



1888 or 1889

Oil on canvas

36 3/4 x 28 inches (92.4 x 71.1 cm)

VINCENT VAN GOGH

Dutch, 1853–1890

LOOKING QUESTIONS

Can you find twelve flowers in this painting?

Which ones are in full bloom? Wilting? Why would van Gogh choose to include wilting flowers?

Which flower has a red-orange center? Where else do you see this color (outlining the jug, the table edge, and “Vincent”)?

How does van Gogh use yellow to lead your eye through the painting?

What is the mood of this painting? What do you see that communicates this?

SUNFLOWERS

Vincent van Gogh created this painting of twelve bright sunflowers in a simple clay jug soon after moving to Arles, a quiet, sun-drenched town in southern France, far from the noisy streets of Paris where he had been working. Excited about living in fresh, clean country air, surrounded by the vibrant colors of nature in Arles—especially the fields of sunflowers—he was also looking forward to the arrival of his friend, the artist Paul Gauguin (go-gan). Van Gogh planned to complete a series of sunflower paintings to celebrate his new beginnings and to decorate his new house and studio, “so the whole thing will be a symphony in blue and yellow.”¹ In this work, van Gogh painted the flowers in various stages of growth and decay, working quickly before they wilted. Some are only partially open, several are in full bloom with their lush, yellow petals spread wide, while another is already beginning to droop.

Although he grew up seeing the detailed, **realistic** style of Dutch painting, van Gogh painted in an **Expressionist** manner, using large brushstrokes and thick paint (called **impasto**). Each dab is visible on the canvas, and the entire surface seems to move and come to life. Bold colors—rusty brown, rich red, dark green, and gold—as well as an array of light yellows and oranges twist and turn against the pale **turquoise** background above the mustard tabletop. The orange outline of the jug and the artist’s signature, “Vincent,” help anchor the tossing, spiky petals.

Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Mr. and Mrs. Carroll S. Tyson, Jr., Collection, 1963-116-19

¹ Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, c. 21 August 1888, from *van Gogh’s Letters, Abridged & Annotated* web exhibit. <http://webexhibits.org/vangogh/letter/18/526.htm>