Van Gogh and Delacroix

Though perhaps not self-evident, Van Gogh was already under the spell of Delacroix when at work on the somber-toned figure studies that would culminate in *The Potato Eaters*. Like Van Gogh, the great French Romantic painter left a detailed written record of his thoughts – in his case, in the form of journals that were written with a verve and intelligence that is rare in the history of art. Delacroix's color theory became familiar to Vincent through the accounts of art historian Charles Blanc in the 1870s. But it was not until the Paris years that the law of simultaneous contrast—as he understood it through Delacroix's example and then saw at work in the paintings of Monet and the Impressionists—that Van Gogh's palette was fully transformed. Freed from the earthen tones of 17th-century Dutch art, the painters of the Hague School, and those of Barbizon that he had held so dear in the work of the first six years, Van Gogh's paintings began to take on an unprecedented intensity of high-keyed color. Also, like Delacroix and so many other 19th-century artists from Courbet to Manet, for Vincent, the study of flowers offered the ideal vehicle for perfecting his burgeoning understanding of how juxtaposed complementary hues could instantly lift his paintings. Two of Van Gogh's most glorious achievements in this subgenre of still life are on view in this gallery.

Van Gogh and Provence

Years before Gauguin's voyage to Tahiti in 1891 to escape the corruption he associated with Paris, painters such as Adolphe Monticelli and Paul Cézanne had voluntarily fled the capitol for Provence, which to them, amounted to a similar rejection of sophisticated urbanity. Van Gogh was preceded by these artist-heroes, in whose footsteps he followed when he took the train from Paris to Arles on February 29, 1888. Still dreaming of an artists' colony, like the one enjoyed by the artists of Barbizon, Van Gogh hoped to establish a "Studio of the South," where like-minded artists could live and work together. Vincent's relationship to Provence had already been prepared through a number of avenues, including favorite novels set in Provence to which he often referred in his letters to Theo, as well as the biographies of older artists like Monticelli, whose heavy impasto provided an influential precedent for Van Gogh's signature encrustations of paint.

In this gallery, we see the culmination of Van Gogh's decade-long search for an art that could express the solace that he craved and that he believed great art should deliver. Spearheaded by the Goncourt brothers, the greatest artists of the 18th century were also part of the mix—in particular, the still-life and genre-painting specialist, Jean Siméon Chardin, whose life and art the Goncourts had mythologized. Chardin's visible facture, humble subject matter, and sympathetic depiction of the servant class found a revival in 19th-century emulators, such as the Realists Bonvin, Antoine Vollon, and the brothers Frère. This so-called 'Rococo Revival', of which Van Gogh was keenly aware, further bolstered his own version of social realism. The sensibility associated with such a nostalgic recollection of pre-Revolutionary France had also been recently explored by the Impressionist precursors Édouard Manet and Gustave Courbet, represented here by two still-life paintings, both of which Van Gogh would have held in the greatest esteem.

19th-century Realists and the Chardin Revival

The 18th-century still-life and genre painter Chardin holds a singular role in the unfolding of art history in the 19th century and beyond—a phenomenon that has yet to be fully understood. The willing invitation to the viewer to complete the act of perception, instead of overdetermining its details through any presumption of things known, is an aspect of Chardin's quiet art that, to this day, seems anachronistically modern.

The Goncourt brothers' resuscitation of the 18th-century masters who had been relegated to the dust heap after the 1789 French Revolution saw a flowering of new emulators of Chardin in particular. Exhibited here are examples of the kind of 19th-century Realists who consciously revivified Chardin's quietest genre paintings of everyday servants, but in contemporary terms. This nostalgic version of pre-industrial working-class existence provided Van Gogh with a prototype for the kind of imagery that he wished to translate into a modern idiom of immediacy.

The Painters of the "Grand Boulevard" and the "Petit Boulevard"

Van Gogh's first encounter with the Impressionists occurred in the early summer of 1886, when he attended the eighth and last Impressionist exhibition. This was the exhibition that saw the debut of Seurat's masterpiece, *A Sunday on La Grand Jatte*. By this point, the original Impressionist group had begun to fragment, with Monet declining to participate and Degas represented by his pastels of nude women bathing.

Georges Seurat, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, 1884. Oil on canvas. Art Institute of Chicago

Pissarro had already begun to embrace Seurat's pointillism, with its tiny dots of juxtaposed but unblended complementary colors that, according to new theories of optics, were believed to blend automatically in the eye of the beholder to create a more brilliant effect. Van Gogh referred to the original Impressionist group as the artists of the "Grand Boulevard" since their gallerists were situated around the Place de l'Opéra. He nicknamed the next generation, the "Petit Boulevard" painters of Montmartre – Anquetin, Guillaumin, Bernard, Charles Angrand, Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec, Signac, and Lucien Pissarro, among whom he counted himself.

Van Gogh also had a chance to see recent works by Monet and Renoir at the Fifth International Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture at the Galerie Georges Petit. This was the first opportunity he had to study their paintings in person. In addition, Theo, as the manager at the Montmartre branch of the art dealer Boussod & Valadon, had begun to show works by Monet, Renoir, Sisley, and Pissarro, giving Vincent still more opportunity to examine these artists' works closely. By the spring and summer of 1887, the influence of the Impressionists on Van Gogh's art was in full evidence in his increasingly colorful paintings.

Van Gogh and Monticelli

Of the many artists that Van Gogh admired (of which more than sixty are represented in this exhibition), Monticelli is by far the most obscure. Yet he was just as important to Van Gogh's artistic development as Delacroix and Millet. Monticelli entered Vincent's consciousness not long after his arrival in Paris and his influence can already be felt in the flower pictures Van Gogh produced in the summer of 1886. Compare, for example, the Kreeger floral still life by Monticelli nearby to Van Gogh's *Still Life with Poppies* on view on the other side of this gallery. The extraordinary palette, suggestion rather than description of form, and, most significant for Vincent, the thick brushwork found in Monticelli's paintings arguably announce Van Gogh's mature style of the last two years. Vincent and Theo were sufficiently impressed with the daring nature of Monticelli's unprecedented manner of painting to acquire his work. Theo would eventually publish an illustrated book on Monticelli in June 1890, just before Vincent's death.

Monticelli, who hailed from Marseille (meaningful to Van Gogh in his decision to retreat to the Provençal town of Arles), produced seemingly countless paintings derived from the Rococo theme of the *fête galante*, in which courtly ladies and gentleman are shown in some unlocatable paradise in amorous poses of exchange. In his late work especially, Monticelli also produced landscapes that border on abstraction in some areas, where his forceful brush and thick impasto appear as bricks of juxtaposed hue. Undoubtedly, Monticelli's stubborn refusal to bow to critical incomprehension at his art appealed to Vincent. He died in obscurity and poverty, leaving behind a body of work that to this day has not received the attention that it surely deserves.