Review
Ella Hendriks, Marije Vellekoop, Maarten van Bommel, Muriel Geldof, and Van Gogh Museum (eds):
Van Gogh's Sunflowers illuminated: Art meets science
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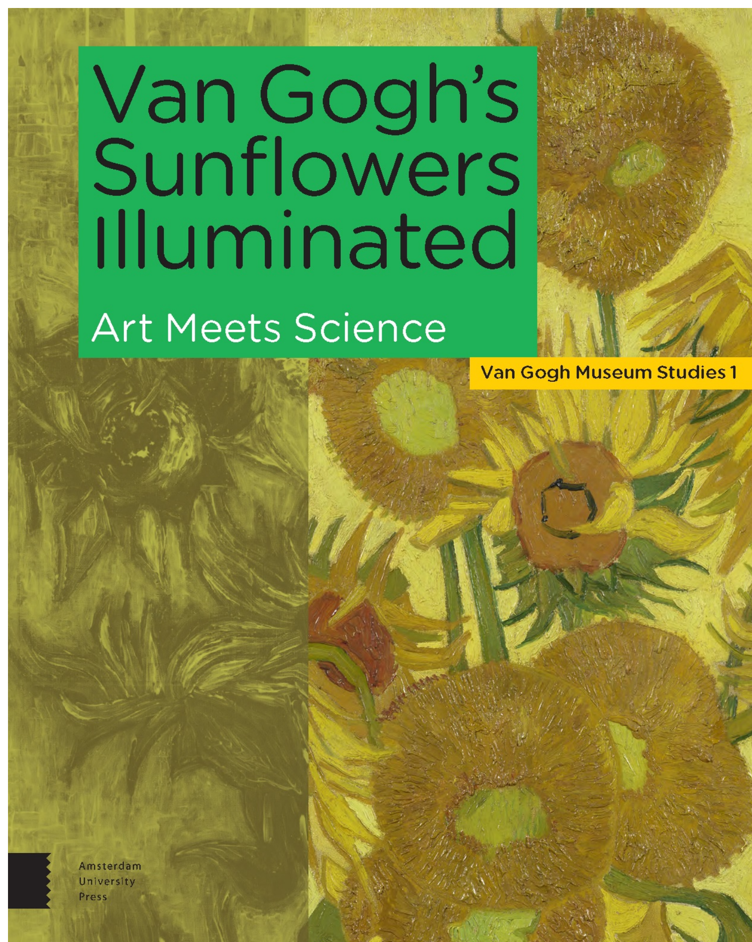

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Van Gogh's Sunflowers illuminated: Art meets science shines a narrowly focused high beam on a small if well-known subset of the artist's production. Within that subset, this volume centers more specifically upon a masterful still life of 15 sunflowers in an earthenware jar (now in the collection of the National Gallery, London) and a "free repetition" of that work (now owned by the Van Gogh Museum) that Van Gogh made for Paul Gauguin in anticipation of an exchange that never came to pass. Both pictures were painted at Arles: the London *Sunflowers* in the summer of 1888 – a period of peak production in which Vincent van Gogh attained what he'd later, in a letter dated March 24, 1889, to his brother Theo, call a "high yellow note" – and the Amsterdam repetition in January 1889, as the artist struggled to recover from the breakdown he'd suffered at Christmastime.

Over the course of the last quarter-century, conservators in London and Amsterdam have done comparative chemical and structural analyses of the visually resemblant London and Amsterdam *Sunflowers*, using increasingly sophisticated techniques. These range from x-radiography and infrared reflectography (both of which allow investigators to look beneath the surface of a painting to determine over-paintings and view underdrawings) to Raman spectroscopy (which helps identify and distinguish pigments) and UV-Vis-NIR optics reflectance and luminescence spectroscopy (a non-invasive means of molecular analysis that takes measurements in situ from a polychrome surface rather than relying on micro-samples removed from one). In the main, this book is a compendium of conservators' concerns about and approaches to Van Gogh's oil paintings – written by and for those in that field. High tech prevails, and the most conventional of art historical methods – side-by-side visual comparison – is not afforded to readers of this book; though it is full of charts, graphs, and microscopic close-ups, and features full-page illustrations and multiple details of both the London and Amsterdam *Sunflowers*, this volume is void of a single instance in which the two paintings are pictured next to one another.

The capstone to a long-term, multifaceted, and evolving scientific investigation, *Van Gogh's Sunflowers illuminated* – coauthored by more than 30 individual researchers – also looks to the uncertain future of paintings that have significantly deteriorated since Van Gogh completed them in 1888-89. The paint surfaces of these heavily impastoed still lifes have flaked, chipped, cracked, and in some areas pustulated, and the vibrant coloristic interactions and tonal harmonies the artist intended have diminished as pigments have changed and become less distinct from one another. In response to the brilliant sunlight and vibrant hues of Provençal summer, Van Gogh deployed "bright but fugitive" geranium lake pigments and chrome yellows that inevitably "turn dark" (Monico et al. 2019, 130, 138). The conservators who collaborated on this volume note that while they

cannot turn back the clock, they are determined to minimize further damage by establishing appropriate guidelines for gallery lighting (Monico et al. 2019, 154).

Both the London and Amsterdam *Sunflowers* also have suffered the effects of 20th-century relining and varnish – the latter locking in place not only flaking paint, but attendant particles of dust and soot. Varnish removal, as described in detail by those who've examined the stratigraphy and composition of the varnishes on Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, is controversial. Always tricky, such cleanings are especially complicated when layers of varnish differ in thickness and chemical composition; a team of 13 scientist-contributors to *Van Gogh's Sunflowers illuminated* ponders the means and feasibility of varnish removal from paintings with already-compromised surfaces (Van den Berg 2019).

General readers daunted by the dense, techno-specific chapters of *Van Gogh's Sunflowers illuminated* probably will find the one that chronicles early efforts to conserve/restore the Amsterdam *Sunflowers* more accessible. Recent investigations of that painting's physical state are here used to discern and reconstruct the materials and methods of Jan Cornelis Traas (1898-1984), who "restored" the Amsterdam *Sunflowers* in 1927, as his career was taking off, and again in 1961, as he neared retirement. This chapter offers interesting glimpses into now-outmoded (and discredited) attitudes and practices – such as infusing paintings with wax-resin to "freeze" their condition – and traces the ramifications of such misguided attempts to reverse or still the effects of time. Conservators who have studied Old Master paintings Traas restored for The Hague's Mauritshuis note his predilection for tinted varnishes of the sort he apparently used on Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* to heighten its warm, tonal palette. The authors remark that even in Traas's day, such treatments were debated, and they note that Van Gogh's sister-in-law, Jo – who had inherited the lion's share of the artist's production – adamantly opposed varnishing any of the paintings in her possession. "I know it spoils the beautiful aspect," she wrote. "Van Gogh's technique does not agree with varnish" (Van Gogh-Bonger 1923, cited in Hendriks et al. 2019, 183).

A more significant nod to Van Gogh's broad fan base is made by the book's chapter on "The Sunflowers in perspective," co-authored by art historians Nienke Bakker and Christopher Riopelle, curators at the Van Gogh Museum and National Gallery, respectively. Although theirs is hardly the first endeavor to home in on and contextualize Van Gogh's sunflower still lifes (Bailey 2013; Dorn 1990, 1999; Van Tilborgh 2008), it is a brisk and information-packed overview of Van Gogh's engagement with a motif he first took up in 1887 in Paris and would continue to include in his post-Arles production, if only from afar (Bakker and Riopelle note the sunflowers' appearance as minor elements in Van Gogh's late landscapes).

Gauguin plays a key role in the *Sunflowers* saga Bakker and Riopelle recount. An early aficionado, Gauguin traded a scene he'd painted in Martinique

in 1887 (*At the Pond's Edge*, Van Gogh Museum) for two of the sunflower still lifes Van Gogh made in Paris that year. Doubtless with Gauguin's enthusiasm in mind, Van Gogh painted his best-known Arlesian *Sunflowers* (including the London painting) as he prepared for Gauguin's move to the south. He decorated the bedroom his friend would occupy with a suite of park views and a pair of sunflower still lifes (the one in London and its pendant, now at the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Neue Pinakothek, Munich). Gauguin was duly impressed – perhaps even taken aback – by the great strides Van Gogh had made at Arles, and as Douglas Druick and Peter Kort Zegers have noted, Gauguin soon began to rewrite the *Sunflowers*' history (Druick and Kort Zegers 2001, 242).[1] The portrait Gauguin made of *Van Gogh Painting Sunflowers* (1888, Van Gogh Museum) suggests, to the casual viewer, that Gauguin was on hand for the pictures' creation – a misrepresentation that Gauguin committed to print in his memoir, *Avant et après* (1903). There, Gauguin casts Van Gogh as a hapless amateur in the fall of 1888, "floundering" and "still trying to find his way." By his own account, Gauguin saved the day by undertaking "the task of enlightening him," and asserts, "From that day, my Van Gogh made astonishing progress . . . The result was that whole series of sunflowers upon sunflowers in full sunlight" (Druick and Kort Zegers 2001, 242).

Gauguin routinely "borrowed" from his colleagues. Both Paul Sérusier and Edgar Degas compared Gauguin to a "pirate," and his onetime mentor, Camille Pissarro, characterized Gauguin's mature work as "a sailor's art, picked up here and there," while Cézanne expressed worry that Gauguin would steal his style, and Emile Bernard was embittered that his contribution to Gauguin's abrupt stylistic shift in summer 1888 went unacknowledged (Naifeh and White Smith 2011, 659; Gayford 2006, 60; Ward 1996, 108). Van Gogh perhaps sensed early-on that his friend aimed to muscle in on his turf; Bakker and Riopelle detail the push-pull over *Sunflowers* that commenced almost as soon as Gauguin left Arles in December 1888. In early January 1889, when Gauguin wrote to suggest that Van Gogh give him the "sunflowers on a yellow ground" (i.e., the London *Sunflowers*), Van Gogh not only resisted, but felt obliged to assert ownership of the motif, telling Gauguin that "I have taken the sunflower" (Bakker and Riopelle 2019, 32). Loath to part with a painting that "grows in richness the more you look at it" (32), Van Gogh offered Gauguin two "absolutely equivalent and identical repetitions" (32) of the *Sunflowers* that hung in his room at Arles (one of these "repetitions" is the Amsterdam *Sunflowers*). Months later, as Vincent prepared to retreat to an asylum at St.-Rémy, he shipped his sunflower still lifes to Theo in Paris. He was

[1] This publication is the catalogue of an exhibition that brought together three of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and occasioned a pioneering joint technical study conducted by Kristin Hoermann Lister, Inge Fiedler, and Cornelia Peres; their findings appear as an appendix to the catalogue.

willing for two repetitions to go to Gauguin – "who has a complete infatuation with my sunflowers" – on the condition that something "better than mediocre" was offered return, as Vincent van Gogh wrote in a letter dated February 3, 1889, to his brother Theo, but the trade never occurred. When Theo died in 1891 – just months before Gauguin set off for Tahiti – the paintings passed to his widow, Jo.

But Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, if out of sight, were not out of mind. Gauguin, having grown sunflowers from seed in the South Seas, made his own, exoticized, sunflower still lifes in 1901 (two of the four are illustrated in *Van Gogh's Sunflowers illuminated*). As Bakker and Riopelle tell it, Gauguin's late-life, sunflower-centered paintings may be read as "surrogate portraits" of his late friend, Vincent, who had committed suicide more than a decade before.[2] This is not a new interpretation, as Gamboni (2014, 356) argues that Gauguin was thinking back to Van Gogh's paintings of his and Gauguin's empty chairs (*Gauguin's Chair*, Van Gogh Museum; *Vincent's Chair*, National Gallery, London) – paintings that evoke their absent owners through the chairs themselves, their surroundings, and the inanimate objects that each contains. Recently, this explication has gotten renewed play when Gauguin's sunflower still life was presented as an allusive evocation of Van Gogh in *Gauguin's Portraits*, an exhibition organized by Cornelia Homburg and seen in Ottawa and London. Charming as that read may be, it seems equally likely that Gauguin – a master of co-option and reliably more cynical than sentimental – simply saw a chance to plunder. Working at some distance from the places and period in which Van Gogh staked his claim to what critic Albert Aurier (1890) proclaimed "this other sun, this vegetal star, the sumptuous sunflower," Gauguin may well have seen fit to make the motif his own at last. If so, the attempt was in vain; this volume reminds us yet again that the sunflower is forever Van Gogh's.

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[2] Although Naifeh and White Smith (2011) have floated the notion that Van Gogh was murdered by a cowboy-crazy teenager, their preposterous theory is not grounded in any credible evidence. It is important that responsible scholars counter sensationalist fiction with the fact that Van Gogh died by his own hand.

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