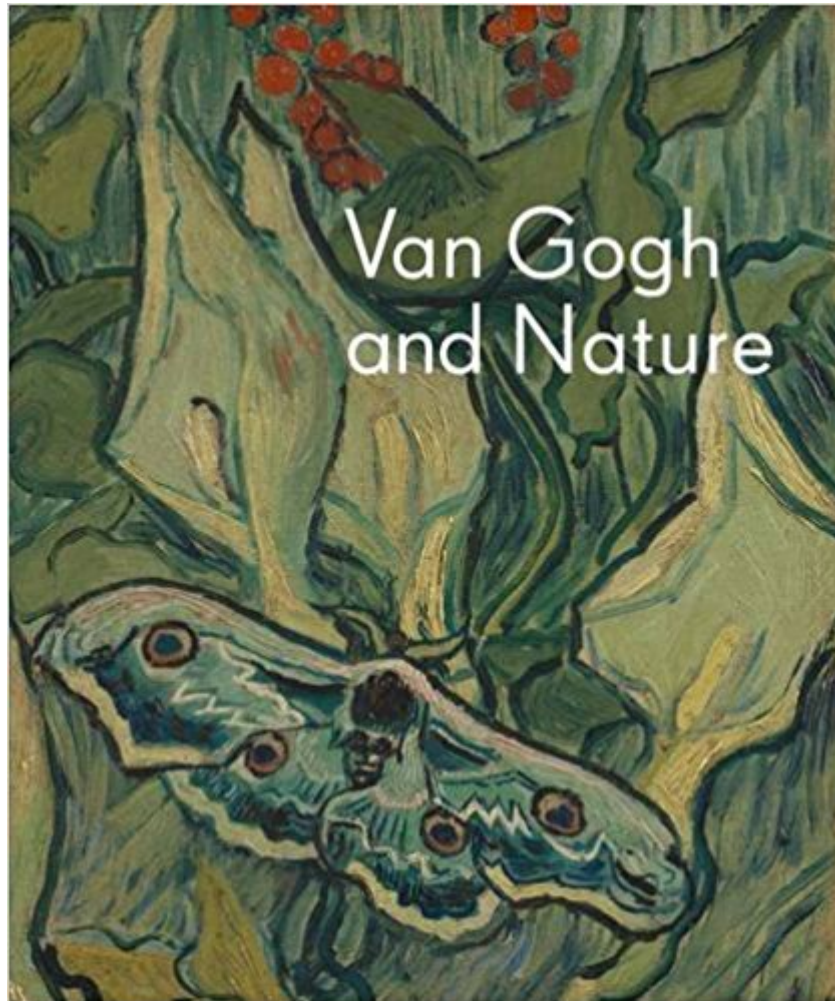




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Van Gogh And Nature



Synopsis

A revelatory study of the importance of nature in Van Gogh's art throughout his life in Holland and France. The celebrated painter Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) had a lifelong fascination with the natural world. He spent his youth in rural Holland, and the country's flat landscapes, trees, flowers, and birds would feature in his early art. After he moved to Paris, he encountered new radical thinking about art and humanity's changing relationship with nature. Later, in Provence and Auvers, he discovered unfamiliar terrain, flora, and fauna that further influenced his artistic ideas and subject matter. Van Gogh's images of such diverse environments reflect not only his immediate surroundings but also the artist's evolving engagement with nature and art. *Van Gogh and Nature* is an eye-opening and beautifully produced catalogue, which accompanied the best-attended special exhibition in the Clark Art Institute's history. It chronicles the artist's ongoing relationship with nature throughout his entire career. Among the featured works are Van Gogh's drawings and paintings, along with related materials that illuminate his reading, sources, and influences. Vivid color photography and explanatory texts based on new research by the authors clarify a central theme of Van Gogh's oeuvre.

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Customer Reviews

This catalogue offers the first study of the importance of nature in Van Gogh's art, from his youth in Holland to his mature artistic engagement with the landscape of Provence.

Richard Kendall is curator-at-large at the Clark Art Institute. Sjraar van Heugten is former head of collections of the Van Gogh Museum and an independent art historian. Chris Stolwijk is director of the RKD Research Centre, The Hague, and former curator at the Van Gogh Museum.

It is surprising to realize that among all the great countryside painters of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist France, Vincent van Gogh was the only real country boy. Monet was a Parisian and Pissarro was from Charlotte Amelie, and even if one goes back a generation or two in the landscape tradition to Daubigny or Corot (also Paris natives), or canvasses the birth places of the major Barbizon painters, one finds mainly urban addresses, again mostly in Paris but also in Nantes, S^{aint}-Vres, Bordeaux, Valenciennes, etc. Among the principal figures, only Courbet and Millet share van Gogh's rural credentials, and they were of course among his favorite painters. Vincent himself was born and grew up in the overwhelmingly agricultural province of Brabant in the southern Netherlands, spent all his formative years surrounded by the natural settings of the countryside and did not encounter a city until he was sixteen years old. Those rural roots stayed with him all his life, and although you could take the man out of the marshes and pine woods of his childhood and youth, you could not take them out of the man; his dedication to perhaps even "devotion" to nature is not too strong a word to nature was probably the primary characteristic of his life and art, and his sensitivity to nature was so extreme that it amounted to something like an identification with it. He himself thought that this sensitivity was the cause of his mental deterioration; toward the end of his life, while in voluntary commitment in the mental asylum at Saint-Remy, he wrote in answer to an inquiry, "The emotions that take hold of me when I am confronted by nature can sometimes lead me to a state of total collapse, resulting in a period of several weeks in which I am incapable of doing any work." The connection between nature, painting and Vincent's mental state which seems undeniable is in fact the subject of the most recent foray into his biography, Edwin Mullins's "Van Gogh: The Asylum Year" (2015—see the review on this website), in which that statement of Vincent's is heavily weighted (148). The extent to which we can take such a self-diagnosis at face value is open to question, especially since at that point the artist was desperately trying to find an explanation for his faltering sanity. However, there is no question at all about the extraordinary importance of nature in his life and art. So it is high time for an exhibition

such as this one at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts (from June to September 2015). It is apparently the first major exhibition to concentrate specifically on this theme, and it is in every respect a significant event, gathering fifty works from over thirty private and institutional collections. Richard Kendall, a curator at large at the Clark, is the exhibition's chief curator and the principal contributor to this catalogue that accompanies it. He said recently in an interview that the idea for the exhibition came to him as he was re-reading Vincent's letters in the six-volume illustrated and annotated edition and was struck by how "rather obsessively" van Gogh uses the word "nature" there ("The Boston Globe," May 17, 2015). Dr. Kendall recruited Chris Stolwijk and Sjraar van Heugten, both former heads of collections at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and two of the most widely respected van Gogh scholars, to co-curate with him and write essays for the volume. There are altogether five essays, and they are generally chronologically arranged. "How Nature Speaks" is Dr. Stolwijk's examination of the years 1881-1885, in which he points to the religious bases of Vincent's appreciation of nature in the "Groningen theology" of his father's ministry and to the boy's surprisingly wide acquaintance with botany, entomology and ornithology as evidenced in the details of his early drawings and in the sometimes quite lengthy descriptions in his letters. In "Nature and the South," the longest of the texts, Dr. van Heugten analyzes the Arles and Saint-Rémy years (1888-90) closely following Vincent's appreciation of the Provençal light, the new types of botanical subjects that became available to him, and the rapturous pantheistic feelings that he wrote of in his letters. There is very close attention to the new subjects here, the sunflowers, cypresses, olive trees, wheat fields, etc. The author demonstrates how each of the new subjects undergoes an evolution toward the more highly stylized as the series progresses, and this very close attention to the details of the works enables him to suggest some new sequences and reorder some probable dates in their creation. Dr. Kendall himself contributes three essays. "Nature and the City" looks at the two years Vincent spent in Paris and the kinds of nature paintings he made there: flowers, the private gardens and allotments on Montmartre, the parks and public gardens. This sticking to nature in the heart of a modern bustling city, he indicates, is evidence of the depth and breadth of his commitment: nature is for van Gogh part religion, poetry and philosophy on the one hand, and part natural science and practical reality on the other. In "The Last Months" (Auvers, 1890), he finds the artist pushing

himself ever farther into natural themes, with hardly a canvas lacking flowers, trees, or farmland. These include the great "double-square" canvases with their heightened palette of bright greens and yellows and their extreme stylization. Perhaps the most unusual material is in Dr. Kendall's more general essay on "Van Gogh, Nature, and Science," in which he continues his study of the effects of Darwinism and natural history on visual culture in the nineteenth century, which has previously resulted in interesting perspectives on Monet and others. Here he emphasizes Vincent's reception of the tendency of his time and place to embrace the hitherto specialized science of natural history as popular culture and the emergence of "amateur" scientists and of books and visual aids tailored to their education. As a youth, van Gogh was fascinated by such material, and the writer indicates a number of sources that he eagerly turned to for enlightenment on such subjects. I found these essays to be interesting, informative, and very well written. They are accompanied by excellent illustrations, of which there are a total of 192, including the catalogue reproductions. The photographs are arranged throughout the volume in order of the discussion, which relieves the reader of much page-flipping. The great majority of non-catalogue reproductions are also by van Gogh, although there are appropriate reproductions of works by Gauguin, Bernard, Monet, Monticelli, and others. This is a copiously illustrated catalogue; there is hardly a page without some reproduction or other, and some of the paintings are only rarely reproduced. The letters are all cited from the six-volume edition, and the art is referenced to both the Failla and Hulsker catalogues raisonnés. There is no bibliography, but the notes to the texts provide abundant references for further reading, and take into consideration more than the usual amount of Dutch-language material. This is a very satisfying traversal of a central concern of van Gogh's, perhaps of the central concern. The exhibition's sole venue is the Clark; it's a pity that it will not travel, but those who will not be able to see it in person can be thankful that it has been captured in this excellent and beautifully illustrated catalogue. Of course there is no end to the books on van Gogh, but this one is quite special and a "must-have" for his aficionados.

This was a very interesting book. The text is excellent and the color reproductions are wonderful. I enjoyed reading the extracts from Van Gogh's letters and seeing the color reproductions of the paintings he was discussing. Very enjoyable read. I only wish I could have seen the exhibition.

Published on the occasion of the Exhibition 'Van Gogh and Nature' at The Clark Art Institute in Williamstown MA in 2015, the book of the same title encompasses every facet of the exhibition with a cohesive and beautifully organized and written narrative. The glorious illustrations, some with full page details, are luminous and perfectly colored. (not an easy feat, recreating the with accuracy the colors of the paintings in print).An outstanding volume with meticulous attention to detail in both story and art. Get two! You will wear the first one out reading and re-reading it, and wish a second, crisp copy, for your library!

Physically beautiful and filled with wonderful information. Rarely does a book come even slightly close to an exhibit--- This book, however, covers all works exhibited and more. A delight to read and simply dwell on each image.

excellent

This book accompanied the loan exhibition of 50 paintings & drawings at the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA, June 14 - Sept. 13, 2015. The chapters are 1. "Introduction" ; 2. "How Nature Speaks: Holland, 1881-85" by Chris Stolwijk; 3. "Van Gogh, Nature, & Science" by Richard Kendall; 4. "Nature & the City: Paris, 1886-88" by Richard Kendall; 5. "Nature & the South: Arles & St. Remy, 1888-90" by Sjraar van Heugten; and 6. "The Last Months: Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890" by Richard Kendall. The 192 illus. (most in color) appear as they are discussed in the chapters. There is an Exhibition Checklist, & there is an Index. Much in this book was new to me: the drawing that was a study for the peacock moth in the painting on the front cover, the Arles picture with falling rain painted with a nearly-dry brush, most of the info. in the chapter about science, & many paintings from the Kroller-Muller Museum & private collections.

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