

Review

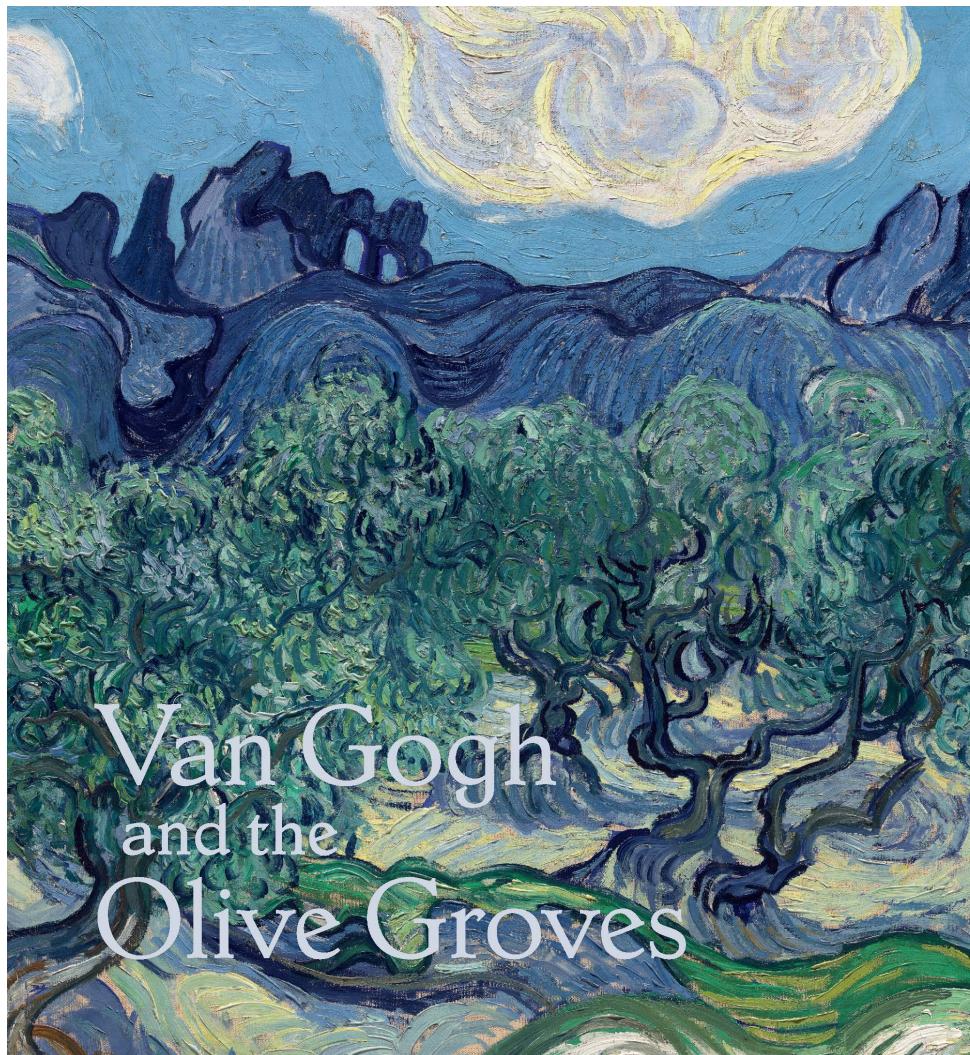
Nienke Bakker and Nicole R. Myers (eds):

Van Gogh and the olive groves

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Reviewed by Cliff Edwards



Van Gogh and the olive groves, edited by Nienke Bakker of Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum, and Nicole R. Myers of the Dallas Museum of Art, sets a high standard for future catalogues of art exhibitions and the cooperative work of museums, curators, conservators, and teams of scientists and technicians involved in such complex projects. Thankfully, the completed work is so arranged that it can easily be read and viewed on many levels: from an appreciation of Van Gogh's creative variations on the olive groves he painted while living in the Asylum at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence from June to December of 1889, to discussions of the artist's intent, to microscopic images of details of these paintings that help determine the materials used by the artist, the chemistry of the paints, and the colour changes or interventions that have occurred over time.

As the volume can be approached in many ways, according to the viewer/reader's interests, I would suggest that the general reader begin with a careful reading of the directors' foreword on pages 11 through 13 and then turn to the essay by Nicole Myers. The latter initiated the study ten years ago at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, where Mary Schafer, its paintings conservator, planted the seeds that led Myers to join forces with the Van Gogh Museum's Nienke Bakker to gather the experts and pursue the Olive Grove project. One might then choose among the five expert essays and careful scientific descriptions of issues regarding Van Gogh's materials and changes in the appearance of the paintings that have occurred with time. All featured works are in full-colour, and many cover the entire ten by eleven-inch pages. The volume concludes with several helpful aids: a checklist of the paintings in the exhibition, a six-page index, a page of technical abbreviations, and a page of copyright and illustration credits.

Five essays by Van Gogh scholars, including the project's two directors, are found on pages 19-73, immediately preceding the catalogue of the paintings of the olive grove series. An indication of the directions taken in those essays may be of special interest to potential readers: Essay One, just over four pages long, by Nienke Bakker, Senior Curator of Paintings at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, is titled "Between hope and agony: Van Gogh at the Asylum." The setting of this private clinic to which the artist admitted himself is described, his personal loneliness in a rocky landscape with mountains, wheatfields, and olive groves. The doctor described Van Gogh as suffering attacks of epilepsy and "acute mania with visual and auditory hallucinations" (20). Bakker believes the clinic's routine had "initially had a salutary effect" (20), as did his surroundings, including the olive groves, once he was allowed outside the walls. His hearing of Gauguin and Bernard's "Synthetist experiments" (21) gave freer rein to his own imagination, through crises and delusions, and word of his friend's imagined biblical scenes with olive trees led him to seek safety not in mysticism, but in nature and the past.

Essay Two by Teio Meedendorp of the Van Gogh Museum is titled “The olive groves in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence.” The essay gives a background on the history of the olive tree in Greece, southern France and beyond, describes olive production, uses of olive oil, and the harsh conditions that led to the decline of olive groves.

Essay Three is by the director, Nicole R. Myers, Interim Chief Curator and the Barbara Thomas Lemmon Senior Curator of European Art at the Dallas Museum of Art. The 16-page essay is titled “Symbolism and seriality: Van Gogh and the olive groves.” Focusing on the 15 paintings of the series of Olive Groves painted at Saint-Remy, Myers discusses the role that a series of related subjects in paintings play in the total work of Van Gogh. Olive orchards allowed the repetition of a theme and its colourful changes linking the seasons, displaying its silver foliage greening between blue sky and orange ploughed soil. Myers describes the mysterious character of olive groves that from Greco-Roman antiquity represented the Tree of Life, yet also had a key place in the Bible and provided the Gethsemane setting with an angel where sorrow and triumph were linked in the life of Jesus. Myers emphasizes the critical moment in November when Van Gogh learned that Gauguin and Bernard had painted imagination-driven images of Jesus in the Garden of Olives. Van Gogh scathingly denounces those images as straying “far from reality” (38). Myers views him turning at this point from his friends’ imaginative abstraction and adding the figures of women he has seen picking the olives in his new paintings, a “direct substitute for biblical figures” (41). Here Van Gogh has come to a summation of his exploration, a “manifesto of his artistic credo” (43). The role of art in a modern society involves living with nature and offering spiritual consolation to human beings.

Essay Four by Louis van Tilborgh of the Van Gogh Museum is titled “Van Gogh, olive trees, and his search for what turned out to be a modern pastoral.” Van Gogh’s admiration for Puvis de Chavanne opens the way to a blending of present and past, a link to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, and finally to an elegiac tone, a pastoral genre, pure faith before dogma.

Essay Five, by the team of Kathrin Pilz and Muriel Geldorf, is titled “Creating olive groves in Saint-Rémy: A comparative study of Van Gogh’s painting technique and materials.” The essay provides and explains charts on the basic sizes and composition of the olive tree paintings, the pigments identified in these paintings, and changes over time including the impact of restoration and the aging of materials.

In closing, this beautiful volume, *Van Gogh and the olive groves*, provides powerful images of an important series of Van Gogh’s paintings along with expert guidance on the pivotal place of these paintings in the artist’s quest. Further, it invites us to understand the changes the paintings have undergone over time. For

many of us, the volume opens new ways to enjoy and learn from the arts, and a new appreciation of the many whose careful labour and creative thinking make art available to us.

About the reviewer

Cliff Edwards served as Powell-Edwards Distinguished Professor of Religion and the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond (Virginia, USA) until his retirement in 2020. Born in 1932 in Southampton, New York, he earned degrees from Drew University, Garrett Theological Seminary, and the Ph.D. from Northwestern University. He studied at the University of Strasbourg in France, The University of Neuchatel in Switzerland, Oxford University in England, the Hebrew-Union School of Bible and Archaeology in Jerusalem, and Daitokuji Zen Monastery in Kyoto, Japan. As a Coolidge Fellow he spent two terms doing research at Columbia University's art libraries. Among the books he has written are *Christian being and doing* (Methodist Church, 1966), *Everything under heaven: The life and words of a nature mystic, Issa of Japan* (Virginia Commonwealth University, 1980), *Van Gogh and God* (Loyola University Press, 1989), *The shoes of Van Gogh* (Crossroad Publishing, 2004), *Mystery of The Night Café* (State University of New York Press, 2009), *Van Gogh's ghost paintings* (Cascade Books, 2015), and *Van Gogh's second gift* (Broadleaf Books, 2020).