

DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

Icons of the Collection: Vincent van Gogh

Judy Sund

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Dorothy Kosinski: It goes back to graduate school days in New York when I was at the Institute of Fine Arts at NYU and she was at Columbia. But Judy is the perfect person to present a lecture about Van Gogh because to a great extent, you can correct me if I am wrong Judy because I know we like to assert our sense of self and sometimes I resent it when people talk to me about--I don't know, Gustave Moreau or symbolism and I feel I have left that in the past--but I feel she is one of the great experts on this master, Vincent van Gogh.

Judy Sund received her BA in 1975 from San Diego State University; her MA at Columbia University in 1977, followed in 1986 by her PhD on French Naturalist Literature and the art of Vincent van Gogh. Right there we have a certain affinity. Judy may not know this, but my dissertation on the image of Orpheus in French 19th century art and literature—you see there are a very few of us who do these sort of interdisciplinary approaches and trying to defy all of those, the push towards the monographic approach. She is now professor in the Department of Art at Queens College and Program in Art History, the Graduate Center of City University of the New York.

She is a full professor but she has been teaching there since 1991. I said that Judy was the logical, the only person to present this lecture and the list of proof is long. Books: *Van Gogh: Fields* co-authored with two other colleagues Dorothee Hansen and Lawrence Nichols and it was an exhibition catalogue very much related to our project; In 2003 at the Toledo Museum of Art, *Van Gogh* part of the series of *Art & Ideas* published in 2002 by Phaidon; *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature* comes from that dissertation, published by Cambridge University Press in 1992.

Lots of articles and I just want to mention three: "Famine to Feast: Portrait Making at St. Rémy and Auvers" in *Van Gogh: Face to face*, that's a Detroit Institute of Arts exhibit in 2000; "Van Gogh's 'Berceuse' and the Sanctity of the Secular" because it relates so much in terms of the biblical resonance of the theme we trace in our exhibition, that was in *Van Gogh 100*, published in 1996 by Hofstra University; "The Sower and the Sheaf: Biblical Metaphor in the Art of Vincent van Gogh" was published in *Art Bulletin* in 1988. That was my end point. I am so pleased that Judy agreed to come down and speak with us tonight and I am so glad you are all here. Thank you.

Judy Sund:

Thanks Dorothy and thank you all for coming. I have to apologize that I don't pronounce the artist's name as beautifully as Dorothy does and I am just going to go with the good old American Van Gogh. So, apologies in advance.

Let me say too that I am delighted to be here in Dallas and to see one of my favorite Van Gogh paintings serve as a springboard for such an interesting and beautiful exhibition. Let me put it up here, here we go. The *Sheaves of Wheat* [1985.R.80] is a great example of Van Gogh's mature style, which is marked by vibrant colorism, lively calligraphic brush work and often, as here, a perfectly calibrated tension between animation and orderliness.

Painted within a couple weeks of the artist's suicide at age 37, *Sheaves of Wheat* demonstrates that Van Gogh's mastery of his craft was with him to the end. Moreover, when viewed within the larger context of the artist's life and work, this painting suggests that Van Gogh was heartened, even as he contemplated death, by both his earthly achievements and his belief in a better world beyond.

So what I would like to do tonight is give you an overview of Van Gogh's life and his body of work, but with special attention to the agrarian motifs that he loved and which I believe elucidate the spirit in which the *Sheaves of Wheat* was made.

To begin at the beginning or maybe even a little bit before the beginning, we have here at left photos of Van Gogh's parents. His father Theodorus was a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church. A lackluster preacher, he passed his career in a series of provincial postings and it was in the first of these, the village of Zundert in Southern Netherlands, that Vincent, the oldest surviving child of Theodorus and his wife Anna, was born in 1853. Zundert is located in the Brabant, an agrarian district and the future artist who is seen as a boy in the photograph on the right, spent his childhood playing in and around farmers fields, mainly in the company of his brother Theo, who was four years his junior.

They and their four younger siblings grew up in a much more cultivated atmosphere than many kids in the Brabant. The parsonage at Zundert was full of books and hung with reproductions after popular paintings including this print of J. J. van der Maarten's *Funeral Procession through the Fields*, which inspired one of Theodorus' sermons.

Since the Van Gogh children were home schooled, contact with farming families was limited. Still, Vincent and Theo would always consider themselves Brabant boys at heart and the two shared vivid memories of the regions rustic byways and old-time farms.

At age 11 Vincent was sent off to boarding school and five years later he took a full time job in the city. Three of his paternal uncle's were art dealers and one of the them, Vincent's namesake, had built a successful gallery in the Hague, which he had later sold to a French firm Goupil and Company which had branches in several countries.

The paintings Goupil sold at its Hague branch--what you see on the photograph at left--were mainly rustic landscapes by a group of Frenchmen known as the Barbizon School. The landscape on the right by Barbizon painter Constant Troyan gives you some ideas of the sorts of scenes for which the Barbizon School was known. Van Gogh's years in Goupil's stockroom and showrooms helped him master this sort of French painting and made him a great fan of landscapes like Troyan's.

By the end of his teen years, Vincent was an able connoisseur and judged savvy enough for transfer to Goupil's London office where he would further his knowledge of the business and polish his English. There the 20 year old dealer became in his own assessment, "A true cosmopolite, neither Dutch nor English nor French, but a man of the world."

His next stop was Paris where he worked in the same Goupil branch that would later employ his brother. Though he made the rounds of museums and sales there, Van Gogh apparently remained oblivious to recent upheavals in the Parisian art world, which only months before had been shaken up by the first group exhibition of the artists we know as Impressionists including Monet and Renoir who only recently had made the Parisian street scenes you see here.

Van Gogh's background and his business led him to focus on more established French painters and he considered himself lucky to have arrived in Paris just in time to see the exhibition devoted to the recently deceased Barbizon painter Jean-François Millet. Millet's rustic subject resonated with Van Gogh, a country boy who was far from home. Works like Millet's *Angelus* on the left and his *Sower* on the right, both of which Van Gogh purchased prints of put the young Dutchman in mind of his roots, by which I mean both his rural boyhood and his Christian upbringing.

Van Gogh sensed an implicit piety in Millet's work and he considered the older artist an almost saintly man, describing Millet as "the archetype of a believer" and his work as "evangelical in its tone."

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When Van Gogh visited the showrooms hung with Millet's work, he later recalled, "I felt like saying take off your shoes, you are standing on holy ground." Though, as always, Van Gogh expressed himself somewhat more extravagantly than most people. His thoughts on Millet were not that odd, at least not in 1875. A quarter century earlier Millet had gotten off to a rocky start with Parisian viewers, many of whom saw his mud splattered and hollow-cheeked peasants as fearsome accusations of workers exploitation. Some even suspected that Millet conceived them as revolution-inciting calls to arms, but by the time of his death in 1875 Millet was widely admired and when Van Gogh arrived in Paris that year Millet was being eulogized in the art press as "Not only a great

painter but a man of perfect goodness” and as an artist whose depictions of rural France achieved what one writer called “Biblical grandeur.”

Millet’s *Sower*, which was once seen as an icon of revolutionary realism, was by the 1870s just as often characterized as a modern French take-off on the Bible’s Parable of the Sower. The parables are anecdotes that Christ used to present his ideas in down-to-earth terms. In the Parable of the Sower, which is recorded in the gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke, the son of God compares himself to a field hand who has charged with planting seeds and he explains that “some seeds fell in the path where birds came and ate it up and some fell on rocky ground where it sprouted quickly, but was scorched and some fell among the weeds and was choked by them, but some seeds fell on good soil, where it grew and bore fruit.” As Mathew explains this last seed would yield the harvest that is slated already for the end of the time. When angels will reap Christ’s field and “The righteous will shine as brightly as it the sun in the kingdom of their father.”

In Paris, God’s word took root in Van Gogh. The moderate religiosity of his youth turned so consuming that the young art dealer lost all interest in the picture business. Instead, he dedicated himself to Christ, embraced evangelical religion and in his newfound piety set his sights on as he wrote, “becoming a sower of God’s word and preaching among the poor.”

Preaching after all was another Van Gogh family business. Vincent’s father and his father before him were ordained ministers as was an uncle on Vincent’s mother side. Having decided to follow in their footsteps, Van Gogh scarcely bothered with his work at the gallery and just months after being transferred to Paris he was fired from Goupil. He welcomed the change. Within months he was back in Holland and at his father’s urging was working with a tutor in the hopes of passing the university entrance exams that would allow him to earn the Theology degree he needed to become an Ordained Minister in their church.

It was hard going for a 24 year old who had been out of school for a dozen years and Van Gogh couldn’t see the point of studying algebra and Greek when all he wanted to do was spread God’s word. So before long he abandoned the goal of ordination and instead, to a lay evangelist organization in Belgium, talked his way into a missionary assignment in the Borinage, a coal-mining district in that country’s southern reaches where, according to Van Gogh, he got a free course at the great “University of Misery.”

In the Borinage, Van Gogh preached regularly to anyone who would listen but he spent most of his time in a hands-on ministry, nursing the sick and injured and distributing his few possessions to those who seemed to need them more than he did.

His supervisors commended this spirit of self sacrifice but observing that he had little talent for public speaking, they relieved Van Gogh of his preacher’s post toward the end of 1879. Reluctant to go home, Van Gogh remained among the miners for a year and remade himself during a time of reflection that he called

his molting period. His attitude toward religious institution soured but his faith in God endured and he still believed that, "God knows what's good for us and he gives us his blessing through the seed of his word which he has sown in our hearts. With God's help we shall get through."

Though he had no second thoughts about abandoning the art trade, Van Gogh nonetheless found himself "homesick for the land of pictures" and he often wondered, "how can I be of use the world?" The solution he decided was to "take up my pencil and draw." He was determined to make his pad of paper a substitute for the pulpit, a form for presenting the Christian and humanitarian sentiments he held dear. After all, he wrote "everything that's truly beautiful and good comes from God."

That being said, Van Gogh's first efforts as an artist were neither very beautiful nor very good. This drawing from 1880, one of his earliest, shows Van Gogh's neighbors on their way to work. Their awkward forms interspersed with those of spindly and uprooted looking trees that seem to float among them. Distressed by his lack of expertise yet far from any art school, the 27-year-old Van Gogh decided to take admired artists as his teachers by copying the sorts of pictures he wished he himself could make.

He had several reproductions of Millet's work on hand and he told Theo that he learned a good deal about picture-making by struggling to replicate them in his notebook. Among the many Millet's he copied in 1880 *The Sower*, seen at left in Van Gogh's drawing of it, is the one for which he felt the greatest affinity and affection. As he told his brother in September, "I've already drawn that sower five times and I am so completely absorbed in it that I will take it up again."

Indeed this solitary caster of seed whom Van Gogh understood as a stand-in for Christ became the model for a long line of sowers in his early drawings. But for all of his fascination with the motif it was not until years later, eight years later at Arles in the south of France that sowers cropped up in Van Gogh's painted work.

By that time Van Gogh had made himself a master draftsman, an accomplished painter and a colorist extraordinaire. But here I am getting ahead of myself. It was back in the Borinage during his molting period that Van Gogh found his true calling and resolved to excel at it. To that end he moved to Brussels and later to The Hague to work among other artists. But, as impatient with formal arts instruction as he had once been with algebra and Greek, Van Gogh reached his artistic maturity virtually self-taught.

His first experiments with oil painting took place in The Hague in 1882-1883, but it was not until he returned to his native region, the Brabant, and began to paint its farmers that he developed the personal style exemplified by *The Potato Eaters* of 1885, at left. Van Gogh's first major work and a picture he called, "the best thing I have done."

At the time he made it Van Gogh later recalled, "I was dreaming of Millet," and indeed his first painting style was heavily inflected by his enthusiasm for that artist whose sower as Van Gogh remarked was once said to look as if it had been painted with the very earth it worked.

In much the same way, Van Gogh's peasant family were painted to look as if they were one with their environment. As Van Gogh put it in a letter to Theo, "I've tried to emphasize that these people eating in a lamp light have dug the earth with the very hands they put into the dish. I want that picture to speak of manual labor". Privileging expressiveness over exactitude, Van Gogh darkened his palette and roughed up the paint surface convinced that "it would be wrong to give a peasant picture conventional smoothness." He felt very strongly that his own "remodelings and deviations" from reality are truer than the literal truth.

That philosophy did not change and three years later, as he describes this sower he painted at Arles, Van Gogh acknowledged that he played hell with the colors in order to tap their symbolic language.

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In both these paintings then color is calculated to amplify meaning though clearly Van Gogh's palette was radically revised in the three year interval that stands between them. In that time period, the mid 1880s, one did not get from point A *The Potato Eaters* to point B *The Sower* without going through Paris, and that's the route that Van Gogh traveled. Within a year of making the dark picture at left, Van Gogh returned to the City of Light seen here in views by Monet and Georges Seurat.

This time around he took note of the avant-garde. Guided by Theo, a dealer who traded in impressionist pictures, Van Gogh became familiar with that style and under its influence he lightened both his palette and his touch. He was also on hand for the 1886 debut of Georges Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Grande Jatte*, the quintessential example of that artist's tendency to order his impressions, distilling stateliness from modern scenes and breaking perceived color into its component parts by means of tiny brushstrokes.

During Van Gogh's two year stay in Paris, Seurat, who's worked was dubbed Neo-Impressionism, dominated the art scene and was widely-emulated.

Though Van Gogh had little patience for the painstaking techniques Seurat devised, he did share Seurat's interest in color theory and like Seurat was especially attentive to the laws of complementary contrast.

Now complementary colors are coloristic opposites. Green is the complement of red; orange, the complement of blue; and violet, the complement of yellow. Nineteenth century theorists stressed that complementary colors, when

juxtaposed, bring each other out. That red for instance looks its reddest on a field of green.

As then Gogh wrote it in a letter to his sister, “Explaining the whole theory to you would involve a lot of writing, but simply stated there are colors that cause each other to shine brilliantly, which form a couple which complete each other like man and woman.”

Drawing lessons from both Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism, Van Gogh in Paris began producing boldly colored works in which freeform swirls of paint combined with swarms of pointillist dots and works like this one, a still-life that Van Gogh made in 1887 to demonstrate his new found passion for complementary color. Note here not only the orange-blue play of the flowers and the wall but also the parallel touches of red and green that enliven the table top.

Combining sprightly brushwork with new found coloristic daring, Van Gogh turned a real corner in Paris becoming the artist we know in love.

But after two years in the French capital he longed for the countryside and rather than return to the cold, dank North of his youth, he set his sights on Provence where he settled in 1888.

He had moved to the town of Arles which lies on the Rhone River some 25 miles from the Mediterranean. Founded by Julius Caesar, Arles has the largest Roman amphitheater in France and a picturesque medieval center with a 12th Century church and cloister that help account for the town’s three-star status in the Michelin Guide. Van Gogh, however, had little interest in those monuments, preferring to work on the outskirts of town and in the open countryside beyond it. When the town center appears in his work, its geometries usually are trumped by the softer lines of foreground fields.

It was in the environs of Arles that Van Gogh found what he called “true Provence.” He was pleased to report that the landscape and laborers he saw there were “real Millet,” absolutely rustic and homely.

Delighted to be back in the countryside where seasonal changes manifested themselves in flowering orchards and ripening grain, as well as in a reassuringly familiar round of agrarian task, Van Gogh lovingly detailed farmers on the land, trees in bloom and stacked sheaves that bespeak a job well done.

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His fascination with the rural cycle of planting and harvest derived from Van Gogh’s nostalgia for his boyhood as well as his awareness of the metaphoric potential of such themes. The symbolic possibilities of which were familiar from the parables which often couch Christian message in agrarian imagery.

As Van Gogh wrote from Arles, "I am still just as charmed as ever by the magic of so many memories of my past and by longing for the infinite which the sower and the sheaf are symbols."

Here he would seem to make reference to the Parable of the Sower in which the Sower stands for Christ, the field for the world and the wheat for the righteous who, having withstood the threat of birds, weeds and scorching sun, stand ready to be harvested by angels.

When he spoke of the infinite that he saw symbolized by sower and sheaf, Van Gogh doubtless meant the infinite grandeur of God and creation which was made manifest to him at least by the ever repeating natural cycle that outlives any single individual.

Such issues were very much on his mind as he returned in Arles to the motif of the sower. Something he said that I've been longing to do for some time.

Van Gogh's *Arlesian Sower*, a free translation of Millet's *Sower*, reprises the posture and gesture of its famous antecedent but expands and enriches his surroundings.

Moreover, the field that he works in is illuminated by a sun of dramatic size and radiance as well as emphatic centrality. The sower who is backlit like his predecessor strides through a field that Van Gogh described as strewn with clods of violet earth that are touched by "many hints of yellow that climb toward the horizon and yellow sky with yellow sun, so very yellow".

Much as he loved the Millet's picture, Van Gogh couldn't help but feel in the wake of his second Parisian sojourn that it was drab. At Arles he set out to update that image with the colorization that reflected modern ideas, particularly the theory of complementary contrast which holds that paired opposites bring out the best in one another.

It's a painting Van Gogh wrote in which color plays a very important part. Even its ploughed earth is richly hued, the violet clods interspersed with blue shadows and scattershot with the same oranges and yellows that dominate the painting's upper quarter, thus, tying earth to sky.

Van Gogh aimed not only to enliven and modernize Millet's iconic image but to exploit what he called the symbolic language of color. As Van Gogh himself noted, he had moved beyond Impressionism and with returning to an idea already at play in *The Potato Eaters*, the notion that color should be expressive rather than true.

As Van Gogh put it, "the Impressionists might find fault with the way I work now because instead of trying to reproduce what I have before my eyes, I use color arbitrarily to express myself forcibly".

The complementary color scheme he deployed here in which opposed hues complete each other like man and woman suggests reciprocity and balance. More significantly, the vibrant yellow that not only dominates the picture's upper quadrant but is diffused throughout speaks illumination.

Illumination after all is a major theme here. As we've seen the Bible, sower is a stand-in for Christ; and in biblical parlance, Christ is the light of the world.

The Word of God emblemized by the seed is the source of enlightenment and Christ's Parables may themselves be said to elucidate his message. It's no coincidence then that the seed cast by Van Gogh's sower is the same brilliant yellow as the sun. This coloristic parallel underscores the fact that both are sources of illumination, lighting the Christian's path and warming him body and soul.

It seemed likely too that Van Gogh's painting is a celebration of creativity. In a letter from Arles, Van Gogh proclaimed Christ a "greater artist than any other artist," and described his parables as "the very highest summit reached by art which becomes a creative force there, a pure creative power, what a sower, what a harvest."

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Van Gogh was in awe of Christ's ability to put readily observed realities into the service of profound truths and to make even the simplest things seem suggestive. The same he thought could be set of Millet in whose work Van Gogh wrote, "All reality is at the same time symbolic". He hoped for the same in his own pictures. That is, to communicate meaning indirectly by way of both metaphoric motifs and color that's more expressive than literally true.

Van Gogh had a strong stake in *The Sower* he painted at Arles. As he told Theo, he wanted it to be tremendous and he despaired of his ability to pull it off. Plagued by self-doubt he reworked it several times, adjusting color, repositioning the figure, adding a cast shadow there, a pair of birds here.

In the end, the painting did not live up to his ambitions for it and he branded it a failure when he sent it off to his brother in Paris. Upon reflection though Van Gogh changed his tune and some weeks later he said, "exaggerated studies like *The Sower* usually strike me as atrociously ugly and bad, but then again these seemed to be the only ones that have any deep meaning."

Nonetheless he was convinced that the definitive sower had yet to be painted and he returned to the motif again and again. The first of his reprises on the left is more a naturalistic, its sower Van Gogh himself concluded small and vague. About a month later under the influence of his new housemate Paul Gauguin, Van Gogh took a different tack and painting from memory and imagination produced his most radical and powerful translation of Millet's painting, the version on the right. Here sky and field are thick with bold color, but these are

only a backdrop for the preeminent figure of the sower, who looms large, faces the viewer and comes so close that he's cut at the knees by the painting's lower edge.

Like his predecessors this sower is lit from behind. But the time of day is now sunset and his face so lost in shadow as to be featureless. His task of sowing is literally brought to the fore and emphasized by his large and vigorous casting hand as well as a rain of outsized seeds, the dark silhouettes of which are touched by vibrant yellow that echoes the glowing and outsized sun.

Having removed the preternatural looking sun of the first Arles Sower from the down to earth rendering at left, Van Gogh later thought the better of its elimination and in the painting at right, the sun is larger than ever before.

But rather than competing with the figure as it had in Van Gogh's first painted *Sower*, the sun of the later work operates in tandem with laborer and circling his head like a halo and emphasizing the metaphoric significance traditionally attached to this task. In rendering it this way Van Gogh acted on a goal he'd set for himself at Arles. He wrote, "I want to paint men and women with something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our colors. I want to express hope by some star and the eagerness of the soul by sunset radiance".

The Sower of this sunset version is strikingly offset by a gnarled foreground tree, the trunk of which echoes the figure's color and angle. It closely resembles a tree used by Gauguin in his *Vision After the Sermon*. So closely in fact, that it might be read as a tip of the hat to Gauguin's remarkable picture, which had been made just weeks earlier and was much discussed by Van Gogh and Gauguin at Arles. By linking the two pictures' compositions Van Gogh perhaps meant to draw attention to the fact that both of them had origins in scripture, and comparing the two pictures tonight serves to make the point about their varied approaches to evoking the spiritual in art.

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Neither artist's take on the Bible was conventional. Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon* invokes Jacob's struggle with an angel, an incident recounted in the book of Genesis, by way of the wrestling match that you see in the painting's upper right. Unlike other artists' depictions of this biblical scene which are numerous, Gauguin's does not render the tussle as a simple event to be witnessed by the viewer, but instead presents it from afar and from the viewpoint of the group of pious peasants in his picture's foreground.

The fight beyond them was meant, Gauguin said, to be understood as these peasants' vision. That is a collective religious hallucination which was induced by an inspiring sermon. Hence, his painting's title, *Vision After the Sermon*.

According to Gauguin, the unnaturally red field against which Jacob wrestles with the angel marks this part of the picture as a supernatural realm; and as he wrote, the landscape and the struggle exist only in the imaginations of the praying figures. Gauguin characterized their religious fervor as a rustic and superstitious spectacle. One that he witnessed from the viewpoint of a curious skeptic who felt emotionally distanced from the piety he painted.

Van Gogh by contrast was a believer, though he rejected traditional subject matter just as he rejected organized religion. He was deeply interested in communicating religious feeling through art. Whereas Gauguin envisioned *After the Sermon* painted the supernatural but denied its reality. Van Gogh in *The Sower* painted reality in a way that affirmed the supernatural.

In his self-avowed “longing for the infinite”, Van Gogh was closer to Gauguin’s hallucinating peasants than he was to Gauguin himself. And this was one of the many, many differences between them that Van Gogh and Gauguin explored, sometimes quarreled about, in the course of their nine week long alcohol enlivened cohabitation at Arles. The culmination of which was the ear cutting incident that left Van Gogh near death and sent Gauguin packing back to Paris.

The agitated and delusional state that led Van Gogh to cut off a piece of his ear was the first of several nervous attacks that led him in the spring of 1889 to commit himself to a mental asylum at Saint-Rémy some 15 miles northeast of Arles where he remained for a year, experienced several more attacks and more and more pondered the human condition and his own mortality. Given his precarious health, the bleakness of his surroundings, and his self-declared aversion to life, the thoughts of suicide his doctor reported are not surprising. Even when he was happily productive at Arles, Van Gogh had pictured death as something of an adventure. A great journey, he wrote, to that other hemisphere of life whose existence we can only surmise.

Perhaps, he mused, death is not the hardest part of a painter’s life. Looking at the stars always makes me dream just as I dream over the black dots representing towns on a map, and why I ask myself shouldn’t the shining stars be as accessible as the black dots on a map.

Well, just as we take a train to get to Rouen we take death to reach a star. Van Gogh even imagined continuing his work in the great beyond, amused on the possibility of “painting under superior and changed conditions on one of those innumerable heavenly bodies”.

Such pronouncements born of faith as well as eccentricity go a long way toward explaining his famous *Starry Night*, which Van Gogh made shortly after his arrival at Saint-Rémy.

Within the context of Van Gogh’s stated belief in the night sky’s promise of an afterlife, the celestial spectacle that comprises much of this painting may be said to reflect his dreams of enhanced existence in a world beyond our own. The

painting's small, mostly dark townscape would seem to suggest earthly lives' relative marginality within a grander scheme and to connote the limited enlightenment available to those caught up in it.

The prominent church steeple at its center which breaks the horizon to touch the sky might be seen to connote human attempts to touch the great beyond her religious practice.

While the large dark cypress at left, the sort of tree one sees in Mediterranean graveyards and one Van Gogh himself called funereal, introduces a note of death. Its vigorous upward thrust amid stars that it fingers and frames may be seen to wishfully forecast the artist's escape from earthly darkness into astral light since, as he said, one takes death to reach at star.

Similar musings on mortality informed *The Reaper*, a painting in the current exhibition that was made around the same time as *The Starry Night* and it was seen by Van Gogh as a counterpoint to *The Sower* he had made a year before.

His inspiration for *The Reaper* came from his immediate surroundings. His window at the asylum looked out on a wheat field. Green when he arrived at Saint-Rémy, the wheat ripened before his eyes reminding him of the natural inevitability of maturation and decline and helping him view his own fate within the broader context of some preordained plan.

As we wrote to his brother, "I feel so strongly that it's the same with people as it is with wheat. We are sown in the earth to germinate and in the end we're ground between the millstones to become bread. Both are necessary and useful as are our death and disappearance from the earth."

Some weeks later, he elaborated this thought in a letter to his sister noting, "What else can we do when we ponder all the things we don't know the reasons for, than go out and look at a field of wheat. The history of those plants is much the same as our own. For aren't we like wheat forced to submit to growing without the power to move, and then to being reaped when we are ripe?" And indeed, one day he peered out his window to see his field being harvested. Van Gogh's response was the painting at the left.

I see in this *Reaper*, he wrote, the image of death in a sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping. This notion scarcely unique to Van Gogh was a venerable one familiar to him through the Parable of the Sower as well as Van der Maaten's *Funeral Procession through the Field* in which a reaper and a half mown field pauses to pay respects to a passing funeral cortege, underscoring the connection between harvest and human demise.

A print of Van der Maaten's picture had, as we know, hung in Van Gogh's boyhood home and not only inspired a sermon Vincent heard his father preach, but later spurred his own pious reflections as shown in Vincent's copy of the print which he annotated in Dutch, English, and Latin.

Van Gogh likely recalled this print as he observed and painted the reaper outside his window. An image he saw as, "The opposite of the sower I try to do before, but there is nothing sad in this image of death. It goes its way and brought daylight, the sun flooding everything with the light of pure gold. It's an image you see of death as the great book of nature speaks it. And I have sought its almost smiling aspect. It's all yellow except a line of violet hills, a pale, fair yellow."

Indeed, *The Reaper* is even more luminous, more yellow than the very yellow *Sower* of the previous summer. Sidestepping the conventional image of the Grim Reaper, Van Gogh aimed instead for radiance. His picture, like his previous sowers, a reflection of the parable in which the field is world, the harvest is the end of time, and the righteous gathered in by angels shine as brightly as the sun in the kingdom of their father.

Van Gogh's year long stay at Saint-Rémy, while offering plenty of time for reflection and rest, did little to improve his condition. He suffered worsening attacks that included hallucinations, losses of consciousness and long periods of disorientation during which he could not work.

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When he was lucid he soldiered on but he was worried by his lack of progress and depressed by his fellow patients. In the end, convinced that his confinement might be doing him more harm than good, he obtained a discharge and in May 1890, 12 months after his admission, he was pronounced cured and left the asylum to journey northward to Paris.

He stopped there just briefly to see his beloved brother and to meet Theo's new wife and a baby boy they had named Vincent. There was no room in the apartment for the older Vincent and Theo, who was feeling financially pinched by his new obligations as well as by his ongoing commitment to his brother's support, could scarcely afford a second Parisian rent. Moreover Van Gogh, as he immediately realized, could no longer stand the pace of Paris.

It had then been decided that he would reside in Auvers, a nearby town that though less than an hour's train ride from Paris, remained rustically picturesque. Auvers' expensive vistas have been painted by several French artists already and now Van Gogh would have his crack at them.

Despite his pleasure in his new surroundings, his spirits were somewhat dampened by the shadows of his illness and Theo's financial woes. As Vincent wrote from Auvers, "I try generally to be cheerful, but I sense that my life is threatened at its very root and my steps sometimes waiver." Painting was the thing that cheered him the most and on some days when the weather was good and Van Gogh found himself working in open air, he even entertained hopes of recovery.

The expensive vistas that were so much a part of Auvers attractiveness to painters inspired Van Gogh to make a whole series of long horizontal works known as the *Double Squares*, paintings that are twice as long as they are high. Despite their uniform dimensions, 20 inches by 40, these Auvers landscapes are quite varied in effect. Some like the ones you see here are pretty even touristic, others almost eerily empty. Still others like this tableau of uprooting trees which cling for dear life to a steep embankment are disturbingly agitated and crowded and put one...

[Gap in audio - 00:47:37 - 00:47:49]

...effects created by the painting's stretched and straining forms and its caustic, clashing hues.

As Van Gogh himself had long since noted, his best work is marked by arbitrary color that's chosen for its expressive impact. Here a suggestive palette adjoins spiky line and shallow, almost claustrophobic space to drive home feelings of discomfort and even panic. When such feelings overtook him at Auvers, Van Gogh's impulse, he wrote, was to give all my nervous energy over to picture making. Describing one such painting session at Auvers he told Theo, "though the brush almost slipped through my fingers I knew exactly what I wanted to do, vast fields of wheat under troubled skies. I did not need to go out of my way to express sadness and extreme loneliness."

One double square that fits the motifs and emotions Van Gogh described is the picture at left. A landscape devoid of humans and their dwellings, its stretch of farmland immense in relation to the haystacks that punctuated, an image that resounds with loneliness.

Another double square that fits the bill is the well-known *Crows over Wheatfield* at left, a similarly uninhabited vista, which features a troubled sky. This picture is often romanticized as Van Gogh's last painting having been presented that way in Vincente Minnelli's popular film version of Irving Stone's *Lust for Life* in which Vincent as played by Kirk Douglas is seen working on it just before he shoots himself. Scores of commentators since have read *Crows over Wheatfield* as a virtual suicide note pointing to its darkening sky and flock of black birds as portents of imminent death.

Though Van Gogh would in fact shoot himself in a wheat field at the end of July, he probably had no plan to do so when he painted *Crows over Wheat Field*.

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But given his comments on the reaper it is reasonable to assume that this mature crop put him in mind of death. It's also notable that *Crows over Wheat Field* resembles Van der Maaten's *Funeral Procession through the Fields* in both its motif of a pathway through a harvest ready crop and its long horizontal

format and certainly Van Gogh recalled the Parable of the Sower as he worked on *Crows over Wheat Field*.

Like his colorful visualization of that biblical text, *Crows over Wheat Field* includes both a path, the place where seeds are left vulnerable to scavengers, and birds that recall those that undermine the Parable of Sower by eating up the seed before it has time to implant. But in contrast to those biblical birds the ones seen in *Crows over Wheat Field* are too late to foil divine plan. Ominous as they may look these crows can in fact do no harm to a crop that stands ready to be reaped. Defying turbulent weather, torturous pests and hungry birds, this crop has made it and stands as a testament to both the generative capacities of nature and the rewards that come to watchful and hardworking human beings.

As such, its message might be read as celebratory not dire and indeed Van Gogh himself remarked that his wheat fields under troubled skies on the one hand lonely and sad were on the other, healthy and invigorating. With that in mind I would further suggest that Van Gogh may have been thinking of his personal productivity as he worked on *Crows over Wheat Field*.

Like the solitary sower he had admired in his youth, down at the heel yet oddly heroic, Van Gogh had worked alone and on task undaunted by sometimes bleak surroundings. Despite his own share of sadness and stormy weather, Van Gogh had brought his project to fruition and the site of a flourishing crop within in a rather hostile looking environment may well have suggested his own triumphs over adversity and reminded him of his earthly achievements, even as it bespoke the inevitability of death.

This interpretation is made a bit more plausible when considered in the context of a letter Van Gogh received from Gauguin some months earlier. Well aware of his friend's fascination with sowers, Gauguin himself alluded to the biblical parable as in his letter to Van Gogh he lamented the hardships faced by avant-garde painters. Comparing their struggles to those of farmers battling nature Gauguin remarked, "Having prepared the ground, man casts his seed and by defending it daily against birds and bad weather he finally manages to reap, but what about us poor artists? Where does the grain we plant go to and when will our harvest come?"

Crows over Wheat Field might be read as an answer to that rhetorical question, an assertion that despite obstacles large and small the work gets done and the harvest comes. Van Gogh himself had produced a respectable harvest of which he was duly proud. His stock pile of paintings not only helped him justify his existence and allowance in the here and now, but allowed him to believe that a piece of himself would live on even as he disappeared from this earth.

Though his letters indicate that Van Gogh sensed the nearness of death in the summer of 1890, he was as we have seen disinclined to view his journey to the beyond as sad or dark and it seems to me unlikely that the painter of *The*

Reaper and *Starry Night* would emblemize his own passage from earth with black birds and somber skies.

The double square that seems a much more likely illusion to Van Gogh's death is Dallas' own sun-soaked double-square [*Sheaves of Wheat*], a painting in which regular rhythmic brushstrokes delineate monumental sheaves, a motif that bespeaks culmination and illumination. The sheaves multiplicity connotes amplitude and success and the painting's vivacious yellows and golds interwoven with pale blue, violet strike a high pitched note.

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This color scheme is reminiscent of the very yellow *Sower* Van Gogh made at Arles and at that time you will recall he noted the sowers and sheaves not only evoked his past in a manner he found magical, but also filled him with a sense of the infinite.

By painting reapers and sheaves--the counterpoint, his many sowers--Van Gogh acknowledged the mutuality of planting and harvest and took comfort in the glimpses of the infinite that were afforded by nature cycles. The parallel palettes of Van Gogh's *Sower* and his *Sheaves* stresses this relatedness and the yellow and violet and their complementarity symbolize natural closure, since they are one of those color couples that "Complete each other like man and woman."

Another complementarity at play in the *Sheaves* is that of the organic and the manmade. Like Van Gogh's paintings, wheat sheaves are the results of nature that is shaped and ordered by trained human hands. Van Gogh's painted sheaves might thus be seen as analogues for the body of work he himself had put together in which he took comfort as he pondered his own earthly end.

Furthermore, as arrayed here, the sheaves are almost figural in form and disposition, recalling Van Gogh's earlier observation that "Humans are to a considerable extent like wheat subject to being reaped when ripe." And finally these sheaves luminosity recalls anew, and for the last time in Van Gogh's work, the ecstatic vision evoked by the Parable of the Sower in which the righteous reaped by angels shine as brightly as the sun in the kingdom of their father. So if Van Gogh's public would like to think of one single picture as his last, I would like to propose the Dallas *Sheaves*, an image that testifies to a job well done, and emblemizes the hope for conclusion to earthly travails and by way of its sunny hues and against the backdrop of biblical parable, evokes the illumination that awakes true believers in that other hemisphere of life whose existence we can only surmise. Thanks for your attention.

Duration: 58 Minutes