Vincent van Gogh and the seasons: images of nature and humanity

Sjraar van Heugten
Vincent van Gogh’s great love of nature is evident not only in his paintings and drawings but also in his correspondence. Van Gogh grew up in and around the village of Zundert in the southern Dutch province of North Brabant. Although the region’s sandy soil was too poor to sustain a wide variety of crops, its landscape of woods, marshes and heath enchanted the young Van Gogh. His parents, Reverend Theodorus van Gogh and Anna van Gogh (née Carbentus), took a great interest in nature, partly because of the teachings of the Groningen School—a theological movement within the Dutch Reformed Church—to which the Van Goghs belonged. The Van Goghs and their children took walks together on a regular basis, and Mrs Van Gogh had a well-kept garden which inspired Vincent’s lifelong love of tracts of nature shaped by human hands. As a boy he also took long, solitary walks in the countryside; Zundert and its surroundings would always remain rooted firmly in his mind.

Prose and poetry were extremely important to the Van Gogh family, and Vincent remained a voracious reader throughout his life. He read about nature in the writings of his favourite authors, such as Jules Michelet’s L’Oiseau (1856). Another book that appealed to him was Alphonse Karr’s Voyage autour de mon jardin (A Tour Round My Garden) (1845), which he warmly recommended to his younger brother Theo in 1874 [028]. Karr’s book takes the form of letters to a friend that recount what is happening in his garden, and Van Gogh admired it so much he penned a letter of admiration to Karr, but never mailed it [RM05].

The changing seasons and their ever-recurring cycle was an aspect of nature Van Gogh found particularly captivating. In June 1885, while studying rural life in Nuenen, he wrote:

> It is something to be deep in the snow in winter, to be deep in the yellow leaves in the autumn, to be deep in the ripe wheat in the summer, to be deep in the grass in the spring. It is something to always be with the mowers and the peasant girls, in summer with the big sky above, in the winter by the black fireplace. And to feel – this has always been so and always will be [509].

This passage testifies to the feeling of eternity Van Gogh experienced in the passing of the seasons—a sentiment that would become essential to his work. Here, his coupling of the seasons with peasant life is also characteristic of his thinking and work as an artist. His oeuvre contains depictions of the seasons not only in the form of landscapes representing spring, summer, autumn or winter but also as portrayals of people engaged in seasonal work, such as reaping the wheat (summer), sowing a crop and harvesting the grapes (autumn) and gathering wood in the snow (winter).
Still lifes by Van Gogh, too, are often clearly connected with particular seasons: not only his flower still lifes of spring or summer bouquets but also compositions featuring the bounty of the autumn harvest, including potatoes, apples and pumpkins – works that can justifiably be described as rural still lifes.

The tradition of portraying the seasons

Van Gogh’s depictions of seasonal labours belong to a long artistic tradition of which he was undoubtedly aware, even if he was not familiar with its oldest examples dating back to depictions of the seasons from Classical Antiquity and medieval representations of the months and their characteristic labours. Books of Hours and almanacs, for example, presented a sower or a ploughman as a symbol of autumn – an artistic association that still endures.

Van Gogh did know of more recent examples. In August 1880, at the beginning of his artistic career, he could boast a thorough knowledge not only of the Old Masters but also of the more established art of his own time (he did not become acquainted with the early art of Impressionism and the contemporary avant-garde until he moved to Paris in 1886). That knowledge had been acquired in the decade preceding his decision to become an artist. From mid 1869 until April 1876 Van Gogh had worked for the art dealer Goupil & Cie at their branches in The Hague, London and Paris. There he had become very familiar with the art of French, English and Dutch academic painters – Realists and masters of the Barbizon School – not only through the originals in which Goupil traded but also through high-quality reproductive prints published by the firm and sold at its various branches. Reproductions of works of art were, moreover, for sale at numerous places in the larger cities, and Vincent and Theo began at an early age to collect graphic works of this kind and gave them to each other and other family members as gifts. Vincent was an avid reader and read art books in addition to literature and magazines, which familiarised him with reproductions of notable works of art.

Van Gogh visited exhibitions and museums: in The Hague, he certainly frequented the Mauritshuis, which was only a few minutes’ walk from Goupil’s branch nearby on De Plaats (The Square). In London in 1873 he saw – according to his correspondence with Theo – the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Wallace Collection and the South Kensington Museum (today the Victoria and Albert Museum). In Paris he was a regular visitor to the Louvre and the Musée du Luxembourg, and in 1873 and on various occasions in 1877, while he was studying in Amsterdam, he visited the Trippenhuis, the predecessor of the Rijksmuseum, as well as the Museum van der Hoop.

Van Gogh’s letters frequently testify to surprising insights and knowledge. For example, he wrote to Theo on 26 December 1878 from the Borinage, a mining district in Belgium:

> There was snow these last few days, the dark days before Christmas. Then everything was reminiscent of the medieval paintings by Peasant Bruegel, among others, and by so many others who were so good at expressing the singular effect of red and green, black and white [149].

We may therefore assume that Van Gogh had a more comprehensive knowledge of seasonal depictions than can be gleaned from his letters, and that he was familiar to some extent with this tradition, at least from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards. As an artist, however, he was, above all, a child of his times, despite his unfamiliarity at the beginning of his career with the latest developments in the art world. Closest to his heart were the painters of everyday life and of realistic landscapes, the French and English realists, as well as the painters of the Barbizon and Hague schools.

The titles of landscapes by these artists frequently alluded to a specific season, as in Charles-François Daubigny’s Spring, 1857 (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Chartres, p. 3), which Van Gogh saw in his younger years at the Musée du Luxembourg [55] and again in its new
(above)
Emile Breton
*Winter evening* 1871
oil on canvas
112.0 x 169.0 cm
Musée de Grenoble
Fonds national d'art contemporain (MG 725)

(below)
Jean-François Millet
*Path through the wheat* c. 1867
pastel and black conté crayon on grey wove paper
40.0 x 50.8 cm
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Gift of Quincy Adams Shaw through Quincy Adams Shaw, Jr., and Mrs. Marian Shaw Haughton (17.1521)
home in the Louvre, when he was living in Paris with Theo between 1886 and 1888. In July 1883 Van Gogh expressed his admiration for a painting he had seen at an exhibition in 1882: Jules Dupré’s *Autumn*, c. 1865 (The Mesdag Collection, The Hague, p. 4), which belonged to the art collector Hendrik Willem Mesdag [361]. At the Musée du Luxembourg he saw *Winter evening* by Emile Breton, 1871 (Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble, p. 5, above) [55]. The name of a season sometimes figured in the title of such works of art in a symbolic sense: winter, for instance, was associated with the harshness of human existence. One of the first works Van Gogh made, several years before embarking on his artistic career, was a watercolour drawing after a lithograph by Jozef Israëls, *Winter, in life as well*, 1863 (p. 143, below), which depicts a one-legged man with a crutch, stumbling with difficulty through the snow; here, ‘winter’ refers both to the season and to the man’s wretched life. This lithograph was one of the prints that decorated Van Gogh’s room in Amsterdam in 1877 [114].

As a nature lover, Van Gogh would have recognised Israëls’s intentions even if that work had been untitled. Because of his knowledge of peasant life, Van Gogh also understood Jean-François Millet’s and Emile Breton’s scenes of the wheat harvest as pictures of summer; scenes of sowers and ploughmen as reminiscent of autumn, in which the new crop was prepared; images of fallow fields covered with snow or frost, or of an idle plough, expressive of winter; and young, green wheat or blossoming fruit trees representative of spring. He made these subjects his own, and after settling in Provence in 1888 added southern European themes, such as the autumn grape harvest, to his repertoire.

### Early seasonal motifs

After deciding in August 1880 to devote his life to art, Van Gogh devised a course of self-instruction that included making copies after prints. His carefully chosen examples included depictions by or after his favourite masters, foremost among them Jean-François Millet, whose work Van Gogh had cherished for many years. After seeing a sale exhibition of Millet’s pastels and drawings at Drouot’s auction house in Paris in June 1875, he wrote to Theo: ‘I felt something akin to: Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground’ [36]. The occasion was the sale of a collection of many drawings by Millet assembled by the artist’s benefactor, Emile Gavet. Among them was a spring scene depicting a peasant with a hoe on his shoulder walking towards
his farmhouse through young, still-green wheat (p. 5, below), as well as a pointedly summery image showing the buckwheat harvest in the foreground and grain being threshed in the background (opposite). Van Gogh found such scenes extremely eloquent and meaningful, so it is hardly surprising that Millet became this novice artist’s most important guide.

Among the prints Van Gogh had with him in the Borinage were sheets after Millet, and he asked Theo to send him, in addition, prints of Millet’s *Labours of the Fields*, comprising ten depictions of peasant work (above). In a letter written on 7 September 1880 [157], Vincent lists the twenty prints he has in his possession, including what he called *Fields in winter*, an etching by Alfred-Alexandre Delaune after a painting by Millet that depicts the barren winter plain of Chailly (p. 8, below). Other prints Van Gogh names in his own fashion display seasonal work on the land: *The sower* (autumn); *Buckwheat harvest* (summer, probably a print – p. 8, above – after the pastel *Buckwheat harvest, 1868–70*, that Van Gogh saw in Paris in 1873); *Woodcutter and his wife in the forest*, a woodcut that has ‘winter’ at the end of its full title (p. 9); and the *Labours of the Fields*, which depict virtually all the seasonal labours. Van Gogh copied such prints many times in the Borinage and again somewhat later in Brussels, and they became firmly anchored in his mind. Although he made hundreds of such copies at this time, few survive because he later destroyed nearly all of them.

In the Borinage Van Gogh also made a few works of his own invention. Despite possessing only a limited ability to render figures convincingly, he attempted several fairly ambitious compositions. In August 1880 he drew miners in the snow, and even though the drawing itself is lost, the composition survives in a sketch preserved with a letter [156]. In September he made a new drawing of that motif, this time in a rather large format (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, p. 10, below). He could not have observed any wintry conditions at this time, so the composition must have been based on scenes he had witnessed in the preceding two years. Van Gogh, with his penchant for the life and labours of the working class, was impressed by the hard lives of miners. Mining work, which was also done by children, was extremely demanding under the best of circumstances, but in the winter cold it was close...
(above)
Ch. Courtry (engraver)
Jean-François Millet (after)
Buckwheat harvest 1875
wood engraving
from Gazette des Beaux-Arts,
May 1875, vol. 11, pp. 437–38
Bibliothèque nationale de France

(below)
Alfred-Alexandre Delauney (etcher)
Jean-François Millet (after)
Winter: The plain of Chailly 1862
etching
11.3 x 11.6 cm
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Vincent van Gogh Foundation
(20050V1962)
to unbearable. Van Gogh’s portrayal of the miners in the snow – very much in line with Israëls’s composition, which he had copied several years earlier (p. 143) – was therefore intended to highlight the workers’ hardscrabble lives.4

In October 1880 Van Gogh moved to Brussels and spent a short and rather unsuccessful time at the city’s art academy, where he met the young artist Anthon van Rappard, who was somewhat more advanced in his studies. In April 1881 Van Gogh left Belgium and moved in with his parents in the village of Etten, in North Brabant, the province of his birth. There, too, he made further copies, including another sower after Millet (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, p. 11, above, left), but working from a live model became his first priority. In Etten, where the Van Gogh family was held in high regard, he succeeded in finding sufficient numbers of models. The experience he had gained in the Borinage and Brussels guided Van Gogh, and he now projected Millet’s lessons onto his freehand work:

Diggers, sowers, ploughers, men and women I must now draw constantly. Examine and draw everything that’s part of a peasant’s life. Just as many others have done and are doing. I’m no longer so powerless in the face of nature as I used to be [172].

In fact, it was not always easy to persuade country folk to make themselves look as workaday as possible:

But what a business it is to get people to understand what posing is! Peasants and townsfolk desperately cling to an idea they won’t give up, namely that one shouldn’t pose other than in one’s Sunday suit with impossible folds in which neither knee nor elbow nor shoulder blades nor any other part of the body has made its characteristic dent or hump. Truly, this is one of the petty vexations in the life of a draughtsman [170].

The seasonal farm labour that Van Gogh chose to depict often corresponds to works by Millet. Various other sowers by Van Gogh can be traced to Millet’s example: a man chopping wood, though stiffly rendered (private collection, p. 11, above, right), resembles the woodcutter in Millet’s The woodcutter, 1853 (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, p. 11, below left); and a convincing drawing of a young man in slippers cutting grass (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, p. 12) is indebted to the reaper wielding a sickle in Millet’s Labours of the Fields series (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, p. 7). These studies prepared Van Gogh for what he ultimately had in mind: to paint more complex compositions, such as a wheat harvest or a landscape with a sower in the field. For the first three years of his artistic career, however, he devoted himself doggedly to the study of the figure, which he considered vital to the accomplishment of more ambitious work. In his drawings, too, Van Gogh stuck to simple compositions during this time.

Then, in mid 1881, Van Gogh made some drawings that clearly revealed his latent talent for the landscape genre. Two pen-and-ink drawings made in the company of Anthon van Rappard in the marshes around Etten at the end of June vividly depict the vegetation of early summer (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, p. 10, above).5 Otherwise there are few real seasonal landscapes from that time. The only winter landscape is an unrefined drawing of a shed in the snow and a man carrying a bundle of sticks.6

Images of seasons in a city

At the end of December 1881, Van Gogh moved to The Hague, where he remained faithful, for the most part, to the task he had set himself of studying the human figure. Yet he also produced townscapes, largely owing to a commission from his uncle Cor van Gogh, an art dealer who had seen one of Vincent’s town views and subsequently asked him to make an entire series of similar works. Cor was pleased with the drawings delivered and
(above)
Vincent van Gogh
Marsh with water lilies June 1881 Etten
ten and india ink on paper, with pencil
nder drawing
3.5 x 31.4 cm
F 845, JH 7
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

(below)
Vincent van Gogh
Miners in the snow September 1880 Borinage
encil, coloured chalk, watercolour,
on wove paper
4.0 x 55.0 cm
F 831, JH none
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo
(KM 111.966)
(clockwise from above left)

Vincent van Gogh
Sower September–October 1881 Etten
charcoal, black chalk, on laid paper
55.9 x 33.2 cm
F 856, JH 17
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo
(KM 117,510)

Vincent van Gogh
Peasant with a chopping knife September 1881
Etten
pencil, black chalk, on paper
40.0 x 19.5 cm
F 894, JH 20
Private collection

Jacques-Adrien Lavieille (wood-engraver)
Jean-François Millet (after)
Reaper 1853
wood engraving
13.5 x 7.5 cm
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Vincent van Gogh Foundation (p023V19966)

Jacques-Adrien Lavieille (wood-engraver)
Jean-François Millet (after)
The woodcutter 1853
wood engraving
13.5 x 7.5 cm
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Vincent van Gogh Foundation (p0245V19966)
The vegetation in the centre of the drawing and small body of water in the foreground are worked out in much more detail than the background and combine to turn this townscape into an evocation of spring.

A series of the seasons

Van Gogh’s thoughts kept returning to the Borinage and he drew further miners, two of whom he placed in a winter landscape. The first of these sheets was meant to be part of a true series of the seasons, in miniature format. Writing about a work he planned to make, featuring a snow effect and the church in Nuenen which he had heard about from his family (who had recently settled there), he reported to Theo on 8 October 1882:

In short, an effect like the enclosed scratch of miners. Just to complete the seasons, I’m sending a scratch of spring and one of autumn with it, which I thought of while making the first [271].

It is impossible to say which of these compositions represented summer and autumn, but spring was depicted by a charming and appropriate scene: a
blossoming orchard with an amorous couple that combines burgeoning nature with awakening love (p. 163, above). The composition of Sketch of miners in the snow: Winter (p. 163, below), enclosed in the letter quoted above, is remarkable because there were practically no coal mines in the Netherlands. To create it Van Gogh drew on his experiences in the Borinage; however, unlike his depictions of Belgian miners, this sketch does not display a particularly onerous aspect of their lives. Instead the miners converse, with mining buildings and shafts in the background; at right, a figure stands in a garden that has been readied for winter. These ‘scratches’ were probably small designs for large, unrealised elaborations on the theme.

The hard reality of the miners’ existence is apparent in another watercolour drawing by Van Gogh (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, p. 14, above), which he described to Theo in a letter of 5 November 1882:

Have been working again on women miners carrying sacks of coal in the snow – watercolour. But above all I’ve drawn 12 or so studies of figures for it, and 3 heads, and I’m not yet finished. I’ve got the effect in the watercolour, I believe, but it isn’t yet strong enough in character for my taste. The reality is like Millet’s The gleaners – austere – so you will understand that one shouldn’t turn it into a snow effect, which would only be an impression and have no raison d’être unless the landscape is the whole point [280].

Although Van Gogh suggests that this is, above all, a figure drawing and not a winter landscape, it may again be assumed that his decision to portray the women walking through the snow was deliberate, for the heavy work of lugging sacks full of coal became even more of an ordeal during the bleak winter months. In this respect Van Gogh’s comparison with Millet’s The gleaners, 1857 Musée d’Orsay, Paris, (p. 14, below) is not coincidental: even though gleaning is summer work, the effort of bending over in the heat of the sun to gather up ears of wheat left behind after the harvest was just as back-breaking as lugging sacks of coal through the snow. Both tasks were typically carried out by poor peasants.

In the same letter in which Vincent announced his series of the four seasons to Theo, he also wrote: ‘How beautiful it is outdoors – I’m doing my best to capture autumnal effects’. It is not known whether he abandoned this plan to pursue other projects – such as resuming his portrayal of working figures – or whether these works are lost, but no autumn scenes survive from this time.
Vincent van Gogh  
*Women carrying sacks of coal in the snow*

November 1882, The Hague
Charcoal(?), opaque watercolour, brush and ink, on wove paper
32.1 x 50.1 cm
F 994, JH 253
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo
(KM 121.745)

Jean-François Millet  
*The gleaners*

1857
Oil on canvas
83.5 x 110 cm
Musée d’Orsay, Paris
Donation by Mrs Pommery with life interest reserved, 1890 (RF 392)
Print collection

It was not only Van Gogh’s memories of the Borinage that led him to depict such scenes; he also found inspiration in his studio. In 1882 he had begun to assemble a collection of illustrations from magazines such as The Graphic, The Illustrated London News and L’Illustration. Van Gogh collected hundreds of prints – approximately 1400 have been preserved and are now held in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Most of these he pasted to coarse paper and put in portfolios (filling eighteen in total), arranged by subject and sometimes by name. The surviving collection contains a sizeable group of scenes from miners’ lives, which Van Gogh drew upon for ideas.8

Seasonal themes are also well represented in this print collection (pp. 226–41). Among them are landscapes such as The old oak of Beersel (winter), after Marie Collart (p. 233, below); A summer landscape, after George Inness (p. 236, right); and A Sunday morning in winter, after Emile Adélaïde Breton (p. 234). There are also choice examples of seasonal labour: The woodcutter, 1875, after Millet, illustrative of winter (below); a number of prints after Léon Lhermitte, a painter Van Gogh admired greatly, including The potato harvest (p. 239, below) and The sower, showing autumn (p. 228); The apple harvest, by Charles Émile Jacque, again depicting autumn (p. 238, below); and the rather peculiar Mistletoe gathering in Normandy, set in winter (p. 236, left). The occasional sheet is somewhat more frivolous in character, such as Summer, after Victor Gabriel Gilbert (p. 232).

Models

In The Hague, Van Gogh had a fairly large pool of models who posed for him dressed in the characteristic peasant costumes and head coverings he had begun collecting. Scores of studies dating from 1882–83 mostly portray working-class types engaged in everyday activities. The fact that rural life was still on Van Gogh’s mind is apparent from various sheets of sowers – not drawn on the land but in his studio, and only later given suitable settings. In December 1882 he produced four drawings of sowers, including one fairly large sheet (p. 119). The man portrayed testifies to the growing ease with which Van Gogh was able to depict action convincingly, as well as to his increased understanding of anatomy, volume and perspectival foreshortening. He had become much more adept at imitating Millet’s iconic imagery and could make his own variations of it.

In July 1883 Van Gogh worked on the motif again, making a drawing of which he had a photograph taken later that month, along with two other sheets. All three works are now known only through these photographs. The dimensions and materials used for both The sower (whereabouts unknown, p. 16, above) and a sheet drawn in June depicting peasants lifting potatoes (whereabouts unknown, p. 16, below) remain unknown, although these were undoubtedly drawings, presumably in large format.9 Van Gogh mentions both works in a number of letters, and the fact that he had them photographed indicates that they were ambitious compositions. Sowing seeds and lifting potatoes were done in early autumn, so again these scenes must have been composed. These figures would have been models posing for him in the studio; he could not have observed people engaged in these labours at that time of year. As he described in a letter to Theo, Vincent’s creative process for The sower was intensive:

I’m also working on a sower on a large field with clods of earth, which I believe is better than the other sowers I tried before. I have at least 6 studies of the figure himself, but now I’ve placed him in the space more specifically as the drawing proper, and carefully studied the land and sky as well [358].

The drawing he made in June of potato grubbers, or peasants lifting potatoes, was also the result of careful preparation [353]. Clearly, works of this kind were of great importance to Van Gogh.

In August Van Gogh again took up the motif of lifting potatoes, this time in oil on paper on canvas (private collection, p.121). Though he based the painting on his drawing from June, Van Gogh took some liberties...
Vincent van Gogh
The sower July 1883 The Hague
technique, measurements and whereabouts
unknown
F 1035, JH 374

Vincent van Gogh
Peasants lifting potatoes June 1883 The Hague
technique, measurements and whereabouts
unknown
F 1034, JH 374
behind the parsonage in Nuenen. It was a spot that surrounded by snowy fields. It was a very picturesque location, one which he had learned several interesting things from his family, who were now living there. Van Gogh moved in with his parents, youngest brother and sisters.

Inspiration in the countryside

In a letter written to Theo in The Hague, Vincent had earlier described his small series of the seasons and also told his brother he hoped to sketch the simple churchyard where peasants were buried in Nuenen, should he ever end up there:

The churchyard with the wooden crosses is often on my mind, so I may do some studies for it in advance - I would like to do something like that in the snow - a peasant funeral or the like [271].

Fourteen months later, in December 1883, his wish came true when it snowed in Nuenen and he made a small sketch of precisely the subject he had hoped for, a funeral procession in the snow, wending its way to the churchyard.11

The peasant graveyard was situated around a medieval tower that was demolished during Van Gogh’s stay in Nuenen. It was a very picturesque location, one that would acquire an important place in his work. Although Van Gogh was a plein-air painter, working on a time-consuming painting in the wintry cold was seldom an option. Despite the season, he was determined to document the scene and decided to make a series of on-the-spot sketches of it (p. 146). More than a year later, when it snowed again, he painted the old tower by itself, surrounded by snowy fields.12

Van Gogh was also attracted to the splendid garden behind the parsonage in Nuenen. It was a spot that

with the composition and added a fifth figure at left. The paintings he had made previously display a palette consisting mainly of earth tones, but here he used strikingly bright colours. It was intended as a study to which he planned to devote a great deal of time:

I keep thinking about undertaking the potato grubbers as a large painting, although it wouldn’t be finished before next year, and only half finished this season. It seems to me that the composition could stay as it is and a start could be made on it [372].

The following month Van Gogh, whose relationship with Sien Hoornik had deteriorated, decided to spend some time in the unspoilt province of Drenthe. After a rather unproductive three-month stay there, on 3 December he arrived in the village of Nuenen, about which he had learned several interesting things from his family, who were now living there. Van Gogh moved in with his parents, youngest brother and sisters.

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reminded him not only of Karr’s A Tour Round My Garden but also of Le Paradou, the luxuriant garden featured in Émile Zola’s novel La faute de l'abbé Mouret (Abbé Mouret’s Transgression) (1879), which he had read in The Hague in August 1882. The parsonage, which instantly became Van Gogh’s favourite spot to draw that December, figures in many of his works. One of the sheets he drew there depicts a small figure in the snowy garden, with the plants packed up to protect them from the frost and the tower looming prominently in the field behind (p. 149). The work’s French title, Mélancolie, is an apt characterisation of its atmosphere. In Drenthe, Van Gogh had also been overcome by melancholic feelings, but these had been caused by his surroundings and not by a depression: ‘And the melancholy which things in general have is of a healthy kind, as in Millet’s drawings’ [386]. That is the kind of mood he sought to evoke in this drawing.

This French title and that of another drawing – Parsonage garden in the snow with three figures (Winter garden) (Van Gogh Muesum, Amsterdam, p. 18) – suggest that Van Gogh hoped to sell them through Theo on the French art market. Landscape with a church (p. 148) was another sheet he probably considered to have commercial possibilities. All of these drawings were made on the same drawing pad; although they are not very large they display Van Gogh’s maturing talent for drawing and his ability to capture the atmosphere a landscape can radiate.

Soon the artist directed his attention to a completely different subject: the many weavers in Nuenen, whom he had long hoped to draw and paint. Van Gogh now spent several months immersed in this subject, pausing only in the first half of March 1884 to create a series of six large landscape drawings, now considered the high point of his Dutch works on paper. Four of these compositions can convincingly be associated with the seasons. Two of them, situated in the parsonage garden, are winter scenes, as emerges from the titles Van Gogh gave them in his letters (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, p. 20). They exude the same atmosphere as the two smaller drawings of the garden made in December, but are considerably more powerful in execution. The forms of the fruit trees and plants, packed up to protect them from the cold, lend the work a rather desolate air. Again these scenes are pervaded by a sense of melancholy, counterbalanced by the comforting feeling induced by landscapes.

A third sheet from the series, The kingfisher, executed in Nuenen in March 1884 (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, p. 21, above right), can also be related to a season – autumn. The work was doubtless inspired by a poem by Jules Breton which Van Gogh copied out for
Anthon van Rappard, to whom he had recently sent the six drawings mentioned above [433]:

**Autumn (To Jules Dupré)**
The river slowly flows. Beside the bank, Its waters murmur round old alder stumps, Tinted blood-red; tall yellow poplars Cast their golden leaves among the paler reeds.

The light wind weaves its moving net — Bright silver wrinkles, leaving those dark spots In which the trees droop cones and canopies, Trembling as if shaken by a host of birds.

From time to time, a thrush's thin repeated cry, And plunging from an overhanging bough, A jewel sparkles in the clear blue air;

A sharp call draws out its strident note; The kingfisher, speeding on burning wing, A furtive streak of emerald and fire.¹³

Late autumn in the Netherlands can be freezing, and the plants and trees in *The kingfisher* are covered in frost. This is not a scene observed in the parsonage garden, but presumably a composite of elements Van Gogh had seen in various places. A fourth sheet from this series, *Avenue of poplars* (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, opposite, below left), can also be associated with autumn. In a letter written to Van Rappard during the same period, Van Gogh described a canvas by Hippolyte Boulenger depicting a row of autumnal poplars, which reminded him of François Coppée's poem 'Tristement' ('Sadly') (1874) and which presumably influenced this landscape drawing.¹⁴

Van Gogh, who had hoped to have some commercial success with this series in Van Rappard's circle or through Theo in Paris, was disappointed yet again. He returned to the weavers subject, but took time in early April to paint the blossoming trees in the parsonage garden—a work that is lost but still known from a letter sketch (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, opposite, below right) [444].

**Reflections on the seasons**

In the early summer of 1884, Van Gogh was struck by an effect connected with the growth cycle of wheat—a subject close to his heart. A letter written to Theo in the first days of July 1884 offers great insight into the artist's ideas about the wheat harvest, a motif redolent of summer, as well as his thoughts about the other seasons:

But for want of a good model I haven't yet started on what has most struck me in nature these last few days. At present the half-ripe wheatfields have a dark, golden blond tone, ruddy or golden bronze. This is brought out to maximum effect by opposition with the broken cobalt tone of the sky.

Imagine female figures against such a background, very crude, very energetic, faces and arms and feet bronzed by the sun, with dusty, coarse indigo clothes and black caps in the shape of a beret on their close-cropped hair—while they go to their work on a dusty path of ruddy violet with some green weeds among the wheat, with hoes on their shoulders, or a loaf of rye bread under their arms, a pitcher or a copper coffee-pot. These last few days I've repeatedly seen that same subject, time and again, in all sorts of variants. And I assure you that it was thoroughly authentic, very lush and yet very sober, most perfectly artistic.

And it preoccupies me greatly.

The state of my paint bill is such, however, that I have to be a bit careful about starting new things in a larger size, and all the more so because it will cost me a fair amount in models if I could ever get suitable models of precisely the type I have in mind (coarse, flat faces with low foreheads and thick lips, not that sharp look, but full and Millet-like) and with those very clothes.
For this is very precise work, and one isn’t at liberty to depart from the colours of the costume, since the effect lies in the analogy of the broken indigo tone and the broken cobalt tone, heightened by the mysterious elements of orange in the ruddy bronze of the wheat.

It would be something that expresses Summer well – in my view summer isn’t easy to express. Usually, or often at least, a summery effect is either impossible or ugly, that’s my feeling, at least – it’s offset by the twilights, though.

But I mean it isn’t easy to find the effect of a summer sun that’s as lush and as simple and as pleasant to look at as the characteristic effects of the other seasons.

The spring is tender green (young wheat) and pink (apple blossom).

The autumn is the contrast of the yellow leaves against violet tones.

The winter is the snow with the little black silhouettes.

But if the summer is the opposition of blues against an element of orange in the golden bronze of the wheat, this way one could paint a painting in each of the contrasts of the complementary colours (red and green, blue and orange, yellow and violet, white and black) that really expressed the mood of the seasons [451].

Van Gogh did not produce a large harvest scene at this time, but a month later he did have an opportunity to focus on seasonal scenes.

A commission

In the nearby city of Eindhoven, Van Gogh had become friends with Antoon Hermans, a wealthy goldsmith. In early August 1884 Vincent wrote to Theo about a conversation he had had with Hermans:

Last week I was in the fields every day during the wheat harvest – of which I’ve made a composition. I made this for someone in Eindhoven who wants to decorate a dining room. He wanted to do it with compositions of various saints. I suggested he consider whether 6 scenes from the peasant life of the Meijerij [a rural part of North Brabant] – at the same time symbolising the 4 seasons – might not whet the appetites of the good folk who would have to sit at table there more than the above-mentioned mystical personages. Well, the man warmed to the idea after visiting the studio. But he wants to paint those panels himself, and will that work? (However, I was to design and paint the compositions on a reduced scale.) [453]

Van Gogh had meanwhile suggested the following subjects to Hermans: ‘sower – ploughman – shepherd – wheat harvest – potato harvest – ox-cart in the snow’ [453]. He made a sketch of the planned wheat harvest for Theo (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, left).

Van Gogh worked out his initial ideas in small sketches, four of which are still extant (private collection, opposite). A small study for a shepherd is unknown, as is his preliminary drawing of the wheat harvest, which survives only in the sketch enclosed in the letter to Theo. Van Gogh then changed his mind to some extent and finally completed six subjects in detail: Planting potatoes (p. 165, below); Peasants planting potatoes (p. 165, above), a Wheat harvest; a Sower; Shepherd and his flock (p. 166, above); and Wood gatherers in the snow (p. 166, below). The sower and the shepherd both portray autumn; the wood gatherers, winter; the potato planters and the ploughman with a woman planting potatoes, spring; and the wheat harvest, summer. Wheat harvest and Sower are no longer known.
Vincent van Gogh

*Potato harvest*  
August 1884 Nuenen  
pen on paper  
5.0 x 13.0 cm  
F 1141, JH 510  
Private collection

*Ox-cart in the snow*  
August 1884 Nuenen  
pen on paper  
5.0 x 13.5 cm  
F 1144, JH 511  
Private collection

(above to below)

Vincent van Gogh

*Sower* August 1884 Nuenen  
pen on paper  
5.5 x 15.0 cm  
F 1143, JH 509  
Private collection

Vincent van Gogh

*Ploughman* August 1884 Nuenen  
pen on paper  
5.5 x 14.0 cm  
F 1142, JH 511  
Private collection
Autumn

In a letter of 22 October 1884 Vincent told Theo that Van Rappard was visiting him and they were studying peasant motifs together and devoting much time to figure drawing. But as usual, the onset of autumn made a deep impression on Van Gogh, who once said, in a letter written in The Hague, that he longed to live in a country where it was always autumn [273]. After making a study, no longer extant, of pollard willows against a background of yellow poplars, he wrote:

It’s extraordinarily beautiful here at the moment with the autumnal effects. In a fortnight we’ll have the real fall of the leaves – when everything that’s on the trees falls in a few days [466].

About three days later Van Gogh reported to his brother:

The last thing I made is a rather large study of an avenue of poplars with the yellow autumn leaves, where the sun makes glittering patches here and there on the fallen leaves on the ground, which are interspersed with the long shadows cast by the trunks [467].

Obsessed by these words, widowhood and autumn,
My reverie seeks no other to express
This melancholy, vast and monotonous,
That robs me of all hope and all desire to love.

Ceaselessly it evokes a long, long avenue
Of plane trees, immensely tall, half bare,
In which a woman in deep mourning, veiled,
Moves slowly forward on the pallid grass."
Van Gogh had recently become fascinated with Eugène Delacroix’s colour theories, about which he had read in Charles Blanc’s *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (1867), and *Avenue of poplars in autumn* is a result of his newly acquired knowledge. At this time Van Gogh was also carrying on a discussion about Impressionism with Theo, who was trying to persuade him to adopt a somewhat brighter palette; however, Vincent was determined to work in even darker colours, and subsequently put this idea into practice. Compared to the works that followed, *Avenue of poplars in autumn* is still relatively bright and rich in colour contrasts.

Starting in November, Van Gogh first began to focus on painting still lifes, prompted by the fact that he was teaching a small group of amateur painters and thought it would be a good way for them (himself included) to practise. In addition to still lifes of various objects, Van Gogh also painted in the late autumn or early winter his first plant still lifes (they cannot actually be called flower still lifes): *Vase with honesty* (p. 124) and a composition consisting only of autumn leaves. After its flowers bloom in the summer, the honesty plant develops translucent seed pods that continue to grow lighter in colour; their silver-white hue provides a striking accent in nature throughout autumn and into winter. Van Gogh associated it with melancholy and leave-taking, as is apparent from a still life he made following the death of his father on 26 March 1885. Though Van Gogh later overpainted it, the composition is still known from a sketch sent with a letter (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, opposite, left). It depicts, next to a vase of honesty, his father’s pipe and tobacco pouch; the whole composition represents an ‘in memoriam’ that clearly shows the associations that honesty evoked in the artist’s mind.

From the end of 1884, Van Gogh began to concentrate on painting and drawing peasants in their domestic environment in a months-long campaign that resulted in *The potato eaters* (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam). This kind of work was perfect for filling the cold winter months. In February 1885, he again had the opportunity to paint a beloved location: ‘I painted a few more studies of our garden when there was snow on it’ [483]. *The parsonage garden at Nuenen in the snow*, painted in Nuenen in January 1885 (p. 151), is one such work, whose high viewpoint suggests that Van Gogh placed his easel in a room on the first floor, at the back of the parsonage.

Peasant life in all its facets kept Van Gogh occupied until June. Van Rappard had criticised the figures in *The potato eaters* rather venomously, and Van Gogh at first reacted indignantly; now he took it to heart and decided that a new round of intensive figure studies was necessary. He chose a new approach, a system devised by Delacroix which he had read about in Jean Gigoux’s *Causeries sur les artistes de mon temps* (Chats About the Artists of My Time) (1885). Gigoux explained that Delacroix, when drawing figures, did not proceed from the contours, but instead sought to capture volumes by means of ovals or egg shapes: ‘You see, the ancients started from the centres whilst in the Renaissance, they started from the line’.

Van Gogh, who wrote approvingly of this method to Van Rappard, employed it in a long series of figure drawings started in June. At first his figures were relatively small and thickset; some are shown working the land, but it is not always easy to tell what they are doing. A digging woman in various drawings seems to be lifting potatoes, as suggested by the two round shapes on her spade (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, opposite, right). At that time of year, however, no one was actually doing this kind of work: potatoes were lifted in the autumn, after the wheat harvest. This suggests that, once again, Van Gogh had peasants pose for him in his studio, equipped with the appropriate paraphernalia, such as a shovel, pitchfork or scythe. The process was not always easy, as he wrote on 28 June 1885:

*I’m working hard on figure drawings every day. I must have at least a hundred, though – or even more, before I can stop again. I’m trying to find something different from my old drawings, and to find the character of the peasants – especially those from round here. And we’re heading towards...*
harvest – and then I must make the wheat harvest
and the potato lifting a campaign time. It’s twice as
difficult to get a model then and yet it’s essential,
because the older I get, the more convinced I become
that one can’t be too conscientious, that one must
always and eternally exert oneself in what [Alphonse]
Daudet ... calls the hunt for the model [510].

In July Van Gogh switched from small peasant types
to large figures working in the fields, again following
in the footsteps of Millet’s *Labours of the Fields* and of
other artists he admired. He knew many depictions
by contemporary artists of series of labours specific
to a month or season. One of the younger artists he
considered worthy of being called a successor to Millet
and Breton was Jules Bastien-Lepage. Van Gogh knew
an illustration after Lepage’s *October*, in which
the potato lifting a campaign time. It’s twice as

Plagued by gossip and accused of getting a woman
pregnant, Van Gogh found himself without models at the
end of August, when a local priest warned the villagers
not to pose for him. He then resumed painting and
produced a long series of still lifes throughout September
and October. Among them is a fairly sizeable group that
displays the fruits of the harvest: baskets of potatoes or
other produce, such as apples and pumpkins (p. 126).
What Van Gogh said about a still life with potatoes holds
true for all of these works, namely that he had attempted

Still lifes and autumn landscapes
to get body into it – I mean express the material. Such that they become lumps that have weight and are solid, which you’d feel if they were thrown at you, for instance [533].

With their dark earth tones and robust manner of painting, these works ooze the atmosphere of the countryside and autumn.

Van Gogh’s palette was at its darkest at this time, but that would soon change. From 6 to 8 October 1885 he visited Amsterdam and its new Rijksmuseum, and the seventeenth-century masters there opened his eyes to the use of brighter colours. Back in Nuenen he was gripped all the more by the advent of autumn and made three paintings and a watercolour drawing that benefit greatly from his experiments with a more colourful palette. In early November he wrote to Theo:

You’ll shortly receive two studies of the autumn leaves, one in yellow (poplars) – and the other in orange (oaks). I’m utterly preoccupied with the laws of colour. If only we’d been taught them in our youth! ... I’ve also made another autumn study of the pond in the garden at home. There’s definitely a painting in that spot. I did already try to get it out once last year [538].

One of the three works mentioned above is Poplars near Nuenen, late October – early November 1885 (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, opposite, above), a large work by Van Gogh’s standards, in which the feeling of autumn is beautifully captured. The study he made in the garden is probably a water-colour drawing (Het Noordbrabants Museum, ’s-Hertogenbosch, opposite, below), which he later used as the model for a painting that is now lost and known only from a black-and-white photograph of poor quality. Van Gogh conducted a revealing experiment in the drawing by initially depicting the autumn garden as he described it later on in the letter:

Two trees (orange and yellow) on the right, two bushes (grey-green) in the middle, two trees (brownish yellow) on the left. In front – the pond, black – foreground of withered grass. Background, a glimpse over the hedge onto a very bright green. A sky to harmonize with this in terms of power, in slate-grey and dark blue [538].

Pointedly, there is no mention of figures, which feature prominently in both the drawing and the painting. A close look at the drawing clearly shows that they were indeed later additions drawn over the existing composition. These figures turned the scene into the prototype of a motif that would come to play an important role in Van Gogh’s oeuvre: a garden or park with reposing figures or amorous couples, in many cases portrayed in autumnal surroundings. These are poetic images intended to give the viewer a sense of solace like that conveyed by the figures in these scenes. The evocative Autumn landscape at dusk also dates from this period (p. 129). Here Van Gogh deliberately coupled the season with a specific time of day which, like evening and night-time, he associated with contemplation and poetic feelings.

On 24 November 1885 Van Gogh left Nuenen to settle in Antwerp, following a plan he had been considering for some time. He hoped that he would be able to do more drawing from live models there, and this was the main focus of the three months he spent in the city. Although Van Gogh captured the snow-covered houses seen from his window, winter is otherwise absent from the works made in Antwerp at this time.

In the city again: Paris

Disappointed by what Antwerp had to offer him, Van Gogh left for Paris. He arrived there around 28 January 1886 and immediately moved into Theo’s apartment in rue Laval in Montmartre. Hoping for more success with his figure studies, Van Gogh enrolled as a pupil in the studio of Fernand Cormon; however, this was not to his liking either, and after three months he packed it in.
Vincent van Gogh

**Baskets of potatoes**
September 1885 Nuenen
oil on canvas
65.0 x 78.5 cm
F 0107, JH 0933
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Vincent van Gogh Foundation (s0154V1962)

**Poplars near Nuenen**
late October – early November 1885 Nuenen
oil on canvas
78.0 x 95.0 cm
F 45, JH 999
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1239 (MK)

**The garden of the vicarage at Nuenen**
October – November 1885 Nuenen
watercolour on paper
38.0 x 49.0 cm
F 1234, JH 914
Het Noordbrabants Museum, 's-Hertogenbosch
Purchased with support from the BankGiro Lottery, the Mondriaan Fund, the VSB Foundation, the Friends of Het Noordbrabants Museum, the Renschdael Art Foundation and Coen Teulings
(above)
Vincent van Gogh
Basket of crocus bulbs January - February 1887 Paris
oil on canvas
32.5 x 41.2 cm
F 0334, JH 1228
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Vincent van Gogh Foundation (50179V1962)

(below)
Vincent van Gogh
Grapes, lemons, pears and apples autumn 1887 Paris
oil on canvas
46.5 x 55.2 cm
F 382, JH 1337
Art Institute of Chicago
Gift of Kate L. Brewster (1949.215)
His time in Cormon’s studio was undoubtedly important in that it gave him an opportunity to meet young artists, including Louis Anquetin, Émile Bernard, John Peter Russell and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Through them Van Gogh became familiar not only with the work of the young avant-garde but also with the contemporary Paris art world and new artistic theories. After leaving Cormon’s studio in early June he resolved to continue his studies of the human figure on his own, but was prevented from doing so by a lack of models.

In Nuenen Van Gogh had vigorously defended his use of dark colours; in Paris, however, he was forced to admit that his position was untenable. He also discovered that a palette of very grey earth tones did not lend itself to working with the colour theories that had become so precious to him. Under the influence of everything he saw and studied in Paris – the Impressionists, the young avant-garde, Japanese printmaking, Delacroix, the collection in the Musée du Luxembourg and the Old Masters in the Louvre – Van Gogh’s practice underwent a spectacular transformation in the space of only two years.

**Still lifes**

In Paris Van Gogh initially chose a genre ideally suited to study: the still life. Earlier, in 1884 and 1885, he had undertaken still lifes as experiments in colour; now, he returned to still lifes of flowers. Late spring and summer were devoted entirely to the genre. Theo was delighted with his brother’s progress and told his mother:

> He is painting flowers mostly, mainly in order to make his next paintings more colourful ... He also has acquaintances from whom he receives a beautiful delivery of flowers every week which can serve him as a model.²⁵

In September–October 1886 Van Gogh wrote to the English painter Horace Mann Livens, whom he had met in Antwerp:

> I have made a series of colour studies in painting simply flowers, red poppies, blue corn flowers and myosotys [sic], white and rose roses, yellow chrysanthemums [sic] – seeking oppositions of blue with orange, red & green, yellow and violet, seeking THE BROKEN AND NEUTRAL TONES to harmonise brutal extremes. Trying to render intense COLOUR and not a GREY harmony [569].

Still lifes of flowers now acquired a permanent place in Van Gogh’s work. He painted about three dozen of them from June to September, until flowers were no longer available and he was forced to stop studying them until the following year.

*Roses and peonies* (p. 169) dates from June 1886 and therefore represents a late spring bouquet. The still life with zinnias (which bloom from July onwards) and other summer flowers, arranged in the same pot (p. 199), was presumably painted a month or two later. The following year Van Gogh returned to flower still lifes in the spring when he painted the impressive picture of a brass vase of fritillaries, which bloom in May–June (Musée d’Orsay). The large, strong and colourful *Still life with wildflowers and carnations* (p. 201) originated in the summer of that year.¹⁶

Van Gogh also painted two pictures of what can be called gestating still lifes: one displays sprouting crocus bulbs (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, opposite, above), and the other shows newly germinating hyacinth bulbs (p. 171). Crocuses are harbingers of spring that sprout early, in the first months of the year, whereas hyacinths shoot up somewhat later. Both still lifes symbolise the new life that spring invariably brings.¹⁷

In the autumn of 1887 Van Gogh painted a number of still lifes featuring fruit harvested in the autumn. No work is more autumnal in character than *Grapes, lemons, pears and apples*, painted in the autumn of 1887 (Art Institute of Chicago, opposite, below); not only does it depict fruits of the autumn harvest, but at a late stage Van Gogh added autumn leaves to the work so as to leave the viewer in no doubt about its message.

**Spring and summer landscapes, 1887**

Although Van Gogh also painted ‘modern’ urban subjects, it is typical of his character that he nevertheless sought and found a remarkable amount of nature in the midst of Paris, and also on the edge of the city, during the two years he spent there. He and Theo lived in Montmartre, a fairly large part of which was still rural in those days, and Vincent discovered many motifs to paint in the area. Among them is the intimate and autumnal picture of a simple drinking establishment, a so-called guinguette, where the Moulin de la Galette centre of entertainment and nightlife was found (p. 131). This work is comparable in character to Van Gogh’s depictions of people relaxing in a garden or park; here, however, they unwind beneath the pergola of the cafe.

In the spring and summer of 1887 Van Gogh was drawn to the natural surroundings of Asnières-sur-Seine and to the banks of the River Seine. He experimented with these subjects well into the spring,
Vincent van Gogh

The bridge at Courbevoie May–July 1887 Paris
oil on canvas
32.1 x 40.5 cm
F 0304, JH 1326
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Vincent van Gogh Foundation (s0086V1962)

Wheatfield with partridge June–July 1887 Paris
oil on canvas
53.7 x 64.1 cm
F 0310, JH 1274
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Vincent van Gogh Foundation (s0197V1962)
painting in highly diluted oil paint, so-called peinture à l’essence. It was using this almost draughtsman-like technique that he produced an alluring landscape with trees on a slope or river bank (p. 175). At this time Van Gogh also painted the fresh vegetation along the Seine (p. 179). Such works are redolent of the Impressionist influence of Claude Monet in particular.

Van Gogh had seen the work of the Impressionists at their eighth and last group exhibition in Paris in May 1886. Monet, Alfred Sisley and Pierre-Auguste Renoir were not included, but Edgar Degas and a small group of his artist friends left a strong mark on the event. Van Gogh saw paintings by Monet a short time later, at the Ve exposition internationale de peinture et sculpture held at the Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, in June–July 1886. At the Vte exposition held there the following year, he saw a large number of works made by Monet on the French island of Belle-Île, off the coast of Brittany. Monet’s heavy impasto and lively brushwork no doubt made a great impression on Van Gogh, who viewed him as the most important innovator of landscape painting.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Van Gogh drew inspiration from Monet for a number of landscapes and river views. The works he produced in the spring and summer of 1887 are clearly Impressionist in character, as shown by a blossoming chestnut tree (p. 173) and a view of the River Seine with the bridge of Courbevoie (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, opposite, above) that were painted with loose but unerring brushstrokes. That spring and summer Van Gogh spent a great deal of time working, sometimes in the company of Paul Signac, in the vicinity of Asnières-sur-Seine. At this time he also painted, in an unknown location, six deep-green wooded views that display the influence of Impressionism (p. 203), as does the contemporaneous Wheatfield with partridge (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, opposite, below). In the spring Van Gogh made a type of painting that would come to occupy a special place in his oeuvre when he directed his gaze downwards to make Patch of grass (p. 177), a work clearly influenced by Japanese art.

Japan

The Japanese ukiyo-e woodcuts that Van Gogh had begun to collect in Paris from then on became an exceptionally important source of inspiration for him. Their bright hues, often arranged in large areas of colour, bold compositions with truncations of pictorial elements – a device highly unusual in Western art – and the love of nature evident in many of these works were a revelation to him and to many other artists of his time. Dozens of prints in Van Gogh’s collection display seasonal motifs, and spring is particularly well represented: blooming irises, cherry and plum trees, and gardens with peonies dominate many of the woodcuts (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, below).

In 1887 Van Gogh made three so-called Japonaiseries; two after examples by Utagawa Hiroshige and one based on a reproduction after Keisai Eisen. One of the Hiroshige copies was of Residence with plum trees at Kameido, from the series One Hundred Views of Famous Places in Edo, 1856–58 (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, p. 32, above), a work that perfectly exemplifies the characteristics of Japanese

**Utagawa Kunisada**

*The splendour of butterflies and peonies in the garden* 1849–53
colour woodcuts on Japanese paper
57.5 x 25.5 cm (each)
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Vincent van Gogh Foundation
(n0211V1962, n0212V1962, n0213V1962)