Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890): The Drawings

Generally overshadowed by the fame and familiarity of his paintings, Vincent van Gogh’s more than 1,100 drawings remain comparatively unknown, although they are among his most ingenious and striking creations. Van Gogh engaged drawing and painting in a rich dialogue, which enabled him to fully realize the creative potential of both means of expression.

Largely self-taught, van Gogh believed that drawing was “the root of everything.” His reasons for drawing were numerous. At the outset of his career, he felt it necessary to master black and white before attempting to work in color. Thus, drawings formed an inextricable part of his development as a painter. There were periods when he wished to do nothing but draw. Sometimes, it was a question of economics: the materials he needed to create his drawings—paper and ink purchased at nearby shops and pens he himself cut with a penknife from locally grown reeds—were cheap, whereas costly paints and canvases had to be ordered and shipped from Paris. When the fierce mistral winds made it impossible for him to set up an easel, he found he could draw on sheets of paper tacked securely to board.

Van Gogh used drawing to practice interesting subjects or to capture an on-the-spot impression, to tackle a motif before venturing it on canvas, and to prepare a composition. Yet, more often than not, he reversed the process by making drawings
after his paintings to give his brother and his friends an idea of his latest work.

Van Gogh produced most of his greatest drawings and watercolors during the little more than two years he spent working in Provence.

**Etten: 1881**

Van Gogh was aimless until, in late 1880, he decided to take up the practice of art—mainly on the advice of his brother Theo, who was his principal source of support. He moved from Brussels to his parents’ house in Etten and applied himself wholeheartedly to a self-designed program of instruction focused on drawing and the study of artists’ books on technique, anatomy, and perspective.

Hoping to become a genre illustrator/painter, van Gogh began by drawing figures in relatively static poses, usually in profile. In a few unpremeditated landscapes of this period, the artist revealed, for the first time, uncommon spirit and ingenuity.

**The Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen: 1882–85**

While in the Netherlands, van Gogh remained focused on his study of the human figure. He was profoundly inspired by the social realism of the masters Rembrandt, Millet, and Daumier but also admired the dark graphic reports of magazine illustrators. In The Hague (January 1882–September 1883), he found models to draw in shelters for the poor and in crowded back streets. In rural Nuenen (December 1883–November 1885), he studied peasants working the earth or weaving at looms.

Always more at ease drawing landscapes, van Gogh continued to record local scenery in increasingly intricate penwork while perfecting his mastery of perspective. He enjoyed contact with the Hague school artists and picked up commissions for two series of city views from his uncle C. M. van Gogh, an art dealer. After a brief sojourn to the peat fields of Drenthe (September–November 1883), he discovered his voice as a draftsman in Nuenen when he described winter’s bleak trees in the garden of his father’s vicarage.

**Antwerp and Paris: 1885–88**

After a short, frustrating effort to conform to the standards of the Antwerp art academy, van Gogh headed for Paris to move in with his brother Theo and to study at Fernand Cormon’s atelier, where he met fellow students Toulouse-Lautrec, Émile Bernard, and John Russell. In the French capital (March 1886–February 1888), van Gogh came in contact with many of the avant-garde artists of the era, including Pissarro, Seurat, Signac, and Gauguin. He awakened to the bright palette of the Impressionists, the pointillist touch of the Neo-Impressionists, and the novelties of imported Japanese prints. Like so many of his most advanced contemporaries, he put aside the practice of drawing to paint in short, semigraphic strokes. In focusing his sights on the city and its suburbs, he kept pace with current trends and found scenery that reminded him of home.

**Sojourn in Arles: February 1888–May 1889**

After two years in Paris, Van Gogh longed for a sunny retreat where he could “recover and regain [his] peace of mind and self-composure.” In February 1888, he headed south to the town of Arles. He hoped to attract other colleagues to his
“Studio of the South,” but aside from Gauguin’s fateful stay that fall, van Gogh spent most of his fifteen-month sojourn alone. His Provençal outpost did not guarantee the fellowship he craved, but instead afforded him the distance necessary for his art to come into his own.

In Arles, Van Gogh depended largely on pen and paper for feedback and dialogue. Drawing, like writing, regained the importance it had held for him earlier in the Netherlands and once again became a staple of his working practice. He discovered in the reed pen—which he made from local hollow-barreled grass, sharpened with a penknife—a drawing tool entirely sympathetic to his aims: easy to acquire and use, bold and incisive in his statement. In turn, he set out to do “an ENORMOUS amount of drawing,” armed with the means to produce works in line that were as compelling as those in color. Casting aside the traditional roles accorded to drawing and painting, van Gogh fully realized the creative potential of both.

Répétitions: Drawings after Paintings
While living apart from the mainstream, van Gogh routinely relied on his drawings—small sketches in his letters as well as full-fledged sheets—to give his family and friends a sense of his recent work. In Provence, he exploited old strategies in novel ways. During the summer of 1888, while his latest oil paintings were tacked up on the walls of his studio to dry, he devoted three weeks to reproducing them in thirty-two pen-and-ink drawings that he sent to fellow artists Émile Bernard and John Russell, and to his brother Theo.

Van Gogh selected and crafted the images with each of the recipients clearly in mind. With these successive suites of drawings, he hoped to elicit an exchange of works with Bernard, to win over the recalcitrant Russell as a prospective patron for Gauguin, and to report his progress to Theo.

None of his drawings is a slavish copy—far from it. Van Gogh used the opportunity to reconsider and reinvigorate his original conceptions in a series of richly inventive linear improvisations.

Taking Asylum in Saint-Rémy: May 1889–May 1890
Van Gogh spent a year as a voluntary patient at the asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in Saint-Rémy. Under the care of doctors (who diagnosed his illness as a form of epilepsy), the artist forged ahead, the pace of his accomplishment slowed only by hospital restrictions, recurrent attacks, and depleted or embargoed art supplies. These challenges did not defeat his creative spirit, but spurred it on. When he was unable to paint, he resorted to his drawing tools, sometimes in novel combinations with whatever materials he had on hand.

The drawings van Gogh produced during this period are stylistically diverse and richly inventive. Those in color—like his contemporaneous paintings—succeed in wedding expressive line to color, synthesizing the breakthroughs he had achieved in Arles with inimitable ingenuity.

Auvers: May–June 1890
Van Gogh checked himself out of the asylum at Saint-Rémy on May 16, 1890, and headed north to the town of Auvers, not far from Paris, where he could live close to
Theo and be cared for by Dr. Paul Gachet, a collector and amateur artist. Enchanted by the quaint hamlet and refreshed by the quality of the northern light, van Gogh responded with a new palette of blues and greens carried by rhythmic, undulating lines. In seventy days he produced nearly seventy-five paintings and fifty drawings—mostly quick sketches.

Van Gogh’s career came to an abrupt end when he died on July 29, 1890, from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. By the time of his death, the paintings he had shown in recent exhibitions in Paris and Brussels had begun to command the interest of artists and critics. Prospects looked even brighter for van Gogh’s work as a draftsman—as one writer boldly predicted: “It may be certain that in the future the artist who died young will receive attention primarily for his drawings.”

Colta Ives
Department of Drawings and Prints, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Susan Alyson Stein
Department of European Paintings, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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