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From Earth to Sky, Reality to Dream
The Cypresses in Vincent van Gogh's Paintings

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Abstract

In Vincent van Gogh's paintings, the flame-like cypresses tower, as he described them, "tall and massive". Enlarged beyond their natural size, they dominate the scene, forming a vivid bridge between earth and sky, the tangible and the eternal. The earth represents the material world, while the sky, linked by van Gogh to dreams, suggests infinite imagination. Thus, the cypresses signify more than a vertical thrust; they trace a passage from outward reality to inner articulation, from objective depiction to subjective expression. In van Gogh's artwork, objects transcended their original meanings and became allegories or symbols. The cypresses painted by van Gogh were not only trees but also a projection of van Gogh himself. "Tall and massive" in comparison to their surroundings, they are different but, at the same time, lonely. Today, van Gogh is recognized as a "giant" and a pioneer in art history. During his lifetime, however, his work received little recognition and was often considered incomprehensible, causing the artist great mental distress. For van Gogh, art — like true love — was "lofty" and "sacred." He often visualized it as a starry sky, a realm he linked to religion and dreams. Notably, he rarely placed cypresses at the center of his canvases; instead, they stand to one side or the other, alone or in clusters, as if guarding that shimmering heaven imbued with divine significance. It was a love he pursued but perhaps never fully fulfilled. On 27th July 1890, van Gogh shot himself in the chest with a revolver; two days later he died at the age of 37, leaving over 850 paintings and 1300 works on paper behind.

Keywords: Vincent van Gogh, modernism, cypress symbolism and allegorism, imitation and creation

"I don't know if you'll understand that one can speak poetry just by arranging colours well, just as one can say comforting things in music. In the same way the bizarre lines, sought out and multiplied, and snaking all over the painting, aren't intended to render the garden in its vulgar resemblance but draw it for us as if seen in a dream, in character and yet at the same time stranger than the reality."[2]

Vincent van Gogh to Willemien van Gogh, Arles, Monday, 12th November 1888

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[2] Vincent van Gogh to Willemien van Gogh, Arles, Monday, 12th November 1888, Letter #720, from Vincent van Gogh, the Letters (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum and Huygens Institute, 2011), https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let720/letter.html.

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Introduction

From 22nd May to 27th August, 2023, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York delighted visitors with the special exhibition "van Gogh's Cypresses." The flame-like cypresses depicted in van Gogh's paintings (Fig. 1) are, in the artist's own words, "tall and massive." [3] Exaggerated compared to their actual scale, these trees dominate their surroundings, creating a powerful visual link between earth and sky, between the tangible and the eternal. The earth symbolizes the physical world, while the sky, which van Gogh associated with dreams, symbolizes infinite imagination. Thus, the cypresses, ascending toward the stars, represent more than just a vertical movement upwards; they also represent an inward journey from external reality to inner subjectivity, from physical existence to profound contemplation.

In the nineteenth century, Vincent van Gogh as well as other modern artists began to move away from the tradition of precise imitation, embracing instead a more dynamic style of artistic expression.[4] This transition from objective observation to subjective expression and from external description to inner articulation is clearly evident in van Gogh's artistic development. Van Gogh's early Dutch period (1881–1885) exemplifies the stage of

[3] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 25th June 1889, Letter #783, https://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let783/letter.html#translation.

[4] Goethe identified three stages in an artist's development: Einfache Nachahmung (simple imitation), Manier (manner or stylization), and Styl (style as the expression of essence). These stages are neither strictly linear nor mutually exclusive; rather, they are interrelated and often coexist within an artist's trajectory.

Einfache Nachahmung der Natur: „Wenn ein Künstler, […], sich an die Gegenstände der Natur wendete, mit Treue und Fleiß ihre Gestalten, ihre Farben, auf das genaueste nachahmte, sich gewissenhaft niemals von ihr entfernte, jedes Gemälde, das er zu fertigen hätte wieder in ihrer Gegenwart anfinge und vollendete." (Simple imitation of nature: If an artist […] turned to the objects of nature, and with diligence and fidelity imitated their forms and their colors as precisely as possible, never straying from them in the slightest, conscientiously beginning and completing every painting he had to make in their presence.)

Manier: „[…] er erfindet sich selbst eine *Weise*, macht sich selbst eine *Sprache*, um das, was er mit der Seele ergriffen, wieder nach seiner Art auszudrücken, einem Gegenstande, den er öfters wiederholt hat eine eigne bezeichnende Form zu geben, ohne, wenn er ihn wiederholt, die Natur selbst vor sich zu haben, noch auch sich geradezu ihrer ganz lebhaft zu erinnern. Nun wird es eine Sprache, in welcher sich der Geist des Sprechenden unmittelbar ausdrückt und bezeichnet." (Manner: […] he invents a *manner* of his own, creates a *language* for himself in order to express, in his own way, what he has grasped with his soul — to give a distinctive, characteristic form to a subject he has often repeated, without having nature itself before him when he repeats it, nor even vividly recalling it. It now becomes a language in which the spirit of the speaker is directly expressed and made manifest.)

Styl: "Gelangt die Kunst durch Nachahmung der Natur, durch Bemühung sich eine allgemeine Sprache zu machen, durch *genaues und tiefes Studium der Gegenstände selbst*, endlich dahin, daß sie die Eigenschaften der Dinge und die Art wie sie bestehen genau und immer genauer kennen lernt, daß sie die Reihe der Gestalten übersieht und die verschiedenen charakteristischen Formen neben einander zu stellen und nachzuahmen weiß: dann wird der Styl der höchste Grad wohin sie gelangen kann; der Grad, wo sie sich den höchsten menschlichen Bemühungen gleichstellen darf. Wie die *einfache Nachahmung* auf dem ruhigen Dasein und einer liebevollen Gegenwart beruhet, die *Manier* eine Erscheinung mit einem leichten fähigen Gemüt ergreift, so ruht der *Styl* auf den tiefsten Grundfesten der Erkenntnis, auf dem Wesen der Dinge, in so fern uns erlaubt ist es in sichtbaren und greiflichen Gestalten zu erkennen." (Style: When art, through imitation of nature, through the effort to create a universal language, through *precise and profound study of the objects themselves*, finally reaches the point where it comes to know the properties of things — and the manner in which they exist — ever more precisely; when it surveys the range of forms and knows how to juxtapose and imitate the various characteristic shapes: then style is the highest level art can attain — the level at which it may be compared with the greatest human endeavors. Just as *simple imitation* rests on tranquil presence and loving attention, and *manner* seizes upon appearances with a light and receptive disposition, so *style* is grounded in the deepest foundations of knowledge — in the essence of things, insofar as we are permitted to apprehend it in visible and tangible forms.) (Goethe 1990, 186-191).

observation: he closely studied rural life and laborers, deeply influenced by realist painters such as Jean-François Millet (1814–1875). His palette was dark and earthy, his forms heavy and sculptural. A representative work from this "Brown Period" is *The Potato Eaters* (1885), a somber portrayal of peasant life rendered with raw sincerity. Later, van Gogh's years in France (1886–1890) marked the beginning of a turn toward stylistic exploration and personal expression. In Paris, he encountered the innovations of Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Japanese woodblock prints, which liberated his palette and expanded his formal vocabulary. His brushwork became more expressive, his compositions flatter, and his use of color increasingly symbolic. While these works still bear traces of stylistic borrowing, they already reflect a shift from external observation to inner interpretation — from reproducing nature to expressing the artist's inner state. This subjective impulse reached full maturity during his time in Arles, Saint-Rémy, and Auvers-sur-Oise. Van Gogh developed a deeply personal style characterized by dynamic, swirling brushstrokes, in which objective forms yield to subjective vision. Works such as *The Starry Night* (1889) and the *Sunflowers* series no longer aim to mirror the external world, but instead reconstitute it according to the inner rhythms of perception and feeling. Art thus arises from the artist's internal experience, liberated from conventional forms and constraints. It is precisely this boundless freedom that defines modernism — a path van Gogh boldly forged for the generations of modern artists who followed in his wake.

Cypresses: A Rebellion Against the Imitative Northern Dutch Painting Tradition

> The cypresses still preoccupy me, I'd like to do something with them like the canvases of the sunflowers because it astonishes me that no one has yet done them as I see them. It's beautiful as regards lines and proportions, like an Egyptian obelisk. And the green has such a distinguished quality. […] I think that of the two canvases of cypresses, the one I'm making the croquis of will be the best. The trees in it are very tall and massive. The foreground very low, brambles and undergrowth. Behind, violet hills, a green and pink sky with a crescent moon. The foreground, above all, is thickly impasted, tufts of bramble with yellow, violet, green highlights. I'll send you drawings of them with two other drawings that I've also done.[5]
>
> Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 25th June 1889

The towering cypresses in Vincent van Gogh's paintings are not only characteristic of the southern French landscape; they also form a striking contrast to the northern Dutch painting tradition, where cypresses were rare, and art was defined by a commitment to realism and the depiction of a single, transient moment. Vincent van Gogh, as well as other modern artists, experienced an artistic transformation from "eyes" to "imagination", "description" to "expression", as Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) wrote in *The Critic as Artist*: "[...] it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age." (Wilde 2003, 1119.) In modern art, the transient moment no longer dominates the painting; instead, it is the artist's intention that takes precedence. So too are van Gogh's paintings — like his cypresses — a journey from earth to sky, from reality to dream, from exterior to interior. Unlike traditional Dutch paintings that meticulously reflect a reality perceived by the naked eye, van Gogh's art constructs a new world imbued with profound spiritual significance. As Wilde eloquently described, "He watched them, and their secrets became his. Through form and color, he re-created a world." (Wilde 2003, 1113)

[5] "'Impressions of Provence' […] But what does he want to say now when the olive trees, the fig trees, the vineyards, the cypresses must be more accentuated, all characteristic things, the same as the Alpilles, which must get more character." Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh. Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Saturday, 5th October 1889, Letter #808, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let808/letter.html.

Van Gogh's art does not imitate nature, it is instead, full of freedom. It is worth noting that cypresses are often described as a symbol of freedom and independence, as Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856) wrote in the footnote to his translation of the *Diwan*:

> Die Lilie gilt unter den Blumen, so wie die Zypresse unter den Bäumen, für die Freie und Unabhängige; weil die eine und die andere hoch und frei aufschießt und der gerade Wuchs derselben von Ästen und Nebenzweig frei ist. Saadi sagte:
>
> Sei wie Palmen, fruchtbar, oder sei wenigstens wie Zypressen, hoch und frei. (Hafis 2013, 39)
>
> (Among flowers, the lily is regarded as the symbol of freedom and independence, just as the cypress is among trees, because both grow tall and free, and their straight growth is unencumbered by branches and twigs. Saadi said:
>
> Be like palm trees, fruitful, or at least like cypresses, tall and free.)
>
> Hafis: *Der Diwan. Die Auswahl der schönsten Gedichte. In der Übersetzung von Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall*

Van Gogh's art is no longer descriptive, but expressive, in which he wanted to "seek style": "the fact is that I feel myself greatly driven to seek style, if you like, but I mean by that a more manly and more deliberate drawing."[6] In *The Bedroom in Arles* (Fig. 2), the exterior reality (latin *realis* "factual") of van Gogh's bedroom was redefined by his mind in such a way that the viewer should come to repose or rest while looking at the painting, as the artist wrote to his brother Theo on October 16th, 1888:

> This time it's simply my bedroom, but the color has to do the job here, and through its being simplified by giving a grander style to things, to be suggestive here of rest or of sleep in general. In short, looking at the painting should rest the mind, or rather, the imagination.[7]
>
> *Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, Tuesday, 16th October 1888*

Van Gogh's paintings reflect his strong artistic impulse. He purposefully altered the appearance of objects in his paintings to better communicate his intentions. His artwork *The Bedroom in Arles* bears little resemblance to his real bedroom in Yellow House in Arles. In this painting, there is little "imitation of nature": the space is distorted, and the shapes of the objects are drawn without correction. Van Gogh redecorated his room with strong color contrast, especially between complementary colors on the color wheel, such as green windows contrasting with red tiles or yellow furniture contrasting with blue/violet walls etc., to achieve a sensual balance and peaceful tranquility:

> The walls are of a pale violet. The floor — is of red tiles. The bedstead and the chairs are fresh butter yellow. The sheet and the pillows very bright lemon green. The bedspread scarlet red. The window green. The dressing table orange, the basin blue. The doors lilac.[8]
>
> *Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, Tuesday, 16th October 1888*

In this painting, the walls and doors were originally violet, not blue. The change from violet to blue was the result of discoloration over the years. The discoloration had already begun during van Gogh's lifetime, as it had been damaged by damp while van Gogh was in hospital. (cf. Pickvance 1984, 191) The situation was noted in correspondence between the brothers. Theo wrote to Vincent on June 16th, 1889: "I'll send the Bedroom back to you, but you shouldn't retouch this canvas, (unless) it can be repaired. Copy it and send

[6] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh. Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Sunday, 3rd November 1889, Letter #816, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let816/letter.html.

[7] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, Tuesday, 16th October 1888, Letter #705, https://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let705/letter.html#translation.

[8] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, Tuesday, 16th October 1888, Letter #705, https://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let705/letter.html#translation.

that one back so that I can have it lined."[9] Despite the damage, van Gogh still considered the *Bedroom* one of his best paintings. "When I saw my canvases again after my illness, the one that seemed the best to me was the bedroom."[10]

In van Gogh's paintings, colors, the language of light and darkness, speak to their viewers, silent but powerful. They show a great vitality that imitation art never achieved. Artworks that aim to replicate reality are constrained. They are like shadows of nature, and therefore lack autonomy. In contrast, the colors in van Gogh's paintings speak for themselves, in a powerful and magical way:

> Certainly — imagination is a capacity that must be developed, and only that enables us to create a more exalting and consoling nature than what just a glance at reality (which we perceive changing, passing quickly like lightning) allows us to perceive.[11]
>
> *Vincent van Gogh to Emile Bermard, Arles, Thursday, 12th April 1888*

Van Gogh, as well as other modern artists, had revolutionized the old standard of art. His paintings reflect the inner state of his being. On the contrary, the traditional approach of imitation confines artists to a specific time and place, hindering their ability to explore a world beyond reality. The world viewed with the "eyes" is narrow, while the world explored with the "imagination" is wide, as Oscar Wilde highlighted in his *Critic as Artist*:

> He will turn from them to such works as make him brood and dream and fancy, to works that possess the subtle quality of suggestion and seem to tell one that [...] there is an escape into a wider world. (Wilde 2003, 1128)
>
> Oscar Wilde: *Critic as Artist*

The formulation "art teaches us to see" echoes Wilde's statement. Modern art teaches us to see not only with our physical eyes but also with our spiritual ones. In the "new" art, color and form transcend their descriptive purpose and assume a higher level of imagination. The new expressive approach of modernism does not correspond to our everyday experience. Instead, it asks us to leave our comfort zone, the "experience of familiarity," and explore an unknown realm, as Gombrich noted:

> In the sixth chapter of Zola's novel *L'Oeuvre*, the painter's rather simple-minded wife ventures to criticize him for painting a poplar quite blue. He makes her look at the motif and notice the delicate blue of the foliage. It was true, the tree was really blue, and yet she did not quite admit defeat; she blamed reality: there could not be blue tree in nature. [...] Her experience of familiarity, like that of everyone, was grounded on a knowledge of invariants, on what Hering called, [...] 'memory color'. (Gombrich 2002, 34)
>
> Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich: *The Image and the Eye. Further studies in the psychology of pictorial representation*

According to Lessing's *Laokoon* (eng. *Laocoon*), image, due to its inherent stillness, faces the severe challenge of selection, for it can only capture a specific moment. Unlike poetry and music, images in paintings, by their very nature, are always fixed and motionless. They cannot capture continuous movement, which can only be imagined by the viewer's mind. Therefore, the artist must choose the "most concise" moment that triggers the most vivid

[9] Theo van Gogh to Vincent van Gogh, Paris, Sunday, 16th June 1889, Letter #781, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let781/letter.html.
[10] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, Tuesday, 22nd January 1889, Letter #741, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let741/letter.html.
[11] Vincent van Gogh to Emile Bermard, Arles, Thursday, 12th April 1888, Letter #596, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let596/letter.html.

imagination so that the viewers can envision the action before and after that specific moment with their own comprehension:

> Die Mahlerey kann in ihren coexistirenden Compositionen nur einen einzigen Augenblick der Handlung nutzen, und muß daher den prägnantesten wählen, aus welchem das Vorhergehende und Folgende am begreiflichsten wird. (Lessing 2012, 116)
>
> (In its coexisting compositions, painting can use only a single moment of the action, and must therefore choose the most concise one, from which the preceding and following become most comprehensible.)
>
> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*

Van Gogh's innovative approach to painting resolved the challenges that art had previously encountered. By simplifying and reimagining reality through a fluid sense of motion, his work transcends the constraints of time and space. The objects in his paintings are no longer static or rigid, but instead appear animated and dynamic, imbued with a sense of continuous transformation. In *The Starry Night* (Fig. 3), there is no moment of reality crystallized. All the stars "sparkle" through wild brushstrokes and intense colors that convey strong emotion. The sky "flows" like *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* from Hokusai, in which shapes and colors are vividly and organically interwoven. They are as turbulent and dynamic as the artist's inner being.

In van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, the cypress tree — and likewise the church — serves as a strong vertical element within the composition, standing in sharp contrast to the predominantly horizontal rhythm of the village and the swirling curves of the night sky. Rising straight from the bottom edge of the canvas and reaching toward the top, the cypress cuts through the pictorial field with a palpable visual tension, as if it were attempting to pierce the boundaries of the frame itself. It functions as a window of inner passion embedded within the painting itself, forming a *mise en abyme* structure: images within images, thoughts within thoughts. This transgressive posture endows the cypress with a defiant energy. Instead of being passively contained by the frame, it challenges the very structure that encloses it. In this sense, the cypress becomes a symbolic rupture of desire, a visual embodiment of the soul's striving to transcend the physical boundary or art tradition. It represents the artist's inner resistance to the limits imposed by form, space, and matter — a metaphysical will to surpass the limitation. Oscar Wilde believed that it is the passion that give a painting its soul and movement, as stated in his work *The Critic as Artist*:

> Art is passion, and, in matters of art, Thought is inevitably colored by emotion, and so is fluid rather than fixed, and, depending upon fine moods and exquisite moments, cannot be narrowed into the rigidity of a scientific formula or a theological dogma. (Wilde 2003, 1144)
>
> Oscar Wilde: *The Critic as Artist*

In modern art, objective forms are reshaped — or even distorted — through the lens of subjectivity. In van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, the depicted objects take on an organic, flowing quality. Their expressive colors are no longer a lifeless imitation of reality, where hues exist in isolation without interaction. Instead, the colors are, in van Gogh's own view, autonomous and charged with "infinite" energy:

> There's something infinite about painting — I can't quite explain — but especially for expressing a mood, it's a joy. In the colors there are hidden harmonies or contrasts which contribute of their own accord, and which if left unused are of no benefit.[12]

[12] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, the Hague, 26th August, 1882, Letter #259, https://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let259/letter.html#translation.

Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, the Hague, 26th August, 1882

In van Gogh's paintings, according to the Austrian author Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), one senses a harmony of hues in which "the colors lived, each for the sake of others"[13] Colors, despite their differences and contrasts, are interwoven in van Gogh's works as a unity and in movement. *The Starry Night* is so famous not because van Gogh succeeded in immortalizing a wonderful moment, a *punctum temporis*, as the old Dutch paintings did, but because in the artwork, one can still feel his impetuous mind or spirit, or, in Oscar Wilde's words, the "passion" in colors and form, as if the artist is talking to us.

The flame-like Cypresses, flowing Qualities and vibrant Colors in Modern Art

> The landscapes with the cypresses! Ah, that wouldn't be easy. Aurier feels it too when he says that even black is a colour, and about their flame-like aspect.[14] I'm thinking of it but I don't dare do it either, and say like Isaäcson, who is cautious, that I don't yet feel that we've reached that point. It requires a certain dose of inspiration, a ray from on high which doesn't belong to us, to do beautiful things. When I'd done those sunflowers I was seeking the contrary and yet the equivalent, and I said, it's the cypress.[15]
>
> *Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Saturday, 1st February 1890*

In van Gogh's paintings, art gradually became more expressive as it moved away from its descriptive past of mere imitation. Its purpose (*telos, τέλος*) ceased to depend upon the external world, becoming instead rooted within itself, an essential and revolutionary shift that defines Modern art in the broader context of art history. Van Gogh's abstract paintings are unrealistic but true. They require us to accept the dualities of "so and not so", "being and non-being". (cf. Rushdie 2021, 24) Perhaps this is why van Gogh was so fond of cypresses: they are not only trees of "death" but also of "life," characterized by their eternal green and everlasting vitality (cf. Lurker 1987, 440–441). The cypresses thus embody both opposites — death and life — at once. In a similar way, dualities such as the ebb and flow of the tides are united in the undulating motion of the waves: ever shifting, yet always in the same flow of movement.

Rather than relying on fixed forms, modern artists, such as van Gogh, diverged from their predecessors by adopting a distinct approach. The colors and brushstrokes they utilized became fluid and unencumbered, reflecting the ever-evolving nature that cannot be constrained or limited. In fact, van Gogh once compared the human heart to the sea, suggesting that its fluid nature best reflects our ever-changing selves: "The heart of man is very much like the sea; it has its storms, it has its tides, and in its depths it has its pearls too."[16] In the past, the moment an object was captured by the painter on canvas, it symbolically "died." In still life painting, although a fleeting moment is eternally suspended within the image, this very act of preservation reinforces the notion of *memento mori* — a reminder of the inevitability of death behind transient beauty. By contrast, van Gogh's

[13] "Und nun konnte ich, von Bild zu Bild, ein Etwas fühlen, konnte das Untereinander, das Miteinander der Gebilde fühlen, wie ihr innerstes Leben in der Farbe vorbrach und wie die Farben eine um der andern willen lebten […]." (Hofmannsthal 2017, 98-99).

[14] Aurier referred to the poem "Rêve parisien" from Charles Baudelaire: "Et tout, même la couleur noire,/ Semblait fourbi, clair, irisé;/ Le liquide enchâssait sa gloire/ Dans le rayon cristallisé."

[15] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Saturday, 1st February 1890, Letter #850, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let850/letter.html.

[16] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Isleworth, Friday, 3rd November 1876, Letter #096, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let096/letter.html.

paintings foreground the vitality of nature. Through the wave-like rhythms of the natural world life is granted a second bloom in art, reanimated with motion and breath.

This evolution from static to dynamic lines marks not only a turning point in the visual rhythm of the artwork but also reflects a historical shift: the advent of photography in 1839, when Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851) invented the eponymous daguerreotype process, thereby liberating art from its purely imitative function (Wolf 2002, 35–39). It also reflects a shift in which the artist redefines art as an expression, either of the individual's inner being or of a collective memory that unites us all. This approach is evident in van Gogh's expressive paintings through his vivid colors and wild brushstrokes or impastos. The former reflects the artist's passionate spiritual being and the latter the primitive, wild nature that lies in the subconscious of all living things.

The unusual spatial effect, as well as van Gogh's expanses of color, characterized by its boldness and strong contrasts, is, according to the artist himself, heavily influenced by *Ukiyo-e*, the Japanese woodblock print. The Japanese term *Ukiyo-e* literally means "picture of the floating world," its motifs range from history to folktales, from nature to people, from *kabuki* actors to eroticism, embracing every possibility in all walks of life. It is made for the collective society and not only for the elites, by communicating in a comprehensible way that even the non-intellectual can easily understand. It conveys life and strong energy that can be reflected in anyone's soul, just as van Gogh did with his energetic brushstrokes and vibrant palettes.

Van Gogh collected hundreds of Japanese woodblocks prints during his stay in Paris, mostly from Samuel Bing, a dealer in Oriental art. The artist recreated many *Ukiyo-e* such as *Plum Trees in Flower and Shower on the Ohashi Bridge near Ataka* from Utagawa Hiroshige. He also used *Ukiyo-e* as the background of his painting *Portrait of Père Tanguy*. These oriental artworks amused van Gogh a lot and were a source of inspiration. Van Gogh first expressed his fascination with Japanese prints in a letter to Theo on November 28th, 1885, after the World Exhibition held in Antwerp:

> My studio's quite tolerable, mainly because I've pinned a set of Japanese prints on the walls that I find very diverting. You know, those little female figures in gardens or on the shore, horsemen, flowers, gnarled thorn branches.[17]
>
> *Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Antwerp, Saturday, 28th November 1885*

Ukiyo-e is known for its solid colors, which create a dramatic and powerful effect, showing endless vitality. "Japanese art is something like the primitives, like the Greeks, like our old Dutchmen, Rembrandt, Potter, Hals, Vermeer, Ostade, Ruisdael. It doesn't end,"[18] wrote van Gogh to his brother Theo. During the 19th and 20th centuries in Paris, the Japanese woodblock print created a significant impact. Ernest Chesneau (1833–1890), a French art historian and critic, mentioned in his article Japan in Paris about this sensation:

> Man konnte nicht anders als sich verwundern über die Unvoreingenommenheit der Komposition, die Geschicklichkeit der Formen, den Reichtum an Tönen, die Originalität der malerischen Effekte und zur selben Zeit über die Einfachheit der Mittel, mit denen man diese Vielfalt an Resultaten erziehte. (Walther and Metzger 1992, 283)

[17] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Antwerp, Saturday, 28th November 1885, Letter #545, https://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let545/letter.html.

[18] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 15th July 1888, Letter #642, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let642/letter.html.

> (One could not help but be amazed at the impartiality of the composition, the dexterity of the forms, the richness of tones, the originality of the painterly effects, and at the same time at the simplicity of the means by which this variety of results was obtained.)

The "simplicity" in the use of color and form in *Ukiyo-e* arises not only from the technical aspects of Japanese woodblock printing, but also reflects a deeper aesthetic philosophy. In woodblock printing, each color requires its own dedicated block. To achieve visual clarity and precision, this technique is characterized by flat surfaces, solid colors, and the absence of blending. Yet "less" does not mean lacking. Rather, it embodies a distinctly Japanese philosophy: through a limited palette, artists create powerful atmospheric resonance. This refined simplicity reflects the spirit of *wabi-sabi* (侘寂) and *ma* (間) — an appreciation of imperfection, incompleteness, and emptiness. By avoiding excess and embracing restraint, the artwork invites viewers into an open space of imagination and emotional participation. The simplicity of colors is also applied in van Gogh's art:

> While always working directly on the spot, I try to capture the essence in the drawing — then I fill the spaces demarcated by the outlines (expressed or not) but felt in every case, likewise with simplified tints, in the sense that everything that will be earth will share the same purplish tint, that the whole sky will have a blue tonality, that the greenery will either be blue greens or yellow greens, deliberately exaggerating the yellow or blue values in that case.[19]
>
> *Vincent van Gogh to Emile Bemard, Arles, Thursday, 12th April 1888*

Van Gogh used color to tell a new kind of story. Rather than beginning with the colors found in "nature", he started with those on his "palette". Though he observed nature closely, he did not follow the rules of mere imitation. Instead, he developed his own style through a deeply personal understanding of color — allowing his paintings to speak for themselves, to breathe, and to leave space for imagination, so they could truly communicate with the viewer:

> It's certain that by studying the laws of colours one can move from an instinctive belief in the great masters to being able to account for why one likes what one likes, and that's very necessary nowadays when one considers how terribly arbitrarily and superficially people judge. […] I still often run up against a blank wall when undertaking something, but all the same, the colours follow one another as if of their own accord, and taking a colour as the starting-point I see clearly in my mind's eye what derives from it, and how one can get life into it. […] May I not simply understand by it that a painter does well if he starts from the colours on his palette instead of starting from the colours in nature? […] I retain from nature a certain sequence and a certain correctness of placement of the tones, I study nature so as not to do anything silly, to remain reasonable — but — I don't really care whether my colours are precisely the same, so long as they look good on my canvas, just as they look good in life. […] A man's head or a woman's head, looked at very composedly, is divinely beautiful, isn't it? Well then — with painfully literal imitation one loses *that general* effect of *looking beautiful* against one another that tones have in nature; one preserves it by re-creating it in a colour spectrum PARALLEL to, but not necessarily exactly, or far from the same as the subject. […] Always and intelligently making use of the beautiful tones that the paints form of their own accord when one breaks them on the palette, again — starting from one's palette — from one's knowledge of the beautiful effect of colours, isn't the same as copying nature mechanically and slavishly. […] Now here's another example. Suppose I have to paint an autumn landscape, trees with yellow leaves. Very well — if I conceive it as — a *symphony in yellow*, what does it matter whether or not my basic yellow colour is the same as that of the leaves — it makes *little* difference. *Much*, *everything* comes down to my sense of the *infinite variety* of tones in the *same family*. […] If you think this a dangerous tendency towards romanticism, a betrayal of 'realism' — painting from the imagination — having a greater love for the colourist's palette than for nature, well then, so be it. […] COLOUR EXPRESSES

[19] Vincent van Gogh to Emile Bemard, Arles, Thursday, 12th April 1888, Letter #596, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let596/letter.html.

> SOMETHING IN ITSELF. One can't do without it; one must make use of it. What looks beautiful, really beautiful — is also right. […] *That is* truly painting — and the result is more beautiful than precise imitation of the things themselves. Thinking about one thing and letting the surroundings belong to it, derive from it. Making studies from nature, wrestling with reality — I don't want to argue it away. I've tackled it that way myself for years and years, almost fruitlessly and with all sorts of sad results. I wouldn't want to have missed that — error. Always carrying on in the same way would be folly and stupid, that's what I mean — but not that all my effort has been utterly in vain. One begins by killing, one ends by healing is a doctors' saying. One begins by fruitlessly working oneself to death to follow nature, and everything is contrary. One ends by quietly creating from one's palette, and nature is in accord with it, follows from it. But these two opposites don't exist without each other. […] Although I believe that the finest paintings are made relatively freely from the imagination, I can't break with the idea that one can't study nature, swot even, too much. The greatest, most powerful imaginations have also made things directly from reality that leave one dumbfounded.[20]
>
> *Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Nuenen, on or about Wednesday, 28th October 1885*

As in Japanese *Ukiyo-e*, "picture of the floating world", the themes in van Gogh's work were often drawn from everyday life, yet rendered in a distinctively artistic manner. In van Gogh favorite painting, *The Bedroom*, shadows are deliberately left out, subjects are flattened, and rules of perspective are not precisely applied. Van Gogh made this adaption so the painting would have the same visual impact as the Japanese *Ukiyo-e*, creating a two-dimensional effect. The importance of accuracy in external reality diminishes as van Gogh becomes more concerned with conveying a sense of what the room gave him and what he wanted his audience to receive. Anything that deviates from this goal is either omitted or distorted.

The asymmetrical composition also reflects the influence of Japanese *Ukiyo-e* and traditional Chinese landscape painting. By breaking away from the rigidity of symmetry, it adopts a more natural, dynamic, and vivid aesthetic. This imbalance draws the viewer's attention, as if the image were "tilting" in a particular direction. The large cypress in *The Starry Night*, positioned on the left side of the canvas, also suggests a temporal narrative. The eyes read from left to right, and the stars recede into the depths of the background, pointing toward a sense of temporal hope and anticipation for the future — or perhaps hinting at a spiritual fantasy that stretches into the distance.

Modern art combines the new with the traditional. Its turn to abstraction is influenced by both geographical and temporal distances, by the Orient and by antiquity. Van Gogh's organic, rhythmic brushstrokes — built up in wave-like layers of impasto — echo the meander motifs of ancient Greek art. Scholars see those Greek bands as emblems of life, drawn from the body itself: their undulating pattern evokes the steady pulse of the heart and the gentle rise and fall of breathing muscles. They hint at an unseen order pervading nature — the cycle of the seasons, the endless surge and retreat of the sea. In this sense the Greek meander, like van Gogh's swirling strokes, embodies a primal instinct shared by all living creatures, an impulse that lies beyond the reach of rational control. By viewing the artworks, the audience feels not only van Gogh but also themselves, a deep forgotten primitive force awakened by van Gogh's art. Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote down this strong impact in his *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten* (eng. *The Letters of the Man who returned*) that he saw "his whole life" in van Gogh's paintings:

> Diese Farbe, die ein Grau war und ein fahles Braun und eine Finsternis und ein Schaum, in der ein Abgrund war und ein Dahinstürzen, ein Tod und ein Leben, ein Grausen und eine

[20] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Nuenen, on or about Wednesday, 28th October 1885, Letter #537, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let537/letter.html.

> Wollust – warum wühlte sich hier vor meinen schauenden Augen, vor meiner entzückten Brust mein ganzes Leben mir entgegen, Vergangenheit, Zukunft, aufschäumend in unerschöpflicher Gegenwart […]. (Hofmannsthal 2017, 104–105)
>
> (This color, which was a grey and a sallow brown and a darkness and foam, in which there was a chasm and a plummeting, a death and a life, a horror and an ecstasy - why was my whole life burrowing up towards me here before my looking eyes, before my enraptured breast, past, future, spuming up in boundless presence [...].)
>
> Hugo von Hofmannsthal: *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten*

Van Gogh's paintings may initially seem "garish, unsettled, and quite rough and peculiar," as Hofmannsthal noted. However, they are more truthful than photography. When viewing the paintings, one senses "the essence, the indescribable-fateful":

> Ich mußte mich erst zurechtfinden, um überhaupt die ersten als Bild, als Einheit zu sehen – dann aber, dann sah ich, dann sah ich sie alle so, jedes einzelne, und alle zusammen, und die Natur in ihnen, und die menschliche Seelenkraft, die hier die Natur geformt hatte, und Baum und Strauch und Acker und Abhang, die da gemalt waren, und noch das andre, das was hinter dem Gemalten war, das Eigentliche, das unbeschreibliche Schicksalhafte. (Hofmannsthal 2017, 94–95)
>
> (I had first to find my bearings in order even to see the first ones as pictures, as a unity – but then, then I saw, then I saw them all in this way, every single one, and all of them together, and the nature in them, and the human power of soul that formed the nature here, and tree and bush and field and hillside which were painted there, and that other thing as well, that which was behind what had been painted, the essence, the indescribably fateful.)
>
> Hugo von Hofmannsthal: *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten*

Vincent van Gogh unveiled, through his artworks, an invisible and unknown world to his audience — a world that encompasses both reality and imagination, the external and the internal, the individual and the collective. These dualities are fused and reimagined by the artist through his renewed understanding of *la surface, la ligne, la couleur* — the surface, the line, and the color — arriving at a fluid state between being and non-being, affirmation and negation. His paintings come alive, set in motion, flowing from the artist to the viewer.

Cypresses and Their Reflection in the Artist's Life

Van Gogh's paintings went beyond the descriptive function of art. Under his paintbrush, art became expressive as the artist imbued the physical world with his spiritual manifestation. In van Gogh's artwork, objects transcended their original meanings and became symbols. The cypresses painted by van Gogh were not only trees but also a projection of van Gogh himself. Trees grow upwards from their seeds, overcoming obstacles and challenges through their innate vitality. Cypresses, often found in rocky and arid areas where other plants and vegetation could not thrive, have demonstrated their ability to survive and are, therefore, the best example of this.

The cypresses in van Gogh's paintings are often compared to flames, reflecting the artist's ardent passion. Art was his inspiration, cure, and lifelong devotion, encompassing his past, present, and future. His urge to create was so intense and unstoppable that he literally continued to paint until his death when the flame burned out its last ashes. In the last 70 days of his life, he produced an impressive 80 paintings and 60 drawings (cf. Gaede 2010, 17).

Therefore, the cypresses depicted in van Gogh's paintings also represent the artist's enduring love for art. "Tall and massive" in comparison to their surroundings, they are

different but, at the same time, lonely. Today, van Gogh is recognized as a "giant" and a pioneer in art history. During his lifetime, however, his work received little recognition and was often considered incomprehensible by the general public, causing the artist great mental distress:

> Art often seems to be something very lofty and, as you say, something sacred. But that's true of love too. And the problem is simply that not everyone thinks about it like that, and those who feel something of it and allow themselves to be swept away by it suffer greatly, firstly because of being misunderstood, but as much because our inspiration is so often inadequate, or the work is made impossible by circumstances.[21]
>
> *Vincent van Gogh to To Willemien van Gogh. Paris, late October 1887*

In fact, cypresses are sometimes criticized for their self-interest, with each branch and needle striving to grow upwards. Their pride prevents them from bending downwards, similar to van Gogh who aimed to break the rules and revolutionize the tradition:

> Was die Dichter und Hafis selbst der Zypresse sonst zum Lobe ausspricht, nämlich ihr freies, hohes, von allem irdischen Staube weit erhabenes, zurückgezogenes Wesen, wird ihr hier zum Tadel angerechnet; dass sie so hoch aufschießt, eh' sie Äste treibt, dass diese Äste nicht zur Erde gesenkt sind wie die der übrigen Bäume, sondern gerade wie der Stamm zum Himmel emporstreben, ist zwar sehr schön, meint Hafis, aber doch auch ein Zeichen von Selbstgenügsamkeit, die, alle Verbindung und Berührung mit dem mütterlichen Boden verschmähend, gar wohl den Vorwurf der Selbstsucht verdient. Hierin steht nun die Zypresse weit hinter dem Freunde, der des eben so hohen Wuchses wegen gelobt, aber nicht der Selbstsucht beschuldigt zu werden verdient. Hafis betrachtet hier nur die Kehrseite der Medaille, den insgemein wird die Zypresse nur gepriesen als das Symbol der Freiheit und Unabhängigkeit, so wie die Palme als das Symbol der Großmut und Freigebigkeit. So sagt Saadi:
>
> Sei wie Palmen, gültig, oder sei
>
> Wie Zypressen, hoch und frei. (Hafis 2013, 55)
>
> (What poets and Hafiz themselves praise about the cypress, namely its free, lofty, secluded nature, far above all earthly dust, is here held against it; that it shoots up so high, before it puts out branches, that these branches are not bent down toward the earth like those of other trees, but strive upward toward the sky just like the trunk, is very beautiful, says Hafiz, but also a sign of self-sufficiency which, spurning all connection and contact with the maternal soil, certainly deserves the accusation of selfishness. In this respect, the cypress falls far short of its friend, which is praised for its equally tall stature but does not deserve to be accused of selfishness. Hafiz is only looking at the other side of the coin here, as the cypress is generally praised as a symbol of freedom and independence, just as the palm tree is a symbol of generosity and magnanimity. As Saadi says:
>
> Be like palm trees, valid, or be
>
> Like cypresses, tall and free.)
>
> Hafis: *Der Diwan. Die Auswahl der schönsten Gedichte. In der Übersetzung von Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall*

In van Gogh's paintings, the starry sky is often accompanied by the cypresses. In fact, the divine significance of the cypress tree can be traced back to the Zoroastrian religion, when two cypresses flanked the urn of fire, the center of the religion. In Persian and later Arab culture, the cypress is also depicted on carpets as the Tree of Life, in which all pairs of opposites are harmonized into one unity. Interestingly, cypresses are rarely placed in the center of van Gogh's paintings. Instead, they are often found on either side of the canvas,

[21] Vincent van Gogh to To Willemien van Gogh. Paris, late October 1887. Letter #574, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let574/letter.html.

either singly or in groups. This not only creates a more pleasing landscape composition but also reflects the divine significance of the cypress, which originated in Zoroastrian culture and was later adopted by Christianity and other religions. In the Zoroastrian religion, cypresses guard the sacred fire, and in van Gogh's paintings, they guard the starry sky, where van Gogh associated with dreams and therefore imbued with divine significance. Art, as "true of love", is something that van Gogh described as "lofty" and "sacred". It is often depicted as a starry sky, which van Gogh associated with religion:

> And it does me good to do what's difficult. That doesn't stop me having a tremendous need for, shall I say the word — for religion — so I go outside at night to paint the stars […].[22]
>
> *Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh. Arles, on or about Saturday, 29th September 1888*

The tall, solitary cypress — often seen as a reflection of van Gogh himself — stands guard over this unattainable dream. According to Socrates who recounts a conversation he once had with a wise woman named Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* (200a – 212c), love (*eros*) is defined by striving and longing. It possesses a fluid, ever-changing nature and is never complete in itself; for that which is perfect has no need to hope for anything. Love is not a god, as many assume, but a *daimon* — a spiritual being that mediates between the mortal and the divine. It is neither fully beautiful nor entirely good, nor is it ugly or evil; rather, it occupies an in-between state, as Eros (Ἔρως, personification of "love") is the child of Poros (Πόρος, personification of "resourcefulness") and Penia (Πενία, personification of "poverty"). Therefore, love is characterized by lack and desire. It desires beauty precisely because it does not possess it. In this vision, love is a dynamic force that compels the soul to ascend from the physical to the metaphysical, from the transient to the eternal. It is not a state of completion, but a movement — a striving that bridges the earthly and the divine. For van Gogh, art, an ultimate goal of an artist, was perhaps like the starry sky, so sacred and symbolic that he, as a mortal, found it inaccessible in reality. It was a love he aspired to, but perhaps never fully grasped and fulfilled:

> For art, now — for which you need time, it wouldn't be bad to live more than one life. And it's not without appeal to believe in the Greeks, the old Dutch and Japanese masters, continuing their glorious school on other globes.[23]
>
> *Vincent van Gogh To Theo van Gogh. Arles, Sunday, 15th July 1888*

This unfulfilled love for art may have contributed to his suicide. Ultimately, as van Gogh wrote in his letter, one can only "take death to reach a star. […] while alive, [one] cannot go to a star, any more than once dead [one could] be able to take the train."[24] Today, the reasons for his suicide remain a myth; some say he died because of lack of recognition, some say it was because of his mental illness, and some say it was because van Gogh believed that death could lead to another world where art could be fully realized.

It is unfair and inaccurate to view van Gogh's art as solely a product of his mental illness, or to suggest that his creative use of vibrant colors and bold brushstrokes was merely a result of his mental breakdown. Instead, I see art as a higher existence and as healing and comfort in the artist's life. Van Gogh's painting did not depict a sad world. His colors are bright and delightful rather than dark and gloomy:

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[22] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh. Arles, on or about Saturday, 29th September 1888, Letter # 691, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let691/letter.html.

[23] Vincent van Gogh To Theo van Gogh. Arles, Sunday, 15th July 1888, Letter #642, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let642/letter.html.

[24] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, Monday 9th or Tuesday 10th July 1888, Letter #638, https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/highlights/letters/638.

> The uglier, older, meaner, iller, poorer I get, the more I wish to take my revenge by doing brilliant colour, well arranged, resplendent."[25]
>
> *Vincent van Gogh to Willemien van Gogh. Arles, Sunday, 9th and about Friday, 14th September 1888*

In contrast to his painful reality, van Gogh's art is full of liveliness. "The sight of the stars always makes me dream,"[26] as van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo. Perhaps this is why van Gogh favored the motif of starry night so much because he associated the stars with dreams, where a brief respite from the pain of life is possible. And the cypresses, an allegory of both death and life, love and beauty, in his paintings connect him with this world, which is the opposite of painful reality. The tranquil village depicted in *The Starry Night* creates a stark contrast to the vibrant sky. The former is dark and quiet, while the latter is bright and vivid:

> Just as we take the train to go to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to go to a star. What's certainly true in this argument is that while alive, we cannot go to a star, any more than once dead we'd be able to take the train. So it seems to me not impossible that cholera, the stone, consumption, cancer are celestial means of locomotion, just as steamboats, omnibuses and the railway are terrestrial ones. To die peacefully of old age would be to go there on foot (Ibid.).
>
> *Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, Monday 9th or Tuesday 10th July 1888*

Vincent van Gogh did not choose a peaceful death. He chose a faster way to reach the star, which took him only 36 hours, but in great physical pain. On July 27th, 1890, van Gogh had shot himself in the chest with a revolver. The reason for his suicide remains unknown. However, the artist did not die instantly but staggered back from the wheat field to his room at the Auberge Ravoux. His brother Theo rushed from Paris on hearing the news and stayed with him until his death on July 29th. Theo later described the event in a letter to his sister Elisabeth: "He himself desired to die. While I was sitting beside him, trying to persuade him that we would heal him, and that we hoped he would be saved from further attacks, he answered: 'La tristesse durera toujours.' I felt I understood what he wished to say. Shortly afterward, he was seized with another attack, and the next minute closed his eyes." (cf. Hulsker 1996, 480) Vincent van Gogh was only 37 years old at the time of his death, leaving over 850 paintings and 1300 works on paper behind. It was not until the skillful promotion of his sister-in-law Jo van Gogh-Bonger (1862–1925) that van Gogh acquired his international fame, a recognition he aspired to.

Conclusion

> Ne crois pas que les morts soient morts
> Tant qu'il y aura des vivants
> les morts vivront, les morts vivront.
> (Smit & Luijten 2023, 86)
> (Don't believe that the dead are dead.
> While there are people still alive,
> the dead will live, the dead will live.)

The "engineer" Vincent van Gogh, the son of Jo van Gogh-Bonger and Theo van Gogh, quoted these lines during his speech on the opening of the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh on June 2nd, 1973. Van Gogh's impact on art was revolutionary. Unlike traditional

[25] Vincent van Gogh to Willemien van Gogh. Arles, Sunday, 9th and about Friday, 14th September 1888, Letter #678, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let678/letter.html.
[26] Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, Monday 9th or Tuesday 10th July 1888, Letter #638, https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/highlights/letters/638.

Dutch paintings that meticulously reflect reality, van Gogh's art constructs an entirely new world imbued with profound personal expression and emotional intensity. His palette, once dark and earthy, explodes into luminous yellows, vibrant blues, and burning oranges — colors that no longer describe the world but reimagine it. The towering cypresses in van Gogh's works are more than mere features of the southern French landscape; rendered in deep greens and undulating blacks against swirling skies of cobalt and gold, they symbolize a metamorphosis from physical existence to infinite dreams and imagination. This artistic shift marks a rebellion against traditional northern Dutch painting, where the cypress is virtually absent and fidelity to natural appearance remained the dominant ideal. Van Gogh's visionary approach liberated painting from the constraints of mere imitation, guiding us toward a realm where the visible merges with the visionary, where vibrant color from his palette becomes the medium of inner expression. His cypresses — at once turbulent and serene, death-haunted yet vibrant with life — stand as enduring symbols of his relentless pursuit of his love for art, as an eternal dialogue between the tangible world we inhabit and the infinite landscapes of artist's inner being. In his paintings, external facts give way to a deeper, chromatic articulation of the inner self, resulting in a language of color that is not descriptive, but existential — a powerful form of expression that has never faded and still resonates today.

Illustrations



Fig. 1: *Wheat Field with Cypresses* (1889)

Vincent van Gogh, Oil on canvas, 732 × 934 mm, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fig. 2: *Bedroom in Arles* (1889)

Vincent van Gogh, oil on canvas, 570 x 740 mm, Musée d'Orsay



Fig. 3: *The Starry Night* (1889)

Vincent van Gogh, oil on canvas, 737 x 920 mm, Museum of Modern Art

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Images (Figures)

Fig. 1. Van Gogh, V. (1889). *Wheat field with cypresses* [Painting]. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436535

Fig. 2. Van Gogh, V. (1889). *Bedroom in Arles* [Painting]. Google Art Project. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vincent_van_Gogh_-_Van_Gogh%27s_Bedroom_in_Arles_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

Fig. 3. Van Gogh, V. (1889). *The starry night* [Painting]. Google Art Project. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:VanGogh-starry_night.jpg