Vincent van Gogh

The Wheatfield, June 1888

Oil on canvas

Honolulu Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Richard A. Cooke and Family in memory of Richard A. Cooke, 1946

When winter finally gave way to spring after Van Gogh's arrival in Arles in February 1888, he was at last able to take advantage of the opportunity to paint outdoors and to return to the agrarian themes of the artists he so admired—Jean-François Millet, Jules Breton, and Léon Lhermitte, who are all represented in this gallery. To Van Gogh, each season naturally occasioned the use of complementary hues. In this case, the summertime activity of the harvesting of the wheat is described through the golden hues of the field itself, contrasted with the complementary purple of the soil. Van Gogh was pleased enough with this composition to record it through small drawings of the best paintings that he had created so far in letters to his friends. The glowing intensity of color and signature brushwork applied in energetic, textured strokes announce Van Gogh's arrival as a fully formed artist with a unique manner of painting that is today revered.

Hendrik Weissenbruch (Dutch, 1824–1903)
***Canal near Noorden*, *Sunset*,** 1893

Oil on board or oil on canvas laid on board

Collection of Bram and Sandra Dijkstra

The landscapes of Weissenbruch, who hailed from a family of artists, typify the group of Dutch painters designated as the Hague School. Like the Barbizon school artists in France, this group was devoted to capturing the nuances of light, atmosphere, and scenery characteristic of Holland, and in Weissenbruch's case, specifically the wetlands around Nieuwkoop and Noorden in southern Holland. Even before Van Gogh set foot in France, his penchant for landscape would have been shaped by paintings such as this one, which lingers on the delicate hues of the horizon, the silhouetted clouds, and the shimmering reflections of the watery canals native to Van Gogh's Holland.

Constant Troyon (French, 1810–1865)
***Under the Trees*,** ca. 1847

Oil on canvas

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of Michael and Jan Schwartz

Though not as well remembered today as his fellow Barbizon school painters Corot and Rousseau, Troyon was one of Europe's most decorated painters by the 1840s. This painting was likely done, if not entirely outdoors in the Fontainebleau Forest, most likely based on sketches executed on the spot. Van Gogh repeatedly listed Troyon among the Barbizon school painters that he most admired. Even after direct exposure to the more avant-garde Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, Vincent would continue to praise this older generation for having accomplished the truthful rendering of nature to which he himself aspired. This painting bears all the hallmarks of Troyon's achievement. We are instantly attracted to the cooling atmosphere generated by the majestic oak tree and the glassy pond over which its limbs extend, joining the workmen who have paused from their labor for a moment's respite. Largely self-taught, Troyon developed a fluid brushwork that animates the canvas surface. His cloud-filled skies recall those of the British painter, John Constable (1776-1837), who enjoyed a kind of vogue among French painters of Troyon's generation.

Georges Michel (French, 1763–1843)

***Landscape*,** 1830s

Oil on panel

Collection of Raj and Grace Dhawan

Like so many of the artists that Van Gogh read about and grew to admire, Michel was lionized for his stubborn commitment to replicating nature as seen, no matter how out of step with Parisian taste, as reflected in the exhibition spaces of the annual Salon. Purportedly eccentric, Michel never wavered from his favorite subjects: Montmartre and the plains of Saint-Denis just outside Paris. Most moving for Van Gogh was that Michel died penniless and yet still unremorseful for his dedication to exactly the kind of truth to nature that Vincent grew to venerate.

Like the life of Millet, that of Michel was mythologized by Alfred Sensier in his monograph, published in 1873. The illustrative plates of this book (displayed in the case nearby) were likely Van Gogh's introduction to Michel's landscapes and not the paintings themselves. This painting, with its moody palette and stand of silhouetted trees, easily recalls one of Rembrandt's most famous landscape etchings—and one that Vincent likely knew, exhibited nearby. Michel's appeal to Van Gogh was likely the consequence of the older artist's organic fusion of Dutch landscape prototypes—from Rembrandt to Hobbema and Ruisdael—with the suburban views he scouted in daily walks around Paris; routes that Van Gogh also enacted.

Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn

(Dutch, 1606–1669)

***The Three Trees*,** 1643

Etching, drypoint, and burin

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Fund

Jules Breton (French, 1827–1906)

***The Pardon*,** 1872

Oil on canvas

Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Gift of Kenneth W. Watters in Memory of Elizabeth Converse Strong Watters

Breton is typically categorized as an academic French painter because of the decorousness of his figures and his polished brushwork. But to Van Gogh, Breton's depictions of the peasantry were far from just picturesque idealizations. In 1880, Vincent even made a pilgrimage to northern France, where Breton lived and worked, to garner inspiration for his own budding aspiration to capture "the typical and picturesque figures of the workmen: different diggers, woodcutters, a farm-hand driving his team, and the occasional outline of a woman in a white bonnet."

In this nearly life-sized painting, the kneeling woman in traditional Breton headdress remains oblivious to our presence, lost in devout prayer for the absolution of her sins. By the 1870s such absorptive figures were already being singled out for their lack of believability by critics (as though feigning their ignorance of us), without the addition of other spectating figures within the image itself. In this case, the artist includes the serpentine line of worshippers awaiting their turn in the distant background at the composition's left side and the seated penitents bent forward on their pews, equally lost in meditation, just beyond the centralized column.

SCAN ME

Jules Breton (French, 1827–1906)

***The Return from the Fields*,** 1867

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Karen and Glenn Doshay

Léon-Augustin Lhermitte (French, 1844–1925)
***Harvesters Resting*,** 1880s

Pastel

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Museum purchase, The Schott Madonna Fund

Van Gogh dubbed Lhermitte, "Millet II," agreeing with the critics who praised Lhermitte as the logical successor to Jean-François Millet in his sympathetic depiction of the peasantry. This pastel in particular offers strong visual evidence of Lhermitte's emulation of Millet, not only in its subject, but also in figural style and choice of medium (a posthumous exhibition of Millet's pastels had cemented his reputation as one of the most accomplished practitioners of this newly popular medium). In 1885, Lhermitte began exhibiting pastels like this one regularly and to very favorable reviews for their authentic record of a rural lifestyle already disappearing in late 19th-century France. The wholesome simplicity of the peasant family living according to good Christian values, as symbolized by the Gothic–style church in the background, is unabashedly nostalgic in intent and was understood as such.

SCAN ME

Jules Bastien-Lepage (French, 1848–1884)
The Ripened Wheat**,** 1884

Oil on canvas

Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Museum purchase with funds provided by Suzette and Eugene Davidson and the Davidson Endowment

In compositional construction, this painting strongly resembles Bastien-Lepage's breakthrough picture called *Haymaking*, which established him as the leading painter of the Naturalist school. Academically trained and equipped with the illusionistic skill to describe the finery of his sitters in society portraiture with as much ease as the countryside of his youth in the village of Damvillers in northeastern France, Bastien-Lepage dominated the Parisian art scene in the years following the emergence of Impressionism. Although Bastien-Lepage's technical sophistication may seem very distant from Van Gogh's decidedly un-academic technique, he was still considered by the Dutch artist to have the requisite first-hand knowledge of agrarian daily life to render it without affectation.

Bastien-Lepage's choice to depict the harvest, a conventional metaphor for man's God-given relationship to nature, would have appealed greatly to Van Gogh, who treated the subject over and over again, though without any overt Christian symbolism.

Jules Bastien-Lepage,
Haymaking, 1877.
Oil on canvas.
Musée d'Orsay

Jean-François Millet (French, 1814–1875)

Maternity: A Young Mother Cradling Her Baby, 1870–73

Oil on canvas

Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati, Ohio, Bequest of Charles Phelps Taft and Anna Sinton Taft

Van Gogh was particularly attracted to Millet's dedication to family—an aspect of his character emphasized in Alfred Sensier's monograph on the artist, which Van Gogh read reverentially. Comforting images of women and children represented the solace that Vincent believed great art must deliver.

Van Gogh's habit of copying, but also transforming, compositions by other artists was not limited to those of Millet. In his own version of mother and child, he has taken as his point of departure a painting by Virginie Demont-Breton, the daughter of his artist-hero Jules Breton, which Vincent knew through a reproductive print. Demont-Breton's anecdotal depiction of a woman pining for her seaman-husband is filtered through Van Gogh's intimate knowledge of paintings by Millet. He synthesized these disparate sources into a secular restatement of the melancholy associated with traditional representations of the Virgin and Child. If Van Gogh's version reads as insistently 'modern' to us now in its gestural brushwork, exaggerated palette, and unremitting flatness, the vestigial traces of these earlier sources are still present, once we realize what they were.

Virginie Demont-Breton, *The Man is at Sea*, 1889 Oil on canvas. Private Collection

Vincent van Gogh, *The Man is at Sea*, 1889. Oil on canvas. Private Collection

Jean-François Millet (French, 1814–1875)

The Sower, after 1850

Oil on canvas

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, 19th Century or Earlier Painting Purchase Fund and with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Samuel B. Casey and Mr. and Mrs. George L. Craig, Jr.

This powerful striding figure of a peasant, flinging seed over freshly tilled soil, would haunt Van Gogh throughout his adult life. He returned to it repeatedly, making some thirty drawn and painted copies, inspired by the reproductive print he owned of the painting by his first artist-hero, Millet. The controlled and repetitive movements of the sower trigger an older sensation of time experienced at a slower pace, as defined by the prolonged duration of traditional forms of labor and the shifting arc of the sun throughout the course of the day. As the critic Théophile Gautier put it in his review: “life spreads out from his large hand, and, with a superb gesture, he, who has nothing, leaves behind the bread of the future upon the ground … There is something magnificent and stylish in this figure, with its violent gesture, its dilapidated demeanor, which seems to be painted with the earth he sows.” Certainly, Van Gogh would have heartily agreed with this assessment and, especially, the equivalence made between the substance of painting and the soil it could embody.

SCAN ME

Pascal Adolphe Jean Dagnan-Bouveret

(French, 1852–1929)

Peasants in a Field Watching a Train Passing through La Valla, 1879

Chalk heightened with white on paper

Collection of Raj and Grace Dhawan

Like Jules Breton, Dagnan-Bouveret studied with the academic painters Alexandre Cabanel (1823-1889) and Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), evident in the arsenal of descriptive techniques on show in a bravura drawing such as this one. As in the case of the idolized Breton, despite the stylistic disparity between Van Gogh and Dagnan-Bouveret, Vincent found much to admire in the artist's work. He recommended Dagnan-Bouveret to his friend Anthon van Rappard as an artist to be collected through reproductive prints. In the 1880s, Dagnan-Bouveret was one of the leading artists of the Naturalist school, having earned a first-place medal for his breakthrough painting, *An Accident*. He specialized in rural scenes of everyday life like this one, which tellingly contrasts a speeding train in the background with the rhythmically repetitive motions of the peasants tilling the land. Such nostalgia for a pre-industrial sensation of time would have greatly appealed to Van Gogh.

Pascal Adolphe Jean Dagnan-Bouveret, *An Accident*, 1879. Oil on canvas. Walters Art Museum

François Bonvin (French, 1817–1887)

Old Man Sitting and Smoking, 1864

Compressed charcoal with stumping and lifting, fixed, on laid paper

Collection of Raj and Grace Dhawan

Although considered a minor artist today, François Bonvin and his brother Léon were categorized as Realists of the same generation as the more famous (and far more notorious) Gustave Courbet (1819-1877). Bonvin's art harkens to that of the 18th-century still-life and genre painter Jean Siméon Chardin, whose posthumous reputation, through the efforts of connoisseurs such as the Goncourt brothers, saw something of a revival in the mid-19th-century. Often working at an intimate scale, unlike the more provocative Courbet, Bonvin represented the daily lives of the working poor. Such typically isolated figures shown in introspective poses, as in this charcoal drawing, exude the sympathetic dignity that Van Gogh attempted to convey in his own figural work.

Théodore Rousseau (French, 1812–1867)
***Valley of Saint-Ferjeux, Doubs*,** ca. 1860–62

Oil on canvas

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of Lady Ridley-Tree in honor of Phillip M. Johnston

The Barbizon school was led by two artists who dedicated themselves to painting outdoors and, in particular, in the environs of the Fontainebleau Forest outside of Paris: Camille Corot and Théodore Rousseau. Along with Jules Dupré, Van Gogh held these interconnected artists in the highest esteem. Not only did they pursue the depiction of nature and its 'truth' single-mindedly, but they also banded together as a group, supporting and encouraging each other's efforts. The idea of an artists' colony, such as the one they formed in the village of Barbizon, became a model for Van Gogh's own fantasy of a similar colony that he hoped to found in Arles—a fantasy, given the disastrous visit of Paul Gauguin to his "Studio of the South," that would never materialize.

Rousseau was notorious for not being able to decide when a painting was finished. This ambitiously scaled landscape may have been intended for display at the Salon, though its comparatively underdeveloped foreground may mean that the artist abandoned the composition before it was completed. Nevertheless, it reflects the artist's intimate understanding of the topography of the Doubs region of the Franche-Comté, near the Swiss border, and his sensitivity to nuances of light to which Van Gogh immediately responded.

SCAN ME

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot

(French, 1796–1875)

Pleasures of the Evening, 1875

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Armand Hammer Foundation

By the end of his long and distinguished career, “Père Corot” (in English, Father Corot) was hailed as one of the greatest landscape painters of the French school. We know that Van Gogh owned a reproductive print after this very painting (on display nearby), one of the last that we have by Corot’s hand. Fittingly, it was selected by Corot’s supporters for the posthumous exhibition organized immediately after his death. It radiates the timelessness of the kind of ‘souvenirs’ (poetic landscapes with a dreamy indistinctness, as though filtered through the memory of yore) for which the artist had earned early critical accolades. This composition, with its dancing nymphs, framed by silhouetted majestic trees at the close of day, feels like the artist’s personal farewell, as if he were departing for the arcadia of the 17th-century Italian painter Claude Lorrain’s idyllic vision of the classical past.

Eugène Louis Pirodon (French, 1824-1908),
after Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot

Pleasures of the Evening, 1875–1877

Lithograph

Courtesy of Eik Kahng

Jozef Israëls (Dutch, 1824–1911)

***Woman in a Landscape*,** 1880s

Oil on canvas

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

Along with Van Gogh's cousin, the artist Anton Mauve, Jozef Israëls was considered one of the leading artists of the Hague school, and one whom Van Gogh deeply admired. Although trained as a history painter in Amsterdam, as well as in Paris by leading academicians, Israëls consciously chose to devote himself to depictions of the poor. Often compared to the French artist Jean-François Millet for his empathetic depictions of laborers, Israëls' art often has a piteous aspect, with an impending sense of futility or doom. He was also compared to his countryman, the 17th-century Dutch master Rembrandt, for his dramatic use of shadow.

In this painting, the stooped outline of a lone peasant woman, trudging home at the close of day, conveys the weariness of her daily life. We cannot know the effect that the melancholy beauty of the last vestiges of sunset has on this exhausted soul, whose eyes remain fixed on the path before her. As Van Gogh put it: "This is far from all theology - simply the fact that the poorest woodcutter, heath farmer or miner can have moments of emotion and mood that give him a sense of an eternal home that he is close to."

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot

(French, 1796–1875)

***The Glacis of a Ruined Castle-Fort*,** 1855–65

Oil on canvas

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of the A. E. Clegg Family

"Corot's figures may not be so well known as his landscapes, but that doesn't mean that he didn't make them. For that matter, in Corot every tree-trunk is drawn and modelled with attention and love as though it were a figure."

—Vincent to Theo, Etten, Friday, August 26, 1881

Charles-Émile Jacque (French, 1813–1894)
***The Shepherdess*,** 1867

Oil on canvas

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. Robert Woods Bliss

Jacque is another Barbizon school artist frequently mentioned by Van Gogh in his correspondence. He specialized in paintings like this one, often including peasants tending their livestock. Although the subject is entirely secular, it would have still carried the spiritual message of man's harmonious relationship with nature for Van Gogh.

Jacque was also very active as a printmaker and played a prominent role in the revival of 17th-century etching and engraving techniques. Indeed, it was likely through Jacque's prints, and not his paintings, that Van Gogh came to know and understand his art.

Constantin Meunier

(Belgian, 1831–1905)

June, ca. 1893

Bronze on marble base

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Museum purchase, The Suzette and Eugene Davidson Fund

In the Belgian painter and sculptor Constantin Meunier, Van Gogh recognized a kindred spirit. Like Van Gogh, Meunier focused on the industrial worker, including miners. As Van Gogh put it in a letter to Theo, "What I'm not indifferent to is that a man who is far superior to me, Meunier, has painted the female thrutchers of the Borinage and the shift going to the pit and the factories, their red roofs and their black chimneys against a delicate grey sky—all things I've dreamed of doing, feeling that it hadn't been done and that it ought to be painted."

Like the French sculptor, Auguste Rodin, Meunier often repurposed certain aspects of larger works. This powerful bust probably derived from a full-length figure representing a mower at rest, focusing all our attention on the wearied expression of the laborer at the close of day.