The City: Paris

Van Gogh arrived in Paris on February 28, 1886, unannounced and four months earlier than expected by his brother. At this point, Vincent had already attempted a failed career as a lay preacher and had spent the previous six years attempting to teach himself the rudimentary skills to become an artist. His new calling took him from Brussels, where he studied briefly at its art academy, to Etten, where he worked briefly in a studio near his parents, to the Hague after a falling out with his father, to Drenthe, a picturesque town in the northern part of Holland, and to Nuenen, where he was forced once again to rely on his disapproving parents to get by. After his father's sudden death in the early spring of 1885, Vincent decided to relocate to the more cosmopolitan city of Antwerp. There, he toiled on with his art, despite being nearly penniless, desperately searching for models and availing himself of free lessons at the Royal Academy of Art.

Vincent was now entirely dependent on Theo to support him. As Theo was an established art dealer, working at the Paris branch of Goupil Gallery, it made sense for Vincent to save money by joining him in Paris. The next two years would prove critical to Van Gogh's rapid technical transformation from a dark palette to the increasingly luminous one that would characterize the mature work. In this gallery, we see Van Gogh's initial response to his new environment: a city bursting with aspiring artists, a density of humanity of all varieties, and new vistas unique to the rapidly modernizing City of Lights. The diverse array of artists who impressed him are included, as well as the many authors, especially novelists, who would equally inform his unique version of social realism.

The City: London

In May 1873, Vincent arrived in London, where he was sent by the Goupil Gallery to take up a position in that branch of the art dealership, following a less than successful stint in the Hague office. His two-year-long stay in London would be formative. In the largest metropolis in the world at the time, Van Gogh was surrounded by some of the greatest public art collections, which he visited frequently to take in the art of the past, as well as that of living artists. He hungrily consumed art-historical periodicals and books, writing enthusiastically to Theo about the writings of Bürger (aka Théophile Thoré) in particular. But, perhaps, most significant for the artist's future development would be the graphic art journals with which he became acquainted, especially *The London Illustrated News* and its younger competitor, *The Graphic*. He avidly collected the prints of his favorite illustrators, among them Hubert von Herkomer, Matthew White Ridley, and Joseph Swain. These artists, who depicted real-life happenings to detail the actuality of the urban poor of industrialized London, were the graphical counterparts to novelists such as Charles Dickens. Likewise, the novels of Dickens became a passionate interest of Vincent's, providing a further artistic model of social realism for his own artistic project.

Van Gogh and the Novel

Vincent was a voracious reader. His letters cite dozens of books, which he read, analyzed, debated, recommended, and even depicted in some of his paintings. Fluent in three languages, his preference was for 19th-century fiction by French and English authors, particularly realist novels.

This selection of 19th-century novels, many of them rare first editions, captures the depth and breadth of Vincent's literary taste. The 19th century was the century of the novel—enabled by new print technology, literature became intimately connected with the rise of newspapers in the form of the serial novel ("roman feuilleton" in French), most famously popularized by Van Gogh's hero, Charles Dickens. The close connection between journalism and literature helped lead to new forms of social realism, with authors striving to truthfully depict the often-harsh conditions of all classes of society.

In terms of themes, subject matter, and even aesthetic approaches, Vincent the reader and Vincent the artist often intersected. As he wrote to Theo: "the love of books is as holy as that of Rembrandt, and I even think that the two complement each other … one must learn to read, just as one must learn to see and learn to live."

Van Gogh's Prints

Prints were everywhere in the 19th century—from newspaper caricatures to illustrated novels, colorful street posters to fine art prints lovingly compiled in collector's portfolios. An avid print collector, Van Gogh engaged with prints in all these forms, but was particularly drawn to reproductive engravings, original prints, and popular newspaper illustrations.

Even after the invention of photography, prints reproducing paintings were the primary means by which most people encountered art in the 19th century. Vincent's knowledge of other artists' work was therefore mediated by reproductive prints. These were usually made by professional engravers, not the original artist, and faced the challenge of translating color and brushwork into a black and white, graphic medium.

In addition to reproductive prints, Vincent also collected original prints made directly by the artists he admired. Barbizon artists such as Millet, Daubigny, and Jacque, for example, were accomplished etchers as well as painters, admiring the ease of the etching medium as a means of capturing the natural world.

Finally, Vincent amassed an extraordinary collection of popular prints: prints made for newspapers and magazines such as *The Graphic* and *The London Illustrated News*. He would mount, file, and assemble them in portfolios that became "a kind of Bible," which he would leaf through for inspiration. Dr. Vincent Alessi, who has painstakingly reassembled Vincent's collection through his research, has generously provided a sample of the types of print portfolios that Vincent made, which you can view on our interactive touchscreen nearby.

Van Gogh: The Life in Letters

The life of Van Gogh is arguably one of the most familiar in the history of art. This is no mere coincidence, since Van Gogh has come to symbolize the quintessential modern artist: misunderstood, alienated from family for his art, and yet of a genius seemingly born of madness that would skyrocket his art to the pinnacle of cultural celebrity—but only after a tragically early death. There are good historical grounds for the Christ-like character of Van Gogh's brief life. The trope of life as a spiritual journey in imitation of Christ is one that colored his minister-father's School of Groningen approach to faith. One of Van Gogh's favorite books growing up was John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (first published in 1678), which established the popular trope of one's own contemporary experience in this world as a spiritual journey of eventual salvation. Van Gogh's short-lived episode as a lay preacher before he took on the identity of artist was itself driven by a version of evangelism built upon the ideal of self denial in the service of the poor; again, in imitation of Christ.

Further enabling our culturally predetermined attraction to the story of Van Gogh's supposed martyrdom for his art are the remarkable letters that he left behind. Now meticulously preserved and in online, searchable format in multiple languages, Van Gogh's correspondence has given us rare access to his weekly, and sometimes, daily progress. Of course, the greatest art is never sufficiently explained by biographical interpretation alone. Our exhibition hopes to exceed such an approach through the rich cultural backdrop of Van Gogh's late 19th-century context.

The Cataloguing of Social Types

From Honoré de Balzac's series of novels describing his *Comédie humaine*, to Émile Zola's sprawling dynastic series of twenty novels following the lives of the Rougon-Macquart family, the 19th-century literary world was dominated by the compulsion to describe, parse, and critique the fabric of modern society in all of its class manifestations, including the working poor. In a way, the novelistic creation of these parallel universes was the culmination of centuries of earlier literary and visual cognates, which generated generic social 'types' that became conventionalized over time. Van Gogh, who was an avid reader and an admirer of French, British, and American authors associated with the Naturalist movement, took inspiration from his literary counterparts. Many of his best-known figural works can be understood as participating in this broader cultural compulsion – the hallmark of a society in rapid transition, in which the anxiety of class identity, displacement, and transgression is not far below the surface.

These three illustrated books share in this cultural phenomenon and are all of the same literary genre. Two (*Les Types de Paris* and *Croquis Parisiens*) include illustrations by the Realist Jean-François Raffaëlli, whose art is represented by multiple canvases on view in this gallery. The other (*La Mascarade Humaine*) is illustrated by Paul Gavarni, an artist whom Van Gogh quoted, via the Goncourts' biography of Gavarni, in his letters: "To be true is what remains." In the biography, the quote continues: "In six words, it is the fullest and widest of professions of faith." A few days later, Gavarni wrote this other sentence: "It is from life that we must paint everything." Van Gogh considered Gavarni's caricatures, like those of Honoré Daumier, to be the product of keen observation and a willingness to unveil societal hypocrisy through images of searing wit.

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