

Van Gogh's Artist-Heroes

For Van Gogh, there were several artists who served as role models from the beginning. The first and most influential, both in terms of his art and the kind of life he led, was Jean-François Millet. Typically, Van Gogh's enthusiasm, especially upon poring over the illustrated biography penned by Millet's friend and supporter, Alfred Sensier, bordered on idol worship. After seeing a posthumous exhibition of the recently deceased artist's pastels and drawings in June 1875, Vincent wrote to brother Theo, "... I felt something akin to: Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."

Millet painted the everyday life of the peasants working the land in the Fontainebleau forest outside of Paris. Almost as important to Vincent was the fact that Millet lived as one with the peasants – an ideal that Van Gogh had emulated during his time living among the coal miners of the Borinage. Vincent's boyhood love of nature and preference for the country would eventually pull him away from Paris (where he lived with his brother Theo for two formative years) to the South of France. The stunning transformation of his palette once drenched in the Mediterranean light of Provence is immediately palpable in the luminosity of Van Gogh's landscape *Wheat Field* (June 1888, Honolulu Museum of Art). However, the story of this technical transformation must start with the painters of the Barbizon school, the Dutch artists of the Hague school, as well as the now lesser-known Naturalists and Realists on display in this gallery. ✨

Realism: The Land

Van Gogh's early choice to dwell on the peasantry and the land they worked was hardly new. In France, depictions of rural agriculture had become an established category in the decades following the Revolution of 1848. Gustave Courbet and Jean-François Millet's most famous depictions of peasants absorbed in manual fieldwork were at times construed as a form of social critique, hinting at the means of revolt that the provinces continued to harbor against the centralized power of urban Paris and the State. But Millet was not the only prototype available to Van Gogh. In his letters to brother Theo, Van Gogh also expressed admiration for Jules Breton and the generation of Realists who followed him and Millet; in particular, Léon Lhermitte and Jules Bastien-Lepage, who are also represented in this gallery. Increasingly, this younger generation of Realists



Jean-François Millet, *The Angelus*, 1857-59. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay



Gustave Courbet, *The Stonebreakers*, 1849. Oil on canvas. Destroyed during World War II.

felt compelled to invent narrative strategies that would lend authenticity to their depictions of the rural poor—a perception that, by the 1880s, led the Impressionist Camille Pissarro to accuse Millet's *The Angelus* of “idiotic sentimentalism.”

Realism, as practiced by the artists that Van Gogh most admired, is decidedly resistant to the post-Industrial version of time. Monet and the Impressionists aestheticized the modern sensation of time as urban and fast-paced, where work, as opposed to leisure, was defined by the settings of the factory clock. By contrast, Realists like François Bonvin or Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret deliberately focused on depictions of peasant life where both leisure and labor are characterized by prolonged duration, emphasizing the figure's complete absorption in the task at hand. Van Gogh would continue to share this Realist objective, even after his vivid palette and gestural brushwork deviated sharply from the artists associated with this earlier form of Realism. ✨