



“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 Théo van Gogh, August 1888**

Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait (detail)*, 1889, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney

1

A Rocky Friendship

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

In February of 1888, Van Gogh moved to the warm, peaceful south of France, to the town of Arles. He dreamed of creating a “studio of the south,” a group of artists who would work and live as a community. He invited his friend and fellow painter Gauguin to join him, transforming 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 arrogance and pride made their life together difficult. After nine weeks, a passionate argument drove Van Gogh to a mental breakdown and Gauguin back to Paris. Despite the rocky ending to the “studio of the south,” the two painters remained friends and wrote each other letters until Van Gogh’s death two years later.

Despite their different personalities, the two artists shared some things in common:

- both were essentially self-taught
- each left urban 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 landscape, still life, and portraits
- neither artist achieved fame until after his death
- 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, to paint with the emotions and intellect as well as the eye.

Self-portraits are part of an artistic tradition of introspection and self-analysis. The works here, both 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 Théo 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, holding several paintbrushes and gripping a palette. He was clearly asserting his identity as an artist, but this is

3

The Mysterious Symbolist

“Between two human beings, he and I, the one all a volcano, the other boiling also, but within himself, a battle of some sort was being prepared.”

Paul Gauguin, *Avant et Après* (personal journals), 1903



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. Around his floating head, Gauguin has arranged some objects—a golden halo, twin apples, a dark blue snake, and curling vine—which served as personal symbols and suggest a mysterious, mystical world particular to an artist. Gauguin proclaimed that he had a “dual nature,” and he used the halo and snake to hint at his saintly and devilish personalities. The apples allude to temptation.

Like Van Gogh, Gauguin manipulated color, line, and form to explore their expressive potential. However, his technique was different from that of his friend. Instead of energetic brushstrokes and thick paint, Gauguin typically applied his paint thinly in smooth, flat patches of color. Often these broad areas of pure color were outlined with dark paint, which tended to flatten the sense of space in his scenes. He simplified shapes to the point of abstraction.

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

Paul Gauguin, 1888

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

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

not a portrait about his exterior appearance: Van Gogh used intense colors to express mood and feelings. He painted his gaunt face with yellow and green tones. His hair and beard in vivid reddish orange are set against a deep violet-blue background. In a letter to his brother, Van Gogh described himself “as thin and pale as a ghost” on the day that he created this painting.

Known for his thick paint application, Van Gogh left each brushstroke visible as opposed to blending or smoothing them, giving a rich texture to the surface. He experimented with a variety of brushstrokes—dots, dashes, curves, squiggly lines, radiating patterns, woven colors, choppy short lines, and longer rhythmic strokes—which creates a sense of energy.

explore

learn more!

Many artists find inspiration by visiting new and exciting places. Exhausted by the bustling city life of Paris, both Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin left the busy city and sought to renew themselves as artists in simpler rural environments.

**Compare these two landscapes: How are they similar?
What differences do you notice?**

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

Paul Gauguin



Gauguin in Brittany

I love Brittany. I find the wild and the primitive here. When my clogs resonate on this granite ground I hear the muffled and powerful thud that I’m looking for in painting. (Letter to a friend, February 1888)

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, simplifying the landscape—fields, farm, haystacks, cow, cowherd—into flat bands of contrasting color. Ever restless, Gauguin eventually found even Brittany too civilized, and in 1891 he left for Tahiti where, except for a brief return to France, he would spend the rest of his life.

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

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



Van Gogh in Provence

It has become very different from what it was in spring, and yet I have certainly no less love for this countryside, scorched as it begins to be from now on. There’s old gold, bronze, and copper in everything, with the azure-green of the incandescent sky, that gives a delicious, extraordinarily harmonious color. (Letter to Théo, 1888)

In the winter of 1888, Van Gogh moved to the sleepy town of Arles, in the southern region of France called Provence. There the dazzling sunlight, glowing wheat fields, and blooming sunflowers were very different from any place Van Gogh had experienced. He was inspired by the beauty of the landscape and worked hard there, often painting outdoors to capture the bright colors and intense sunshine.

Summer was Van Gogh’s favorite season, and he made many paintings depicting wheat fields and farms during the summer 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: blue hills on the horizon and yellow-orange haystacks and rooftop, pink-purple clouds and a turquoise-lime sky, red and green flowering plants. These color combinations create the feeling of pulsing heat of the strong southern sun.