

Vincent van Gogh / Paul Gauguin



1 A Rocky Friendship

Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) and Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) both experimented with the expressive possibilities of color and line to create distinct personal styles of painting. Working in France at the end of the nineteenth century, the two friends inspired each other during a nine-week period in the autumn of 1888.

In February of that year, Van Gogh moved to the peaceful town of Arles in the south of France. He dreamed of creating a “studio of the south” where a group of artists could work and live as a community. He invited his friend and fellow painter Gauguin to join him. Van Gogh transformed his yellow house into an artist’s studio in anticipation. Gauguin finally moved to Arles in October of 1888. Although they learned from each other’s techniques and produced many works side by side, Van Gogh’s stubborn nature and Gauguin’s pride and arrogance made their life together difficult. After nine weeks, a passionate argument caused Van Gogh to have a mental breakdown, and Gauguin returned to Paris. Despite the unhappy ending to the “studio of the south,” the two painters remained friends, and they wrote letters to each other until Van Gogh died two years later.

Even though they had different personalities, the two artists shared some things in common:

Both were essentially self-taught artists.

They both left city life in Paris in search of nature.

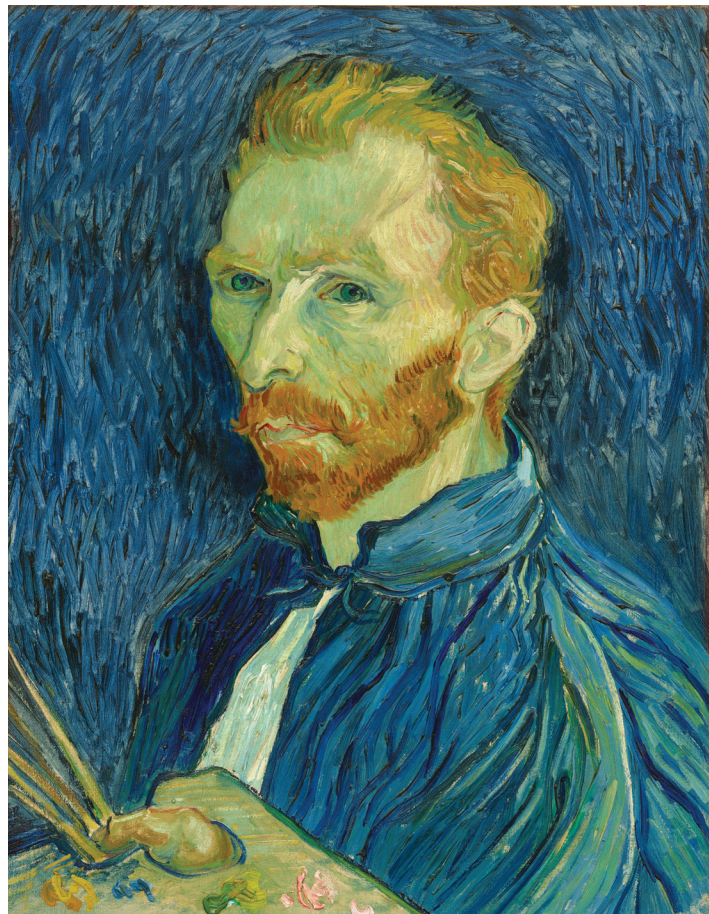
Both admired the brilliant color, simplified forms, and unconventional compositions of Japanese prints.

Each painted a variety of subjects, including landscapes, still lifes, and portraits.

Neither achieved fame until after his death, yet their works greatly influenced twentieth-century artists.

Although Van Gogh and Gauguin were influenced by impressionism, they were not satisfied with merely capturing the visual effects of nature and instead sought to create meaning beyond surface appearances, that is, to paint with emotion and intellect as well as with the eye.

These self-portraits, painted in the year after Gauguin and Van Gogh lived together, provide a glimpse into their complex personalities and unique painting styles.

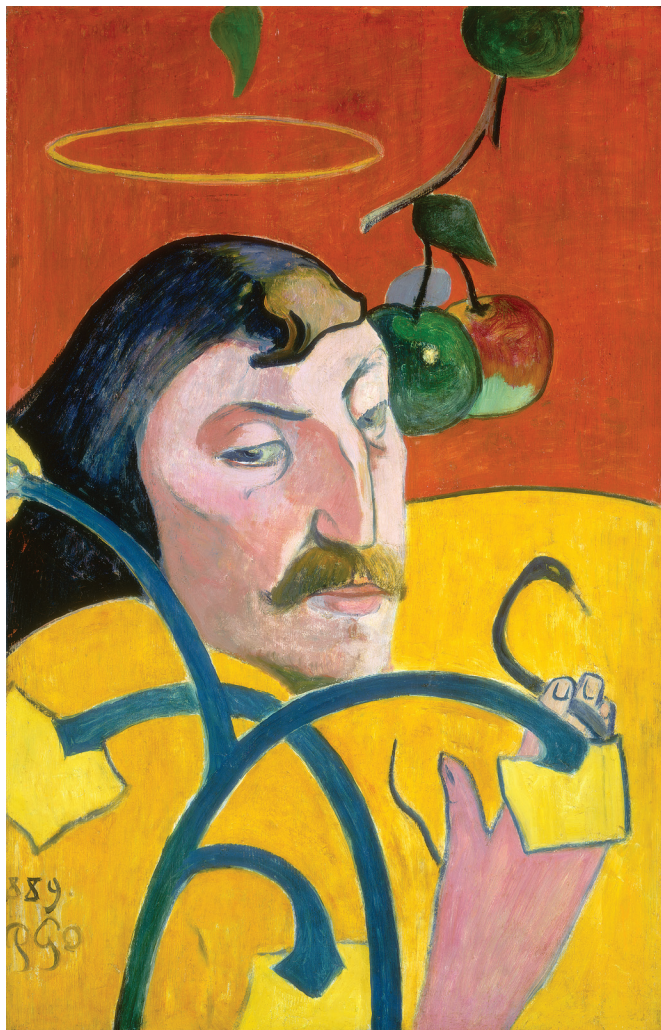


“They say — and I am very willing to believe it — that it is difficult to know yourself — but it isn’t easy to paint yourself either.” Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, September 1889

2 A Colorful Expressionist

After Van Gogh and Gauguin quarreled in 1888, Van Gogh became ill and spent many months recuperating in a hospital. This is the first self-portrait he created after he recovered. Van Gogh chose to paint himself wearing a blue painter’s smock over a white shirt and holding several paintbrushes and a palette. He was clearly asserting his identity as an artist, yet he also used intense colors to express his mood and feelings. He painted his gaunt face with yellow and green tones, and he set his vivid reddish-orange hair and beard

**“For most I shall be an enigma, but for few
I shall be a poet.” Paul Gauguin**



against a deep violet-blue background. In a letter to his brother Theo, the artist described himself as looking “as thin and pale as a ghost” on the day he painted this portrait.

Known for the way he applied paint thickly, Van Gogh gives a rich texture to the canvas by leaving each brushstroke visible as opposed to blending or smoothing them. He experimented with a variety of brushstrokes—dots, dashes, curves, squiggly lines, radiating patterns, woven colors, choppy short lines, and longer rhythmic strokes—that create a sense of energy in his work.

3 The Mysterious Symbolist

Gauguin painted this self-portrait on a panel of a cupboard door in the dining room of the inn where he was staying in Brittany, France. Around his floating head, Gauguin arranged a golden halo, two apples, a dark blue snake, and a curling vine—objects that served as personal symbols of the artist’s mysterious, mystical world. Gauguin stated he had a “dual nature” and used the halo and snake to hint at his saintly and devilish sides. The apples allude to temptation.

Like Van Gogh, Gauguin manipulated color, line, and form to explore their expressive potential. His technique, however, was different. Instead of using energetic brushstrokes and thick paint, Gauguin applied his pigments thinly in smooth, flat patches of color, and outlined these broad areas of pure color with dark paint. He simplified shapes to the point of abstraction.

**“Instead of trying to reproduce what I see
before me, I use color in a completely
arbitrary way to express myself powerfully.”
Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh,
August 1888**

far left: Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1889, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney

left: Paul Gauguin, *Self-Portrait*, 1889, oil on wood, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection

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Portraying the French Countryside

Many artists are inspired by visiting new, exciting places. Both Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin left the city, seeking to renew themselves as artists in simpler, rural environments.

Compare these two landscapes. How are they similar? How are they different?

Gauguin in Brittany

In 1886 Gauguin first traveled to Brittany, a remote region of northwestern France famous for its Celtic heritage and rugged landscape. Gauguin painted *Haystacks in Brittany* in 1890. He simplified the landscape—fields, farm, haystacks, cow, and cowherd—into flat bands of color created with blocks of contrasting colors. Ever restless, Gauguin eventually found even Brittany to be too civilized. He left for Tahiti, an island in the Pacific Ocean, in 1891. Except for a brief return to France, he spent the rest of his life in French Polynesia.

Van Gogh in Provence

In the winter of 1888, Van Gogh moved to Arles in the southern region of France known as Provence. There, the dazzling sunlight, golden wheat fields, and blooming sunflowers were far different from any place Van Gogh had experienced. He was inspired by the beauty of the landscape, and he often painted outdoors to capture the bright colors and intense sunshine.



top: Paul Gauguin, *Haystacks in Brittany*, 1890, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman



bottom: Vincent van Gogh, *Farmhouse in Provence*, 1888, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection

Summer was Van Gogh's favorite season, and he made many paintings depicting wheat fields and farms during the harvest. In *Farmhouse in Provence*, painted in the summer of 1888, haystacks are piled high behind a stone gate, and a farmer walks through the tall grass toward a farmhouse. The golden field seems to shimmer in the sunlight. Van Gogh energized his paintings by pairing complementary colors—the blue mountains on the horizon with yellow-orange haystacks and rooftop; the pink-purple clouds with the blue sky; the red and green flowering plants—to convey the heat of the strong southern sun.

“Don't copy nature too closely. Art is an abstraction; as you dream amid nature, extrapolate art from it.”

Paul Gauguin