
Potsdam, October 24, 2019

Van Gogh: Still Lives

October 26, 2019 to February 2, 2020

“Painting still lifes is the beginning of everything,” Van Gogh remarked in the winter of 1884/85. The exhibition *Van Gogh: Still Lives* examines the experimental, ground-breaking character that Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) attributed to his still lifes. Now, for the first time, tribute is paid to the significance of this genre in his oeuvre. In still life the artist attained singularity: this was the right medium for his struggle with the expressive power of colour. His persistent experimentation with the genre reflects his artistic development. Here, he pre-empted modernism, but without forsaking the important role that still life had played in Dutch painting ever since the 17th century. The result is an emblematic, existential art that continues to radiate energy today.

During the single decade he was active as a painter from 1881 until his death in 1890, Van Gogh executed over 170 still lifes. As a genre, still life was a rewarding gateway into painting as it offered him a framework to experiment with painterly techniques and options. The paintings reflect his response to impressionism, which Van Gogh witnessed first-hand in Paris between 1886 and 1888, but also the influence of colour woodcuts from Japan. The still lifes describe his journey towards an ever freer, more intensive use of paint.

The exhibition *Van Gogh: Still Lives* has been organized by Dr Michael Philipp, Chief Curator at the Museum Barberini. Overall, it presents 27 of these paintings in a representative selection, illustrating the painter’s artistic evolution. It traces the oeuvre from the studies in sombre, earthy tones painted during Van Gogh’s early period between 1881 and 1885 to the still lifes with brightly coloured fruit and flowers that he produced during his last years in Arles, Saint-Rémy, and Auvers.

In collaboration with the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo and the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Under the patronage of H. E. Wepke Kingma, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Germany.

Chapters in the Exhibition

The exhibition *Van Gogh: Still Lives* traces the key stages in the painter’s life and work, illustrating the significant role, which still life played in his artistic development, with a representative selection of 27 paintings.

The Hague and Nuenen, 1881–1885

Vincent van Gogh had already reached the age of 27 when he turned to art in August 1880. After a year of self-study, during which he practised drawing, he began painting in oils in the winter of 1881. He took lessons in The Hague from a cousin by marriage, Anton Mauve, a reputed artist of the Hague School. “Mauve immediately installed me in front of a still life consisting of a couple of old clogs and other objects, and so I could set to work,” Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo in early December 1881. Still life was a rewarding gateway to painting. *Still Life with Cabbage and Clogs* is one of Van Gogh’s first paintings. Unlike Dutch artists of the 17th century, who often celebrated grand and exotic items or conveyed a symbolic message with their still lifes, Van Gogh depicted simple, everyday items and country fruit and vegetables. He confined his palette to a few muted colours, mostly shades of brown, sometimes tinged with red or green. Initially he was concerned with the spatial relationships between the objects, with form and perspective, but soon he began to address the use of colour: deeply struck by the books *Les Artistes de mon temps* (1876) by Charles Blanc and, in particular *Du dessin et de la couleur* (1883) by Félix Bracquemond, which he read several times, he began in autumn 1885 to experiment with colour contrast and nuances as compositional devices. Studies such as *Still Life with Apples and Pumpkins* were an exercise in “modelling with different colours”, as Van Gogh wrote to his brother in late September 1885.

The artist was a great nature-lover, and this also finds its way to the fore in his still lifes. Van Gogh had a collection of birds’ nests built by many different species and kept them, along with stuffed birds, at his studio in Nuenen. Nests had been a common motif in Dutch still life during the 17th and 18th centuries but always within a larger arrangement alongside a vase of flowers, and often accompanied by various kinds of animals. Van Gogh was the first painter to devote an entire work solely to a bird’s nest. These paintings bear a symbolic meaning. Few other motifs are such powerful metaphors for family and a personal sense of safety. This last thought was certainly on Van Gogh’s mind when he depicted these birds’ nests, as a letter to his brother testifies. He enclosed a sketch of a single nest on which he had noted: “I feel for *la nichée et les nids* [the brood and the nests] – particularly those *human* nests, those cottages on the heath and their inhabitants”.

Paris, 1886–1888

When he moved to Paris in late February 1886, Van Gogh put not only the Netherlands behind him but also a spectrum of colour dominated by earthy, sombre tones and themes he had encountered in the peasant world. During the two years he spent in the French capital he developed a brighter, richer palette and an individual style. The path to this artistic breakthrough was laid in his floral still lifes. Van Gogh painted over 30 of them in

his first summer in Paris. The motifs also gave him an opportunity to maintain his close affinity with nature in the urban environment. Van Gogh drew ideas from floral still lifes by contemporary artists whose works he first witnessed in Paris. The one he admired most was Adolphe Monticelli, who inspired Van Gogh to experiment with backgrounds of dark colour and lashings of thick paint.

At that time, Paris was not only the hub of European cultural activity but also a hot-spot of horticulture, where the passion for flowers was shared by every social class. Public parks such as the Jardin du Luxembourg and the Voyer d'Argenson in nearby Asnières were popular with Parisians, and Van Gogh painted views of both places, as well as in the gardens that then still existed in Montmartre. *Roses and Peonies* could have been prompted by a floral still life by Édouard Manet. It was painted in June 1886, the month when Van Gogh saw his *Peonies in a Vase* of 1864. Two years later he was still writing enthusiastically in a letter to Theo about Manet's free brushwork "in solid, thick impasto".

Like the impressionists, whose eighth exhibition he visited in May 1886, Van Gogh read Charles Blanc's book *Grammaire des arts du dessin* about the law of simultaneous contrast. This states that the impact of tones on opposite sides of the colour wheel is mutually reinforced when they are placed directly side by side. Flowers with their many-hued petals provided a natural trove of strong hues that could be combined easily and at will. The fleeting impressionist feel of Van Gogh's Parisian still lifes is accompanied by an expressive element: by making his brushwork visible, he was also declaring an artistic style.

The format of his *Still Life with Meadow Flowers and Roses*, on display at the Museum Barberini, is unusual: it measures 100 x 80 cm and is one of the largest still lifes that Van Gogh ever painted—even bigger than his *Sunflowers*. It is a homage to summer and perhaps also a traditional *memento mori* to remind us that all life is transient, for the lush splendour of the colours and petals of these meadow flowers is only short-lived. No doubt he was equally fascinated by the radiant hue of the poppies. Claude Monet had recently celebrated this flower in landscapes like *Poppies* (1873, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). The *Vase with Poppies* from the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford has only recently been certified as an authentic Van Gogh, following a thorough examination at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. It is on display here for the first time since this attribution and can be compared with the *Still Life with Meadow Flowers and Roses*, which features similar motifs.

The significant artistic discoveries that Van Gogh made while living in Paris included, apart from coloured Japanese woodcuts, the work of the impressionists and neo-impressionists, which he witnessed in the early summer of 1886. Although he felt no allegiance to either of these movements, he derived important input from observing the latest trends.

In spring 1887 he went painting in Asnières with Paul Signac, one of the pioneers of pointillism, and it was here that he painted the extended still life *Interior of a Restaurant*. From these pointillist efforts Van Gogh went on, by juxtaposing long, vigorous brush-

strokes, to evolve the distinctive, dynamic technique that became a hallmark of his style.

Van Gogh now began to animate the surroundings of the objects in his still lifes. At first, elaborate background wallpaper offered the chance to incorporate complementary contrasts of red and green, blue and orange. The paint in *Carafe and Dish with Citrus Fruit* is so thin in places that the canvas remains visible, reinforcing the picture's delicate feel. Here Van Gogh used fine hatching to convey the volume of the lemons instead of modelling them out of the paint. In the still lifes with fruit that followed, the grounding that frames the loosely scattered objects draws vibrancy from the opposing angles of the hatching. In *Grapes, Lemons, Pears, and Apples* Van Gogh granted autonomy to the picture space by casting aside the illusion of three-dimensionality.

In Paris Van Gogh remained aware of potentially emblematic readings and he transposed these into a modern form of art. The unusual combination of objects in *Still Life with Plaster Statuette* and the clearly legible book titles suggest that Van Gogh had a symbolic message to convey. The novels *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864) by the brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt and *Bel-Ami* (1885) by Guy de Maupassant, key works of literary naturalism, recount love affairs that bring ruin or social success. The statuette of Venus and the rose, her attribute since ancient times, are also references to the theme of love.

Arles, 1888–1889

After arriving in Arles in February 1888 Van Gogh, fascinated by the Southern spring in Provence, turned to landscapes. In rare still lifes he continued his formal experiments with colour and texture. For some years he had been eager to make a painting entirely in shades of yellow, and he did this in August 1888 with the *Sunflowers*. Today, these *Sunflowers* are the best-known still lifes in art history. Van Gogh painted four variations in August 1888 and three more the following January. The surviving versions are now in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the National Gallery in London, the Neue Pinakothek (Bavarian State Painting Collections) in Munich, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Sompō Japan Nipponkoa Museum of Art in Tokyo as well as a private collection—no museum will ever send these icons of art out travelling.

The exhibition *Van Gogh: Still Lifes* presents a number of works drawn from the same context of his still lifes with sunflowers. One of these is the *Basket of Lemons and Bottle*, an experiment in monochrome painting, a procedure he had been trying to master for some time. The surface of the tablecloth, the structure of the basket and the shapes of the lemons are modelled by using gradations of yellow. The *Vase with Zinnias*, executed around the same time, also laid the ground for his *Sunflowers*. As in so many floral still lifes painted back in his first summer in Paris, Van Gogh set this bouquet in front of a richly dark, monochrome background, making the radiant colours of the blossoms stand out all the more brightly. In its dense profusion and close-up perspective, the bouquet

appears almost monumental. The formula behind the composition is similar to that of the *Sunflowers*.

Van Gogh sought not simply to depict things but “to imbue nature and objects with so much passion” (Antonin Artaud). Often his motifs were proxies for the artist himself and illustrate his identification with his paintings. The *Still Life with a Plate of Onions* also fits into the context of the *Sunflowers*. In this oblique self-portrait, Van Gogh described his personal circumstances in January 1889. He painted it shortly after his release from hospital in Arles. He had spent two weeks there after cutting off part of his left ear following an argument with Paul Gauguin. This still life takes artistic stock and testifies to his unbroken desire to paint. As soon as he returned from hospital, Van Gogh was eager to return to work; he wrote to his brother that he wanted to begin by doing some still lifes to get back into the way of painting. The burning candle evokes Paul Gauguin, whose looming departure in December 1888, after only two months, put an end to their time together and to the dream of an artists’ community, and it plunged Van Gogh into a severe mental crisis. In the still life *Gauguin’s Chair* (National Gallery, London), painted in November 1888, Van Gogh had set this burning candle on the chair as a proxy for his absent friend. The pipe and tobacco represent the artist himself: he had painted this pipe and open tobacco pouch once before in *Van Gogh’s Chair* (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), the counterpart to *Gauguin’s Chair*. There are onions in that still life too, in the wooden crate at the back to which he added his signature. Probably, then, these onions in the centre of the painting are yet another reference to himself. Onions are associated with tears and a sting of pain, but the green shoots also symbolize growth and self-expression.

Still Life of Oranges and Lemons with Blue Gloves was painted a few days later, just before the repeats of the *Sunflowers* for Paul Gauguin. Perhaps the gloves left on this table are not only a winter accessory but also an expression of vulnerability and a desire for protection. Certainly, by placing his signature so visibly at the opening of one glove, Van Gogh was emphasising how important the garment was to him. Just a few months after he completed this painting, Van Gogh had himself admitted to the psychiatric clinic in Saint-Rémy.

Saint-Rémy, 1889/90

A Pair of Leather Clogs was painted in the seclusion of the clinic at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, where Van Gogh produced about 140 works in the space of a year—although almost no still life. This painting consequently has a special significance. *Shoes* are an unusual motif for still life. Van Gogh first drew on it in 1881 in The Hague with the typical Dutch clogs, returning to it in Paris in 1886/87 with rows of boots and in August 1888 in Arles with the still life *Shoes* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). He picked up the theme once more during his stay at the institute in Saint-Paul-de-Mausole. Here it symbolises a will to

look ahead: with their openings turned to face the viewer, these shoes are an invitation to slip them on and walk away.

Auvers, 1890

In May 1890, after a year in the clinic at Saint-Rémy, Van Gogh moved to Auvers-sur-Oise near Paris. There the blossoming chestnut trees, the most powerful expression of the spring-time life force, must have imparted a sense of vitality to Van Gogh, always sensitive to nature's signals. Within just two months—until his death on 29 July—he produced almost 80 paintings, including ten still lifes. In these pictures Van Gogh dismissed all impressionist notions of dissolving form. On 3 June 1890 the artist wrote to his brother: “And I also hope that I'll continue to feel much surer of my brush than before I went to Arles”. This self-assurance comes across in the painting *Blossoming Chestnut Branches*. It was the biggest of Van Gogh's later still lifes and the most expressive of them all. He continued to paint in bright colours, applying the technique he had forged in the South of France. Van Gogh breathed soul into the purportedly static genre of still life, as if the painter's emotions were engrained within the things he depicted.

www.museum-barberini.com/en/van-gogh

While *Van Gogh: Still Lives* runs in Potsdam, the Städel Museum in Frankfurt am Main will be presenting its large-scale exhibition *Making Van Gogh: A German Love Story*. With altogether 70 works by Van Gogh on display at these two shows, only once before has so much art by Van Gogh been seen in Germany at once: back in 1914 when Paul Cassirer's gallery in Berlin staged its ground-breaking retrospective.

Press contact:

Achim Klapp, Marte Kräher
Museum Barberini
Humboldtstr. 5–6, 14467 Potsdam, Germany
T +49 331 236014 305/308
presse@museum-barberini.com
www.museum-barberini.com