



**Sunflowers**, 1889, by Vincent van Gogh



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## About the Artwork

Twelve sunflowers, at various stages of growth and decay, burst outward from a simple earthenware jug. No two sunflowers in the arrangement are alike; Van Gogh imbues each one with individual personality and expression. Some, like those at the center, are full and heavy, rendered in a rich, thickly-painted mustard color. Others, like those at the top of the arrangement, have petals that extend wildly out from the center of the flowers like yellow flames. Van Gogh's use of a bold red color for the center of a large sunflower on the right, the outlines of the earthenware jug, the edge of the table, and the artist's signature break up the sea of yellow hues that otherwise dominate the painting. On the bottom right of the arrangement, a lone sunflower droops downward, the weight of the bud too heavy for its weakened stem. The bouquet of sunflowers appears even more brilliant in contrast with the turquoise color of the background.

Paintings that show a collection of carefully arranged inanimate objects are called *still lifes*. A still life can include objects ranging from natural things, like flowers and fruit, to everyday objects from around the home, like books and kitchen utensils. The objects featured in still life arrangements often symbolize life, death, and the passage of time. Having grown up in the Netherlands, Van Gogh began his career immersed in the traditions of Dutch painting. Dutch artists greatly valued realism and attention to detail, and were particularly well-known in the genre of still life painting. For this still life Van Gogh chose to focus only on a simple earthenware jug and a bouquet of sunflowers so as not to distract from the brilliant colors of the impressive flowers. Unlike the artists that came before him, Van Gogh painted in an expressionist style, forgoing realism in favor of bold colors and large, dynamic, thickly painted brushstrokes. This technique creates a visible texture on the surface of the canvas and is called *impasto*. Van Gogh uses the *impasto* technique to great effect in *Sunflowers*, creating an image that is even more dynamic due to the fact that the oil paint recreates the three dimensional textures of the sunflowers he was painting.



### **Sunflowers**

1889

### **Vincent van Gogh**

Dutch, 1853–1890

Oil on canvas  
36 3/8 x 28 inches  
(92.4 x 71.1 cm)

Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Mr. and Mrs. Carroll S. Tyson, Jr., Collection, 1963-116-19

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## About the Artist

Vincent van Gogh was born in a small village in the southern Netherlands. His father was a pastor in a local church and Van Gogh was the eldest of six children. He was particularly close to his brother Theo and they remained close throughout their adult lives. When he was sixteen, Van Gogh began an apprenticeship at Goupil and Company, an art dealership in The Hague, a city in the Netherlands. This job brought Van Gogh to the company's London and Paris offices, but after several years he tired of art dealing and left the company. In the intervening years, Van Gogh attempted a number of careers, even following in his father's footsteps and for a short time becoming a preacher in an impoverished mining town. These flirtations with different careers ended in 1880 when Van Gogh officially decided to pursue a career as an artist.

After studying with artists in Brussels and the Hague, Van Gogh began developing his own unique style, which continued to evolve when he moved to Paris in 1886 to live with his brother Theo. There he met many Impressionist artists and was excited by the use of bright colors and visible brushstrokes in their paintings. Van Gogh found inspiration in the work of the Impressionists and the Japanese woodblock prints that they collected, which led him to develop his own expressionist style of painting, which was unlike any of his contemporaries.

Much of what we know about Van Gogh's life comes from the more than 700 letters that he sent to Theo, who supported him both emotionally and financially while he pursued a career as an artist. These letters provide an autobiographical portrait of an extraordinarily thoughtful, sensitive, and troubled man. From 1880 until his death by suicide in 1890, Van Gogh fully devoted himself to being an artist and produced over 800 paintings and approximately 1,600 drawings. Theo, who was a successful art dealer, 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 celebrated artists of all time.

## Let's Look

- Can you find all twelve sunflowers in this painting? Look closely. Some are overlapping and hard to see.
- Which flowers are in full bloom and which ones are wilting? Why do you think Van Gogh chose to include both healthy and wilting flowers in the same painting?

## Let's Look Again

- Sometimes color can be used to express mood and emotion. How would you describe the mood and emotion in this painting? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Van Gogh loved using expressive color in his paintings. Which colors stand out the most in this painting? Why?



*Sunflowers*, 1889, by Vincent van Gogh (Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Mr. and Mrs. Carroll S. Tyson, Jr., Collection, 1963-116-19)



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## The Yellow House

In 1888 Van Gogh moved to Arles, a quiet, sun-drenched town in southern France, far from the noisy streets of Paris where he had been working. Excited about living in fresh, clean country air, surrounded by the vibrant colors of nature—especially the fields of sunflowers the town was known for—he was also looking forward to the arrival of his friend, the artist Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903). He rented a yellow stucco-faced house, which Van Gogh affectionately named the “Yellow House,” and that was intended to be a “studio in the south” for him and his artist friends. While waiting for Gauguin to arrive he painted a number of still lifes of sunflowers in simple earthenware jugs. At least two of these paintings were finished and already decorating Gauguin’s bedroom when he arrived in Arles in October. Van Gogh continued painting sunflowers while Gauguin was in Arles and even painted two replicas the following year.

Gauguin and Van Gogh lived and worked well together at first; however, by December their friendship began to unravel. On December 23, in a fit of rage and madness, Van Gogh cut off part of his ear. He was then admitted to a hospital where he would stay through early January. Hereafter Van Gogh would continue to struggle with mental health issues, eventually resulting in his institutionalization in an asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence in southern France. Throughout his illness Van Gogh continued making his art. One painting that

he completed while at the asylum is called *Rain* and shows the view from Van Gogh’s window on a stormy day. Van Gogh chose not to include the bars on the window, instead showing an unobstructed view to the fields below. In July of 1890, after having left the asylum, Van Gogh relapsed once again and committed suicide. His brother Theo was at his side when Van Gogh died in the hospital from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Many have come to think that Van Gogh’s expressive use of color and gestural brushstrokes reflect the personal struggles that he faced in his lifetime.



*Rain*, 1889, by Vincent van Gogh (Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Henry P. McIlhenny Collection in memory of Frances P. McIlhenny, 1986-26-36)



## Comparing and Connecting

Christoffel van den Berghe (Dutch, active around 1617–after 1628) painted this still life in 1617, which was 272 years before Van Gogh painted *Sunflowers*. Also from the Netherlands, Van den Berghe's still life of flowers, shells, and insects is full of rich and precise detail. Van Gogh's painting of twelve sunflowers in an earthenware jug is part of this long tradition of Dutch still life painting, for which artists of the Netherlands were especially well-known.

- Compare both paintings. What are some similarities and differences that you notice?
- Van Gogh's still life is painted in an expressionist style while Van den Berghe's still life is painted in an extremely realistic style. Which style of painting do you prefer? Why?
- Still life paintings often include objects that represent different stages of life. Can you find examples of this in both paintings?
- If you were painting your own still life, what objects would you include?



*Still Life with Flowers in a Vase*, 1617, by Christoffel van den Berghe (John G. Johnson Collection, 1917: cat. 648)



*Sunflowers*, 1889, by Vincent van Gogh (Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Mr. and Mrs. Carroll S. Tyson, Jr., Collection, 1963-116-19)