

**Vincent van Gogh**

***Digger***, May–June 1885

Black chalk on laid paper

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

## Vincent van Gogh

### *Two Women Digging*, July–August 1885

Black chalk, gray wash, on laid paper

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Vincent had to concede that his mastery of the figure was not where it should be after the cold reception with which *The Potato Eaters* was met. He returned to his drawing exercises, this time using the now famous method of interconnected eggs and ovals that his artistic hero Delacroix had recommended. It was the method, according to Delacroix, that the ancient Greeks had used to capture mass and movement. This technique is evident, for example in the kneecaps and quadriceps of *The Digger* (in fact, clearly a model posed in Vincent's studio).

After just a few months of disciplined practice, Van Gogh's ability to capture movement had improved, as evident in the more complex dual figure study of women diggers. These drawings were preparatory to a large painted figural composition of working peasants that he hinted at in a letter to Theo—however, it never came to fruition.



Eugène Delacroix, *Study with Horse and Two Figures*, 1830s. Pen and brown ink. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

# Vincent van Gogh

## ***Marsh with Water Lilies, Etten***, June 1881.

Pen and India ink on paper, with pencil under drawing

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

This delicate drawing provides early evidence of Van Gogh's instinctive affinity for the textural and rhythmic effects of line. It was done outdoors on the vast marshes of Passievaart not far from Etten, where Vincent's father had taken up a position as a minister in 1875. Vincent's pen-and-ink drawing compares interestingly to that of his friend Anthon von Rappard, whom Vincent had befriended during his short-lived attendance at the Brussels Academy of Fine Arts, and with whom he may have even worked side-by-side on these drawings. Van Gogh's high horizon dwarfs the spire of the church tower of the village Seppe in the distance, elongating the foreground and delighting in the feathery marsh reeds and their shimmering reflections, with the paper itself standing for the ovals of the floating water lily leaves. By contrast, van Rappard's more conventionally picturesque view replicates the forgettable composition of a postcard.



**Anthon van Rappard** (Dutch, 1858–1892)

***The Passievaart near Seppe***, June 13, 1881

Pencil on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

# Vincent van Gogh

## *Potato Eaters*, April 1885

Lithograph on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

This lithograph was intended by Vincent to be one of a series that he planned, in his words, “of subjects from peasant life, in short—the peasants at home.” By 1885, Van Gogh had spent nearly four years diligently attempting to master the representation of the human figure. The painted version of *The Potato Eaters* was supposed to announce his arrival as a fully mature artist, committed to the truthful and respectful depiction of ‘real’ peasants, just as they were and not idealized. To Van Gogh, the medium of lithography held the promise of providing an affordable form of art “from the people and for the people.” Vincent made many drawn and painted studies of the de Groots, a farm family in Nuenen. They were likely the models for the five figures engaged in the everyday activity of consuming their humble repast.

Though secular in nature, the strong chiaroscuro created by the single source of illumination at the composition’s center recalls that of Rembrandt’s religious prints, which Van Gogh knew well. This illumination was likely intended by Van Gogh to lend a dignifying spirituality to these otherwise unabashedly ugly workers of the land.



Vincent van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*, April-May 1885. Oil on canvas. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

**Ary Scheffer** (Dutch, 1895–1858)

***Christus Consolator***, 1851

Oil on canvas

Lent by the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Given in memory of Rev. D. J. Nordling by Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Dassel, Minnesota

Van Gogh knew this painting well through a reproductive print that his father displayed on the wall in their family home in Zundert. He hung a copy of the same print in his room when he heard his own missionary calling, while working at a boys school in the London suburb of Isleworth. The painting is an illustration of the biblical passage: “I have come to heal those who are of a broken heart” and shows Christ revealing the stigmata as a way of comforting the suffering supplicants around him.

Although Vincent would come to disavow any organized form of religion, he never abandoned the sentiment of solace through suffering. If anything, he transferred this powerful sentiment onto his art.

***Phryné devant le tribunal*, after Jean-Léon  
Gérôme. Photogravure, 1861. From the  
series *Galerie photographique*, published  
by Goupil & Cie, no. 103**

Courtesy of Eik Kahng

**Vincent van Gogh** (Dutch, 1853–1890)

***Self-Portrait with Pipe***, September–November  
1886

Oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Before his arrival in Paris in late February 1886, Van Gogh had never painted a self-portrait, likely because he did not possess a mirror, which this exercise obviously requires. Theo's apartment, which also served as Vincent's studio, was equipped with one, and Van Gogh would avail himself of it to paint some thirty self-portraits during his two years in Paris. This one, done in the fall of that year, does not yet reflect the increasingly experimental and higher keyed palette of the transitional Paris period work. The thirty-three-year-old artist regards his reflection calmly. He is neatly groomed, attired in a well-tailored suit, and smoking a pipe. He looks every bit the part of a sophisticated expat, discovering the cultural riches of Paris.



**Honoré Daumier** (French, 1808–1879)

***The Strong Man***, ca. 1865

Oil on wood panel

The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, acquired 1928

Daumier was one of the many French printmakers whose work Van Gogh knew well and collected, and whom he admired for his “terrifying truthfulness” in his depiction of everyday life. Daumier earned his living as a caricaturist for such satirical magazines as *Le Charivari*, for which he created some 3,900 lithographs: typically biting caricatures that lampooned politicians, as well as all manner of social classes, from low to high.

Daumier’s paintings, however, remained relatively unrecognized for their daring modernity until after his death. Largely self-taught, Daumier dwelled frequently on the urban poor, using an anti-academic, gestural brushwork that, like Vincent’s, seems to anticipate the progressive art of the next generation. The dark tone of this painting of a parade of sideshow characters, hawking their attractions, has been interpreted as a parodic condemnation of the propaganda wielded under successive monarchs to manipulate public sentiment.

**Anton Mauve** (Dutch, 1838–1888)

***The Potato Diggers*, 1880s**

Oil on canvas, mounted on board

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of Sanford and Mary Jane Bloom

Mauve was Vincent's cousin by marriage and was a very famous artist. He was part of the so-called Hague school, who generally treated subjects of rural life, depicted in earthen tones, as in this oil sketch. It was Mauve who at last recognized some artistic potential in his now determined protégé and it was Mauve who first introduced Vincent to watercolor, which, the ever-practical older artist believed could be a means of livelihood for his fledgling understudy.

As always with Vincent, his unbridled enthusiasm soon overwhelmed the more retiring Mauve, and the two parted ways after a fight over the necessity of learning to draw from plaster casts *before* attempting the live model. Nevertheless, Vincent's brief apprenticeship certainly stoked his desire to learn how to paint and in vivid color.

**Vincent van Gogh**

***Head of a Peasant Woman,***

November 1884-May 1885

Oil on canvas on wood panel

Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John J. Emery

## Vincent van Gogh

### *Head of a Peasant Woman,*

November 1884-May 1885

Oil on canvas

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Charles H. Yalem by exchange, and funds given by Bruce and Kimberly Olson, Mrs. Alvin R. Frank, Sam and Marilyn Fox and the Fox Family Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Jack C. Taylor, Mr. and Mrs. Andrew C. Taylor, the Ruth Peters MacCarthy Charitable Trust, The Arthur and Helen Baer Charitable Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. David C. Farrell, The Jordan Charitable Foundation, Nancy and Kenneth Kranzberg, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas K. Langsdorf, Mr. and Mrs. William C. Rusnack, and the Gary Wolff Family

This painting and the one next to it belong to a group of such studies that Van Gogh produced during the winter of 1884. Once Vincent finally made up his mind to be an artist, he sought to emulate the painters he admired most (Jean-François Millet and Jules Breton), both of whom concentrated on the depiction of peasant life. By December, he was referring to these studies as “heads of the people,” evidently inspired by the series of prints of the same title by the illustrator Hubert von Herkomer (1849-1914), several of which he had in his personal collection.

Van Gogh deliberately sought out models whose rough features conveyed an immediate sense of the arduousness of their daily lives. If the earthen tones still derive from Hague school painting, like that of his uncle, the artist Anton Mauve, already in evidence is a conscious use of complementary colors—for example in the reds and greens used to describe the complexion of the peasant woman in profile—that Van Gogh had learned about through the example of his artist-hero, the Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix.

**Photogravure print from  
the original 1861 painting  
by Jean-Léon Gérôme,  
*Phryné devant le tribunal.***

From the series, *Galerie  
photographique*, published by  
Goupil & Cie, no. 103, 1870.

**Jean Alexandre  
Joseph Falguière**

(French, 1831– 1900)

***Phryné***, n.d.

Bronze

Lent by the Minneapolis  
Institute of Art, Bequest of  
Bruce B. Dayton

Through his early days in the art trade, Van Gogh was aware of the technical accomplishments of artists like the French academic virtuoso Jean-Léon Gérôme, even though his art now seems diametrically opposed to everything that Vincent would hope to accomplish. Gérôme's most popular compositions were translated from oil to reproductive print and, in this case, to three dimensions as executed by the celebrated sculptor Falguière. But as Vincent commented in a letter to brother Theo, dated January 9, 1878, "Uncle Cor asked me today if I didn't find the Phryné by Gérôme beautiful, and I said I would rather see an ugly woman by Israëls or Millet or a little old woman by Edouard Frère: for what does a beautiful body such as Phryné's really matter? Animals have it too, perhaps even more so than people, but animals don't have a soul like the one that animates the people painted by Israëls or Millet or Frère, and hasn't life been given to us to become rich in our hearts, even if our appearance suffers from it? I feel very little sympathy for that statue after Gérôme, for I see not one sign of reason in it, and a couple of hands that bear the signs of work are more beautiful than such as are seen on that statue."