

Van Gogh's 'Bedroom' on Loan From the Art Institute of Chicago



The Bedroom, 1889

Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853-1890

The Art Institute of Chicago
Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection

An art dealer, teacher, bookseller and lay preacher before deciding to become an artist at the age of 27, Vincent Willem van Gogh (1853-1890) was mostly self-taught, copying prints and learning from drawing manuals and a variety of books. In his short career of 10 years, Van Gogh created close to 900 paintings and more than 1,100 works on paper.

Much of Van Gogh's life was spent moving. In his 37 years of life, he moved 37 times in search of companionship and a purpose in life. While living in Nuenen in the Netherlands, Van Gogh explored the subject of rural life and peasants in his art using a dark **palette** influenced by **Barbizon** painters like Jean-François Millet and Pierre-Étienne-Théodore Rousseau. Moving to Paris in 1886 to live with his younger brother, Theo, Van Gogh's **palette** became lighter and his brushstrokes shorter as he saw works by **Impressionists** and **Neo-Impressionists** such as [Georges Seurat](#) and [Paul Signac](#). He would move again in 1888 to the South of France, first to Arles, then Saint-Rémy, and in 1890, to Auvers-sur-Oise near Paris, where he would die presumably from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Through all of Van Gogh's travels, it was in Arles, living in the Yellow House, where he finally found a place that he could call home with a bedroom of his very own.

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Arles: The Yellow House

Van Gogh moved to Arles in February 1888 “to see in a different light.” He lived in the Yellow House renting four rooms, two rooms on the ground floor, a kitchen and studio, and two rooms on the first floor, his bedroom and a guest bedroom. His bedroom looked directly over Place Lamartine, which was laid out as a public park. Van Gogh had hopes to create a “Studio of the South,” where a community of artists could live in harmony, work side by side to create and promote their art. Decorating the Yellow House with his paintings of sunflowers, portraits, the view of his bedroom and garden subjects, Van Gogh looked forward to the arrival of his friend, [Paul Gauguin](#).

Key Concepts

The Bedroom owned by the Art Institute of Chicago is the second of three versions of the subject each unique in color, style and detail. The first canvas painted in October 1888 (now at the Van Gogh Museum) suffered water damage from flooding in the Yellow House prompting Van Gogh to paint a second version (copied from the first version) in 1889 while living in an asylum in Saint-Rémy. A smaller third version (now at the Musee D’Orsay) was painted three weeks after the second version.

The pictorial structure of [Japanese prints](#) was an inspiration for Van Gogh and taught him a new way of looking—through flat planes of color, cropped compositions and bold outlines. He even became an enthusiastic collector of Japanese prints, which were popular in the late 19th century.

It was in Arles that Van Gogh’s confidence grew as an artist, and he developed his characteristic style of using vibrant colors and dynamic brushstrokes. After Van Gogh left Arles, he reflected on his many paintings and believed *The Bedroom* to be his best.

A Closer Look at the *The Bedroom*

- Van Gogh described his bedroom in a letter to Theo: “the walls are pale lilac, the ground a faded broken red, the chairs and the bed chrome yellow, the pillows and the sheet a very pale green-citron, the counterpane blood red, the washstand orange, the washbasin blue, the window green.” However, in the Chicago painting, the walls are now blue and the floor is depicted with green **impasto** over pinkish-brown brushstrokes that were

applied **wet-in-wet** from white, red and green. Over time, some of Van Gogh's **pigments** have chemically shifted and faded.

- Through the use of color, Van Gogh wanted to convey a feeling of tranquility. In the same letter to Theo he continues, "By means of all these very diverse tones I have wanted to express an absolute restfulness, you see, and there is no white in it at all except the little note produced by the mirror with its black frame."
- Van Gogh expresses his idea of his bedroom through the formal elements of line, color and form. He suppresses shadows and paints in flat tints to portray an irregularly shaped room of simple furnishings.

Discussion Questions

- Van Gogh was a **Post-Impressionist** artist who applied color to convey a feeling of "absolute restfulness." Does his bedroom seem like a tranquil place? Why or why not?
- Look carefully at the [three versions](#) of *The Bedroom*. List all the differences that you find and read about what was happening in [Van Gogh's life](#) in the time they were made. Discuss why Van Gogh might have chosen to interpret each bedroom slightly differently.

Activity

- Create a list of all the things that would make up your ideal bedroom and share this list with the person next to you. Then, find and print out images from the internet of these items. Using the images, cardstock, scissors and gluesticks, create a [vision board](#) of your dream bedroom.

Vocabulary

Barbizon: a school of mid-19th-century painters who worked in and around the village of Barbizon in the forest of Fontainebleau, south-east of Paris.

Impasto: paint that is thickly applied so that it stands out from the canvas or panel almost like a relief.

Impressionism: a movement or style of painting that originated in the 1860s in France, characterized by the use of unmixed colors and small brushstrokes to capture the effects of light and create an "impression" of the subject matter at a given moment.

Japanese Prints: in the mid-19th century Japan opened its ports to the West, and Western artists were strongly influenced by the compositions, patterns, colors and subjects of Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints and woodblock prints.

Neo-Impressionism: a movement or style of painting that flourished principally in France from 1886 to 1906, characterized by using dabs of contrasting color to create an image.

Palette: the range of colors used in a particular painting.

Pigments: a substance or powder that makes up a color of paint.

Post-Impressionism: an art movement that originated in France in the late 19th century in reaction against the naturalism of Impressionism. Post-Impressionist artists emphasized symbolic content, formal order and structure.

Wet-in-wet: A painting technique by which one applies fresh, wet paint on top of a previous layer of paint that is still wet; this results in a blending of colors.

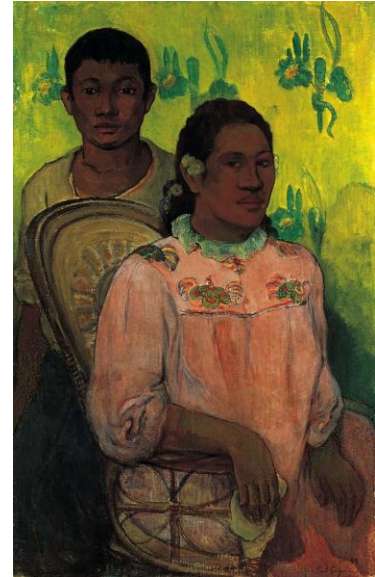
Tahitian Woman and Boy, 1899

Paul Gauguin

French, 1848-1903

Oil on Canvas

37-1/4 x 24-3/8 in. (94.6 x 61.9 cm)



Gauguin: Seeker of Paradise

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) arrived at the Yellow House on October 23, 1888, as the first and last artist to move in to the “Studio of the South.” Van Gogh and Gauguin had a rivalrous friendship, working hard together and also engaging in “electric” discussions on art. Their differences caused much tension between them. Van Gogh was interested in working from nature; Gauguin in greater **abstraction** through memory and imagination. On December 23, 1888, after two months together, Gauguin threatened to leave and with the pressure being too much, Van Gogh suffered a mental breakdown and cut off part of his left ear. As a result, Gauguin left to Paris, and it was the end of the “Studio of the South.” Both artists continued to correspond through letters but would never meet again. After Van Gogh’s death in 1890, Gauguin decided to leave Paris in pursuit of a “Studio of the Tropics,” which he had planned with Van Gogh. He departed for Tahiti in 1891.

Key Concepts

Like Van Gogh, Gauguin was primarily self-taught and influenced by Japanese prints in his use of flattened space and bold color as seen in *Tahitian Woman and Boy* where two figures are against a flat decorative background of bright yellow-green.

As the **Industrial Revolution** led to the rapid modernization of Western civilization, Gauguin became disheartened by Europe’s capitalist culture and what he thought of as a corruption of urban civilization. After losing his job as a stockbroker during a stock market crash in 1882, he abandoned his family to pursue painting full time in search of a primitive paradise in the South Seas.

Disappointed to find that Tahiti had long been a French colony, Gauguin created his own version of Tahitian culture in his paintings. Finding a new direction in art through emotion, imagination, mystery and spirituality, Gauguin became a leading figure of **symbolism**.

A Closer Look at *Tahitian Woman and Boy*

- A young boy stands behind a seated woman as both figures gaze towards the viewer in this vertical composition.

- The effects of **colonization** can be seen in the woman's high-neck, pink missionary dress and in the Victorian wicker chair in which she sits.
- Gauguin used his imagination as well as the vivid colors of the local flora around him to dramatize his composition; the Granny Smith apple color of the wall vibrates against the poised woman's pink-violet gown as a fiery ring of orange around the boy's shirt complements the woman's light green collar.

Discussion Questions

- Imagine that you could have a conversation with the woman and boy in this portrait. After learning about the background of this portrait, what would you ask them? Why? How might they respond?
- As opposed to creating an exact replica of nature, Gauguin was interested in using his imagination and emotions to create art. How might the mood of this painting change, if Gauguin had painted a **photorealistic** portrait of the *Tahitian Woman and Boy*? Why?

Activity

- Choose a country on this [world map](#) that you have never visited. Write a paragraph of your ideas about this country, what you might see and do here. After, do some research on this country and write about its culture and history. Compare your initial ideas with what you learned and discuss your findings with the class.

Vocabulary

Abstraction: works of art that may have form, but have little or no attempt at pictorial representation.

Colonization: a process by which one nation maintains control over another.

Industrial Revolution: rapid changes in manufacturing, transportation and technology during the late 18th to 19th centuries that affected the social, economic, and cultural conditions of life in Western Europe.

Photorealism: a genre of art that encompasses painting and drawing where an image is depicted as realistically as possible with extremely meticulous detail.

Symbolism: a literary and artistic movement that originated in France in the late 19th century where artists expressed ideas and emotions through symbolic images and indirect suggestions.

Portrait of the Artist's Mother, October 1888

Vincent van Gogh

Dutch, 1853-1890

Oil on Canvas

16 x 12-3/4 in. (40.6 x 32.4 cm)



Van Gogh's Mother: Anna Carbentus-Van Gogh

In October 1888, the same month and year that Van Gogh

Painted *The Bedroom*, he also painted a portrait of his mother.

Van Gogh would give the smaller third version of *The Bedroom*

to his mother and sister, Wilhelmina as a gift. The portrait of Van

Gogh's mother, Anna Carbentus-Van Gogh, was for himself, as he could not stand the colorless

black-and-white photograph that he had of her. In a letter to Theo, he wrote "Ah, what portraits

could be made from nature with photography and painting! I always hope that we are still to

have a great revolution in portraiture..."

Key Concepts

Derived from a black-and-white photograph, Van Gogh's portrait of his mother is cropped and

her position is seen in reverse from the photograph (which was probably

printed backwards). She wears a more simplified dress and gazes to the right

with extra volume in her hat or headdress.

Back in Nuenen, Van Gogh took piano lessons to learn about musical **tone**

and color, something his friend, [George Seurat](#), was exploring at the same

time. Van Gogh said, "Painting is like algebra: something is to this as that is

to the other." Van Gogh describes the thick broad brushstrokes of the

background in this portrait as having an effect that was like "dropping

reality and making a kind of music of **tones** with color."

Van Gogh believed that through portraits one learns to reflect. In one of his

letters from Arles, he stated "I want to paint men and women with that

something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we now seek to give by

the actual radiance and vibrancy of our coloring."

A Closer Look at *Portrait of the Artist's Mother*

- Van Gogh's mother, Anna Carbentus-Van Gogh is seen gazing into a distance and slightly smiling. Her face is painted with thick strokes in the consistency of paste depicting her with a gray-green skin color.



- Van Gogh used a variety of application methods including impasto throughout his mother's face, headdress and background. Using several sizes of brushes, Van Gogh applied strokes ranging from short to long.
- There is no background in the traditional sense but pure color formed with brushstrokes in a grid pattern like woven tapestry.

Discussion Questions

- Van Gogh used color as a form of expression. Describe the colors you see in his mother's portrait. Why do you think Van Gogh chose these colors to paint this portrait? What meaning might the colors have behind them?
- Writing to his sister, Van Gogh confessed that he was dissatisfied with his portrait. Why do you think he disliked this portrait of his mother?
- Van Gogh was an admirer of the 17th century Dutch artist, [Rembrandt van Rijn](#) and was inspired by Rembrandt's ability to express emotion with great tenderness. Compare this portrait of Van Gogh's mother with Rembrandt's [Portrait of a Boy](#), and discuss what similarities and differences you can find in their styles.



Activity

- Print an enlarged photograph of a special person in your life. Using tracing paper, [trace](#) the image and transfer it onto a piece of cardstock. Paint the traced image with colors that express his/her personality. On the back, write a letter to this person describing your artistic choices and why you chose him/her for this activity.

Vocabulary

Tone (art): refers to the light and dark values of a color.

Tone (music): refers to the quality, pitch, and character of a sound.

Anna Cornelia van Gogh-Carbentus, Vincent van Gogh's Mother, 1888

Photograph taken by Lavieter and Co., The Hague

Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), Amsterdam

Portrait of a Boy, 1655-60

Rembrandt van Rijn

Dutch, 1606-1669

Oil on canvas

25-1/2 x 22 in. (64.8 x 55.9cm)