

**EXALTING  
THE UNREMARKABLE**



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**Exalting the  
Unremarkable:  
Van Gogh's *Poet's  
Garden* and  
Gauguin's Bedroom**

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The prospect of living with someone, however passionate or platonic, is always fraught with projections, hopes, and anxieties. Innumerable border scuffles are strategized and executed—a thousand little acts in a daily art of diplomacy. Safety and security (or their ideals) are ushered in with the idea that one will share one's habitus and habitat. Comforting and dividing, cohabitation is wrapped up with our beliefs in what gets us through our days, with what makes those days possible, and with the material confines that serve as glue to sociality.

Vincent van Gogh, in a period of ambition and hope, aspired to an ideal cohabitation that would involve not just life but work and art. His idea for a "Studio of the South" was both a commercial and a utopian endeavor, and he transformed his rental of a small house into a plan in which a new mode of painting would be cultivated and a brotherhood of painters nurtured. While others were considered, it was the older painter Paul Gauguin who became, in Van Gogh's mind, an essential cornerstone of the project. The two, together, would form the studio and live and work in concord.

At least, this was Van Gogh's hope in the months leading up to Gauguin's arrival. In May 1888, he signed a lease for a small, two-story residence (fig. 1) on the place Lamartine in the southern town of Arles, where he had been living for some months. It would be four months until he could move in. He was waiting for gas lighting to be installed, and, more importantly, he needed to acquire furniture. As he planned, Van Gogh wrote to Gauguin in Brittany, inviting him to the South. Gauguin would not arrive until the third week in October 1888, and Van Gogh spent the time leading up to his arrival painting the house, slowly purchasing some meager furnishings, and—crucially—decorating the interior. Van Gogh hung prints and filled the walls with his paintings made in anticipation of Gauguin's appearance.

This essay will focus on one of the major works done at this time—the painting that has come to be known as *The Poet's Garden* (plate 15), completed in mid-September 1888, in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>1</sup> Intended for Gauguin's bedroom, this painting can be understood to distill some of Van Gogh's hopes for the Studio of the South. After creating it, Van Gogh altered his initial plans for Gauguin's chamber, shifting to a new scheme in which *The Poet's Garden* would be joined by three additional paintings of the same subject sharing the same title.<sup>2</sup> As I will discuss, however, with this first work Van Gogh made a case—through the materiality and application of paint—for what art should do. *The Poet's Garden* is properly understood as a sort of manifesto, one that came to be directed at his confrère and imminent cohabitant.

*The Poet's Garden* was begun at a crucial point in the painter's preparations, after he had given much thought to what would be on the walls. During the four months of waiting, he undertook a suite of paintings that would key to various aspects of the interior. He aligned his work on the house with the practice of *décoration* that occupied many late nineteenth-century artists and critics.<sup>3</sup> A *décoration* involved a unity of ornamentation, art, furnishings, and design coordinated under an organizing principle. This integration of art and design was understood as a manifestation of the persona of the artist and, furthermore, as a vehicle for artistic innovation. Van Gogh, in dreaming of his Studio of the South, planned his *décoration* with Gauguin as its primary audience.<sup>4</sup>

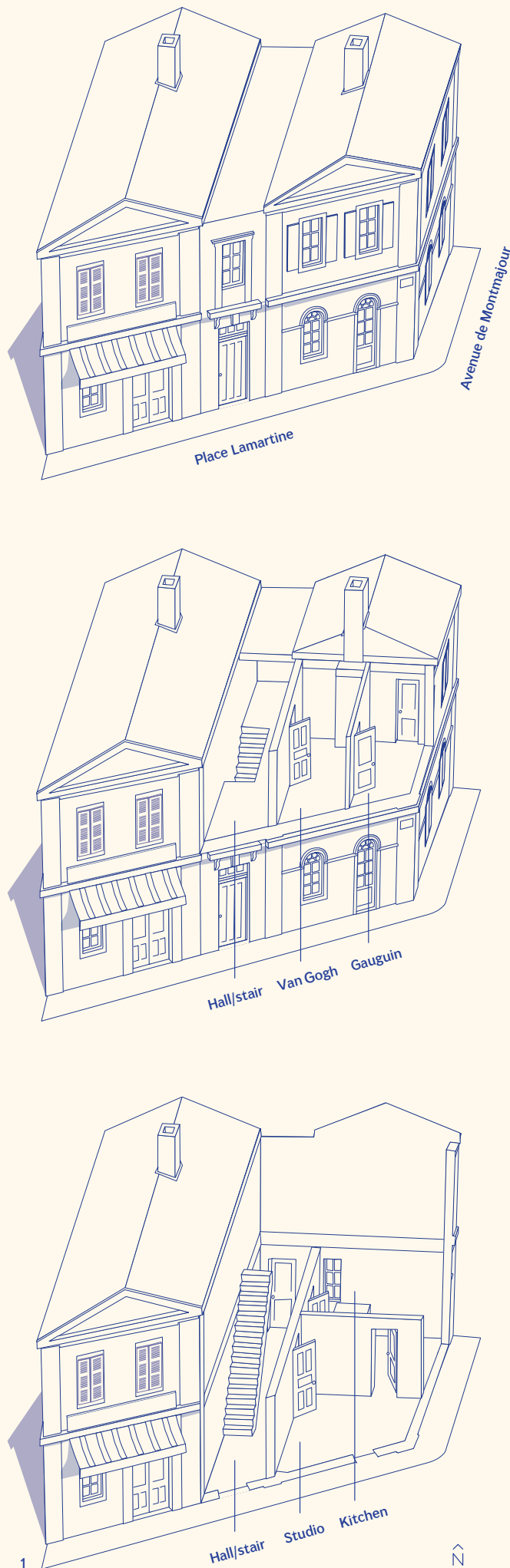
In August 1888, after Gauguin declared his willingness to come to Arles, Van Gogh's initial plan for the *décoration* began to take shape. The impending move spurred his enthusiasm, and he started creating large, size 30 canvases, all intended to be placed on the newly white-washed walls of the Yellow House. There was, however, some ambiguity in Gauguin's acceptance of Van Gogh's invitation, and an actual move date was left unspecified. In the days just prior to painting the Art Institute canvas, Van Gogh had written to Gauguin, pressing him on an arrival date.<sup>5</sup> It was this intense anticipation, mixed with doubt about whether Gauguin would actually come, that pushed Van Gogh in September to make some of his most ambitious and polemical paintings, such as *The Night Café* (fig. 2) and its initial chromatic inversion and daytime counterpart, *The Poet's Garden*.

**Arriving at *The Poet's Garden*:  
Van Gogh's Changing Plans**

Of particular concern was the upper floor's adjoining second bedroom, which Van Gogh hoped would be Gauguin's. Believing Gauguin to require more comfort than he did, Van Gogh gave much attention to this well-lit corner room. He wrote to his brother Theo, "There'll be the prettiest room upstairs, which I'll try to make as nice as possible, like a woman's boudoir, really artistic."<sup>6</sup> He had come up with a scheme to achieve this and had earlier written, "In the hope of living in a studio of our own with Gauguin, I'd like to do a decoration for the studio. *Nothing but large Sunflowers*. . . . The whole thing will be a symphony in blue and yellow."<sup>7</sup> In the initial plan, executed in late August, sunflower paintings (see figs. 3–4) were intended for many rooms of the house. Highly symbolic for the artist, the sunflower also reinforced the theme of the southern sun, making the interior evocative of this trait of the region that he so prized. Beyond this and other meanings, however, his reliance on the motif—he had originally envisioned between "half a dozen" and a dozen sunflower



Fig. 1 Top, three-dimensional view of the Yellow House. Middle, section view of the second floor. Bottom, section view of the first floor. From Druick and Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, p. 159.



paintings, of which he actually realized four— indicates that any individual symbolism the painting might have had singly was mitigated (by their planned repetition) in favor of their contribution to the overall *décoration*.<sup>8</sup> In particular, sunflower paintings were to fill the walls of Gauguin's bedroom.<sup>9</sup> Their number was reduced, however, after Van Gogh created *The Poet's Garden* series.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the autumn, he made these and other additions to the *décoration* of the house as a whole, including a selection of Japanese prints; lithographs by Honoré Daumier, Eugène Delacroix, and Théodore Géricault (all sent by Theo); and a group of portraits, some of which Van Gogh would eventually hang in his own room.

Before creating the first *Poet's Garden* canvas, the artist had been making paintings of the Yellow House and its surroundings. He had already done a major painting of the interior of a bar in town, *The Night Café*, over a few evenings in the first week of September. In the days immediately following, he shifted to a morning scene that would be its counterpart— *The Poet's Garden*.<sup>11</sup> The sun-drenched daytime garden inverted the intensified nighttime scene of the café with its plunging perspective and exaggerated colors. He wrote soon after finishing the café painting that he had “tried to express the terrible human passions with the red and the green.”<sup>12</sup> It was both the emotional tenor of *The Night Café* and its jarring use of complementary colors that Van Gogh reversed in *The Poet's Garden*, which is calm and quiet with its harmonious chromatic scheme and its idyllic scene. Such pairings of paintings in which the second would invert or comment on the first were central to how Van Gogh's plans for the *décoration* evolved. As Roland Dorn has discussed, this process allowed not only recombinations but also connections across works—wherever they ultimately were hung in the house.<sup>13</sup> This is the case with *The Poet's Garden*, which soon left its pairing with *The Night Café* behind as it became the foundation for the new plan for Gauguin's bedroom. This was among the last paintings the artist made before moving into the Yellow House.<sup>14</sup>

Excited by *The Poet's Garden*, Van Gogh made a new pendant for it a little over a week later.<sup>15</sup> It was a painting with a “round cedar or cypress bush” in the foreground and “a line of [oleander] bushes in the background.” The painting (now lost) included two couples walking in the distance: a pair of women with parasols and an opposite-sex couple. This work is only known through two sketches in letters (see fig. 5).<sup>16</sup> In October he created another pair of paintings that, like the second canvas, include a male-female couple walking in the park—the *Public Garden with Couple and Blue Fir Tree: The Poet's Garden III* (fig. 6) and *Row of Cypresses with a Couple Strolling* (fig. 7). Together, these form a four-part

cycle leading from the unpopulated early morning of the Art Institute canvas to the subsequent stages of the day, signaled by the increasing prominence of the two figures. He had painted the gardens before, but it was the Art Institute canvas that consolidated Van Gogh's belief that he should use the place Lamartine as part of the *décoration*.

### Rendezvous in the Garden, Past and Present

In his letters, the artist explained his enthusiasm for making these new paintings by invoking the Renaissance. Since deciding to settle in Arles, he had attempted to justify to himself and others (such as Theo) exactly

the July/August 1888 issue of the *Revue des deux mondes*.<sup>18</sup> The piece discussed the conversations and correspondence of figures in the poet's literary and artistic milieu, such as Petrarch, Dante, and Giotto. Reading the accounts of Petrarch and Boccaccio's exchanges sparked Van Gogh's idea to layer onto his series of paintings a reference to the garden in which the poets purportedly conversed. Given the July 15 publication date of the *Revue* essay, it is likely that his engagement with the article only preceded the painting by a fairly short period (a few weeks to a month or so). Overall, the exact sequence of events cannot be fully determined, as Van Gogh did not mention the publication until a September 18 letter to Theo.<sup>19</sup>

Fig. 2 Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). *The Night Café*, 1888. Oil on canvas; 72.4 × 92.1 cm (28 1/2 × 36 1/4 in.). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, 1961.18.34. F463, JH1575



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why he had chosen this small city. He associated the region with both Japan and the Netherlands, hoping that southern France would facilitate analogous approaches to light, perspective, and composition. Beyond these geographic associations, Van Gogh also looked back to the region's history and the poets with whom he associated it, such as Boccaccio (who had lived in Avignon and wrote about Arles). In June 1888, he wrote to the painter John Peter Russell of his intent to explain to him "something about Arles as it is—and as it was in the old days of Boccaccio."<sup>17</sup>

Some weeks into his stay in this new city, Van Gogh read an article on Boccaccio in

Whatever the sequence may have been, the connection to the garden seems to have been activated by the presence of particular plants that Van Gogh observed in the place Lamartine. A few days after he had completed the Art Institute canvas, he wrote to Theo:

*I have such luck with the house—with work—that I even dare believe that blessings won't come singly, but that you'll share them for your part, and have good luck too. Some time ago I read an article on Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Giotto, Botticelli; my God, what an impression that made on me, reading those people's letters! Now Petrarch was just near here, in Avignon, and I see the same cypresses and oleanders.*



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Fig. 3 Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). *Sunflowers*, 1888. Oil on canvas; 92.1 × 73 cm (36 1/4 × 28 3/4 in.). The National Gallery, London. Bought, Courtauld Fund, 1924. F454, JH1562

*I've tried to put something of that into one of the gardens, painted with thick impasto, lemon yellow and lemon green. Giotto touched me the most—always suffering and always full of kindness and ardor as if he were already living in a world other than this.*<sup>20</sup>

The plants were the main source of Van Gogh's enthusiasm, and they spurred further associations. In the same letter, he wrote, "My dear Theo, when you've seen the cypresses, the oleanders, the sun down here—and that day will come, don't worry—you'll think even more often of beautiful works by Puvis de Chavannes."<sup>21</sup> Coming on the heels of the association with Boccaccio, the reference to Puvis also hinged on the cypresses and oleanders. Rather than limiting himself to a single symbolic program for his series of garden paintings, Van Gogh layered and multiplied its meanings in his delight that this garden was across from the house that he had just moved into.

The intensity of these weeks in mid-September must be kept in mind when looking at *The Poet's Garden* series. While it is not directly iconographic or symbolic of the time of Petrarch and Boccaccio, it is infused with the artist's anticipation of new beginnings and the establishment of new traditions promised by the arrival of his housemate. It is for this reason that the innovations of the Renaissance came to Van Gogh's mind as he set to work on paintings intended for the space that would house the artists' fraternity for which he so fervently yearned. The letters of the poets that he read in the *Revue des deux mondes* article reinforced his hopes for an ideal community, and the garden came to be the imagined stage for this aspiration. As he would write to Gauguin several weeks later, "These parts of the world have already seen both the cult of Venus—essentially artistic in Greece—and the poets and artists of the Renaissance. Where these things have been able to flower, Impressionism can do so too."<sup>22</sup>

As the first painting of the series, the Art Institute canvas, especially, was tied up with the artist's conception of the garden outside the Yellow House as fertile ground for a new renaissance of painting, as he described in his letter to Gauguin:

*The unremarkable public garden contains plants and bushes that make one dream of landscapes in which one may readily picture to oneself Botticelli, Giotto, Petrarch, Dante and Boccaccio. In the décoration I've tried to tease out the essence of what constitutes the changeless character of the region.*<sup>23</sup>

Van Gogh was again making a case to Gauguin for why his impending move to Arles was a good one. Just at the time when his Studio of the South was about to become a reality, Van Gogh recalled (and probably reread) the

article that discussed artistic collaboration and tied it to Petrarch's presence in the region. In that same letter of October 3, he wrote to Gauguin about the region's ties to "the old poet from here (or rather from Avignon), Petrarch, and at the same time the new poet living here—Paul Gauguin."<sup>24</sup> Thinking of the ways in which the younger Boccaccio turned to the older Petrarch for counsel, Van Gogh signaled (perhaps too obsequiously) the importance of Gauguin's arrival. This same letter is also the first reference to the series as *The Poet's Garden*; he also wrote to the artist Émile Bernard the same day using a very similar phrase.<sup>25</sup> This title, in other words, seems to have come to retroactively describe the first painting in the series.

In addition, the association with the poetry of Petrarch and Boccaccio has led some to interpret *The Poet's Garden* series as being about poetry's concern with the thematics of love.<sup>26</sup> The increasing prominence and seclusion of the strolling couples, keyed to the progress of the day, would seem to indicate that this theme structured the series. However, it is important to note that these are not necessarily the same couples, as there are clear differences in their clothes in each painting. Since Van Gogh prized working from observation, this multiplicity of pairings could be a subtle reference to (or merely the effect of) the nearby brothels, of which he was well aware and that also informed his understanding of the place Lamartine. A few days after finishing the Art Institute canvas, the artist wrote to Bernard about coming to Arles and the possibility of painting in the brothels.<sup>27</sup> Van Gogh's cognizance of their proximity to the Yellow House and the garden is repeatedly evident. He told Theo about the place, using the euphemism "good little ladies" (*bonnes petites femmes*):

*But what scenery! It's a public garden where I am, just near the street of the good little ladies [...] But you'll understand that it's precisely that which gives a je ne sais quoi of Boccaccio to the place. That side of the garden is also, for the same reason of chastity or morality, empty of flowering shrubs such as the oleander. It's ordinary plane trees, pines in tall clumps, a weeping tree and green grass. But it has such intimacy! There are gardens like that by Monet.*<sup>28</sup>

The second pair of paintings (figs. 6–7) that makes up the series depicts the couples alone on the side of the gardens with the coniferous trees. This landscaping, Van Gogh insinuated, avoided those trees and shrubs that could have provided cover for sexual encounters. Combined with the fact of the differing clothes, it becomes clear that there is not a unified or singular theme of love organizing the series. It seems, rather, to replay a recurring problem in Van Gogh's practice—how to balance a desire

Fig. 4 Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). *Sunflowers*, 1888. Oil on canvas; 92 × 73 cm (36 1/4 × 28 3/4 in.). Neue Pinakothek, Munich, 1912 Tschudi Contribution, inv. no. 8672. F456, JH1561

Fig. 5 Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). *The Public Garden* (“*The Poet’s Garden*”), Sept. 26, 1888. Pen and ink on paper; 13.5 × 17 cm (5 5/16 × 6 11/16 in.). Private collection. F1465, JH1583

for symbolic complexity and a belief in painting based on observation, not invention. Both the open spaces of the garden’s landscape and the presence of couples can thus be seen to derive from the site that the artist chose.

### Materializing Vision

Identifying Van Gogh’s associations with the garden, however, does not foreclose or fully explain the meanings of these paintings.<sup>29</sup> One must be cautious about leaning too heavily on the title and on Van Gogh’s associations of the series with the Renaissance. None of the four works, for instance, has any direct iconographic relationship to these contexts, and a discussion of topics such as Van Gogh’s casting of Gauguin as Petrarch offers relatively little help in an analysis of the paintings themselves.<sup>30</sup> This is especially the case with regard to the first in the series. Van Gogh’s excitement about *his* garden was driven by the ways he could deploy it, rhetorically, as an indication of the value of Arles, but the paintings are, more importantly, about the observation and transformation of what he could see if he crossed the street outside the front door of his new house and—more importantly—what he could see from the second bedroom’s windows.

The choice to hinge the *décoration* of Gauguin’s bedroom on this series is underwritten by this relation of proximity. Each day, Gauguin would wake to see both Van Gogh’s painting of the morning garden and the windows that faced out onto the garden itself. As Van Gogh wrote to his sister Willemien, the bedrooms “look out on a very pretty public garden, and where you can see the sunrise in the morning.”<sup>31</sup> It was this opportunity to have Gauguin compare the actual garden with his own painting that fueled Van Gogh’s decision to make this work the grounds for a new plan. It became crucial to the message he was sending Gauguin about his own priorities with regard to working from observation in contrast to Gauguin’s emphasis on imagination and invention. Whereas he told his sister that the garden was “very pretty,” it is important to remember that he had described it to Gauguin as “unremarkable,” setting up the contrast between his own painting’s intensification and its prototype outside the window.<sup>32</sup>

The first *Poet’s Garden* (plate 15) canvas did transform and amplify what could be seen in the public gardens. It depicts an expanse of grass studded with wildflowers and hedged in by trees and bushes, offering a view of the setting “under a pale yellow lemon sky.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the colors of the sky are intense, and they echo tones used throughout the foreground, with its range of greens. The composition is divided into demarcated zones, with the foreground’s spread of grass leading to the middle ground’s smaller area, bound by the round bush on the left and the weeping

tree on the right with the oleander at the direct center. Beyond that, a row of trees begins to dissolve into an almost aerial perspective as the dark greens give way to lighter oranges and browns. These trees are overtaken by the yellow sky, thick with impasto. On the far left, a blue steeple over the tree line picks up the light blue of the flowers dotted across the grass.

In its organization, *The Poet’s Garden* follows the structure of most landscape paintings, in which an expanse of space and its visual recession moves from foreground to background. By convention, such works are sectioned into proportional horizontal bands in which the lowermost represents the most proximate space to the viewer’s/painter’s perspective. Following the image’s depiction of space, one moves upward along the canvas’s horizontal bands from foreground to middle ground to background (often rendered as sky). Most paintings of landscape follow this structure, in which the viewer’s gaze is directed to move vertically up the painting as it engages with the illusion of spatial recession extended behind the picture plane. In *The Poet’s Garden*, the relationship between the image created by the pictorial array and the flat material object’s division into horizontal zones is an active one. Beyond the construction of an image of landscape, the move upward along the horizontal bands of the painting’s surface also brings with it an increase in the literal depth of the paint’s impasto. The flat picture of the garden’s receding expanse, in other words, is interpenetrated with a literal projection of materiality out from that surface that grows as one’s eyes track upward along the painting’s surface to focus on the representation of sky.

In the band that represents the grass nearest to the position of the painter or viewer, the handling is light and the paint thin. Patterns of grass are visually generalized through the use of vertical brushstrokes with almost no literal depth. The vertical orientation of the brushstrokes continues until the tree line well into the middle ground, but they become more pronounced, thicker, and more varied when the forms of trees or bushes are outlined and demarcated. The weeping tree at right, for instance, has strong outlines and passages of short, broken brushstrokes throughout the dark green of the drooping branches, their weight reinforced by the dark values of the shaded lower foliage. By contrast, the bush to the left seems to emit energy through the use of thicker brushstrokes organized in a radial pattern. The progressive thickening of the brushstrokes continues to the tree line, where the predominantly vertical pattern gives way to a multidirectional one. The uppermost reaches of the tree line begin to meld into the yellow sky. That sky, however, returns to regularity with the use of emphatic horizontal brushstrokes applied thickly.

Fig. 6 Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). *Public Garden with Couple and Blue Fir Tree: The Poet’s Garden III*, 1888. Oil on canvas; 73 × 92 cm (28 3/4 × 36 1/4 in.). Private collection. F479, JH1601

Fig. 7 Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). *Row of Cypresses with a Couple Strolling*, c. Oct. 21, 1888. Oil on canvas; 75 × 92 cm (29 1/2 × 36 1/4 in.). Location unknown (Nationalgalerie, Berlin, until 1937). F485, JH1615





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As noted in the conservation report on this painting, X-ray examination reveals how much this spatial organization was structured into the composition as a whole (see fig. 8).<sup>34</sup> The space around the two middle-ground trees has been carefully plotted out. Their dark outlines indicate thin areas in the paint surface, probably from holding the space for the trees in reserve when the first layer of foreground was painted. This planning is further indicated by vertical paint strokes at regular intervals along the bottom edge that are evident to the naked eye when the picture is unframed. They operate like and resemble a ruler's measured divisions, and their presence reinforces the emphasis on verticality that characterizes the lowermost band of the landscape painting and its depiction of the grass.



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Overall, Van Gogh established a syntax in his use of vertical, diagonal, and horizontal regular brushstrokes. The strong distinction between the verticality that characterizes the nearby grass and the horizontality with which he painted the heavily impastoed sky is important in thinking through the effects of materiality in *The Poet's Garden*. It is the immediate foreground that could be seen most closely and most directly, and it was here that Van Gogh gave an indication of empirical measurement. The grass, after all, was underfoot. It could be seen, touched, and inspected. The painting, however, orchestrates a series of contrasts between the canvas's lowermost and uppermost bands. The vertical brushstrokes of the lower, foreground section are thinly applied, bleeding one into the next.

The horizontal brushstrokes of the background sky, on the other hand, are prominent, visible, and individualized. This was intentional on Van Gogh's part. He described the painting to Theo, writing, "There's a lemon-coloured sky above it all, and then the colours have the richness and intensities of autumn. Then it's done in much heavier impasto, plain and thick" (see fig. 9).<sup>35</sup> The medium-thick impasto of the trees was painted directly onto the ground layer, but the sky was underpainted with a thin layer of pale yellow that Van Gogh almost entirely covered over with a layer of the yellow, thick, horizontal strokes.<sup>36</sup> Unlike the still visible bright-green underlayer of the foreground and its scattering of thin, almost watery strokes, the sky's paint is piled up as part of Van Gogh's efforts to achieve both chromatic brightness and articulated material density. It would be unmistakable as paint—"plain and thick."

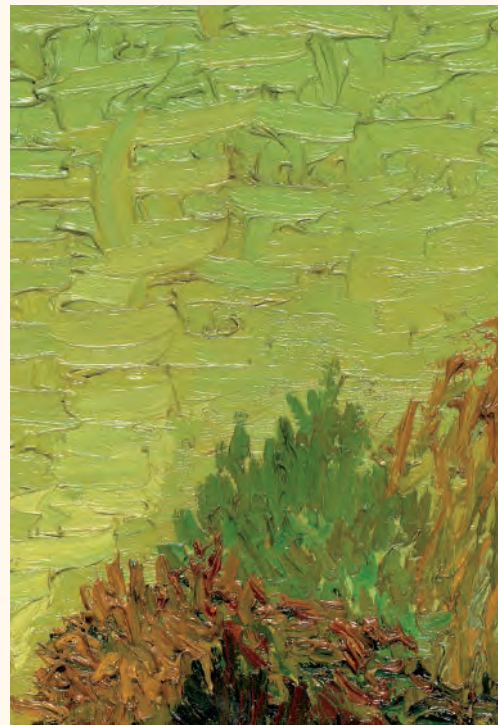
The syntax of the paint's thickness and directionality encourages the viewer to recognize that both the pictorial image and its material substance are in dialogue with each other. The experience of looking *into* the represented space (and following the bands from near to far, bottom to top, thin to thick) is an experience of tracking the increasing pictorial recession while simultaneously encountering the accumulating material presence of paint as one looks into the represented distance. As a result, the sky—which is not a thing and in its immensity cannot be touched, measured, or even outlined—has in Van Gogh's painting a real, impasto-heavy, physical thickness, which incites an almost tactile response.

This performance of paint's materiality in *The Poet's Garden* was Van Gogh's message to Gauguin. In his enthusiasm for what the Studio of the South could do, he wanted to make this canvas for Gauguin's bedroom as a reminder of painting's ability to transform and deepen the experience of the observable world. It is the ineffable and the immaterial—sky itself—that the work makes most tangible. The riotous yellows of the sky, in contrast to the thinness of the nearer grass, appear *more present* in their literal, material depth. This is an image of the painter's work of amplification, with Van Gogh showing how the aim is to make material that is beyond our quotidian grasp. That is, the artist made a case for observation but also showed how it is the painter's task to transform and intensify it. Here he did so by making the thick and tactile sky call attention to itself in contrast to the thin grass underfoot. In short, *The Poet's Garden* was for Van Gogh a statement about the painter's *vision*, which he claimed should be founded on observation and transformation.

This was, as discussed below, an ongoing concern in Van Gogh's ambitions. Within days of making *The Poet's Garden*, he would destroy for the second time his attempt to paint

Fig. 9 Detail of the top left of *The Poet's Garden* (plate 15) showing the horizontal impasto of the sky. The Art Institute of Chicago, 1933.433.

Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. He explained to Theo that he could not paint it if it was not based on observation: "Because here I see real olive trees."<sup>37</sup> He later wrote to Bernard about this failed work, "I mercilessly destroyed an important canvas—a Christ with the angel in Gethsemane—as well as another one depicting the poet with a starry sky—because the form hadn't been studied from the model beforehand, necessary in such cases—despite the fact that the colour was right."<sup>38</sup> The artist believed in working from and being inspired by the direct observation of nature. He did, however, amplify and alter those observations, and he even wrote to Theo about how he edited out some of the small bushes in *The Poet's Garden* in order to increase the painting's clarity. He continued to couch



this as a form of accuracy to the observed site and its character: "Now it's true that I've left out some trees, but what I've kept in the composition is really like that. . . . Now that's the garden that's right in front of my house, after all. But this corner of a garden is a good example of what I was telling you, that to find the real character of things here, you have to look at them and paint them for a very long time."<sup>39</sup>

Intensely looking outward at nature rather than inward at imagination, Van Gogh argued, was how painters could make their works most vital and expressive. This, he knew, was a main source of contention with Gauguin, who argued that painters should work from invention and imagination. Van Gogh capitalized upon *The Poet's Garden's* exaltation of

that "unremarkable" public garden to make an anticipatory response to Gauguin.

Van Gogh had both the Art Institute's *Poet's Garden* and its pendant framed in walnut—the material out of which Gauguin's bed and elaborate chair were made.<sup>40</sup> Its use for all of these furnishings not only contributed to unifying the *décoration* but also communicated to Gauguin that *The Poet's Garden* was intended specifically for him. Writing to Theo just after the completion of the fourth painting in the series and just days before Gauguin's arrival, Van Gogh summarized how much he was addressing these works to Gauguin as a means to initiate their dialogue about painting:

*I nevertheless pressed ahead as far as I could with what I had on the go, in a strong desire to be able to show him something new. And not to fall under his influence (because of course he'll have an influence on me, I hope) before being able to show him beyond any doubt my own originality. He'll see that anyway from the décoration as it is now.*<sup>41</sup>

These were the emotions and aspirations that were tied up with the series from the first. Van Gogh's anticipation combined both hope for synergistic collaboration and fear of losing his own voice.<sup>42</sup>

Over the course of the nine weeks of Gauguin's cohabitation with Van Gogh, the two engaged in intense—and increasingly contentious—dialogues about the priorities and future of modern painting. *The Poet's Garden* was but the initial move in a contest that evolved from collaborative to agonistic. As happens with intense expectation, reality often does not live up to hopes and dreams.

### Apart Together: Van Gogh and Gauguin at Home

It is important to remember that the Yellow House was no ideal space for living or for art. The ground-floor studio, while of a somewhat good size, was shared by the two painters. More intimately, the two small bedrooms on the upper floor were adjoining, so that Gauguin had to daily (and nightly) pass through Van Gogh's bedroom to get to his own. Especially given their different nightlife proclivities, this would have meant recurring negotiations about living space. Van Gogh's anxieties about social interaction were fueled by his observation of Gauguin's activities and a degree of jealousy about them. He wrote to his brother that the French painter was "particularly intrigued" by the women of Arles and, later, that he "has some success with the Arlésiennes."<sup>43</sup> Van Gogh, by contrast, had often stated that sexual activity distracted from the artist's task.<sup>44</sup> With this in mind, Gauguin's nocturnal departures would have been met with Van Gogh's disapproval as

Fig. 10 Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). *Woman Reading a Novel*, Nov. 1888. Oil on canvas; 73 × 92.1 cm (28<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 36<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.). Private collection. F497, JH1632

well as worry that his friend's time away from him also weakened their joint project.<sup>45</sup>

For Gauguin's part, he arrived at his new home to find it completely decorated (somewhat obsessively so) with Van Gogh's own canvases and prints by artists he admired. Van Gogh even came to include a painting of his own bedroom among the works in the house's *décoration* (plate 20).<sup>46</sup> In this way, *The Bedroom* reiterated the message that painting, according to Van Gogh, should focus on what could be observed directly. The strong-willed Gauguin was met with his new housemate's urging everywhere he looked. From this perspective, works like *The Poet's Garden* and *The Bedroom* were not just arguments about painting but were also evidence of Van Gogh's suffocating enthusiasm.

Surrounded by Van Gogh's canvases and having to endure his pleading yet judging attention every night when he came home to

Fig. 11 Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). *Memory of the Garden at Etten (Ladies at Arles)*, 1888. Oil on canvas; 73.5 × 92.5 cm (28<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 36<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.). State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. F496, JH1630

Fig. 12 Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903). *Arlésiennes (Mistral)*, 1888. Oil on jute; 73 × 92 cm (28<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 36<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Larned Coburn Memorial Collection, 1934.391.



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his own bedroom, Gauguin became increasingly dissatisfied with the arrangement. He talked of establishing a “studio of the tropics” that would be more in line with his own ambitions. Van Gogh began to see his own lofty anticipations—the ones that had infused *The Poet's Garden*—turn from hope to precariousness. Again, he looked to painting as a means to engage Gauguin in a dialogue, and a tipping point in their relationship can be located in the two pictures of chairs (plates 23–24) from the Yellow House that he executed rapidly in the middle of November, about a month after Gauguin's arrival.<sup>47</sup> While *The Poet's Garden* series distilled Van Gogh's anticipatory aims into the *décoration* of the home, these paintings drew on the lived reality of its furnishings to give voice to his growing awareness of the profound differences between himself and Gauguin.

He painted Gauguin's chair (plate 24) against a background of green and red, resting

Gauguin's use of these antagonistic hues. The horizontal line created by the join of the floor and the wall creates a stark bilateral division, flattening out the space and offering little sense of perspective or depth. This, too, evoked some of Gauguin's methods and the ways in which he replaced spatial recession with flat, mostly unmodulated fields of contrasting color. Van Gogh overlaid the bottom half of this division with reflections from a gaslight on the wall, spreading yellow glimmers across the red floor tiles.

Van Gogh set both chairs in the ground-floor studio in which the two artists worked. The red tiles can be seen in both pictures, but Van Gogh's painting of his own chair (plate 23) departs significantly from the other work in its color and depiction of space. He placed it against a daylight blue wall instead of a night-time green wall, and diagonals dominate. Whereas the other image emphasizes flatness, this one showcases the ways in which he could amplify perspective (as in *The Bedroom*). The colors are far more harmonious, and Van Gogh's signature yellow gives both solidity and lightness to the chair. Van Gogh painted Gauguin's chair after dark, perhaps when the other painter was out at the local café; his own enjoys a flood of natural light.

Van Gogh's chair is one of twelve he had purchased in September.<sup>48</sup> Rush-bottomed and without arms, it evokes both simplicity and traditions of rural craft. With its curving lines, Gauguin's chair was the most intricate in the house, and it had been acquired specifically for the guest bedroom. On it sits a candle and books, indicating Van Gogh's continued faith in Gauguin as a source of inspiration. His own chair, however, holds a pipe and tobacco. Behind it is a box bearing his signature and containing onions. While these attributes would seem to show the artist's continued self-subordination to the example of Gauguin, the different ways of using color and space are also an assertion of his own artistic independence. Much like *The Poet's Garden*, Van Gogh placed emphasis on the painter's amplification and enhancement of the observable, quotidian world. These two chairs became a substitute portrait and self-portrait that, together, showed Van Gogh's ability to emulate Gauguin's practice while also keeping to his initial ambition to work from observation of all that surrounded them in the Yellow House and its environs.<sup>49</sup>

*The Poet's Garden*, *The Bedroom*, and the two chair paintings all take the exaltation of the unremarkable as their starting point. Van Gogh placed an emphasis on the amplification of observed reality, whereas Gauguin sought to introduce imagination and new imagery, likening his role as artist to that of prophet, able to see the unseen.<sup>50</sup> In *The Poet's Garden*, Van Gogh retained the

traditional structure of landscape painting and maintained the importance of observation. Nevertheless, he transformed what he observed, stressing the *importance of paint itself* to make the “unremarkable garden” into something remarkable. Each day, Gauguin would wake to Van Gogh’s painting, more vivid than the actual garden just outside the window. Just as the Studio of the South was becoming a reality, Van Gogh chose to make a case for the importance of observation as a means of achieving evocative and symbolic content. He wanted to keep his work rooted in reality, and he made the polemical move of showing Gauguin how the painting of the world outside could both resemble and exalt that which could be seen. But, as John House noted, “The paradox is, of course, that at this moment Gauguin was looking in quite the opposite direction for the roots of inspiration—not outwards to nature, but inwards to his own vision.”<sup>51</sup>

Van Gogh did attempt to learn from Gauguin, and he wrote to his sister that Gauguin encouraged him “to work purely from the imagination.”<sup>52</sup> Under Gauguin’s influence, he explained, he tried to paint from memory (rather than direct observation), resulting in *Woman Reading a Novel* (fig. 10) and *Memory of the Garden at Etten (Ladies at Arles)* (fig. 11). The *Memory of the Garden at Etten* looked back to *The Poet’s Garden*, using the place Lamartine as its setting. In that same letter he continued, “There you are, I know it isn’t perhaps much of a resemblance, but for me it conveys the poetic character and style of the garden as I feel them.” Emphasizing the dialogue with *The Poet’s Garden*, he also told Willemien that he intended to hang this new painting in his own bedroom. Following this experiment, however, the artist returned to his commitment to observation, however amplified and intensified it became.<sup>53</sup> As has been argued, Gauguin recognized the ways in which these two garden paintings were directed at him. He responded to both with *Arlésiennes (Mistral)* in mid-December 1888 (fig. 12), in which he more boldly redefined pictorial space, flattening out the stages of receding depth that structured Van Gogh’s canvases. In that painting, he not only remade the scene from Van Gogh’s *Memory* but also quoted—and anthropomorphized as a self-portrait—the bush from *The Poet’s Garden*.<sup>54</sup>

Van Gogh already knew that he and Gauguin had differences before his friend arrived, and his anticipation of cohabitation led him to make a painting to stake out a position for himself. The preparations for the Yellow House were interwoven with hope and anxiety for Van Gogh, and just as moving into it became a reality, he made a manifesto in paint about how the observable world could be an endless resource for the painter without, however, leading to pure imagination and fabrication.



11



12

Van Gogh would reiterate this aim in one of the next major works he created after his intense period of working outdoors on the paintings of the garden of the place Lamartine—his *Bedroom*. Also intended as part of the *décoration* of the house, *The Bedroom* similarly amplified the experience of observation and set up a comparison between that which could be immediately seen and the painting that transformed it. He wrote coyly to Gauguin about this painting, saying that “it amused me enormously doing this bare interior.”<sup>55</sup> But Van Gogh knew that—like the garden across the street—Gauguin would, in his daily life in the Yellow House, be confronted again and again by the comparison between the painting and what it depicted. He had walked through that bedroom every day on the way to his own, after all.

The significance of *The Poet's Garden* for this moment in Van Gogh's history has not been fully acknowledged previously, and it has often

been overshadowed by other paintings that seem to dramatize the psychological complexity that has come to be associated with his work. That is, paintings like *The Night Café* and *The Bedroom* are receptive to readings that emphasize the painter's emotions and anxieties, and they have made the landscape of *The Poet's Garden* seem, to many, to be less revealing by comparison. Added to this has been the tendency to see all of the *Poet's Garden* paintings as a single endeavor. The initial painting in the series, I contend, is worthy of attention precisely because it evinces such a concerted effort by Van Gogh. It does this intentionally, with evidence not of anxiety but of conviction. This conviction, however, had its primary manifestation neither in subject matter nor in form but rather in the orchestration of paint's materiality.

I would like to thank Gloria Groom for encouraging me to write this essay and Kristin Hoermann Lister for her insights. My research assistant from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's graduate program, Maggie Carrigan, was exemplary and contributed to the research for this essay. In the following notes, the artist and his brother are referred to as Van Gogh and Theo, respectively. The abbreviation *Letters*, followed by a number, refers to a specific letter in *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker (Van Gogh Museum/Huygens ING, 2009), <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/>.

1. The date is confirmed in a letter from Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 16, 1888, *Letters*, 681.

2. There are paintings of the gardens at the place Lamartine that precede and follow the tightly linked series of four works that Van Gogh intended for the second bedroom and that have been grouped accordingly under his title *The Poet's Garden*.

3. A key source for Van Gogh was Bracquemond, *Du dessin et de la couleur*.

4. See Van Uiter, “Vincent van Gogh in Anticipation of Paul Gauguin”; and the extensive discussions in Druick and Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*; Dorn, “Vincent van Gogh and the Concept of *Décoration*”; and Dorn, *Décoration*.

5. Van Gogh to Theo, on or about Sept. 11, 1888, *Letters*, 680.

6. Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 9, 1888, *Letters*, 677.

7. Van Gogh to Theo, Aug. 21 or 22, 1888, *Letters*, 666. Emphasis in the original.

8. See Van Gogh to Émile Bernard, on or about Aug. 21, 1888, *Letters*, 665, which mentions “half a dozen paintings of sunflowers”; and Van Gogh to Theo, Aug. 21 or 22, 1888, *Letters*, 666, which raises the number to “a dozen or so panels.”

9. “But you'll see these big paintings of bouquets of 12, 14 sunflowers stuffed into this tiny little boudoir with a pretty bed and everything else elegant. It won't be commonplace.” Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 9, 1888, *Letters*, 677.

10. It is believed that two sunflower paintings continued to be included in Gauguin's bedroom after *The Poet's Garden* series commenced. This is based on a later letter in which Van Gogh mentions that two sunflower paintings (figs. 3–4) were hung together in the bedroom. Van Gogh to Theo, Jan. 28, 1889, *Letters*, 743. See further in Dorn, *Décoration*, p. 60.

11. Dorn, “Van Gogh and the Concept of *Décoration*,” pp. 379–80. The morning scene of *The Poet's Garden* should also be seen in relation to the evening setting of the café's exterior in *The Café Terrace on the Place du Forum, Arles, at Night* (1888; Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo [F467, JH1580]). See also Dorn, *Décoration*, pp. 370–75.

12. Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 8, 1888, *Letters*, 676.

13. As Dorn noted, “This [practice] permanently allowed alterations, regroupings within the *Décoration*. The first, that is, the genetic pendant relationship, is therefore not necessarily pointing to the factual decorative use.” See Dorn, “Van Gogh and the Concept of *Décoration*,” p. 380; and more generally, Dorn, *Décoration*, pp. 71–110.

14. In a letter of September 16, Van Gogh mentioned that it was his “plan to go live in the house tomorrow” and discussed the completed *Poet's Garden*, saying, “That's the first painting this week,” citing as well his *Café Terrace* (see n. 11) and *Self-Portrait* (p. 59, fig. 8 [F476, JH1581]). Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 16, 1888, *Letters*, 681.

15. On September 26, he wrote to Theo of the pendant's completion. Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 26, 1888, *Letters*, 689.

16. Figure 5 was sketched in a letter from the artist to Theo, Sept. 26, 1888 (*Letters*, 689). The other sketch (JH1584) was in a letter to Eugène Boch, Oct. 2, 1888, *Letters*, 693. The latter, more abbreviated sketch from the October 2 letter only includes the pair of women.

17. Van Gogh to John Peter Russell, on or about June 17, 1888, *Letters*, 627.

18. Henry Cochin, “Boccace d'après ses oeuvres et les témoignages contemporains,” *Revue des deux mondes*, July 15, 1888, pp. 373–413.

19. Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 18, 1888, *Letters*, 683.

20. Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 18, 1888, *Letters*, 683.
21. Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 18, 1888, *Letters*, 683.
22. Van Gogh to Gauguin, Oct. 3, 1888, *Letters*, 695.
23. Van Gogh to Gauguin, Oct. 3, 1888, *Letters*, 695.
24. Van Gogh to Gauguin, Oct. 3, 1888, *Letters*, 695.
25. Van Gogh to Émile Bernard, Oct. 3, 1888, *Letters*, 696. The phrase in the letter to Gauguin of October 3 (see Van Gogh to Gauguin, Oct. 3, 1888, *Letters*, 695), is "jardin d'un poète," and in the one of the same date to Bernard is "jardin du poète."
26. See Van Uitert, "Van Gogh in Anticipation."
27. Van Gogh to Émile Bernard, Sept. 19–25, 1888, *Letters*, 684.
28. Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 18, 1888, *Letters*, 683.
29. For a discussion of the theme of the garden among Van Gogh's contemporaries and of the more specific "poet's garden," see Van Uitert, "Van Gogh in Anticipation." As Van Uitert notes, such comparisons are limited, since "neither the extent of his knowledge nor exactly where he found the title can be precisely ascertained" (p. 196).
30. Van Gogh's general familiarity with the literary context is discussed in Johnson, "Vincent van Gogh and the Vernacular." However, Johnson overextends his analysis, basing it on an ungrounded assertion that each of the four paintings relate directly to one of the poets mentioned in Cochin's article. This results in interpretations that do not correlate with the evolution of the series nor with the paintings themselves.
31. Van Gogh to Willemien van Gogh, Sept. 9 and about 14, 1888, *Letters*, 678. He also wrote to Theo, "Opening the window in the morning, you see the greenery in the gardens and the rising sun and the entrance of the town." Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 9, 1888, *Letters*, 677.
32. Van Gogh to Gauguin, Oct. 3, 1888, *Letters*, 695.
33. Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 26, 1888, *Letters*, 689.
34. Kristin Hoermann Lister, conservation report for *The Poet's Garden*, Mar. 20, 1990, on file in the Department of Conservation, Art Institute of Chicago.
35. Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 16, 1888, *Letters*, 681.
36. Kristin Hoermann Lister, conservation report for *The Poet's Garden*, Mar. 20, 1990, on file in the Department of Conservation, Art Institute of Chicago.
37. Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 21, 1888, *Letters*, 685.
38. Van Gogh to Émile Bernard, on or about Oct. 5, 1888, *Letters*, 698. See discussion in Druick and Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, pp. 142–44; and Edwards, *Van Gogh's Ghost Paintings*.
39. Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 26, 1888, *Letters*, 689.
40. See Van Gogh to Willemien van Gogh, Sept. 9 and about 14, 1888, *Letters*, 678.
41. Van Gogh to Theo, Oct. 21, 1888, *Letters*, 709.
42. For more on this relationship and its combination of collaboration and rivalry, see Van Uitert, "Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin," pp. 149–68.
43. Van Gogh to Theo, Oct. 27 or 28, 1888; and Van Gogh to Theo, on or about Dec. 1, 1888, *Letters*, 714 and 723, respectively.
44. In a long letter to Bernard, Van Gogh detailed his observations about a number of painters' sexual appetites and their effects on their art. He advised Bernard that "if you don't fuck too hard, your painting will be all the spunkier for it." As for himself, he wrote, "Personally, I find continence is quite good for me. It's enough for our weak, impressionable artists' brains to give their essence to the creation of our paintings. Because in thinking, we expend cerebral activity." Van Gogh to Émile Bernard, on or about Aug. 5, 1888, *Letters*, 655.
45. For a speculative, but illuminating, discussion of the ways in which sexuality was an element of Van Gogh's attachment to and desire for Gauguin's partnership, see Nagera, *Vincent van Gogh*, esp. pp. 132–50.
46. Van Gogh painted the first version of *The Bedroom* as part of the suite of size 30 canvases intended for the décor. See Van Gogh to Theo, Oct. 16, 1888; and Van Gogh to Gauguin, Oct. 17, 1888, *Letters*, 705 and 706, respectively. That it was on display in the Yellow House is attested to in Van Gogh to Theo, on or about Oct. 29 1888, *Letters*, 715.
47. For the November date for these paintings, see Van Gogh to Theo, on or about Nov. 19, 1888, *Letters*, 721.
48. On the number of chairs, see Van Gogh to Theo, Sept. 9, 1888, *Letters*, 677.
49. See the more extensive analysis of these paintings in Druick, "Van Gogh and Gauguin," pp. 127–28; Druick and Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, pp. 209–10. For another interpretation, see the essay by Louis van Tilborgh in this catalogue.
50. I benefited from Joan Greer's discussion of these issues at the Universities Art Association of Canada 2013 conference. As Greer noted, the distinction between Van Gogh and Gauguin is informed by their religious backgrounds: Van Gogh's Protestantism emphasized the humanity of Christ and, by extension, the empirical, whereas Gauguin's Roman Catholicism stressed the visionary. See also Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*.
51. House, "Post-Impressionist Visions of Nature," p. 580.
52. Van Gogh to Willemien van Gogh, on or about Nov. 12, 1888, *Letters*, 720.
53. In the period after the Studio of the South, Van Gogh did take more liberties with his compositions, for instance, with regard to the amalgamation of sources in *Starry Night* (1889; Museum of Modern Art, New York [F612, JH1731]), as is argued in Soth, "Van Gogh's Agony," pp. 301–12. The question of Van Gogh's emphasis on observation versus Gauguin's on imagination informed not just these developments but also the former's continued engagement with the latter's work, as Cornelia Homburg has argued with regard to Van Gogh's painting after Gauguin's *L'Arlésienne, Portrait of Madame Ginoux* (1888), in "Affirming Modernity," pp. 127–38.
54. This argument is made by Dario Gamboni in *Paul Gauguin*, pp. 86–89. See further Gamboni, *Potential Images*, pp. 88–90; and Druick and Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, pp. 252–53.
55. Van Gogh to Gauguin, Oct. 17, 1888, *Letters*, 706. The day before, he had written to Theo about *The Bedroom* that "looking at the painting should rest the mind, or rather, the imagination," further indicating how the painting was part of Van Gogh's debate with Gauguin about imagination and observation. Van Gogh to Theo, Oct. 16 1888, *Letters*, 705.

David J. Getsy, "Exalting the Unremarkable: Van Gogh's *Poet's Garden* and Gauguin's Bedroom," in Gloria Groom, ed., *Van Gogh's Bedrooms*, exh. cat, Art Institute of Chicago (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 36-49.