators an aesthetic palliative to the grim facts of society outside the museums and galleries. The image even penetrated the poverty-stricken depths of black society in the United States, as in the work of Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937). Having studied with Eakins from 1880 to 1882, he finally moved to Europe in 1891, making his home in Paris, where he was free from the racial prejudices of his own country and where the Salon exhibited his religious paintings. Back on a visit to the States in 1893–94, he painted such scenes as *The Thankful Poor* (fig. 415), a black American version of the kind of imagery which had earlier so often inspired Van Gogh. Here, both the aged grandfather and the young boy lower their eyes and heads in an act of Christian gratitude, receiving more sustenance from their steadfast faith than from their spare meal. And as in the work of Israëls and Uhde, a soft veil of light and shadow adds a mood of otherworldly piety that softens the

Fig. 414 Fritz von Uhde, “*Come Jesus, Be Our Guest*,” 1885. Oil on canvas, 52 × 66". Nationalgalerie, Berlin.





Fig. 415 **Henry Ossawa Tanner**, *The Thankful Poor*, 1893–94. Oil on canvas, 45 × 35½". Private collection.

hard facts of poverty which Van Gogh depicted so toughly. Nevertheless, Tanner's painting at least carries the authenticity of firsthand experience among the black poor. Appropriately, it was immediately given to a philanthropic institution, the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf.

Had Van Gogh stayed in the Low Countries, his art might have remained a brutally powerful and personal version of that uneasy reconciliation between contemporary poverty and Christian morality with which the nineteenth century so often struggled. But his growing artistic ambitions, which already included in 1885 the study of old-master paintings in Antwerp and the acquisition of Japanese prints, pushed him toward Paris, where, under the protective roof of his brother Theo, he lived and worked from March 1886 to February 1888, rapidly embracing the latest stylistic innovations of the French painters and turning his eye outward from the depressing social depths of Belgium and Holland to the world of a vast, open city, where people circulated freely in parks and streets and where the constant interchange of people in cafés and restaurants provided a fluid situation of endless potential. Intoxicated by Paris, Van Gogh also tried to master its new art, which in 1886–87 was hovering on the brink of transition from the established styles of the Impressionists to the amazing disclosure, in 1886, of the *Grande-Jatte*. Van Gogh immediately became a disciple of this exciting rush of new styles, in which a clarity of light, color, and dappled brushwork seemed to wipe out the murky black and gray

tonalities and the heavily troweled paint that marked so many of his early works.

In *Interior of a Restaurant* of summer 1887 (fig. 416), we can hardly recognize the Van Gogh of *The Potato Eaters*. As if he wished to pose for himself a rigorous problem in a totally alien discipline of style and subject, he painted the inside of a restaurant, probably one in the industrial suburb of Asnières, where Seurat and Raffaelli also painted, and recorded that unnaturally regimented, pristine condition that prevails only before the first diners arrive. Within a lucid, rational perspective scheme that captures and freezes an angled corner, the chairs, tables, upside-down wine glasses, and floral decorations are lined up in orderly grid patterns that permit no intrusion of emotion or of a human presence. Moreover, the brushwork and color also belong to this realm of strict control, for Van Gogh has attempted here the overall mottling of tidy Pointillist dots which he had admired in Seurat's work, and which he was learning about directly from his friendship with Signac. The result is like an arduous lesson in the mastery of a foreign language and a foreign ethos, where the possibility of a compassionate subjectivity is rigorously suppressed in favor of an objective problem in perspective, geometry, Divisionist color, and Pointillist technique.

In other works of the period, Van Gogh's momentarily strait-jacketing discipline seemed to crack, as in his view of the vegetable gardens near his brother's home in Montmartre, painted also in the summer of 1887 (fig. 417).

Fig. 416 **Vincent van Gogh**,
Interior of a Restaurant, summer
1887. Oil on canvas,
18 × 22¼". Rijksmuseum
Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.

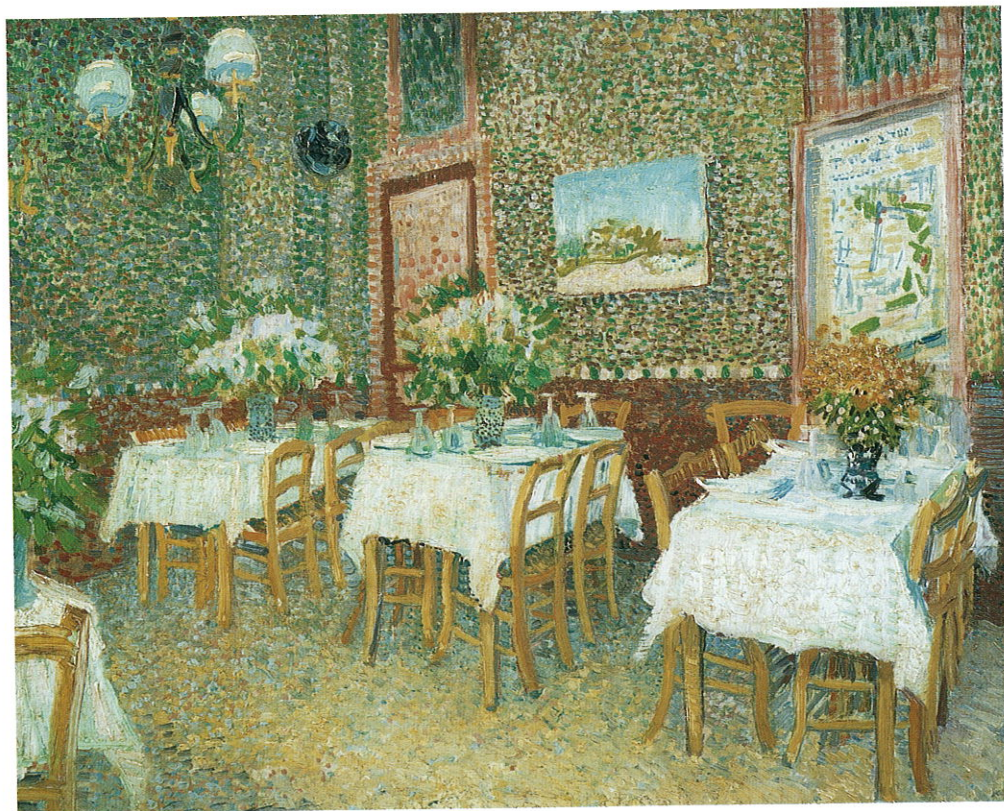


Fig. 417 **Vincent van Gogh**,
*Vegetable Gardens in
Montmartre*, summer 1887.
Oil on canvas, 37¾ × 47¼".
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Here, too, he works with the broken brushstroke shared, with different inflections, by Monet and Seurat, but an unleashed velocity overcomes the widening scene, recklessly dragging these paint marks with them, like iron filings clustering on a magnetic surface. The exhilarating amplitude and energy unbalance the equilibrium of both the contracted, cropped spaces of the Impressionists and the stable, measured ones of Seurat, resurrecting that quality of sweeping, panoramic breadth which Van Gogh knew from the landscape of his native Holland and from the seventeenth-century painters—Rembrandt, Hobbema, Ruisdael—who depicted it. Indeed, the appearance above the horizon of the X-shaped blades of the windmills that then marked the heights of Montmartre may well have instigated this merging of modern Parisian style and his native Dutch landscape traditions. Van Gogh's stamp, however, is already clear here, not only in negative terms (the adapted Impressionist techniques seem blotchy and roughhewn, the work of an inspired amateur), but in positive ones as well. For Van Gogh seems to have redirected the language of French painting toward a vehicle to convey an urgent involvement with the landscape before him. His own emotions seem to radiate outward toward these scrappy patches of cultivated gardens and to engulf the earth, the sky, and the horizon with an all-embracing love and energy that propel us swiftly from the near path at our feet to the farthest points beyond the crest of the hill.

Different though Van Gogh's art was from that of his Parisian contemporaries, by 1887 he was fully included in their milieu, both professionally and socially. He dreamed of arranging vast permanent exhibitions of their most advanced work throughout Europe, as if he were now propagating the faith of a new art rather than an old religion. He actively organized artistic splinter groups that would seek out restaurants and theaters for the display of their canvases; and, in 1888, he would even arrange to show this view of the Montmartre vegetable gardens as well as two other canvases at the more established Salon des Indépendants. It was in February of that year, too, that Van Gogh left Paris for Arles, where, even in winter, he was dazzled by the sunlight, the intense color, the abundance of this Provençal landscape. For him, accustomed to the overcast, gray winters of Northern Europe, the south of France could even be equated with the exotic beauty of Japan, whose prints, with their clean, unmodulated colors and sharp contours, seemed to come to life in this verdant world of flowers, blue skies, and the yellowest of suns. And as these pure colors surrounded him in life, so, too, did he want them to surround him not only in his own art but in the art of his colleagues. He kept in close touch with Émile Bernard and Paul Gauguin, his painter-friends in the north of France who had been evolving a pictorial style that would treat color as flat, spaceless pattern, and tried to convince them to join him that year in Arles, in the hopes

of establishing around him, in this newfound Garden of Eden, a community of artists with a similar vision. It was there that he worked on what he called his "Yellow House," whose interior he planned to decorate with bold colors and whose facilities he hoped could be used as a home and studio for other artists who believed with him in the primacy of color.

The sun of Arles was for Van Gogh a life-giving force, and even by his usual standards, his output in 1888 was prodigious, with over a hundred paintings that chronicle this energetic embrace of a fresh environment and a fresh start. *The Sower*, a work executed in the blaze of the Arles summer (fig. 418), reflects some of these quantum leaps in artistic self-revelation. Its theme is a hallowed one in nineteenth-century painting, the cyclical motif of harvesting and reseeding the earth, and the sower himself is a figure transformed from the work of one of Van Gogh's idols, Millet. But now the bountiful earth is dominated by the disk of the yellow sun, which, located in the exact center of the horizon and radiating stylized beams of light from its incised circular edge, becomes almost a secularized religious emblem, a halo of heavenly light that gives the force of life and growth to the terrestrial world below. Recreating the effect of a Christian altarpiece, the sun's hypnotic centrality is made still more abstract by the audacious rejection of conventional perspective schemes. Here, the fertile land rises steeply from the ragged, choppy brushstrokes of the soil to the tidier, upright brushstrokes of a wheat field that becomes a horizontal frieze of organic vitality. Spread out as a flattened plane, this continuous crust of thick pigment began to translate the language of Impressionism into the bold decorative patterns Van Gogh admired in Japanese prints and in the works of Bernard and Gauguin.

How daringly new *The Sower* was can be partly measured by looking at another painting of the 1880s by one of Van Gogh's earlier enthusiasms, Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848–84), who was raised in a farming village not far from the Belgian border and who also depicted agricultural themes inspired by Millet in a style that adapted some of the innovations of Impressionism. In *Père Jacques*, shown at the Salon of 1882 (fig. 419), the name of the title refers to the old woodsman Bastien-Lepage used as a model for a painting that confronts us with the brutalizing results of a life worn to its end by physical labor in the fields. In a chilly autumnal setting, the woodsman still carries a crushing bundle of faggots on his back while his granddaughter gathers flowers. Van Gogh would surely have approved of the artist's candor in depicting the pathetic, weary features of this human beast of burden, and he might well have admired too the painting's many allegorical implications, which include not only the overt cyclical contrast of youth and age as winter approaches, but perhaps a covert allusion to La Fontaine's fable about a woodsman who, aching



Fig. 418 **Vincent van Gogh**, *The Sower*, summer 1888, Arles. Oil on canvas, 25¼ × 31⅞". Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.

under his labors, suddenly realizes the value of life when his idle wish that death release him from his chores is granted. Moreover, Van Gogh might also have responded favorably to the way in which, without sacrificing the potency of the theme, Bastien-Lepage borrowed the tapestry-like effect of Impressionist landscape, blurring, as conservative critics would complain, many of the details of the figures in a spotty profusion of underbrush. But the results that Van Gogh obtains in *The Sower* from a comparable absorption, not only of the Realist tradition of peasant paintings, with their moralizing overtones, but of the Impressionist impulse to compress such images into a continuous weave of paint, are of a drastically different order. As Van Gogh himself recognized, *The Sower* inaugurates a new phase in his art that would open limitless possibilities.

These possibilities could turn out to be innovations of feeling as well as style; for the artist's precarious psychological equilibrium, which resulted in a breakdown that began just before Christmas of 1888 and included the mutilation of his ear, often swerved from the exultant joy of *The*



Fig. 419 **Jules Bastien-Lepage**, *Père Jacques*, 1881 (Salon of 1882). Oil on canvas, 77½ × 7½". Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin.



Fig. 420 **Vincent van Gogh**, *The Night Café at Arles*, September 1888. Oil on canvas, 28½ × 36¼". Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.

Sower, with its paean to the almost supernatural wonder of the earth's fertility, to the deep anxiety revealed in *The Night Café at Arles*, painted in September 1888 (fig. 420). A visual inventory of most of the advanced innovations of French painting in 1888—from Gauguin's flat zones of intense, unmodulated color to Seurat's circular aureoles of dotted light that vibrate outward from the hanging gas lamps—*The Night Café* also projects a psychological environment of conflicting emotions, from a hellish, breathless agitation that dizzily funnels us upward into the scene across the converging rush of yellow floorboards, to a barren inertia, in which a waiter in white stands almost like a prison or hospital attendant among his charges, who, at the far corners, sink in lassitude. It is hard to believe that this is the work of the artist who, only a year before, had painted so orderly and so unpopulated a restaurant interior (see fig. 416); for here, the plummeting spaces, the clashing colors, the harsh light fulfill Van Gogh's own ambition "to

express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin one's self, go mad, or commit a crime . . . to express the power of darkness in a low drinking spot . . . in an atmosphere like a devil's furnace." Moving in extremes from the sower's sunlit heaven to the drinker's gaslit hell, Van Gogh astoundingly succeeds in communicating these desperate feelings without sacrificing either his acute sense of the real and the specific (warped as it is, the clock reads 12:15; and the glasses and the bottles, emptied or partly full, can be counted), or his insistence on imposing the kind of patterned, decorative coherence which had inspired him in Japanese prints and Gauguin's painting.

It is telling that his mind swarmed with the fashionable color theories of the moment, but that he immediately translated them into emotional terms. Earlier, he had written about expressing "the love of two lovers by a marriage of two complementary colors, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibrations of like tones"; and, in

writing about *The Night Café*, he claimed that he wished “to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green,” a chromatic contrast which for a Neo-Impressionist might only have been the rational demonstration of a law of optics. Van Gogh’s wish was more than granted in the strident collisions of complementary color that pervade the scene, from the shrill juxtaposition of what he called blood-red walls with the acid-green ceiling to the baize billiard table which creates a restless framed ground for the startling red of a ball that is both separate from and part of an odd still life of a long cue and two white balls, so disquieting to post-Freudian viewers aware of Van Gogh’s imminent self-mutilation. Whether dealing with the facts of the real world around him, with the adventurous pictorial vocabularies of his French colleagues, or with the artistic theories of the 1880s, Van Gogh transformed everything into a vehicle for his own urgent emotions, leaving us to wonder how he also managed to harness them into compelling works of art.

Of the many marvels that make up Van Gogh’s genius, one is his uncanny capacity to project his total visual and emotional attention into anything he painted, animate or inanimate, so that a shoe, a sunflower, a chair, a book could carry as much weight as the image of a human being. In this, he perpetuated the efforts of so many Romantic artists and writers to find all of the world in a blade of grass and to seek out, through intense, staring proximity, the differing scales of their subjects, be they children, animals, or fragments of a landscape. An especially poignant example of this empathy can be seen in a small painting of late May 1889 which depicts a death’s-head moth almost camouflaged in its natural habitat of leaves and flowers (fig. 421). Regretting that he had to kill the insect in order to paint it, Van Gogh scrutinized it with the eye of a naturalist, bringing it so close to the viewer that we almost feel immersed in and identified with the life and environment of this strange creature of the night. Given the turbulent facts of Van Gogh’s psychological biography in the months preceding this work—a sequence of events that included violent conflicts with Gauguin during his two-month sojourn in Arles, followed by a series of nervous breakdowns that resulted in voluntary and involuntary incarcerations in the prisons and mental asylums of first Arles and then nearby St.-Rémy—it is easy to invent a symbolic scenario for this painting, in which the image of the skull on the insect’s head is at war with the blossoming life around it. Could it be that the joy elicited by Theo’s marriage on April 17 might conquer the gloom of the death’s head? Could the freedom of the winged creature be a symbol of Van Gogh’s own wish to escape from literal or metaphoric prisons? Yet no such specific interpretation is ever adequate to translate the full and elusive range of associations, both personal and public, which emanate from Van Gogh’s art, an elusiveness which allied him to the Symbolist aesthetic of his French

contemporaries who wished to penetrate, without naming the mysteries below the visible surfaces of things. Nor would such an interpretation take into account either the power of this painting lies also in the startlingly bold and animate patterns of organic form, at once as delicate as the scenes of plants and insects familiar to Japanese prints and as forceful as the passions that pervade all of Van Gogh’s work.

Such mysteries and such visual triumphs recur throughout the prodigious profusion of some seventy-five paintings that Van Gogh executed in Auvers, near Paris, in what were to be the last two months of his life, from May 21 to July 27, 1890, when he died two days after shooting himself and after writing a last, despondent letter to Theo about his doubts that there would ever be adequate support in the modern world for the modern art that had become the whole of his life. In Auvers, where Pissarro and Cézanne had also painted, Van Gogh lived under the personal as well as professional protection of Dr. Paul Gachet, an odd personality who was well known by the Impressionists whose works he collected, and who, concerned with nervous disorders, had a part-time practice in Paris. In



Fig. 421 **Vincent van Gogh**, *Death's-Head Moth on an Arum*, May 1889. Oil on canvas, 13 × 9½". Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam.

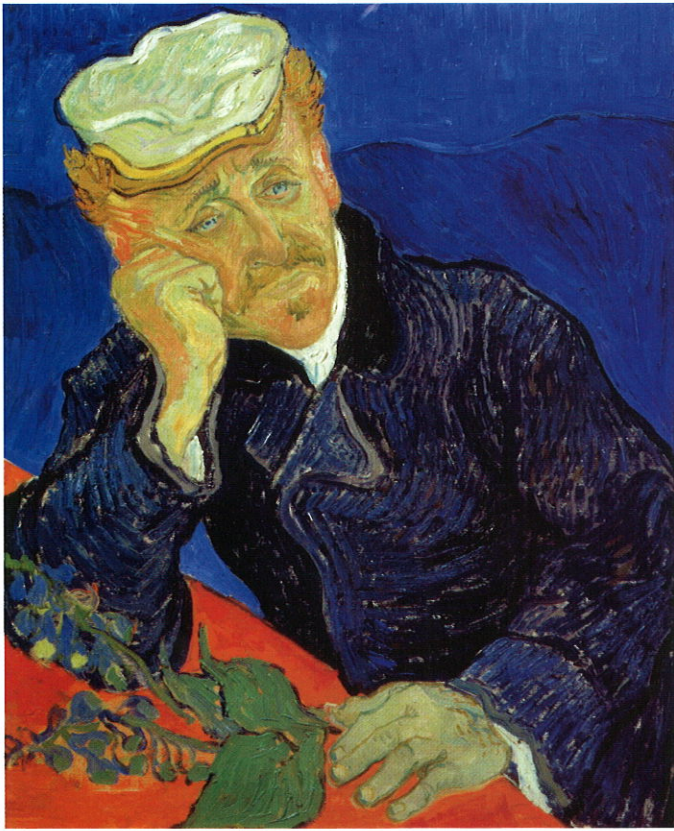


Fig. 422 **Vincent van Gogh**, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, June 1890, Auvers. Oil on canvas, 26 × 22³/₈". Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

June, Van Gogh painted the doctor's portrait (fig. 422), which in many ways became, like the death's-head moth, a self-portrait. Theo had already noticed the physical similarity between the two men (who were both redheads), and Vincent himself claimed that the doctor, who had in fact written a thesis on melancholy, suffered from a nervous disorder as troubling as his own. Be that as it may, the portrait, as Van Gogh described it, projects not only "an expression of melancholy," but "the heartbroken expression of our time," a mood immediately conveyed by the passive, tilted posture, with hand supporting head, that was a common pose of melancholy in the international repertory of Romantic painting. Even within this aura of depression, which seems to expand to universal dimensions, Van Gogh clung to specific facts related to the doctor himself. Not only did he include the overcoat and white visored cap that the doctor wore the year round, but also a symbolic still life of two novels by the Goncourts and a digitalis plant, the former alluding to the miseries of contemporary life, including the failure of artists like those befriended and patronized by Gachet to achieve their aesthetic goals, the latter alluding to a well-known natural treatment for heart disease, one of Gachet's medical interests. But these particularized and intellectualized symbols are quickly absorbed in the molten contours that dominate the whole, irregularly

throbbing arabesques which seem to emerge from the interior emotional life of the static figure and which are so contagious in their emanations that even the flat background planes of the wall are warped by their rhythms. In works by Seurat and Signac also of 1890, such as *Le Chahut* (see fig. 404) and the portrait of Fénéon (see fig. 407), abstract, curvilinear patterns begin, too, to lead a life of their own, but their effect is of an orderly, diagrammatic decoration. In Van Gogh's portrait, such animated circuits become paths of unruly emotion, discharged from their sitter's, and hence from the artist's, invisible core of feeling.

Although by the time of his death, Van Gogh's work had been seldom shown publicly and only one critic, Georges-Albert Aurier, one of the chief spokesmen for the Symbolist aesthetic, had troubled to write about him, his work became ever more widely known to artists in the 1890s, and to the public at large in the early twentieth century. It was then that the full impact of his legacy could be explored by painters who, under the banners of Fauvism or Expressionism, sought out the most immediate ways of finding a correspondence between art and emotions that could alternate, as they did in Van Gogh's life and art, between exultant joy and paralyzing depression.

Ensor, Klinger, Redon

Because he lived out his last four years in France, where he brought his art to fruition by voraciously absorbing the newest styles of his French painter-friends, Van Gogh has often been assimilated into the history of French painting. Yet his evangelical faith that art was made for life's sake rather than art's sake separates him from most French painters, who had a more cautious view of the limited role that art might play as a savior of souls and society; and his works themselves, with their often clumsy, impetuous touch and turbulent rhythms, are alien to the more decorous professional standards of technique and emotion that prevailed even among the most anti-establishment French painters of the later nineteenth century. In Van Gogh's willingness to sacrifice refinement of brushwork and harmonious structure in order to express his urgent emotions, he stands close to another painter from the Low Countries, the Belgian James Ensor (1860–1949), whose reclusive and often ugly art seems more the product of a unique and disturbing personality than of a shared aesthetic program. Like Van Gogh, Ensor virtually defined the whole of his art in the decade of the 1880s, even though he was to live through the first half of the next century. Again, like Van Gogh, he was swift to adapt the most innovative styles coming from Paris, but at the same time to mold them into his own strange ends.

Thanks to his training in the Brussels Academy, he was technically proficient enough and thematically conventional