



1889

Oil on canvas

28 7/8 x 36 3/8 inches (73.3 x 92.4 cm)

VINCENT WILLEM VAN GOGH

Dutch

The Henry P. McIlhenny Collection in memory
of Frances P. McIlhenny, 1986, 1986-26-36

LET'S LOOK

What kind of weather is van Gogh depicting?

What adjectives would you use to describe this day? Why?

How many different kinds of brushstrokes can you find? Look for thin, thick, horizontal, vertical, diagonal, and others. What do they represent?

Where do you think the artist was in relation to the scene when he painted it? How can you tell?

What kind of mood do you feel when you look at the painting? Why?

RAIN

"Through the iron-barred window I can make out a square of wheat in an enclosure . . ."

—Vincent van Gogh, from a May 1889 letter to Theo van Gogh

In this dramatic landscape van Gogh depicts a gray, rainy autumn day in France. He uses quick, diagonal slashes of white paint in the foreground to depict the rain falling outside his window. Through streaks of rain, a plowed field composed of many green, gray, blue, white, brown, and golden yellow colors stretches into the distance toward an extremely high horizon line. A wall surrounding the field climbs up and across on a steep diagonal, giving the field the feeling of stretching both outward and upward toward the misty mountains in the distance.

Van Gogh's unusual composition combines a sense of deep space with the flat streaks of rain in the foreground. The unusual vantage point and the practice of representing rainfall by diagonal lines can be linked to his interest in and study of prints by Japanese artists, who employed similar compositional techniques in their woodcuts. In fact, van Gogh had copied Utagawa Hiroshige's *The Great Bridge: A Sudden Shower at Atake* two years earlier when he saw it in Paris.

Van Gogh painted *Rain* while he was a patient at the hospital of Saint-Paul de Mausole in Saint-Rémy, a small town near Arles. He entered the facility in May 1889 in search of help for his emotional problems. He had a private room as well as a studio. From his room van Gogh could look down on the wheatfield depicted in *Rain*. During his eleven-month stay van Gogh drew and painted this view about a dozen times, experimenting with the shifting light effects and weather changes he observed through the seasons. This is the only painting he made of this field in the rain. Although he was looking through bars on the window when he composed this

image, van Gogh made a conscious decision to leave them out of his landscape. He felt that the act of painting was healing, though he sometimes worked so hard that he made himself sick. Van Gogh created many of his greatest masterpieces during his time in Saint-Rémy by looking at the views outside his window.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

"I'd like to paint in such a way that if it comes to it, everyone who has eyes could understand it."
—Vincent van Gogh, from an August 1888 letter to Theo van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh, the oldest of six children, was born in a village in the southern Netherlands. His father was a pastor in a local church and he was particularly close to his younger brother Theo, who was born in 1857; Vincent and Theo remained strongly connected throughout their lives. As a boy van Gogh enjoyed exploring his hometown and the surrounding countryside, sketching what he saw around him. He was sent to a boarding school at the age of eleven, but was not happy there and deeply missed his family. In 1869, at the age of sixteen, van Gogh began an apprenticeship at Goupil and Company, an art dealership in The Hague where his uncle worked. He was so successful at his job that he was transferred to London and then Paris, but after seven years in the business he lost interest in art dealing and was eventually dismissed.

After leaving Goupil in 1876, van Gogh attempted several other professions, including jobs as an assistant teacher, a social worker, and a bookstore employee. He eventually decided to follow in his father's footsteps, and in 1878 van Gogh served as a lay preacher to an impoverished mining community on the border between France and Belgium. However, by 1880 van Gogh had decided to become an artist.

He first studied in Brussels with painter Anthon van Rappard and later moved to The Hague to study with artist Anton Mauve. After several years of practice van Gogh created his first significant works, such as the 1885 painting *The Potato Eaters*. He tended to use primarily dark earth tones in his early canvases, following the tradition of earlier painters like Rembrandt van Rijn.

In 1886 van Gogh moved to Paris to live with his brother Theo, who had become an art dealer at Goupil and Company. In Paris van Gogh met many young artists and became familiar with the bright colors and visible brushstrokes of Impressionists such as Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Charles Angrand, and Paul Signac, as well as the stylistic innovations of other artists including

Jean-François Millet and Eugène Delacroix. He also collected Japanese prints, which were popular among Parisian artists at the time. The flat areas of color outlined in black, unusual perspectives, and cropping of Japanese art had a significant impact on the work van Gogh produced in the last years of his life. In 1888 he moved to southern France, seeking relief from the excitement of city life in the countryside around the town of Arles. Van Gogh believed that the sun and proximity to nature in this area of France were similar to his imagined idea of Japan.

Van Gogh was a prolific writer and sent over 700 letters to Theo, who supported him emotionally and financially and enabled him to dedicate his life to art. This correspondence provides a type of autobiographical portrait of an extraordinarily thoughtful, sensitive, troubled man who passionately searched for meaning and purpose in his short life. From 1880 until his death in 1890, van Gogh fully devoted himself to being an artist and made over 800 paintings and approximately 1,600 drawings, including portraits, landscapes, and still lifes. Theo had become a successful art dealer and made attempts to sell his brother's work, but the public was not ready for van Gogh's unique modern style. Despite the fact that his paintings remained largely unsold during his lifetime, van Gogh has since become one of the most popular artists of all time.

INFLUENCE OF JAPANESE ART ON VAN GOGH

"I envy the Japanese the extreme clarity that everything in their work has. It's never dull, and never appears to be done too hastily. Their work is as simple as breathing . . ."

—Vincent van Gogh, from a September 1888 letter to Theo van Gogh

After several hundred years of limited international relations, Japan signed trade agreements with Britain in 1854 and France in 1858. As a result of these treaties, Europeans became increasingly familiar with the art of Japan through subsequent world's fairs like the Exposition Universelle of 1867 in Paris. Many artists, including van Gogh, were inspired by Japanese woodblock prints. The sophisticated compositions, extraordinary color schemes, and use of black outlines led to distinctive stylistic changes in van Gogh's later work. For example, the Japanese use of repeated vertical or diagonal lines to depict rain in many prints may have influenced van Gogh's painting *Rain*.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Hiroshige's *The Great Bridge: A Sudden Shower at Atake* with van Gogh's *Rain*

- What similarities do you see in the two pictures?
Subject matter? Composition? Depiction of space? Other?
- What differences do you notice?
Colors? Lines? Shapes? Other?
- How does each of these images make you feel? Why?



The Great Bridge: A Sudden Shower at Atake
(Ōhashi Atake No Yūdachi)

1857

Color woodcut

Ōban tate-e: 14 x 9 1/8 inches
(35.6 x 23.2 cm)

UTAGAWA HIROSHIGE I
Japanese

The Louis E. Stern Collection,
1963, 1963-181-156